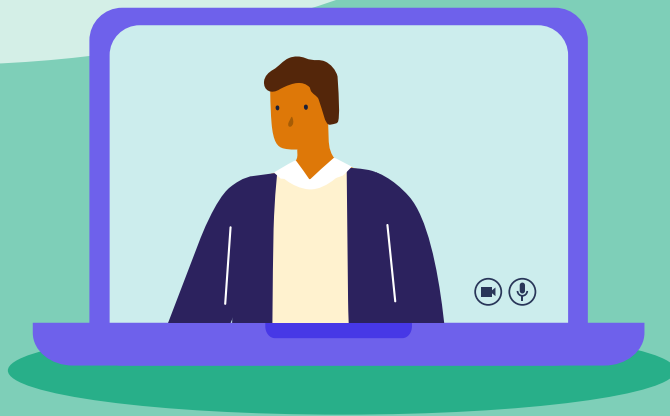


Understanding Student Mental Health Inequalities:

Part-time, distance learner and commuter students

Written by Nicola Frampton, Dan Thompson,
and the Positive Digital Practices Student Panel



student
minds



Foreword

As a long-term distance and part-time learner myself, I am delighted to introduce this report on understanding student mental health inequalities for part-time, distance learners and commuter students. This important group of students have been overlooked for too long, so it's fantastic to see Student Minds shining a light on their needs and galvanising the sector into action.

Part-time, distance learners and commuter students are often very different to full-time students. They may be mature, with children or other caring responsibilities. They may have full-time jobs or other substantial life commitments. Studying at university is often not the primary focus in their lives, but can be an extra thing that they are trying to add into already busy timetables. Their motivations for study can vary: they may be trying to change their lives, to upskill, to shift careers, or to right a wrong in their past study experiences. They may be trying to set an example to their children or other family members. They are often the only people in their circles studying, and their families and friends may find it hard to understand or support them in their studies. They may have disabilities, mental health difficulties or conditions that make studying from home or part-time a more manageable option for them than a campus-based university experience. They are often keen to succeed and highly skilled at juggling priorities, but may feel out of their depth, guilty, isolated or lacking in confidence.

Research has shown that part-time, distance learner and commuter students can be more likely to experience difficulties with mental health and wellbeing, and paradoxically can be less likely to be offered, or able to access, the support they need from universities. Many of the support options, wellbeing interventions and social opportunities universities offer are campus-based.

Their needs and struggles are often overlooked: out of sight, out of mind. This needs to change. The higher education sector needs to adapt to recognise and support this vital group of students. Universities need to adopt an inclusive and intersectional approach to embedding mental wellbeing considerations throughout their pedagogies, practices, cultures and support structures, in order to create inclusive environments that do not rely on campus-based support for mental wellbeing. This report, so rich in student voice and experiences, is an important step towards this goal.

I would like to share my heartfelt thanks with the student panel, for being so supportive and generous with their time and experiences, and with the entire Positive Digital Practices team for being so dedicated to improving higher education for part-time, distance learners and commuter students. I believe these voices and actions can make the difference we need to see in the world.



Professor Kate Lister

Part-time distance learner and Associate Dean of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at Arden University.

Acknowledgements

Positive Digital Practices Student Panel

This report was inspired and co-produced by a panel of incredible students who have generously volunteered their time, insights and experiences to help improve the experiences of other and future students. Their contributions have been invaluable, and have allowed us to build a better, broader understanding of the student populations we aim to support. Thank you to all of them: Amanda Sheard, Ananya Viswanathan, Bethany Collyer, Emma Browne, Fiona Stewart, Iris Yu, Limou Dembele, Naveesa Zaheer, Rachel Hasson, Renato Afonso, Seiara Imanova, Tyler Powell, Verena Lauer, Verity Bramwell, and Yvon Modu.

Positive Digital Practices Project Team

Over the last two years, we have worked with the Positive Digital Practices project team to support the creation of an [online resource hub](#). Thank you to all involved for truly hearing and valuing the insight offered by the student panel, and for working so hard to improve the mental health of students.

Thanks in particular to Kate Lister, for her leadership throughout the project; for enabling and trusting Student Minds to effectively recruit and support the student panel; and for her support in writing this report, including providing the Foreword.

Office for Students

Thank you to the Office for Students for funding the Positive Digital Practices project and for their continued support for the work Student Minds produces.

Student Minds

Thank you to the whole Student Minds team for all of their ongoing support and work to improve student mental health. In particular, thanks to:

- Dom Smithies for his support during the Positive Digital Practices project, including in student panel meetings. Your experience and insights have been essential in ensuring the successful management of the project and effective support of the volunteers involved.
- Lee Ovens for generously sharing her own experiences as a new part-time, distance learner in this report. Your insights are immensely valuable and always appreciated.
- Andy Costigan for his support in recruiting volunteers back in 2021.
- The Comms team – Grace Anderson, Abi Morris, Emmy Kelsall – for supporting the launch and dissemination of this report.

Hornett Design

Thank you for designing this report and bringing it to life.

Contents

5

7

14

35

36

Terminology

Student Minds recognises that the language we use is important and can have significant bearing on how our work is understood and interpreted. Therefore, we feel it is important to define our terms, to enable a shared understanding and interpretation.

This report stems from our work as partners on the Positive Digital Practices project, which focuses

primarily on the experiences of part-time, distance learner and commuter students.

We have defined these terms as we understand them below. We have indicated where definitions are taken from other sources; otherwise, our terminology has been shaped by our own understanding and the experiences of the students we have worked with.

Commuter student

A student studying for a higher education qualification, living off-camps in accommodation which is not designed for students, and without other students. Given there is no sector-wide consensus on how far from campus a student would need to live to be described as a 'commuter', we have opted not to attach a distance to this definition.

Distance learning

A way of learning remotely without being in regular face-to-face contact with a teacher in the classroom. All aspects of the higher education experience are delivered online. (Adapted from The Complete University Guide's definition, cited in the Augar Review, 2019).

Part-time student

A student studying for a higher education qualification over an extended period of time.

Mature student

A student who begins undergraduate study at age 21 or over, or postgraduate study aged 25 or over.

Transnational student

A student studying for a higher education qualification at a UK institution, despite being based outside of the UK.

We further recognise that students can fall into more than one of these categories at any given time.

Mental health

Mental health refers to a full spectrum of experience ranging from good mental health to mental illness (Hughes and Spanner, 2019).

Mental health issues

Refers to experiencing levels of emotional and/ or psychological distress beyond normal experience and beyond an individual's current ability to effectively manage. It will include those who are experiencing mental illness and those whose experiences fall below this threshold, but whose mental health is not good (Hughes and Spanner, 2019).

Wellbeing

Wellbeing will encompass a wider framework, of which mental health is an integral part, but which also includes physical and social wellbeing. This uses a model provided by Richard Kraut, in which optimum wellbeing is defined by the ability of an individual to fully exercise their cognitive, emotional, physical and social powers, leading to flourishing (Hughes and Spanner, 2019).

**University
Mental Health
Charter****A whole-university approach**

Student Minds supports and advocates for a whole-university approach to mental health, with focus on both preventative and responsive interventions and support. We believe that such an approach enables the development of environments and cultures which reduce poor mental health, whilst also supporting good mental health. We have written this report with a whole-university approach in mind, exploring a variety of the interrelated themes and domains which form the University Mental Health Charter and framing the experiences and reflections shared by students in this way.

Background

Student Minds recognises the need to identify and understand the inequalities which exist within our education system (and society more broadly) and which negatively impact the experiences of some students and groups of students. Inequalities can have negative impacts on all aspects of the student experience, including finances (Russell Group SUs, 2023), belonging (Blake et al., 2022), attainment (Nguyen et al., 2020), and graduate outcomes (Bolton and Lewis, 2023). It is only by listening to, and co-producing with, students with unique lived experiences that we can truly understand the impacts of inequalities and develop targeted support to address them.

student minds

Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity.

