

MEETING OUR STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE:

Higher Education Responses To Evolving Student Needs

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Foreword

The students who arrive on our campuses today are more likely than ever to be commuting from home, balancing study with substantial paid employment, and navigating financial pressures, challenges that recent generations did not face to the same extent. To support student success, these increasingly defining features of participation in Irish higher education challenge institutions to respond and align their structures, policies, supports, and teaching practices to reflect this reality.

It is against this backdrop that the idea for a collaborative project between Maynooth University's (MU) Centre for Teaching and Learning and Dundalk Institute of Technology's (DkIT) Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching emerged, supported by the Higher Educations Authority's Strategic Alignment for Teaching and Learning Enhancement (SATLE) Pathfinder fund.

The project set out to systematically examine how higher education institutions are responding effectively to these evolving student realities, and to translate that evidence into actionable activities for practitioners, leaders, and policymakers at Maynooth University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and more broadly across the Irish higher education sector.

In common with most other Irish higher education institutions, both Maynooth University and Dundalk Institute of Technology, serve diverse student populations, many of whom commute considerable distances, depend on part-time employment to sustain their studies, and experience financial and time pressures. For this reason, we have focused on institutional responses to the challenges presented by these evolving student needs.

This report is designed to be relevant to a wide range of readers, and we would encourage different audiences to approach it in the way that best serves their needs.

For those new to the themes of student financial hardship and commuting, Chapter 2 may be the most appropriate starting point. This chapter synthesises the research across seven interconnected themes, from financial hardship and the student work imperative through to belonging, extra-curricular engagement, timetabling flexibility, and block teaching. It builds a comprehensive picture of some of the pressures shaping contemporary student life and structural responses based on the evidence.

Readers already familiar with the landscape and looking for practical examples of institutional action in practice will find Chapters 3 and 4 most directly relevant. They present a suite of case studies of institutional approaches, ranging from small, immediately actionable initiatives to large-scale curriculum and governance reform, all selected for their relevance, evidence base, and transferability to the Irish context.

Those engaged in strategy, policy, or planning at institutional or sectoral level may find Chapter 5's research synthesis the most useful entry point. This chapter distils the recurring patterns and institutional levers that emerged across the project, outlining the conditions under which effective and sustainable change becomes possible. It identifies four key areas for institutions to consider – deepening student insight and partnership, strengthening flexible and inclusive learning environments, enhancing practical and preventative interventions and supports, and coordinated sector-wide learning and collaboration.

We would like to pay particular tribute to the excellent work of Senior Research Fellow, Dr Ciara O'Farrell, who has worked tirelessly on this project from the initial research to the final report. We are most grateful to her for the expertise, time, commitment and insights that she has brought to every stage of this project.

It is our hope that this work provides evidence-based insights and actions that can be applied by higher education institutions in responding to the ever-evolving needs of their students.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Across higher education, students are navigating an increasingly complex mix of pressures that fundamentally shape how they participate in university life. For many, the traditional idea of an immersive campus experience has been overtaken by the daily realities of financial strain, long commutes, and the growing necessity to work substantial hours alongside study. These pressures are unfolding in a context of rapid technological change and rising expectations for flexibility, accessibility, and personalised learning pathways. Taken together, they signal a profound shift in the conditions of contemporary student participation, challenging institutions to adapt their structures, policies, and practices to meet contemporary student needs.

This publication emerges from a collaborative project between Maynooth University (MU) and Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), developed in response to the widening gap between traditional institutional models and the lived experiences of an increasingly diverse student population. By examining how higher education institutions across Ireland, the United Kingdom, and internationally are adapting to these rapid shifts in student realities, the project sought to identify strategies that respond to the practical and academic needs shaping contemporary student life.

Taking a systems-thinking approach, and informed by over 400 institutional documents, grey and academic literature, the project mapped key developments affecting students; analysed institutional responses across strategic and operational levels; and identified innovative, evidence-based practices that strengthen engagement, belonging, and retention.

A central aim of the project was to collate approaches that Irish institutions can adopt, sustain, or scale, drawing on transferable lessons from international practice. By synthesising the existing evidence base and examining leading institutional responses, the project sought to collate actionable insights that can support sector-wide strategy, policy formation, planning, and future research.

Beginning with a rapid review of published literature from (2023–2025) that included academic sources (titles and abstracts from key higher education journals), sector grey literature, and findings from largescale student surveys, the project sought to capture both conceptual insights and lived student experiences. Although not exhaustive, the review provided a strong evidence-informed high-level overview of evolving student needs. Across the evidence base, ten consistent themes were identified:

1. **Financial hardship for students**
2. **The commuting student experience**
3. **Flexible timetables and learning structures**
4. **Technology enhanced and blended learning**
5. **Generative AI and emerging student expectations**
6. **Employability, work readiness, and return on investment (ROI)**
7. **Health, wellbeing, and the pressures of student life**
8. **Social belonging, identity, and connection**
9. **Neurodiversity and institutional change**
10. **Structural inequities and systemic barriers**

From this broad evidence base, the study then focused investigation on two interconnected priority areas: student financial hardship and the commuter student experience. While presented separately here for clarity, we found that these issues rarely occur in isolation. Indeed, the challenges they generate (time poverty, increased work obligations, limited campus presence, and reduced opportunities for social connection) intersect and often compound one another, shaping students' ability to engage and succeed within higher education today.

The following chapters consider emerging issues facing students and the creative ways institutions are responding to these challenges. Drawing on insights from international strategy analysis, academic research, sectoral evidence, and examples of emerging practice, we highlight recurring patterns, strategic levers,

and coherent, sustainable and scalable design principles that can support more equitable environments in which students can thrive, regardless of socioeconomic background or external commitments. Our intention is not to prescribe a single model of practice, but to offer some transferable principles and practices that institutions can refine or scale according to their contexts and priorities.

Chapter 2 examines the emerging needs that are increasingly shaping today's student experience. What began as an exploration of three foundational briefings identified through literature and sectoral reports—financial hardship in higher education, the student work imperative, and the commuting student experience—quickly expanded as the analysis unfolded. While each theme is important in its own right for understanding students' capacity to engage and succeed, it became clear that they rarely operate independently. Instead, financial strain, long commutes, and work responsibilities intersect to create compounding pressures that shape students' everyday lives. For example, students balancing employment, travel, and study frequently experience chronic time poverty, significantly limiting their academic engagement and participation in campus life. Running through these interlocking pressures, and emerging as the strongest crosscutting pattern, is the centrality of belonging. Feelings of inclusion, connection, and recognition are essential to student success, yet they are heavily constrained by these structural conditions. This insight led to the development of two further thematic summaries on student belonging and extracurricular engagement. Finally, the literature synthesis highlighted the urgent need for institutions to respond more coherently to these challenges through strengthened student supports and changes to curriculum structures and pedagogical approaches, informing our final two summaries on flexible timetabling and block or immersive teaching. Together, these seven thematic summaries map the interconnected challenges facing contemporary students and outline the structural, pedagogical, and cultural shifts required to support their success.

