

Who Commutes to College, and Why It Matters

Supporting commuter students for a better college experience

Introduction

Ireland is far from unique in having a high proportion of college students living at home with their parents while participating in higher education. Two in five (40%) students do so, a little higher than the European average (34%), but similar to countries such as the Netherlands (43%), Slovenia (42%), and Portugal (37%) (Hauschildt et al., 2021). Students in Ireland also spend a lot of time commuting to college, though again this is not unusual. The median one-way commute time in 2019 for those living at home was 45 minutes, compared to a European median of 40 minutes.

But there are also important areas where Ireland diverges and stands out. For example, students living at home with their parents tend to have relatively high rates of dissatisfaction with their location (27% vs European average of 15%) and commute time (41% vs 32%) (Hauschildt et al., 2021). In addition, those living in student accommodation in Ireland have by far the highest rates of dissatisfaction with accommodation costs (60% vs 24%). It is also notable that the mean one-way commute time for students living with their parents in Ireland in 2022 was 52 minutes, compared to 28 minutes for those who did not (Erskine & Harmon, 2023).

Who commutes to college?

Defining a 'commuter student' can be tricky. Previous research has focused on students living at home, usually with their parents, and distant from their place of study (Maguire & Morris, 2018). In the Irish context, students who are full-time, are male, are younger, have a disability or impairment, study at institutes of technology or technological universities (TUs), and are based in Dublin



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The number of students with long regular commutes to college is growing. Reasons include an increasing number and changing mix of students participating in higher education, a shortfall in appropriate and affordable student accommodation, and the recent cost-of-living crisis. But does it matter and, if so, what can and should be done to address it?

are all more likely to live with their parents or guardians (Erskine & Harmon, 2023). There is also evidence that, contrary to the US and UK, students who live with their parents and commute to college rank higher on a range of socioeconomic indicators (Gormley, 2016; Hauschildt et al., 2021).

A new study profiling college student commuters reveals striking patterns in commute time. Analysing Eurostudent data for 2019, and focusing on full-time undergraduate students, Cullinan (2023) shows that one-third of students faced one-way commutes of 40 minutes or more, while almost one in six had a one-way commute of at least 1 hour. The research also reveals important differences across a range of dimensions, including demographic and higher-education characteristics, institutions, geography, and socioeconomic background.

A key result in the paper relates to socioeconomic disparities in commute time. Among students living at home, the least well-off had one-way commutes that were 18 minutes longer on average than the most well-off. In terms of differences by higher education institution (HEI) and geography, average daily commutes varied from just 11 minutes on average at St Angela's College to almost 1 hour at TU Dublin, with average one-way commutes of 45 minutes across all Dublin-based HEIs.

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Why it matters

Long commutes should be a concern to HEIs and policymakers for several reasons. International evidence shows that commuting to college has a negative effect on campus participation, student engagement, and academic achievement (Kobus et al., 2015; Allen & Farber, 2018; Coutts et al., 2018; Webb & Turner, 2020). Maguire and Morris (2018) state that commuter students obtain poorer outcomes from their higher education and are less satisfied with their overall academic experience. They also note that while many commuters will see advantages in living at home while studying, those living far from college are at 'higher risk' in terms of student success.

This is a result of both increased travel disruption and lower potential for social engagement. Commuter students can be more isolated from other students outside formal classes. This can adversely affect their out-of-class interactions, participation in group work, integration with fellow students and academics, and ability to participate fully in extracurricular opportunities typically considered a core part of the college experience (Maguire & Morris, 2018).

Another new study considers the relationship between living arrangements, commute time, and student wellbeing (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023). The authors find that living at home reduces student wellbeing on average, but that these effects are driven almost entirely by female students. Long commutes are

related to very large increases in poor wellbeing for female students living at home (ibid.). The findings suggest that for female students living far from campus, any benefits from living at home are significantly outweighed by the negative effects of commuting. Female students with long commutes also express relatively high rates of dissatisfaction with aspects of their general college experience, including friendships, and aspects of their programme, such as the organisation of their studies and timetable (ibid.).

What to do

Given the drivers of levels and changes in commuting in Ireland, the likelihood is that both short- and longer-term solutions are required. A shortfall of suitable and affordable student accommodation is an obvious challenge, particularly given the socioeconomic disparities in commute time identified in Cullinan (2023). In simple terms, the fact that many less-well-off students face very long commutes could exacerbate inequalities in student outcomes. While some HEIs are making good progress in developing more on-campus accommodation, making this affordable is crucial – particularly in the current context of a general accommodation shortage in many urban areas in Ireland.

There is no shortage of practical actions that HEIs can consider to help commuter students in the shorter term. These are likely to be context-specific but could include adjustments to timetables to include later starts, or blocked timetables to reduce the number or timing of days that commuter students need to be on campus (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023).

In terms of social integration, holding more events during the day and creating commuter common rooms could be considered. Maguire and Morris (2017) discuss other possible measures, such as adapting welcome and induction activities, providing better advice and guidance about commuting, matching the curriculum and assessment models to commuter students' needs, and creating online commuter support communities with activities close to commuter students' homes. While some HEIs in Ireland are already implementing such initiatives, much more needs to be done.

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An internal survey of students and staff at Trinity College Dublin (30.11.2023) found that students and staff are less likely to walk or cycle to the university than before COVID-19, with just 9% currently cycling.