We exist to ensure that no student is held back by their mental health whilst at university and beyond. Our aim is to empower students and members of university communities to improve student mental health, by challenging existing structures and stigmas and taking a whole-university approach to mental health.



Methodology

Over the last two years, Student Minds has been a partner on the Positive Digital Practices project, funded by the Office for Students (OfS). The project has focussed on the experiences of part-time, distance learner and commuter students, successfully developing a [hub of resources](#) to improve the support available to these groups. As part of the project, Student Minds has been supporting a panel of 15 volunteers who are all part-time, distance learner and/or commuter students. These volunteers were recruited by Student Minds in 2021, following an application and interview process. The panel has helped to co-produce the hub of resources, by generously sharing their experiences, feedback, insight and opinions with the project team.

Through working with the student panel we quickly realised that their experiences were unique, and their needs and preferences as students were often overlooked. It's for this reason that we decided to compile this report, exploring the experiences of part-time, distance learner and commuter students, and highlighting the support needed to ensure they have a positive experience in UK higher education. This report is therefore fully informed by what these students have shared with us throughout the Positive Digital Practices project over the last two years. Their insight was captured predominantly through focus groups and written contributions in response to set questions. In addition, we have drawn from a range of existing literature and included quotes from other sources where relevant to complement and build upon discussion points.

Challenges and Limitations

The Positive Digital Practices project began one year into the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when almost all university students had experienced a shift to online learning for at least some of their course. As such, universities had made great strides to improve online provision and put in place structures and systems to effectively support remote and distance teaching, learning and assessment. The experiences shared by students throughout this report therefore likely reflect a unique context and time period. This is further exacerbated by the fact several students on our panel live outside of the UK, and therefore had varying experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, given the different approaches countries took in responding to the crisis.

We are clear in our understanding that every student will have a unique experience at university and it is difficult and problematic to draw direct comparisons between different groups. Throughout this report, we will reflect on the ways in which part-time, distance learner and commuter students have similar experiences, as well as how their experiences differ. We will aim to do this through an intersectional lens, recognising the numerous ways in which a student's identity can shape their experiences. We do however recognise that what we share is a snapshot and unlikely to be wholly representative of the experiences of all part-time, distance learner and commuter students. The student panel we worked with was disproportionately made up of women, and most studied at the same institution. As such, we encourage readers to engage with this report with recognition and understanding of these limitations, as well as the systemic biases and inequalities which may shape our findings.

The UK Landscape

Part-time Students

In the 2021/22 academic year, there were over 2.8 million students studying at UK higher education providers. Of these, almost 600,000 (21%) were studying part-time (HESA, 2023a). Although this number has increased steadily over the past five years, the proportion of students studying part-time is much lower now than in the earlier years of the millennium. In 2003/04, there were 840,000 part-time students at universities across the UK, making up 38% of the total student population. This fall was particularly prominent amongst part-time undergraduate students, with numbers halving in the ten years from 2009/10 to 2019/20.

According to a briefing by Hubble and Bolton (2022), “a range of policy changes and social and economic factors have created a ‘perfect storm’ which has led to the sharp downturn in [part-time] student numbers”.

This includes reforms to higher education funding, the cost of studying, and the flexibility of studying. A report by the Sutton Trust (Callender and Thompson, 2018) further explores the decline in part-time undergraduate students, noting “approximately 40% of this decline is attributable to fee changes” and that “the decline in part-time study has significant knock-on effects for widening participation”. This reduction in the number of part-time students has further led to a significant decrease of students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education (Butcher, 2020).

Research by Universities UK (2013) identified numerous benefits to part-time learning, including improved self-confidence, career prospects and happiness levels. Part-time learning also allows for workers to reskill whilst remaining within the workforce, which can produce a “more highly skilled workforce which benefits the whole economy and is essential to increase national productivity” (Hubble and Bolton, 2022: p6). Such evidence therefore suggests that part-time learning opportunities are beneficial to both students themselves and wider society.

The demographic make-up of part-time students is notably different to that of the full-time student body. In 2021/22, 62% of part-time learners were female, compared to 56% of full-time students. Part-time students were also more likely to be older, with 60% aged 30 and over and just 21% aged 24 or under. Amongst undergraduate students, part-time students are also slightly more likely to have a known disability than full-time students (20% and 17% respectively) (HESA, 2023a).



Distance Learners

In the 2021/22 academic year, over 278,000 UK-based university students were distance learners, with the vast majority (around 151,000) studying at The Open University (The OU) (HESA, 2023b). In addition to these UK-based learners, there were also over 500,000 transnational students studying at UK universities, again with the majority (around 46,000) studying at The OU (HESA, 2023c).

The Open University has ‘pioneered distance learning’ for over 50 years (The Open University, 2023), offering a wide range of higher education qualifications to students who wish to study flexibly from across the world. Students have access to online learning resources, as well as module forums, tutors and support teams. OU students typically report positive experiences, with 86% agreeing that they are happy with the overall quality of their course and 78% agreeing that their course was well organised and running smoothly - significantly higher than the sector benchmark (NSS, 2022a).

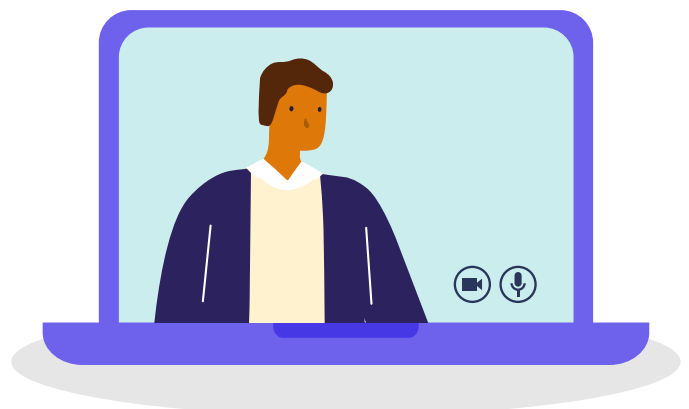
According to a blog by Oliver (2022), UK universities are outperforming global benchmarks for distance learning in a number of areas, including value for money and overall satisfaction. A briefing by The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (2021) also notes that ‘research evidence from diverse educational settings suggests that [distance learning] can be as, or more, effective than in-person instruction at achieving learning outcomes for students in some subjects and contexts, with particular benefits of a blended learning approach’ (p.3).

However, when it comes to wellbeing, Student Minds’ latest research (conducted in 2022), found that distance learner students were amongst the most likely groups to report low life satisfaction, poor wellbeing and worse mental health compared to when they began university. Reasons for this are likely to be complex and nuanced - but it is important to acknowledge the mental health inequalities which may exist within student communities so that universities can actively seek to understand them and how they may be addressed.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

It is important to note that the Covid-19 pandemic enforced involuntary distance learning on almost all students. This enabled a particular focus on the benefits and limitations of wholly-online study, albeit in a unique context. As noted previously, our work with the Positive Digital Practices project and student panel began in 2021, and as such our findings represent a snapshot of experiences during this period of time. That said, the distance learner students we worked with were all voluntarily studying as distance learners.

Doghonadze et al. ‘s (2020) research into distance learning during the pandemic concluded that whilst there are notable benefits of learning digitally, including reduced costs and flexibility, there can be downfalls such as unequal access to digital infrastructure, limited social connectedness, and concerns over inclusivity. As the UK emerges from the pandemic, and university campuses have returned to varying levels of in-person teaching, it is important to remember that many students will continue to engage in distance learning (either through choice, or due to new hybrid ways of teaching), and support should be tailored as such.