Building on this, Chapters 3 and 4 present a curated set of case studies that illustrate what effective institutional practice looks like in action. Evidence-informed, operationally feasible, and capable of being adapted or scaled across diverse institutional contexts, these cases were selected to represent a wide spectrum of approaches ranging from small, manageable initiatives to more focused structural interventions or largescale institutional or multi-institutional strategies. Together, they offer a flexible suite of examples that institutions can draw on, whether seeking quick wins, piloting targeted reforms, or pursuing deeper system-level change. The first collection of case studies examines institutional approaches to strengthening student financial wellbeing. It explores how universities are responding to growing levels of student financial precarity through integrated governance structures, meaningful student–institution partnerships, and a range of practical supports. The second collection of case studies focuses on supporting commuter students and showcases a spectrum of initiatives from small, manageable interventions to broader structural and system-level strategies, all with the common goal of enhancing the academic and social experiences of students who balance significant commuting and other external commitments.

The final chapter's research synthesis brings together the breadth of evidence generated across the project to provide a brief, consolidated picture of how higher education institutions are adapting to evolving student needs. Rather than setting out prescriptive recommendations, the synthesis distils the key patterns, principles, and institutional levers that consistently emerged across the project's thematic analysis, international strategy review, literature review, "emerging issues" thematic summaries, and case studies. It highlights how effective responses operate at different levels and shows how these layers can work together to create more supportive environments for students.

Collectively, the evidence from this project shows that contemporary student needs are

increasingly interconnected. Financial strain, long commutes, work responsibilities, and limited time on campus combine to shape students' capacity to engage, belong, and succeed in higher education. While institutions are responding with innovative practices, there remains a clear need for more coherent and strategically aligned action that connects student realities to curriculum design, timetabling, governance, and resource planning. Because challenges of this scale are not only institutional but national, HEIs cannot address them meaningfully in isolation. A sector-wide, system-level approach is required, one that is supported by national funding models, policy frameworks, collaboration mechanisms, and robust data infrastructures. This publication aims to contribute to that next phase of collective action by providing an evidence base that captures evolving student needs and informs coordinated, sustainable responses.

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Chapter 2:

Evolving Student Needs: Key Themes, Approaches and Interconnected Challenges

Introduction

This chapter presents seven evidence-informed thematic summaries that synthesise research, sectoral reports, institutional strategies, and student insights from 2020–2025. The first three themes examine core emerging student needs—**financial hardship, the student work imperative, and the commuting student experience**. Building on these foundations, the next two themes explore **belonging** and **extracurricular engagement** as crosscutting drivers of student success. Finally, with a focus on coherent whole-of-institution responses, the last two themes examine **flexible timetabling** and **block or immersive teaching**. Each briefing examines its theme through the lenses of key drivers, impacts, barriers, current institutional responses and potential future directions. Together, these seven thematic summaries offer an integrated view of the interconnected challenges shaping contemporary student life and outline the structural and pedagogical shifts required to support student success.

1.Financial Hardship

Introduction

Financial hardship in higher education is a complex, multidimensional challenge (Leung et al, 2020) with significant implications for student well-being and academic outcomes. It has become an increasingly urgent concern in Ireland and across the UK and Europe, driven by escalating living costs (including travel and fuel costs), inadequate financial supports, ongoing housing shortages and widening socioeconomic inequalities. A growing body of evidence points to a worsening financial landscape for students and a cost-of-learning crisis across the sector, with more students relying on part-time work, remaining living at home to reduce expenses, or undertaking long commutes to university.

Financial strain is linked not only to reduced academic persistence but also to weaker social integration, as it restricts participation in extracurricular or campus-based activities, potentially eroding students' sense of belonging.

Drivers of Financial Hardship for Students

Insufficient support: Students across Europe and the UK are among the groups most severely affected by financial hardship, with maintenance loans, bursaries, and hardship funds falling short of meeting real living costs (Freeman, 2023; Dabrowski, 2024).

High prevalence of difficulty: Eurostudent VIII (HEA, 2023) found that one-third of Irish students face serious financial difficulty, and the National Youth Council of Ireland (2024) reported that 22% of young people have skipped meals due to financial strain.

Rising living costs: In the UK, the Russell Group Survey (2023) found that 94% of students experienced increased living costs, with two-thirds reducing spending on food and essentials. Over half said the cost-of-living crisis harmed their academic experience, and one in five considered dropping out. Similar findings emerged from the Student Academic Experience Survey (HEPI, 2024), where three-quarters of respondents said their studies were affected by the cost-of-living crisis, and one in ten had considered leaving university because of financial pressure. International evidence mirrors this trend. A scoping review from Australia and New Zealand found that 68% of students reported significant financial issues, with food and housing insecurity the most pressing hardships, and 96% reporting high levels of emotional stress (Russell et al., 2025).

Impacts of Financial Hardship on Students

Need for coping strategies: Surveys have highlighted that students are having to seek alternative ways to cope with financial precarity due to lack of adequate support. Coping strategies include moving back home, bulk-buying cheaper food, cutting back on heating, skipping meals, maximising time in libraries or public spaces to save energy, and limiting social activities (Dabrowski, 2023; Iqbal et al., 2025).

Food insecurity: Food insecurity has become a critical issue, with many students relying on food banks to meet daily needs (D'Andrea-Baker et al., 2024; Faigbor & Brown, 2025; Russell et al., 2025).

Academic and career trajectories: Implications of financial hardship are far-reaching, affecting not only students' material living conditions but also their academic and career trajectories. Class attendance, academic performance, retention and graduation rates are undermined by financial insecurity (Fiabgor & Brown, 2025; Iqbal et al., 2025; Dabrowski et al., 2024).

Academic impact of working: Over half of working students in Ireland reported that employment negatively affected their academic performance, and 42% of postgraduate researchers considered withdrawing, with nearly a quarter citing financial hardship (USI, 2023).