Commuter Students

Students may choose to live off-campus without other university students for a number of reasons, and living arrangements are varied. Commuter students may live alone, with partners and/or children, with non-student friends or housemates, or with their parents.

According to a Sutton Trust study published in 2018, approximately one in four UK university students are commuters, with most of these being 'short-distance commuters', travelling less than 57 miles from home to university (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). More recently, in 2023, Save the Student's National Student Accommodation Survey found that 15% of students now live with their parents during term-time, with this being the case for 18% of first year students. The same research also found that students are increasingly moving further away from university campuses, with the average distance increasing from 21 minutes in 2022 to 24 minutes in 2023. Save the Student attributed these trends to the rising cost of living, acknowledging that living with parents is often the cheapest option available to students.

Research from Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) argues that some forms of commuting, namely those tied to the family home, are symptomatic of inequalities of class and ethnicity; "over three times more students in the lowest social class group commute from home than do so from the highest group" (p.4). Fostering good wellbeing of commuter students is, therefore, crucial to supporting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and requires a genuinely intersectional approach.

As acknowledged by Maguire and Morris (2018), there is evidence to suggest that, compared to residential students, 'commuter students obtain poorer outcomes from their higher education, and will be less engaged and satisfied with their academic experience' (p.6). They are also more likely to be the first generation in their families to enter higher education, have a lower income, be a mature student and be from an ethnic minority background. Students who live at home are also reportedly less likely to say they study because they enjoy the subject, and more likely to say they need the qualification to enter a particular occupation (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014). Research from Neves and Hillman (2019: p31) further demonstrates that there is a link between commuting and the quality of experience at university, "with typical residential students significantly more likely to report good value and satisfaction with their choice [of course and institution] than full commuter students". Whilst there can be significant variations in the precise living experiences of commuter students (e.g. one living within five miles of campus with non-student peers will have a substantially different experience to one living over ten miles away with family), it is evident that commuting can have an impact on the perceived value of learning in UK higher education.



Mature Students

Whilst the Positive Digital Practices project did not specifically focus on support for mature students, we recognise that Mature students in the UK are more likely to be flexible learners, including studying part-time or via distance learning (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). Often, this is due to other commitments including work and parental or other caring responsibilities. A report published by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2014) also found that older students were more likely to live at home during their university studies.

Mature students are an underrepresented group in higher education and, in England, the Office for Students (2023) has made an increase in the access and participation of mature learners a regulatory target for universities. The regulator noted in 2020 that “mature students have not been prioritised by many universities, despite overall low and falling proportions of such students in their own populations and the sector more broadly” (Office for Students, 2020: p:9).

There is evidence to suggest that part-time studying for mature students can have positive personal outcomes, such as increased self-confidence and new friendships, and economic benefits including improved work performance and employability (Swain and Hammond, 2011).



Quotes key

Distance learner

Commuter student

Part-time student

External quote

Findings and Discussion

Through our work with the student panel, we identified a number of themes which can broadly be understood within the domains of the University Mental Health Charter (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). Throughout this chapter, these themes are explored through direct quotes from our student panellists, as well as consideration of existing literature and research findings.

Live

In this section of the report, we explore themes related to students' everyday lives. This includes their living environments, their experience balancing multiple priorities, finances and the cost of living, and students' sense of connectedness and belonging. These are some key issues highlighted by the students we worked with when considering their experiences as part-time, distance learner and/or commuter students. Many are also common themes identified in other pieces of research.

Flexibility and balance

One of the major themes which emerged when discussing the benefits of attending university as a part-time, distance learner and/or commuter student was around flexibility and balance. As with all students, our panellists have full lives outside of their university experience, and engaging in higher education therefore often relied on the ability to be flexible with their time and balance other priorities alongside their academic course. This often meant taking a more agile approach to studying than perhaps the typical full-time, on-campus student experience allows.

For example, several students on our panel worked alongside their studies, either in full-time or part-time employment. Although this is common across the whole student body, Chappell et al (2020) also found that commuter students were significantly more likely than on-campus student groups to hold a part-time job. Many of our panellists expressed that their chosen mode of study afforded them greater flexibility and allowed them to continue working throughout the year, often in well-established careers. Paid roles also helped to fund their studies – a key benefit of simultaneous work and study for many.

"I love the flexibility that allowed me to pursue this second Postgraduate degree while being able to keep working and not having to abandon my career."

A part-time student panellist

"[I like that] I am able to work alongside it so that I can help fund it."

A part-time student panellist

"[It is] easier to keep part-time employment alongside studying, as I don't have to move anywhere during breaks from university and can have a year round contract."

A commuter student panellist

"I have been able to get work experience local to me which has allowed me to make valuable contacts in the relevant industry which will be more prominent for me as I will be staying here [after university]."

A commuter student panellist

In addition to the benefits associated with continuing employment, students reflected that their chosen mode of study allowed them to balance their academic course alongside other priorities, such as their health or family, more effectively. Panellists also felt that having flexible access to learning materials, such as recorded lectures, allowed them to engage more fully at times when they felt most able to.

Support for recorded lecture materials is also mirrored in the wider student population, with research from the UPP Foundation (2022) showing that 90% of students prefer in-person lectures to be recorded. 76% wished to have hybrid options for lectures, with only 12% opposed to this. These figures demonstrate that such practices are not only beneficial to part-time, distance learner and commuter students, but also for students studying full-time on campus too.

On the other hand, it was also clear that studying flexibly could present a challenge at times. Part-time students in particular reflected that a lack of structure and having to regularly 'switch' between studying and working could be difficult.

"I can prioritise my health. The demands of full-time study with my disabilities were not possible, so this gives me the option to still study."

A part-time student panellist

"I loved being able to divide my time according to how it suited what else was going on."

A part-time student panellist

"[I like] working at my own pace, and balancing it with other responsibilities."

A part-time student panellist

"[I value the] greater availability of webinars/lectures at times outside of "normal" class times; also, not always having to attend in 'real time'. Rare in full-time study."

A part-time student panellist

"[I have] more access to seminars that are held online and otherwise probably would not have been."

A distance learner student panellist

"There is not as much routine as full-time study so you have to self manage a lot of your work. You need to navigate distractions and a schedule (which can also be a positive)."

A part-time student panellist

"Sometimes it is difficult to stay 'in the zone' due to switching between studying and working."

A part-time student panellist

"Dividing time is not always easy, especially if part-time over takes and turns more into full-time in certain weeks."

A part-time student panellist

When considering what support universities could offer to improve the experiences of part-time, distance learner and commuter students, our panellists highlighted the need for universities to help students with structuring their work and maintaining focus. This challenge was addressed by the Positive Digital Practices project, through the development of [Warwick University's 'Be Well, Learn Well' platform](#) which includes practical study tips for students. The project also developed an interactive resource, ['At a crossroads'](#), which explores the challenges of navigating work and/or family alongside study and considers possible sources of support.

Connection and Belonging

Connection and sense of belonging are common themes when considering students' experiences in higher education - particularly since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Loneliness and isolation can, unfortunately, be common amongst student populations (Hughes and Spanner, 2019; Wonkhe, 2019; ONS, 2022; Student Minds, 2023) and this can have a clear impact on wellbeing and mental health. A sense of connectedness and belonging is important for many students. In working with the Positive Digital Practices student panel, it quickly became clear that many of the challenges faced by part-time, distance learner and commuter students stemmed from the connection (or lack thereof) they feel to their university, their peers and their educators. This was frequently viewed as a negative aspect of their university experience, and one which our panellists felt needed to be addressed by universities.

Student panellists had common, shared experiences of feeling disconnected, lonely, and lacking a sense of belonging. Often, it was felt that this stemmed from universities, students' unions and/or student groups catering mostly for students who live on, or close to, campus and study full-time. Reflections were also linked to how often students are in contact with their peers and educators, and how regularly (if at all) they visit physical campuses in-person.

"It can be hard to get involved in on-campus communities if you are seeing people less."

A part-time student panellist

"Sometimes you feel you are missing out following emails that point to events that are going on on campus."

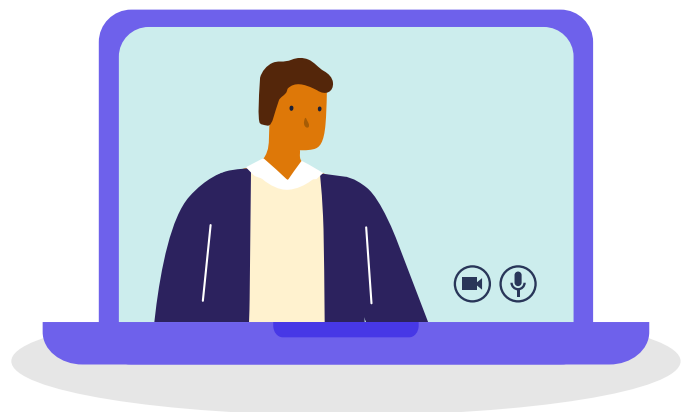
A distance learner student panellist

"It can at times feel isolating as nobody is around and we are physically not on campus."

A distance learner student panellist

"While it is great to connect with people worldwide it does not replace meeting people in person and having spontaneous meets/discussions etc."

A distance learner student panellist



“ Societies and other activities are often centred around the campus which makes it harder to join in – especially if it is just for an hour.”

A commuter student panellist

“ Connecting with peers is difficult – they can easily spend time with each other in-between lectures etc whereas often I’ll have to leave ASAP to get home.”

A commuter student panellist

“ With Covid forcing freshers and my first two years online I feel I missed out on building connections that my peers were making. It can now feel like I am intruding sometimes.”

A commuter student panellist

“ [It’s] harder to join societies – a lot of the time they’ll hold events in the evening meaning you have to travel to uni just to be involved, and often they’ll have drinking events which means you have to find an alternative to driving.”

A commuter student panellist

It has been argued that it is difficult for universities to acknowledge the needs of some student groups if staff do not see them on a day-to-day basis, as they might with those living on campus. Maguire and Morris (2018: p25) state that, for commuter students, “their experiences may be more hidden from their institutions and less integrated with the rhythms of traditional student life”. Research from GuildHE (2018: p29) further identifies commuter students as a group that are “hard to hear” (in that their engagement with the community on campus is low) and found that 85% of providers surveyed did not hold additional facilities for commuter students.

We recommend that this argument be re-framed and that rather, university services and support be considered ‘hard to reach’ for some part-time, distance learner and commuter students. Institutions must make conscious, concerted efforts to understand their students’ needs and subsequently offer appropriate support where needed.



The idea that non-traditional groups of students are seen to be ‘intruding’ was also commonplace amongst our panellists. The sense that they did not belong at university, or that they were less-valued than their full-time, on-campus peers was commonly shared. This became further exacerbated through interactions with staff, and our panellists spoke of feeling a stigma around being lazy or less intelligent because of how they have chosen to study.

“There is this stigma that part-time or distance learning courses are not as valuable, and students aren’t as smart or have less potential.”

A part-time student panellist

“People think that you are lazy for not taking a full-time course.”

A part-time student panellist

“Sometimes lecturers/uni support staff can be dismissive of part-time students – I study part-time due to prior commitments and disability, not out of laziness.”

A part-time student panellist

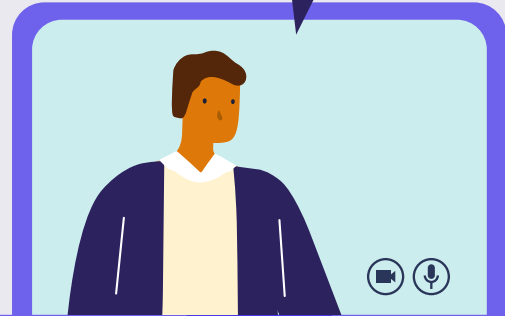
“It does not always feel like we are a ‘real’ part of the university and are heard/supported as much as in-person students.”

A distance learner student panellist

“Not feeling like you belong to the institution as much as others – sometimes when people ask me where I am studying I still default to my Sixth form even after 3 years.”

A commuter student panellist

Case Study



“There have been cases when I tell people I have graduated from a university in London and they sound so impressed. However, once you tell them it’s distance learning, you can sense that their perception or enthusiasm changes, as if they’re thinking that it’s not really being part of the university and distance learning programs are not legit. It seems the stigma is carried out even outside academia. Perhaps highlighting such facts can help reduce the stigma of distance students not being as capable or motivated. Many of my fellow distance learner students have now gone forward in pursuing PhDs, social enterprises, and building a mental health app – all which inspire me to pursue my own dreams.”

Distance Learner

However, there were also some positive experiences highlighted by panel members relating to connectedness. For instance, commuter students on the panel reflected on the value of staying in their hometown and therefore close to existing connections and support networks.

“ [I have] extra support around me from family and friends which I would not have as easy access to if I moved away.”

A commuter student panellist

“ I get to see my family/friends from outside of university as often as I want to, which I might not have been able to do if I'd moved away.”

A commuter student panellist

One student also reflected on how valuable this was for the connections they made at university too, saying:

“ I've been able to show my university friends around my hometown which is really special, and also been able to give my university friends a home away from home when they don't want to be stuck in uni halls.”

A commuter student panellist

For another, it is precisely the disparate nature of distance learning that allows for the forming of meaningful relationships with peers worldwide that would otherwise not be possible:

“ Being able to meet other students across the globe is super interesting! I have made friends with fellow alumni's online, where they have even visited me in (Dubai), and they live in London.”

A distance learner student panellist

These feel like particularly powerful reminders of how important and valuable diverse student populations are.

As part of the Positive Digital Practices project, our student panellists co-produced [Bradford University's 'Positive Digital Communities'](#) resources alongside students studying at Bradford. This workstream of the project recognised the challenges outlined above around creating and maintaining a sense of community and set out to co-create guidance around the use of 'digital circles', or online communities. The successful creation, maintenance and monitoring of online communities was identified by our panellists as particularly important to them in order to feel a connection to their course, university and/or their peers.

Finances and the Cost of Living

Another key issue highlighted by our student panel which has also become increasingly apparent over the past year is the impact of finances and the cost of living. Even before the cost of living crisis took hold in 2022, our panel had shared reflections around the financial benefits and challenges of being a part-time, distance learner and/or commuter student.

On one hand, commuter and distance learner students in particular recognised that the cost of moving away for university is high and they therefore felt they saved money by not needing to re-locate to study. This is despite those who remain at home receiving “a maintenance loan entitlement 20 per cent below the level for those who live away from home” (Augar, 2019: p195) . However, since travel-associated costs have increased over the past year, commuter students have consistently been highlighted as a group disproportionately impacted by the rising cost of living.

“I’ve been speaking to a lot of students in recent weeks and they’re obviously anxious about the cost of living... inflation has rocketed to over 10%. Accommodation costs up 5%, food up 14.5%, transport costs up 10.6% hitting commuter students particularly hard. The result: students face an average funding gap of £439 per month and dropping out. Whilst the government faces a credibility gap in this sector, can the Secretary of State tell us, what are students supposed to do?”

Matt Western, Shadow Minister for Higher Education, addressing the Secretary of State for Education, 2022

Analysis by the MillionPlus Group (Jones, 2022) also identified commuter and live-at-home students as particularly at-risk of financial difficulties during the cost of living crisis.