Reduced engagement and belonging: Students under financial strain are less likely to join societies, volunteer, or engage in social events that enhance employability, often leading to isolation and a weakened sense of belonging (Mearman & Payne, 2023; NUS, 2022; Wiley et al, 2023).

Mental health: Students who experience food, housing, and financial stressors are more likely to experience anxiety, depression and reduced quality of life (Russell et al., 2025; Leung et al., 2020; Iqbal et al., 2025; Dabrowski et al., 2024; Fiabgor et al., 2025; Sprung & Rogers, 2021). Financial wellbeing data from *Blackbullion* (2023) shows a 39% increase in the shortfall between student income and expenses compared to 2022, with 87% of students worried about money and 58% reporting negative mental health impacts. Similarly, the UK's National Union of Students (2022) found that 90% of students cited cost-of-living pressures as a major factor affecting their well-being, echoing research identifying financial anxiety as the top driver of student distress.

Barriers to Effective Support

Fragmented interventions: Universities have introduced a range of interventions such as food support schemes, rental and transport subsidies, and hardship funds. However, systemic shortcomings persist and these interventions can be piecemeal and reactive, limited in reach or offering only short-term relief without addressing underlying inequities or systemic financial strain (Freeman, 2023; Russell, 2024).

Framing: University responses sometimes treat financial hardship as an isolated issue rather than embedding it within student success and retention strategies (D'Andrea-Baker et al., 2024; Sprung & Rogers, 2021; Soederberg, 2023).

Access: Barriers to uptake and access of supports include stigma associated with accessing support, poor communication, fragmented services, lack of awareness, and gaps in availability or effectiveness of supports (D'Andrea-Baker, C., et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2025; Corney et al., 2024; Soederberg, 2023).

Institutional Responses and Future Directions

Universities have adopted a range of measures to address student hardship, although provision remains uneven. The HEPI Cost of Living Report (2023) identified that 76% of UK universities provide support for food and drink, 47% for health costs, and 35% for travel and digital access. Over a quarter (27%) operate food banks, and half have implemented meal price freezes or food discounts.

There is a growing call for institutions to move from reactive aid to systemic policies and strategies that embed financial well-being within the wider student experience (Dabrowski et al, 2024; D'Andrea-Baker et al., 2024; Sprung & Rogers, 2021; Soederberg, 2023). Many of these strategies recommend both operational reform and cultural change, challenging assumptions of the "traditional" full-time student, and acknowledging the diverse realities of today's higher education learners (Romito et al., 2020).

Emerging research also calls for universities to adopt structured, multi-level, and long-term approaches to financial hardship that prioritise prevention and intervention to address unique challenges of students facing economic hardship (D'Andrea-Baker et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2025; Soederberg, 2023; Kim & Murphy, 2024).

D'Andrea-Baker et al. (2024) posit several strategies for food security including:

- Promoting awareness and advocating for resources through targeted marketing and communication campaigns.
- Strategically locating the campus food pantry in a visible and central location.
- Establishing clear systems for collecting and analysing food insecurity data.
- Augmenting food pantries and support centres by integrating financial literacy and education programs.
- Forming a housing and food security task force with the full support of the college president, which would include a diverse representation of all campus voices.

Russell et al. (2025) argue that universities should create inclusive and user-friendly financial support systems that effectively serve all students in need across multiple levels:

- **Interpersonal level:** Strengthen peer groups, mentoring programmes, and Students' Unions to provide emotional and practical support and guidance on finances (see also Dubber, 2024).
- **Organisational level:** Expand scholarships and emergency grants; embed financial literacy in induction and student support; provide essentials such as subsidised meals, campus food banks, and zero-cost course materials; integrate financial support with mental health and academic advising for wraparound care; adopt flexible timetabling and teaching models to accommodate students balancing work and study.
- **Community collaboration:** Partner with local authorities, non-profits, housing organisations, food banks, health clinics, and legal aid providers to expand students' support networks.
- **Policy level:** Advocate for systemic reforms including increased government funding, protections for student housing, and regular national surveys on student well-being to guide evidence-based policy.

Conclusion

Financial hardship is an urgent and growing concern in higher education, driven by rising costs and systemic inequities that affect many but disproportionately impact vulnerable students.

The growing cost-of-living crisis impacts negatively on academic performance, student retention, mental health, and students' sense of belonging. Responding effectively to these challenges will require coordinated, multilevel approaches across institutions. Part of this involves a cultural shift away from viewing students primarily through the lens of the "traditional" fulltime model and toward recognising the diverse realities and pressures facing today's "new majority" learners. It also calls for operational development, from largely reactive financial aid responses to a more proactive, holistic strategy that embeds financial wellbeing throughout the student experience. Without broader systemic change, financial stress will continue to undermine both access and outcomes in higher education.

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2. The Student Work Imperative

Introduction

The student work imperative has become an established and accelerating feature of higher education across Europe and the UK, driven largely by escalating living costs and widening financial pressures. The 2023 HEPI/Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey reported that, for the first time, more students are now in paid employment than not (55% versus 45%), with over half of students (52%) seeking to increase their working hours (HEPI, 2023). Similarly, Eurostudent VIII (HEA, 2023) found that 53% of European students undertake paid work during term time or vacation periods. It is reported that across Western Europe, working students average between 23–28 hours per week (Lessky & Unger, 2023), while UK students typically work around 14.5 hours alongside their studies, or an average of 42 hours per week in paid work and study (HEPI 2024). HEPI warns that these levels are approaching thresholds likely to impact academic performance and student well-being (HEPI, 2024).

As global trends indicate continued growth in student employment (Eastgate et al., 2023), the sustainability of full-time study models is increasingly called into question (HEPI, 2024). While moderate employment can enhance employability and develop transferable skills, the evidence consistently shows that excessive work hours undermine academic attainment, mental health, and students' sense of belonging (Eastgate et al., 2023; Eurostudent VIII, 2023; Peltz et al., 2021; Sprung & Rogers, 2021). This growing "work-study tension" reflects a wider challenge for universities seeking to foster engagement and inclusion at a time when many undergraduates must work to sustain their participation in higher education (Flynn et al., 2023).

Drivers of Student Employment

Financial necessity: Many students engage in paid work due to financial pressures, rising living costs, and insufficient student funding (HEA, 2023; HEPI, 2024; Lessky & Unger, 2023; O'Shea, 2020). The Eurostudent VIII report (2023) reveals that students have an average monthly income of €1,122, yet their average monthly spending amounts to €1,340. For nearly all student groups, expenses surpass income, making them heavily dependent on financial support from family members or partners to bridge the gap.