“There are also large numbers of at-risk students that either commute to campus or have remained living at home during their studies. Given the additional costs associated with commuting, it should not be surprising that between 61,900-68,400 commuter students face financial difficulties. While 36,000- 39,800 live-at-home students are at-risk as the cost-of-living bites.”

Jones (2022)

Our student panellists have also highlighted this challenge, and spoke about the limited financial support available to them. Such concerns have also been echoed in research conducted by the National Union of Students (NUS), with students sharing their experiences of the cost of living crisis.

“[Part-time students get] less student loan money for ‘living expenses’ compared to full-time; if you can’t work, this makes it harder to afford part-time study.”

A part-time student panellist

“I’m a distance learner, learning outside of two part-time jobs. I’m falling behind in my studies because I’m having to look for extra hours and additional employment just to make ends meet, and the stress just keeps piling on with each news story about increasing prices.”

A distance student (NUS, 2022)

This challenge is likely to become exacerbated for many students in the coming years, as real-term cuts to student maintenance funding have been ‘baked in’ to the student finance system in England (Ogden and Waltmann, 2023), meaning students from the poorest families could lose out on £1500 per year in coming years. Although this will, of course, impact all students in receipt of maintenance funding, the impact on commuter and part-time students may well be greater, given the rising costs of transport and the fact part-time students only receive maintenance funding dependent on the number of modules taken. Some students may also need to take on additional, paid employment in order to afford the costs of living and studying. Indeed, research has shown that some part-time students enter education via this particular route specifically because they cannot afford to give up work or other responsibilities (Butcher, 2020). These financial constraints could create further challenges to the balance discussed by part-time, distance learner and commuter students as highlighted in the previous section.

Physical Environment

The physical environment plays an important role in shaping many students' university experience. As highlighted in the University Mental Health Charter (Hughes and Spanner, 2019), "there is a growing body of evidence that our physical environment and how we interact with it has a significant impact on our mental health and wellbeing. Given the amount of time that many staff and students spend on university grounds, there is a clear need to consider how the physical environment can be used to improve the wellbeing of the university community" (p.59).

Along with the role of the physical environment on campus, it is also important to recognise the role of the physical environment(s) students engage with away from campus, whether that be within their residential accommodation or other spaces used for study. When discussing their experiences, the Positive Digital Practices student panel made many references to the physical environment around them, and the way this interacts with their studies as part-time, distance learner and/or commuter students. Although universities may have limited control over spaces outside of the university, it is still important to recognise how they may shape a student's experience and the support they may need.

For many of our panellists, living (and often studying) in their own homes was particularly beneficial. This removed barriers to engagement and sources of stress, and improved access to existing support networks.

"There is no hassle or stress about living arrangements meaning I have a steady living space which I may not have gained if I had moved away."

A commuter student panellist

"[I enjoy] being in a familiar place with familiar faces e.g. having old school friends local [to me] and being in the family home."

A commuter student panellist

Staying local also meant commuter students could find work and create new networks which could be particularly valuable post-graduation, and they were also able to share their knowledge and experience of living in their town/city with other students who had moved away for university.

"I have been able to get work experience local to me which has allowed me to make valuable contacts in the relevant industry which will be more prominent for me as I will be staying here after [my studies]."

A commuter student panellist

"Knowing the area better than others at the university - being able to share cool places to go which others may not have been aware of."

A commuter student panellist

"Studying in my own environment at home as an autistic person is a big plus for me. As well as not having to travel."

A distance learner student panellist

However, distance learning by its nature means that students enrolled on distance courses are not required to attend any in-person teaching, and therefore many do not have access to their university's physical environment at all, due to the distance at which they live from campus. Several of our student panellists were transnational students, meaning they were based outside of the UK, despite studying for a degree at a UK institution. In 2021/22, there were around half a million transnational students whose awarding provider was in the UK (HESA, 2023c). For some of our panellists, the lack of access to physical university spaces had negative impacts, particularly when it came to a sense of connectedness and belonging (explored more broadly on pages 17–20).

Although clearly, there are many benefits to distance learning, as explored throughout this report, the absence of physical spaces is also seen to have clear down-sides for some students. It is important that universities work to consider how they can create positive spaces for students to connect and engage with each other, without needing to be on-campus.

“Not having that physical space to actually speak to people and connect to people – as a social butterfly – can be depressing.”

A distance learner student panellist

“Sometimes you feel you are missing out following emails that point to events that are going on on campus.”

A distance learner student panellist

“It can at times feel isolating as nobody is around and we are physically not on campus.”

A distance learner student panellist

Case Study



“I am part of a social enterprise in the UK which is about bringing neuroscience awareness to the general public. Every month, we do meet-ups, (mostly online), but sometimes we try to gather even in a city (London). This really helps build the relationship and connection with everyone in the organisation. We also help each other with other aspects, like supporting business ideas, and collaborating together in projects. This really helps feel connected with the organisation, even though many live abroad in different cities. Universities can also benefit from actively creating such opportunities.”

Distance Learner

For those student panellists who could access physical university environments, the focus was often on how these spaces met the varied needs and requirements of the whole student population. For instance, commuter students have clearly articulated in previous research the importance of having spaces on-campus to rest, relax, eat, work and socialise between lectures, as well as communal spaces for study (Chappell et al, 2020; Maguire and Morris, 2018). This was also one of the suggestions made by a student panellist:

“Have a space for commuter students on campus – sometimes if I have a gap between class I will go to find somewhere to work or have a sit down whilst I wait but there isn’t enough space. I can’t just go home like other students.”

A commuter student panellist

Many universities do have spaces like these already, often offering kitchen facilities, ‘lounge’ environments with sofas and seating, study space, lockers, and toilets and showers. Examples include the [Commuter Lounges at the University of St Andrews](#), [the Commuter Hub at St Mary’s University](#), and the [Commuter Hubs at the University of Salford](#).

These spaces offer practical support whilst also ensuring commuter students feel welcomed and comfortable on-campus.

We therefore recommend that all universities consider introducing dedicated spaces, such as those for their own commuter students, at the earliest possible opportunity.

Travel (Commuter Students)

Another key issue which stood out clearly, and which has been highlighted in previous and ongoing research too, is the impact of travel on commuter students’ experiences (Maguire and Morris, 2018). Of course, travelling to and from campus is central to a commuter students’ higher education experience - but for many, the unpredictable nature of travel can cause additional stress. Chappell et al (2020) found that fatigue, stress and anxiety linked to lengthy travel times and frequent delays were highlighted in 8.19% of questionnaire responses. This was echoed by our student panellists, who found that travelling to and from university could result in additional stress due to delays. This was often coupled with a lack of understanding or empathy from staff, and challenges related to timetabling which meant in-person teaching was scheduled at impractical times for commuter students (e.g. one lecture at 9am and another at 4pm, with nothing in between).

“Sometimes travel can be unreliable e.g. traffic/delays and staff may not understand.”

A commuter student panellist

“Commuting can add extra stress – 9am starts and 5pm finishes can be difficult because there’s so much traffic going in and out of the city.”

A commuter student panellist

“Sometimes coming in for just one hour long class can feel like a waste of time given the commuting time on top of that – better timetabling could solve this.”

A commuter student panellist

When asked how commuter students could be better supported at university, our commuter student panellists pointed to better support from staff, and more commuter-friendly timetabling.

“ [We need] greater awareness among staff about travel issues – not just being told to leave earlier or go a different way as lots of delays (like roadworks and traffic accidents) can be unexpected.”

A commuter student panellist

“ Scheduling/timetabling with commuter students in mind – living on campus it’s fine to have a lecture at 9am and a lecture at 4pm but for a commuter student it’s an issue.”

A commuter student panellist

“ Encourage tutors to identify whether a student is a commuter student or not – it can sometimes feel random to just go up to them to remind them that you are commuting.”