Multiple role commitments: Students juggling caring responsibilities, commuting, and family obligations are more likely to take on paid work, further complicating their academic schedules (Eastgate et al., 2023; Gorney, 2025).

Employability and experience: Students often view work as a strategy for improving post-graduation employment prospects, though this is often outweighed by the necessity of income generation (O'Shea, 2020).

Impacts of Student Employment

Academic Performance and Retention

- The relationship between student employment and academic outcomes is complex and often dependent on the intensity of work. The literature concurs that it is not employment itself, but the amount of time spent working that most strongly predicts negative outcomes. While limited part-time work can have neutral or positive effects (Saddique et al., 2023; UNICOMM, 2023), excessive working hours are consistently associated with poorer academic performance, reduced persistence, and higher attrition (Eastgate et al., 2023; Eurostudent VIII, 2023; Peltz et al., 2021; Saddique et al., 2023).
- Definitions of "high" work intensity differ: Some research links negative outcomes to working more than 10 hours per week (Lessky & Unger, 2023), while other studies suggest that up to 15 hours may have neutral or even positive effects when well-integrated with academic schedules

(Triventi et al., 2025). Peltz et al. (2021) note that working beyond 15 hours per week significantly increases risks, including reduced study time, disrupted sleep, and heightened psychological distress; and HEPI posits that part-time work reduces academic performance when students work more than 17 hours a week (HEPI, 2023).

- National data from Ireland (Eurostudent VIII, 2023) show that over half of working students report negative academic impacts due to employment demands. Likewise, HEPI 2023 reported that half of undergraduate students report that they missed classes in 2022/23 to do paid work.
- Recent data suggest students are taking longer to complete their degrees, deferring study, or withdrawing altogether, with lack of work-study balance cited as a key factor (Eastgate et al., 2023; HEPI 2024).
- The literature argues that without providing flexibility for working students, institutions are effectively excluding students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who cannot afford not to work. First-generation and low-income students are especially vulnerable, with financial strain amplifying the likelihood of withdrawal or delayed completion (Lessky & Unger, 2023; O'Shea, 2020; Peltz et al., 2021; HEPI, 2023).

Work-Study-Life Balance and Role Conflict

- Students face role conflict as they juggle academic, employment, and family responsibilities. Because time is a fixed, non-renewable resource, students are forced to strategically allocate their hours (Eastgate et al., 2023).
- Role conflict correlates strongly with academic dissatisfaction, burnout, and withdrawal intentions (Eastgate et al., 2023).
- Commuting between work and/or home and university adds time pressure and stress, intensifying negative emotions when travel distances are long (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023).

Mental Health and Well-Being

- Financial stress and long working hours predict higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among students. Students working excessive hours report poorer sleep quality, reduced social integration, and higher rates of mental health challenges (Peltz et al., 2021; Sprung & Rogers, 2021).

Barriers Faced by Working Students

Inflexible structures and scheduling: Higher education is still largely built around assumptions of full-time availability, with courses and services offered during standard hours and fixed periods, limiting access for working students (Remenick & Bergman, 2021). Academic schedules rarely reflect students' off-campus commitments, increasing time conflicts and stress (Gorney, 2025).

Limited on-campus employment: While on-campus roles are seen as most beneficial, they are scarce and unevenly distributed (Remenick & Bergman, 2021).

Insufficient targeted support: Few institutions provide dedicated guidance on time management or virtual counselling to help students integrate work and study (Lahav et al., 2020).

Institutional Responses and Future Directions

Remenick and Bergman (2021) propose four core strategies for institutions to better support working students:

1. Remove or adjust policies and practices that dis-incentivise working students.
2. Develop policies that integrate students' work experience with their education.
3. Provide on-campus part-time employment opportunities.
4. Establish support systems that help students find employment aligned with their schedules.

Other recommendations emerging from the literature include:

Flexible scheduling: Integrating flexible timetabling, hybrid learning, and condensed contact hours into institutional strategy. Evening, weekend, online, or block course formats reduce time conflicts and improve access (Roche et al., 2024; Samarawickrema et al., 2021).

Expanded support services: Offering services outside traditional hours or via digital platforms benefits students balancing work and study (Lahav et al., 2020).

Time-management guidance and virtual counselling: Helping students develop effective work-college management strategies (Lahav et al., 2020; Eastgate et al., 2023).

Targeted support for vulnerable groups: Identifying and supporting vulnerable groups, through mentoring, advising, and peer networks (Sprung & Rogers, 2021).

Expanding on-campus employment: Scaling up paid opportunities on campus to allow students to earn income without sacrificing academic engagement. Part-time work within faculties or central services or with local employers could enable students to add to their subject or professional knowledge rather than detracting from it (HEPI, 2024).

Conclusion

The student work imperative is a growing reality of higher education, driven by several factors but increasingly, by financial necessity. While some employment can be beneficial, the literature concurs that excessive work hours present a significant threat to students' academic success, mental health, and overall well-being. This is especially true for vulnerable groups such as low-income and first-generation students, for whom work is often not a choice but a necessity. To address this complex challenge and promote equity and success, institutions should continue to push for systemic reforms, including improved student funding and social protections, to alleviate the financial pressures driving excessive work hours. Emerging research also calls for universities to view student employment as a structural equity issue rather than an individual choice, and to adopt a holistic, systemic approach that provides targeted supports and recognizes the multifaceted lives of today's students.

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3. Commuting Student Experience

Introduction

Commuter students – those who live at home or elsewhere and travel to campus – represent a growing segment of higher education populations across Ireland, the UK and Europe. Rising living costs, housing shortages, and broader financial pressures have made commuting an economic necessity for many. The post-pandemic era has seen a rising academic divide between commuter and on-campus students, or "outsiders and insiders" (Blackbullion, 2025). The literature highlights links between commuting, financial hardship, academic performance, and challenges of belonging, engagement, and well-being. Approximately 20% of Irish students are estimated to live on campus, with 40% living with their parents and the remainder in private accommodation (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023). However, many institutions have not yet fully acknowledged the extent of this shift in student participation, and changes to teaching approaches, policies, and procedures have been gradual (Kenyon, 2024).

Drivers of Student Employment

Financial necessity: Many students live at home and commute, often long distances, to avoid high rents and accommodation costs (Blackbullion, 2024) even though the cost of commuting also contributes to financial stress (Keynon, 2024).

Housing shortages: A lack of affordable and available student housing forces students to live further from campus. This trend is linked to wider housing crises across Europe and is especially pronounced in Ireland. The financialisation of housing has positioned students as consumers in competitive rental markets, reducing access to affordable accommodation (Morris, 2025; Olfert et al., 2023).

Multiple role commitments: Part-time work, caring responsibilities, and family obligations make commuting more likely (Stalmirska et al., 2021).

Impacts of Commuting on students

Academic Performance and Persistence

- Residing on, or near, campus was found to have a positive effect on student grade point average for first year students in the US and UK (Webb and Turner, 2020). Longer commuting times are linked to reduced GPAs, academic persistence, and satisfaction. Commuter students have lower rates of success in higher education and beyond (Thomas, 2020).
- Commutes beyond 15–20 minutes significantly reduce attainment, with UK continuation rates falling 0.63% per additional 10 minutes of commute (Jachimowicz et al., 2021; Kaushik et al., 2024; Burzacchi et al., 2025).
- The average commute in Europe is approximately 15 minutes for students in university residences but 40 minutes for those living with parents (Gwosc et al.,2021; Cullinan & Flannery; 2023; Hauschildt et al. 2021). On average, students in Ireland have a longer commute time than in Europe. The TU Dublin Smarter Travel survey (2022) found that more than one-quarter of students travelled more than 30km to college (Irish Times, 2024). Disadvantaged students have longer average commutes than their more advantaged counterparts (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023).
- Students living at home are more likely to consider leaving university than those living in university accommodation (Ahn & Davis, 2020).
- Commuting limits time on campus, which may reduce engagement with teaching, support services, and academic staff (Blackbullion, 2025; Chappell et al., 2020; Morris, 2025; Page, 2021).

Social Integration, Belonging and Mattering

- Commuter students seek to optimise their time and make strategic decisions about when to attend campus, weighing the costs and benefits of each activity (Chappell et al., 2020; Keynon, 2024). They often prioritise academic engagement at the expense of social integration, believing that social activities offer lower returns than formal contact hours (Chappell et al., 2020; Page, 2021; Thomas, 2020; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022). When lectures are spread across multiple days with long gaps, the travel burden often outweighs the benefits of participation, resulting in lower attendance (Keynon, 2024). The quality of teaching and perceived value of classes also influence participation (Thomas, 2020).
- Reduced participation in extracurricular activities weakens a student's sense of belonging (feeling accepted, valued, and connected), which is linked to retention and success (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Blackbullion, 2025; Hallam, 2023; Kenyon, 2025; Pinto et al., 2024; Tinto, 1975).
- Recent literature highlights "mattering" - the sense of being important to others - as especially relevant for commuter students (Tett et al., 2025; Hallman, 2023). Commuter students occupy a liminal space between home and university and are more likely to experience feelings of disorientation, emotional exhaustion, and loneliness (Keynon, 2025).

Well-being

- A key theme from the Blackbullion (2025) survey is a growing sense of isolation among university students. Commuting negatively affects physical and mental well-being, leading to higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression, compounded by time pressure, travel fatigue, work overload, fear of failure, and lack of campus integration (Wenn & Turner, 2020; Parker et al., 2023; Pinto et al., 2024; Burzacchi et al., 2025).
- Cullinan et al. (2024) point to high rates of psychological distress among college students in Ireland, with 24.5% and 14.8% of students classified in 'mild to moderate' and 'severe to extremely severe' ranges for stress respectively. Their research finds that longer commute times are associated with substantial increases in poor well-being for female students living at home.
- Commuter students may have multiple roles in addition to being a student, such as work commitments, family, or other obligations. Such a wide range of challenges contributes to elevated psychological distress among commuter students (Blackbullion, 2025; Cullinan & Flannery, 2023; Parker et al., 2021).
- Commuters face also unique challenges in navigating the distinct cultures and expectations of both their family and college life. They can be more susceptible to demand overload and inner conflicts (Parker et al., 2023).

Barriers Faced by Commuting Students

Inflexible academic structures: Assumptions of nine to five availability disadvantages students juggling work or caring responsibilities. Rigid timetables, with early starts and late finishes, large gaps between classes, are identified by students as a particularly challenging issue (Keynon, 2024; Thomas, 2025). Limited online resources and requirements to be on campus every day can exacerbate these challenges (Goode et al., 2023; Remenick & Bergman, 2021; Page, 2021; Roche et al., 2025; Thomas, 2025).

Lack of spaces on campus: Commuters frequently lack access to lockers, kitchenettes, lounges, or microwaves, forcing them into libraries or cafés which have financial or social costs (Chappell et al., 2020; Thomas, 2020).

Reduced participation: Commuter students spend less time on campus outside of classes and have reduced engagement in extracurricular activities and student leadership opportunities, especially at night (Blackbullion, 2025; Page, 2021; Thomas, 2025; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022).

Institutional Responses and Future Directions

Addressing commuter students' needs requires both structural change and cultural recognition. Universities can best mitigate disadvantages experienced by commuter students by embedding reforms at the core of their strategies (Stalmirska & Mellon, 2021; Thomas, 2025; Turner & Webb, 2024). Emerging research calls for higher education institutions to view commuting as a structural equity issue rather than an individual challenge. It recommends the adoption of multi-level responses to enable commuting students participate in, and engage with, shared spaces and practices. This would ultimately increase commuter students' sense of belonging and build a positive university community and student experience (Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022):

- **Structural change:** Build flexibility into academic structures (hybrid or asynchronous options, sensitive timetabling) to reduce on-campus days and support work-study balance. Promote extra-curricular activities congruent with commuting.
- **Cultural recognition:** Signal clearly that commuter students matter by embedding belonging, well-being, and representation in institutional strategies.
- **Integrated services:** Link mental health, academic support, and practical assistance (e.g., transport subsidies or meal schemes) for wraparound care.
- **Partnerships and policy:** Collaborate with local authorities, transport providers, and housing organisations to address external stressors, and advocate for policy reforms that improve the student commuter experience.

Other institutional strategies to support commuter students include:

Timetabling/curriculum reform: Block teaching, condensed teaching days, online advising, out-of-hours services, and virtual office hours improve access for students balancing work and travel (Chappell et al., 2020; Cullinan & Flannery, 2023; Goode et al., 2023; Page, 2021; Remenick & Bergman, 2021; Thomas, 2025).

Enhanced use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and online facilities: Shifting some forms of physical access to high quality online provision can offer greater flexibility for both commuter and noncommuter students, helping to reduce the divide in attendance patterns (Keynon, 2024). Other strategies include recording lectures for asynchronous access, strengthening online learning resources, adopting flipped learning approaches, and providing online advisory or office hours (Roche al., 2025; Tett et al., 2025; Thomas, 2025).