A commuter student panellist

Timetabling was also identified by Maguire and Morris (2018) who noted that ‘haphazard’ timetabling can be a barrier to students who have to travel significant distances to their place of study, which may result in commuter students being less likely to attend isolated lectures.

Commuter students



Commuter students are often the ‘forgotten’ group in undergraduate cohorts, moving within university spaces with little awareness from higher education institutions (HEIs) as to who they are, and in what numbers. ‘Commuter-friendly’ timetabling recommended by participants in this study, and consistently voiced across academic and practitioner-led research, would be integral to improving commuter students’ experiences. My own research has uncovered the sheer heterogeneity of commuter student experiences which HEIs should consider when assembling support for this student group.

*Emma Maslin – PhD researcher
(Durham University)*

Learn

This chapter of the report will specifically focus on the learning experiences of part-time, distance learner and commuter students. This includes the benefits of studying in these ways and the challenges students have faced. Key themes include the pace of study, the role of learning environments, and ways in which staff can shape students' experiences.

Pace of Study and Autonomy

For part-time students in particular, being able to study at a less intense pace was a key benefit. Our panellists felt that studying part-time afforded them greater opportunity to fully consider their learning and take knowledge onboard, whilst also balancing studies with other responsibilities (explored in greater depth on pages 15–17).

"[I have] more time to absorb knowledge and think about it."

A part-time student panellist

Part-time student panellists also reflected on the greater sense of autonomy and self-led learning they have experienced as part-time learners. For some on the panel, it felt challenging managing often busy and finely balanced schedules, whilst also navigating other priorities and distractions. However, panellists also felt that the opportunity to work at their own pace and self-manage their time was a positive benefit to part-time learning. This was often interlinked with the theme of 'flexibility and balance', explored earlier in the report.

"[I enjoy] working at my own pace, and balancing it with other responsibilities."

A part-time student panellist

"Dividing time is not always easy, especially if part-time over takes and turns more into full-time in certain weeks."

A part-time student panellist

"There is not as much routine as full-time study so you have to self manage a lot of your work. You need to navigate distractions and a schedule (which can also be a positive)."

A part-time student panellist

"I think I paid more attention to the materials as I know I won't have someone baby me – responsibility was mine which was great."

A part-time student panellist

Learning Environments

In addition to the role of physical environments in everyday life, explored on pages (22–24), students also highlighted the role of learning environments in shaping their experiences as part-time, distance learner and commuter students. This included online learning environments, as well as physical spaces.

Unsurprisingly, for distance learners, online learning environments were a key factor in their experience of distance learning. Many felt that having all learning materials available online was a key benefit, and enabled a more positive learning experience. Our panellists spoke about being able to access learning materials flexibly, at times which were convenient for them; re-visiting online materials to support their learning; as well as having access to a bigger range of learning materials when studying online. The benefits of online learning were not only highlighted by distance learners, but by part-time and commuter students too.

“ [I value the] greater availability of webinars/lectures at times outside of “normal” class times; also, not always having to attend in ‘real time’. [This is] rare in full-time study.”

A part-time student panellist

“ [I value having] more access to seminars that are held online and otherwise probably would not have been.”

A distance learner student panellist

“ [I like that] lectures were digital so you can always go back to them.”

A part-time student panellist

“ As a visual learner, it feels better to watch lectures, than to listen to your Professor in a classroom. It’s hard for me to take notes and listen at the same time. So this way, I can pause the slides when needed, take my notes, and get back to learning the material at my own discretion.”

A distance learner student panellist

Access to online learning is also a fundamental part of the transnational student experience. Several of our student panellists were transnational students, studying in locations such as the United Arab Emirates, India, and even whilst travelling the world as a medic on cruise ships. One student panellist felt the transnational availability of courses helped to promote diversity and gave them the opportunity to meet new people with different viewpoints and lived experiences.

“ I love the diversity of minds on our course from all around the world. There are so many different viewpoints and experiences shared in our WhatsApp groups, Teams meetings or tutorials which are unique.”

A distance learner student panellist

In addition to online spaces and environments, students also spoke about the physical environment around them. For distance learners in particular, their study spaces were often also their living spaces – which was viewed as both beneficial and challenging for a variety of reasons.

“ Studying in my own environment at home as an autistic person is a big plus for me. As well as not having to travel.”

A distance learner student panellist

“It can be more easy to get distracted especially if at home, with other things going on.”

A distance learner student panellist

As explored in the ‘physical environment section’ (pages 22–24), other students reported clear benefits to being in familiar physical environments during their studies, such as being close to existing support networks and local employment opportunities.

Relationships with Staff

Students’ relationships or interactions with university staff as part-time, distance learner and/or commuter students was another common theme of discussion amongst our student panellists. Experiences were varied – some students reported positive interactions with staff, which effectively supported their learning, whilst others shared reflections around how their interactions and relationships with staff could be improved. Often, these reflections related to staff’s understanding of a student’s mode of study, their online presence and availability, and the academic support offered (explored further in the ‘Support’ section of the report).

“Lecturers/staff have been available without needing to physically go to a campus building during ‘office hours’ (often impossible for parents, workers, etc).”

A distance learner student panellist

“If [you are] wanting to reach out to collaborate for a project, or be in contact with an academic or supervisor, it’s much more difficult as they are more likely to reject due to never building a form of connection with you. It’s hard for them to actually see your character and intentions.”

A distance learner student panellist



Unfortunately, some student panellists reflected that they felt less supported by staff due to their mode of study. They felt dismissed by staff, or labelled as lazy or less capable. Commuter students also felt that their experiences would be more positive if staff were aware that they were commuter students and that often, commuting can be unpredictable and stressful.

University staff should seek to understand their student communities and shape their offering based on the needs of their students, as outlined in the Principles of Good Practice within the University Mental Health Charter (p.72).

“Sometimes lecturers/uni support staff can be dismissive of part-time students – I study part-time due to prior commitments and disability, not out of laziness.”

A part-time student panellist

The Positive Digital Practices [resource hub](#) includes numerous resources developed to support staff to embed wellbeing within their own practice and improve support for students.

“[There should be] greater awareness among staff about travel issues – not just being told to leave earlier or go a different way as lots of delays (like roadworks and traffic accidents) can be unexpected.”

A commuter student panellist

Undoubtedly, university staff play a huge role in shaping students' experiences, and interactions with staff can have both positive and negative impacts on a student's wellbeing. Equally, staff wellbeing is essential to a whole-university approach to mental health, and staff should be supported by higher education institutions to offer positive teaching and learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their mode of study.

Support

When understanding and exploring students' mental health, an important consideration often relates to their access to effective support. This might be clinical mental health support, delivered by counsellors or advisors, or it may be financial support, broader wellbeing support, academic support, or peer support, for example.

The aim of the Positive Digital Practices project was to better support part-time, distance learner and commuter students through the development of resources and initiatives which build confidence, promote help-seeking behaviours, and embed wellbeing within academic teaching and learning. Such work is incredibly important in helping students to support themselves, and in helping staff to effectively support students' overall wellbeing.

Awareness of Support and How to access It

A key barrier highlighted regularly when discussing mental health and wellbeing support relates to the visibility and accessibility of the services available to students. In 2023, Student Minds' research found that 26% of all students surveyed would not know where to get mental health support at university if they needed it. If students aren't aware that support exists, or they don't know how or where to access it, then opportunities to effectively support students are lost. Student panellists reflected on this barrier and how this was exacerbated by their mode of study, with many suggesting they would benefit from clearer information about how to access help when it's needed.

"[We need support in] knowing who to speak to when help is needed, this is not always clear and is important as we cannot speak to fellow students or just pop into someone's office as we are not on campus."