Dedicated commuter spaces: Facilities like commuter hubs, lockers, microwaves, and low-cost social areas make daily campus life easier for commuting students and help boost their overall engagement (Chappell et al., 2020; Cullinan & Flannery, 2023; Worsley et al., 2021).

"Sticky Campus" initiatives: Students living on or near campus are two to three times more likely to participate in university activities. In contrast, over two thirds of commuter students report that travel time and competing commitments make it difficult to take part in campus-based activities (Chappell et al., 2020). Timetabling extracurricular activities during the day, increasing opening hours of hubs and restaurants; providing commuter-friendly social opportunities, and creating representation (e.g., commuter student forums or reps) enhance belonging and mattering (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023; Thomas, 2020; Thomas, 2025).

Housing and legal support: Providing transparency about local housing costs, tenant protections, and cost-of-living information to reduce external pressures (Chappell et al., 2020; Morris, 2025).

Communication and visibility:

- Explicitly recognising and expressing commitment to commuter students on institutional websites and institutional policy documents.
- Clearly promoting the supports, facilities, and services available to commuter students.
- Collaborating with a commuter student advisory panel to develop a dedicated webpage tailored to their needs.
- Hosting a dedicated webinar outlining key on-campus resources, facilities, and initiatives designed to enhance the commuter student experience at the start of each academic term (Chappell et al., 2020; Thomas, 2025).

Conclusion

The growing number of students who commute to university is increasingly being shaped by financial pressures, housing shortages, and the rising cost of living. This is a systemic equity issue, with both academic and social costs, and one that requires a holistic institutional response. Priority action areas include timetabling, use of VLEs, flexible learning approaches, and accessible support. Small, targeted actions can act as a starting point to meaningfully improve the commuter student experience while more focused reforms can address deeper structural barriers, ensuring commuter students can participate fully and equitably in the wider university experience.

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Ollscoil

4. Student Belonging

Introduction

As far back as 1975, Tinto identified belonging (alongside self-efficacy, perceptions of curriculum, goals, and motivation) as an essential psychological condition for student persistence and progression. Contemporary research continues to reinforce this view: students who experience a strong sense of belonging demonstrate higher motivation, confidence, academic engagement, and retention (Pedler et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2025). Blake et al. (2022) conceptualise belonging as comprising four core elements: connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy. Yet feeling valued, accepted, and connected to one's institution has become increasingly difficult for many students amid the changing pressures of modern higher education. Belonging is also unevenly experienced by students with commuter students and students with non-majority identities (e.g. first-generation, LGTBQ+ students, minoritised and non-traditional students) routinely reporting weaker belonging than their peers (Ajjawi et al., 2023; O'Shea, 2021; Spaducci et al., 2024; Baker et al., 2020).

Quality of student life is often an indirect measure of belonging, as it is seen to reflect the university environment and social experience. The 2025 Global Student Satisfaction survey (Study Portals, 2025) reports that satisfaction with the quality of student life has decreased significantly (by 4.39%). Similarly, in Australia, the student experience survey highlights a significant drop in student belonging since 2017 - from 52.7% to 49.3% in 2023 (QILT, 2023). On the other hand, research also shows that when higher education institutions actively support and encourage students' participation in extracurricular activities, they help strengthen the campus community and enhance students' sense of belonging. In Europe, the UNICOMM project (2023) highlights that fostering belonging is closely tied to students' active engagement with their university community. Similarly, in the UK, the Being, Belonging, Becoming (BBB) survey (Dunbar-Norris et al., 2025) provides a new quantitative tool for measuring 'Belonging' alongside 'Being' and 'Becoming' across multiple pilot institutions. Its findings indicate that building peer relationships (reported by 41% of respondents) and having supportive academic staff (34%) are the most influential factors in helping students develop a strong sense of belonging.

Drivers of Student Belonging

Socio-economic status and identity factors: First-generation, low-income, and culturally diverse students often experience weaker belonging due to financial pressures, fewer networks, and perceived exclusion (Ajjawi et al., 2023; Ahn & Davis, 2023; Baker et al., 2020; Crawford et al., 2024; Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023).

Living arrangements and proximity: Students living at home or far from campus, or who commute extensively, report lower belonging and higher withdrawal intentions (Ahn & Davis, 2023; Baker et al., 2020). The TU Dublin Smarter Travel survey (2022) found that more than one-quarter of students travelled more than 30km to college in Dublin (Irish Times, 2024). Disadvantaged students have longer average commutes than their advantaged counterparts (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023).

Social and peer networks: Fostering students' sense of belonging is closely linked to their active participation in the university community (UNICOMM Project, 2023). Clubs, societies, informal peer groups, and opportunities for student-student interaction underpin belonging (Ajjawi et al., 2023; Ahn & Davis, 2020; Crawford et al., 2024; De Sisto et al., 2021; Munoz & Baik et al., 2024; Penner et al., 2021; Van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman, 2020).

Institutional and staff signals: Students' perceptions of "mattering", especially through interactions with teaching staff, predict stronger belonging and engagement (Dunbar-Norris et al., 2025; Hallam, 2023; Cohen & Viola, 2022).

Support for transition: Orientation activities, mentoring, and "settling-in" supports are linked to stronger belonging, particularly for new majority cohorts (Allen et al., 2022; Crawford et al., 2024; McLean et al., 2022).

Impacts of Belonging on Students

Retention and persistence: Low belonging is strongly correlated with higher dropout rates, whereas belonging fosters motivation, purpose, and resilience (Ahn & Davis, 2023; Blackbullion, 2025; Middleton et al., 2021).

Academic engagement and success: Students who feel connected to their institution participate more fully in class, take on more leadership roles, and demonstrate higher achievement and satisfaction (Dunbar-Norris et al., 2025; Pedler et al., 2022; Cohen & Viola, 2022).

Well-being and mental health: Belonging mitigates stress, loneliness, and imposter feelings, and reduces anxiety and depression risks (Thomas et al., 2020; Worsley et al., 2021).

Equity outcomes: Without deliberate action, belonging gaps widen between traditional and non-traditional students, reinforcing structural inequalities (Crawford et al., 2024).

Barriers to Belonging

Time and distance: Commuting, part-time employment, and caring responsibilities limit opportunities for social and academic integration (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Baker et al., 2020; Blackbullion, 2025; Mearman & Payne, 2023; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Tett et al., 2025).

Fragmented support and poor communication or visibility: Students may not know about available clubs, events, or services (Dunbar-Norris et al., 2025; Knekta & McCartney, 2021).

Perceived exclusivity or irrelevance: Extracurricular activities and/or university events may appear culturally exclusive or low value to underrepresented groups (Dickinson et al., 2021; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021).

Online learning and post-pandemic norms: Increased online delivery reduces incidental peer contact and can weaken traditional pathways to belonging (Crawford et al., 2024).

Limited campus spaces: Lack of informal spaces for connection diminishes opportunities for authentic interaction (Chappell et al., 2020; Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020; Thomas, 2020; Thomas, 2025).

Institutional Responses and Future Directions

Institutional definitions of belonging sometimes place an onus for achieving belonging on individual students, and, therefore, failure to achieve belonging can be seen as the 'fault' of the learner (Ajjawi et al., 2023). The literature consistently emphasises the need for universities to make belonging a strategic priority. Evidence-based practices to increase belonging include:

Structured transition support: Early orientation, peer mentoring, and "settling-in" programmes that explicitly welcome and support all students, especially non-traditional or commuter students (Allen et al., 2022; Dunbar-Norris et al., 2025).

Enhancing peer connections: Investing in and promoting extracurricular activities, student societies, clubs, and study groups. Fostering students' sense of belonging through active participation in the university community (Ajjawi et al., 2023; De Sisto et al., 2022; Dunbar-Norris et al., 2025; Lee et al, 2025; King et al., 2021; UNICOMM Project, 2023).

Creating inclusive spaces: Providing physical spaces, such as lounges, hubs, and informal areas, for students to "be themselves" and meet peers (Ajjawi et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2025; Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020; Thomas, 2020; Thomas, 2025).

Staff development: Supporting academics to design purposeful learning interactions, such as embedding group work and collaborative learning (Brouwer et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2025). Outside of curriculum, modelling inclusivity, signalling that students matter, and recognising the unique and often invisible challenges different student populations face (Guyotte et al., 2021).

Recognition of diverse forms of engagement: Valuing community-based or off-campus engagement as part of students' belonging and learning journey (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Dunbar-Norris et al., 2025).

Detection and support: Identifying the barriers to feelings of belonging and inclusion experienced by students can inform action taken by universities to promote belonging. For example, data analytics can identify students at risk of low belonging and enable timely intervention of targeted supports (Crawford et al., 2024; Dunbar-Norris et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Declining rates of belonging reported in recent national surveys make it a pressing challenge for universities. Belonging is a complex concept that impacts student persistence, engagement, and well-being. By building belonging into core strategy and employing interventions to increase students' feelings of connection and integration with their institution, higher education institutions can embed belonging as a measurable, cross-institutional priority tied to retention and student success.

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5. Extracurricular Engagement

Introduction

Extracurricular activities (ECAs), through clubs, societies, volunteering, sports, and leadership roles, have long been recognised as central to the student experience. Recent literature finds a positive association between involvement in ECAs and strengthened student belonging, well-being, and other desirable student outcomes including higher self-efficacy, better academic performance, and enhanced graduate employability. For example, the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (Student Survey, 2020) links engagement in ECAs to the development of key capabilities like critical thinking and problem-solving. Other research associates higher rates of ECA participation with lower psychological distress and better self-esteem (UCL, 2023) with one report citing that students involved in ECAs experienced an 8% reduction in feelings of anxiety and depression (Gitnux, 2024).

Despite the importance of ECAs for holistic development and personal growth, research highlights that engagement with university-linked ECAs is often stratified by socio-economic status, age, and ethnicity. Recent research also shows a marked decline in ECA participation, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, due to rising costs of living, increased student employment, and a rise in students commuting (Munoz & Baik et al., 2024). This decline has significant implications for student engagement, persistence, and the sense of "campus life."

Drivers of Reduced ECA Participation

Financial pressures: Rising living costs have increased students' reliance on part-time jobs, leaving less time for ECAs (Wiley, 2023).

Commuting and distance from campus: Long journeys discourage students from staying late for extracurricular events (Mearman & Payne, 2023).

Timetabling: Irregular schedules make it harder for students to coordinate ECAs with class times (Munoz & Baik, 2024; Lacey et al., 2022).

Online learning: The growth of online resources and recorded lectures means students spend less time on campus, reducing contact with ECAs (Gretzinger & Hicks, 2024).

Well-being: Students report lower psychological well-being and higher social anxiety, potentially limiting ECA participation (Gretzinger & Hicks, 2024).

Perceived low value or exclusivity: Some students, especially first-generation or underrepresented groups, perceive ECAs as less relevant than academic attendance to their goals, or as socially exclusive (Dickinson et al., 2021).

Impacts of Reduced ECA Participation

Weakened sense of belonging: Fostering students' sense of belonging is closely linked to their active participation in the university community (UNICOMM Project, 2023). Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) (2024) defines this as "belonging" (i.e. feelings of connectedness, inclusion, and acceptance), which is closely associated with both academic achievement and personal wellbeing. It notes that belonging has dropped sharply since 2017 - from 52.7% of students feeling a sense of belonging to 49.3% in 2023 (QILT, 2024).

Loss of social capital and peer networks: ECAs have traditionally functioned as a "third space" where friendships form. Without them, students, especially first-years, lack informal support networks (Buckley & Lee, 2021; Chapman et al., 2023).

Lower retention and academic performance: Reduced engagement in extracurricular activities (ECAs) is associated with decreased retention and academic performance, partly because students forgo opportunities that support motivation, time management, and stress regulation (Buckley & Lee, 2021; Muñoz & Baik, 2024).

Unequal impact on commuting and working students: When institutions rely only on fixed-schedule, time-based ECAs, students with substantial work or commuting commitments are systematically disadvantaged, as they are less able to participate and therefore miss opportunities for community-building, support, and skill development.

Barriers to Participation

Time poverty: Students balancing part-time jobs or caring responsibilities are less likely to engage in ECAs (Wiley, 2023).

Commuting: Long travel times reduce ability to attend events (Mearman & Payne, 2023).

Timetabling: Inconvenient class schedules and reduced on-campus hours limit opportunities to participate (Munoz & Baik, 2024; Lacey et al., 2022).

Post-pandemic disengagement: Lower psychological well-being, increased online learning, and changing social norms have eroded traditional patterns of participation (QILT, 2023; Gretzinger & Hicks, 2024).