A distance learner student panellist

Universities should consider how information around the support available and how to access it can be effectively communicated to students who may be less present on campus, or who are not full-time students.

Tailored communications, with clear and accessible information about how to access support, could empower more students to reach out for help when they need it.

"[There needs to be] clearer information about where/how to access help (e.g. who do you contact for disability-related advice; who do you contact for academic support; etc)."

A part-time student panellist

Academic Support

Student panellists also reflected on their experiences of receiving academic support as part-time, distance learner or commuter students. Often, reflections were linked to not being physically present on campus, and the impact that this could have on the support they received. Some students reported having good access to support online, with staff being available to offer support without a student needing to travel to campus. This was viewed as a clear benefit for some. However, others also highlighted the downsides of relying on accessing support in virtual spaces, citing longer response times and not being able to address issues quickly.

Again, we feel this challenge can be addressed through applying the Principles of Good Practice set out in the University Mental Health Charter. This includes university staff taking steps to understand their populations and differing needs and experiences, whilst also developing specific interventions to dismantle barriers faced by particular groups (Hughes and Spanner. 2019: p. 72).

Experiences of Accessing Support

Ease and equality of access to adequate support is crucial to the academic attainment and wellbeing of student communities. According to our research, 74% of students know where to go to access support services if they were needed. This has increased from 63% in 20/21 during the pandemic, but remains at a similar level to 2019/20. This suggests that the transition to online support during the pandemic impacted student's knowledge of where to access services and as such it is important that universities take steps to communicate the range of services available, particularly digital or online interventions.

Amongst student panellists who had been aware of and able to access a range of academic and technical support, experiences were mixed.

“Lecturers/staff have been available without needing to physically go to a campus building during “office hours” (often impossible for parents, workers, etc).”

A distance learner student panellist

“When you don't understand something, it can become more discouraging and demotivating as sometimes it takes time for email responses/meeting set ups.”

A distance learner student panellist

“24/7 IT support, which for my course is provided, makes life A LOT easier!”

A distance learner student panellist

“[It is difficult] not being able to reach someone immediately when needed, like a fellow student or lecturer.”

A distance learner student panellist

“[It is] harder to access resources and support. It can seem pointless spending time going into campus for some things which could've been an email or phone call so it can put me off from using support.”

A commuter student panellist

Beyond accessing support for study, there are also implications relating to the access of wellbeing services for those who are not on campus regularly (or at all). It is encouraging that 97% of higher education institutions in England offer either (or both) online or face-to-face psychological support, with 99% offering in-house 'self-help' resources (Department for Education, 2023). However, as a sector, we must continue to consider potential barriers for particular groups of students (including part-time, distance learner and commuter students) in accessing these avenues for support and how to ensure such barriers are removed.

Again, the Covid-19 pandemic provides a snapshot into the experiences of the wider student population having to access wellbeing support services online, in the same manner that a distance learner student would have to. In the years prior to the pandemic, there was a considerable increase in internet-based wellbeing intervention services, but these remained limited within higher education (Papadatou-Pasou et al., 2017). When forced online both in study and support, many institutions had to restructure their models of counselling to web-based services, including virtual counselling.

A report on wellbeing services during the pandemic in Scotland found that "online platforms such as Zoom and Teams emerged as an alternative psychological intervention and treatment tool" (Sousa and Feeney, 2023: p3). These services are generally seen as supplementary to traditional modes of support post-pandemic but for some part-time and off-campus learners, these digital services may be the only options to access support. Timely and proportionate access to support, alongside clear signposting, are key drivers of positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes in our student communities.

Universities should seek to enable all students to confidently access support if or when it's needed, particularly taking steps to understand the possible support needs and preferences of part-time, distance learner and commuter students, to understand and subsequently remove any barriers to access which may exist due to their mode of study. Any new interventions should be co-developed alongside students to help ensure they are accessible and inclusive of the student populations they serve.



Inclusivity and Intersectionality

An inclusive and intersectional approach to mental health is key to successfully creating mentally healthy environments which reduce poor mental health and support good mental health. Such an approach requires an understanding of students' diverse identities and needs, as well as a commitment to dismantling barriers to engaging fully in their university experience and accessing support.

Amongst the part-time, distance learner and commuter students we worked with on our student panel, there were two identities which were commonly shared and reflected upon as shaping their experiences: disability and 'mature' student status. This does not mean that the students on our panel did not have other identities, or that these identities did not shape their experiences. Disability and age were simply the most commonly reflected upon throughout our work, and we have therefore included an exploration of these within this report. We would encourage further research into how a student's identities shape their experiences of mental health and higher education, particularly amongst students who are part-time, distance learners or commuters.

Disability

Several of our student panellists identified as having a disability, and for some this was a significant factor in shaping their decision to study as a part-time, distance learner or commuter student, and their experiences of higher education. Amongst part-time undergraduate students, 20% have a known disability compared to 17% of the full-time undergraduate population (HESA, 2023a). Given the limited amount of data available around commuter students and distance learners, it is unclear whether these modes of study are more common choices amongst disabled students.

For the disabled students on our panel, there were clear benefits to studying part-time, off-campus and/or as a commuter, such as prioritising wellbeing and being able to study in familiar environments.

"I can prioritise my health. The demands of full-time study with my disabilities were not possible, so this gives me the option to still study."

A part-time student panellist

"Studying in my own environment at home as an autistic person is a big plus for me. As well as not having to travel."

A distance learner student panellist

Disabled student panellists also reflected on the positive impact of having access to tailored support, such as through disability advisors and the Disability Support Allowance (DSA).

"I was given an autism tutor and a mental health tutor as part of DSA which was useful."

A part-time student panellist

A survey of disabled higher education students by Randstad (2023) found that of those surveyed who had considered dropping out of university, 55% said DSA had prevented them from doing so.

Whilst our research here highlights encouraging examples of adjustments being made in higher education, it must be recognised that there are considerable barriers in access and outcomes for disabled students (Pearson et al., 2019). This further highlights the need for targeted student support, especially for those who may come into contact with support services at a lower frequency, including off-campus and part-time learners.

Age

Studying as a mature student through a non-traditional mode is another student identity that can pose considerable barriers. Research from Askham (2008: p90) suggests that some mature, part-time students can feel intimidated by academic culture “including rules and regulations, word limits, language, assessment assumptions and other ‘academic’ issues”. Difficulty assimilating into the culture of higher education can have implications for feelings of belonging:

“Being a mature student can feel overwhelming at times, especially as with distance learning there isn’t as strong a peer network and it can feel very isolating. I urge those in my position to reach out to their tutor groups, forge connections, and support each other.”

A part-time student panellist

Yet, it should be recognised that the ability to study at a later stage in life can be an incredibly rewarding experience. One part-time, mature student stated that:

“I thought my chance to study was behind me, and always felt like my lack of degree has hindered my career progression somewhat. The ability to study at a distance learning institution as a disabled, mature student, has been instrumental in reigniting my confidence in myself. I am grateful for the ability to do this part-time, therefore fitting around my commitments and work.”

A part-time student panellist

Again, we return to the theme of flexibility in part-time and distance learning as a key benefit to alternative modes of study. The opportunity to access higher education remains an incredibly valuable experience for many part-time, distance learner and commuter students and it’s vital that universities continue to support them in juggling responsibilities by providing appropriate support and adjustments.

Targeted support for mature students can include tailored timetabling, additional support for students with caring responsibilities, and the fostering and maintenance of mature student communities.

Conclusion

Overall, this report has sought to shine a light on the experiences of part-time, distance learner and commuter students, and highlight the ways in which universities can provide support to these communities as they engage in higher education.

Our work with the incredible student panel has shown us that the higher education sector still has a way to go in becoming genuinely inclusive to all students and prospective students. However, our work with the Positive Digital Practices team has shown us that progress is possible and that with committed and focused efforts, tailored support can be developed to ensure all students have the university experience they deserve.

We hope that this report serves as a useful tool for colleagues across the higher education sector, and that the student voice shared throughout will prompt discussions, reflections and actions which will improve the experiences of part-time, distance learner and commuter students across the country.

We further hope that our sector will come together and focus efforts on supporting students and creating truly inclusive environments for all. Together, we can ensure that no student is held back by their mental health, or by the identities that make them who they are.

References

- Askham, P. (2008). Context and identity: exploring adult learners' experiences of higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32(1). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03098770701781481>
- Augar, P. (2019). Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf
- Blake, S., Capper, G. and Jackson, A. (2022). Building Belonging in Higher Education. Pearson & WonkHE. <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/10/Building-Belonging-October-2022.pdf>
- Bolton, P. and Lewis, L. (2023). Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England. House of Commons Library. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9195/CBP-9195.pdf>
- Butcher, J. (2020). Unheard: the voices of part-time adult learners. Higher Education Policy Institute. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Unheard-The-voices-of-part-time-adult-learners.pdf>
- Callender, C. and Thompson, J. (2018). The Lost Part-Timers: The decline of part-time undergraduate higher education in England. The Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/The-Lost-Part-Timers-Final.pdf>
- Chappell, A., McHugh, E., Wainwright, E., Gilhooly, K. (2020) The Experiences of Undergraduate Commuter Students. Brunel University London. <https://bura.brunel.ac.uk/bitstream/2438/21689/1/FullText.pdf>
- Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2014). Learning from futuretrack: studying and living at home. Department for Business Innovation and Skills. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/287699/bis-14-642-learning-from-futuretrack-studying-and-living-at-home-bis-research-paper-167.pdf
- Department for Education (2023). HE providers and practices to support student mental health. Government Social Research. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mental-health-and-wellbeing-practices-in-higher-education>
- Doghonadze, N., Aliyev, A., Halawachy, H., Knodel, L. and Adedoyin, A. S. The Degree of Readiness to Total Distance Learning in the Face of COVID-19 - Teachers' View. *Journal of Education in the Black Sea Region*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3904094
- Donnelly, M. and Gamsu, S. (2018). Home and Away: social, ethnic and spatial inequalities in student mobility. The Sutton Trust. https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Home_and_away_FINAL.pdf
- GuildHE. (2018). Wellbeing in Higher Education. GuildHE. <https://www.guildhe.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GuildHE-Wellbeing-in-Higher-Education-WEB.pdf>
- HESA (2023a). Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22 - Student numbers and characteristics. Higher Education Statistics Agency. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-01-2023/sb265-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers>
- HESA (2023b). Table 60 - HE student enrolments by HE provider and location of study 2014/15 to 2021/22. Higher Education Statistics Agency. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-60>
- HESA (2023c). Where do HE students come from?: Transnational education. Higher Education Statistics Agency. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from/transnational>
- Hubble, S. and Bolton, P. (2021). Mature higher education students in England. House of Commons Library. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8809/CBP-8809.pdf>
- Hubble, S. and Bolton, P. (2022). Part-time undergraduate students in England. House of Commons Library. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7966/CBP-7966.pdf>
- Hughes, G. and Spanner, L. (2019). University Mental Health Charter. Student Minds. <https://universitymentalhealthcharter.org.uk/>
- Jones, A. (2022). Learning with the lights off: students and the cost-of-living crisis. MillionPlus. https://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Learning_with_the_lights_off_-_students_and_the_cost_of_living_crisis.pdf
- Maguire, D. and Morris, D. (2018). Homeward Bound: Defining, understanding and aiding 'commuter students'. Higher Education Policy Institute. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/HEPI-Homeward-Bound-Defining-understanding-and-aiding-%E2%80%98commuter-students%E2%80%99-Report-11429_11_18Web-1.pdf
- Neves, J. and Hillman, N. (2019). Student Academic Experience Survey. AdvanceHE & Higher Education Policy Institute. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2019.pdf>
- Nguyen, Q., Rienties, B. and Richardson, J. T. E. (2020). Learning analytics to uncover inequality in behavioural engagement and academic attainment in a distance learning setting. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(4). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/02602938.2019.1679088?needAccess=true&role=button>

- NSS (2022a). National Student Survey - NSS. NSS data: provider level. Office for Students. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/nss-data-provider-level/>
- NUS (2022b).[Social media post] <https://twitter.com/nusuk/status/1541798586257735681>
- Office for National Statistics. (2022). Coronavirus and higher education students. Office for National Statistics. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandhighereducationstudents>
- Office for Students. (2020). English higher education 2020. Office for Students. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/annual-review-2020/>
- Office for Students. (2023). Regulatory notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance. Office for Students. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/>
- Ogden, K. and Waltmann, B. (2023). Large real cuts to student financial support to become permanent. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/news/large-real-cuts-student-financial-support-become-permanent>
- Oliver, M.T. (2022) Distance Learning in UK Universities: How do UK Universities compare to global benchmarks?. Tribal. <https://www.tribalgroup.com/blog/distance-learning-in-uk-universities>
- The Open University (2023). About The Open University. The Open University. (Accessed 31/05/2023). <https://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/>
- Papadatou-Pastou, M., Goozee, R., Payne, E., Barrable, A. and Tzotzoli, P. A review of web-based support systems for students in higher education. International Journal of Mental Health Systems, 59. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s13033-017-0165-z>
- The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) (2021). Distance learning. POST. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0639/POST-PN-0639.pdf>
- Pearson, V., Lister, K., McPherson, E., Gallen, A. M., Davies, G., Colwell, C., Bradshaw, K., Braithwaite, N. S. J. and Collins, T. (2019). Embedding and Sustaining Inclusive Practice to Support Disabled Students in Online and Blended Learning. Journal of Interactive Media in Education. 1. <https://oro.open.ac.uk/61877/>
- Randstad (2023). A Changing Landscape: Mental Health and Wellbeing in Higher Education. Randstad. <https://www.randstad.co.uk/employers/areas-of-expertise/student-support/student-mental-health-report-2023/>
- Russell Group SUs (2023). Student Cost of Living Report. Russell Group Students' Unions. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63f4ed73056f42572785c28e/t/640b4a3d20fc6122160c275e/1678461513650/Cost+of+Living+Report+-+March+2023.pdf>
- Save the Student (2023). National Student Accommodation Survey 2023. Save the Student. <https://www.savethestudent.org/accommodation/national-student-accommodation-survey-2023.html>
- Sousa, F. S. and Feeney, A. (2023). University Counselling Services in Scotland: Insights and Perspectives Following the Covid-19 Pandemic. Think Positive. <https://thinkpositive.scot/resources/university-counselling-services-in-scotland/>
- Student Minds (2023). February 2023: new research findings on student mental health. Student Minds. <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/insight-briefings.html>
- Swain, J. and Hammond, C. The motivations and outcomes of studying for part-time mature students in higher education. International Journal of Lifelong Education, 30(5).. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02601370.2011.579736>
- Universities UK (2013). The power of part-time: a review of part-time and mature higher education. Universities UK. <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/26225/1/PowerOfPartTime.pdf>
- UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission (2022). A Students Futures Manifesto. UPP Foundation. <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/a-student-futures-manifesto/>
- Wong, B. (2018). By Chance or by Plan?: The Academic Success of Nontraditional Students in Higher Education. AERA Open, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858418782195>.
- Wonkhe (2019). Only the lonely - Loneliness, student activities and mental wellbeing at university. Wonkhe. https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2019/03/Only-the-lonely-8-Page_v2-003.pdf

**student
minds**

www.studentminds.org.uk

Designed by Hornett Desgn Ltd