Perceptions of low value or social stigma: Some students attach less importance to ECAs or perceive them as exclusive (Dickinson et al., 2021).

Institutional Responses and Future Directions

"Sticky Campus": The term "Sticky Campus" refers to a university environment designed to encourage students to stay on campus longer (not just for classes, but for social, study, and leisure activities) to encourage a stronger sense of belonging. Transforming underused facilities into versatile hubs for collaboration, relaxation, and chance encounters, will encourage students to stay longer and engage more deeply with the campus community (Thomas et al., 2025).

Strategic timetabling and integration: ECAs are the primary mechanism for driving the social and communal components of a sticky campus. Institutions are increasingly considering daytime extracurricular offerings or creating timetables with gaps between classes so more students can take part in ECAs (Lacey et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2025). By deliberately scheduling protected time blocks for ECAs during daytime, universities can encourage higher student and staff participation in ECAs. This integration maximises opportunities for social and communal interaction, thereby driving the "sticky campus" experience (Lacey et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2025).

Diversifying opportunities: Some institutions offer micro-volunteering, short-term projects, and/or hybrid or online extracurricular options to accommodate students who are balancing work and caring responsibilities (Ahyad et al., 2020).

Physical spaces and facilities: The pandemic underscored the necessity of physical spaces for teaching, learning, and peer connection, prompting universities to repurpose areas like offices, kitchens, and outdoors spaces (Gravett et al., 2023). Connected environments are increasingly viewed as essential to a cohesive university experience. (Thompson et al., 2025). Providing lockers, kitchens, quiet lounges, microwaves, commuter hubs, and informal study/social spaces make staying on campus practical and attractive (Thomas, 2020).

Early induction: Introducing ECAs during orientation and weaving them into academic programmes normalises participation from day one (Allen et al., 2022; Thomas, 2020).

Prioritise peer connection and ECAs: Clubs, societies, informal peer groups, and opportunities for student-student interaction underpin HEI belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Crawford et al., 2024; De Sisto et al., 2022; Penner et al., 2021; UNICOMM Project, 2023; Van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman, 2020). ECAs and peer-building opportunities should be encouraged and prioritised rather than treated as optional add-ons.

Conclusion

Declining participation in extracurricular activities undermines social connection and belonging, an important lever for student success. The literature highlights how financial imperatives and other time pressures have driven this decline, with particularly severe impacts for students who commute, work, or have caring responsibilities. Developing a sticky campus – through thoughtful timetabling, commuter-friendly spaces and diversified ECA opportunities – offers a practical way to support the development of a campus environment that draws students in and keeps them connected to enhance both academic and personal outcomes.

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6. Flexible Timetabling

Introduction

Student demand for flexibility in higher education has grown significantly in the post-pandemic era, driven by experience and normalisation of remote learning through the pandemic, diverse student demographics, increasing work commitments, and advances in digital learning. Traditional, rigid timetables (based on fixed attendance and uniform scheduling) no longer meet the needs of modern students, particularly those who commute, work part-time, or have caring responsibilities.

Flexible timetabling refers to the strategic design and organisation of the academic day to enhance choice, accessibility, and engagement while reducing logistical barriers to participation (IUA, 2021; Thomas, 2020). Unlike block or immersive models, flexible timetabling retains the traditional academic calendar but uses smarter scheduling to improve student access, promote well-being, and strengthen "sticky campus" culture by supporting both academic and co-curricular engagement.

Examples of Flexible Timetabling include:

- Clustering modules to reduce the number of days students need to attend campus.
- Minimising small gaps between classes and aligning timetables across related modules.
- Reserving common daytime free slots for co-curricular activities or peer engagement.
- Providing recorded lectures and asynchronous resources to complement live sessions.
- Publishing timetables early to support students in advance planning.

Drivers of Flexible Timetabling

Post-COVID digital transformation: The pandemic normalised flexible learning modes and demonstrated the feasibility of remote, hybrid or hyflex participation (Beer et al., 2023; Guppi et al., 2022; El Galad et al., 2024; Watterston & Zhao, 2023).

Changing student demographics: A single fixed schedule cannot serve an increasingly diverse student population ("new majority") including part-time, mature, and working learners (Page et al., 2021; Saddique et al., 2023).

Student-centred inclusivity: Flexible timetabling mitigates time-related inequalities, supports student autonomy, reduces stress, and improves retention (El Galad et al., 2024; UNICOMM, 2023).

Increasing belonging: Fostering students' sense of belonging is closely linked to their active participation in the university community. Strategically designing timetables to support extracurricular and peer activities strengthens social connection and belonging which are key predictors of retention and success (Munoz & Baik, 2024; Lacey et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2025; UNICOMM, 2023).

Impact on Student Experience

Accessibility and equity: Disjointed schedules disproportionately disadvantage commuters, carers, and working students (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Eastgate et al., 2023). Often students trade off travel and paid work against campus participation (Eastgate et al., 2023; Remenick & Bergman, 2021). Predictable, compact timetables allow students to optimise campus time, reduce travel costs and improve attendance (Page et al., 2021; CTEEC, 2025).

Academic performance: Timetable structure strongly shapes attendance, participation, and other academic outcomes. Studies show that frequent gaps, early starts, and long days reduce engagement and performance (Agarwal et al., 2023; Larabi-Marie-Sainte et al., 2021).

Well-being and engagement: Considered scheduling supports mental health, reduces burnout or absenteeism, and enhances student belonging (Challenge Success, 2025).

Integration of ECAs: Building "non-contact" time into the schedule enables participation in societies, volunteering, or peer learning - activities that foster belonging and employability (Crawford et al., 2024; UNICOMM, 2023).

Student support services: Often, student support services are only available during normal working hours and therefore not uniformly accessible by part-time/ flexible students (IUA, 2021).

Barriers to Implementation

Policy gaps: Current HE policy frameworks often privilege the full-time, on-campus model, which creates a systemic hurdle to recognising and progressing flexible study. The IUA (2021) highlights the need for systemic reform, policy change, and a national definition of flexible and part-time learners.

Institutional awareness: Cultural and administrative awareness of diverse student needs remains uneven across and within higher education institutions, which can delay reform.

Legacy systems: Many universities rely on rigid timetabling software that struggles to accommodate dynamic scheduling or student choice and can hinder flexible scheduling Effective flexible timetabling relies on sophisticated, connected software systems that manage attendance, resources, and student choice data seamlessly (Chen et al., 2021).

Operational complexity: Balancing hard constraints (room, staff, resource) with soft constraints (student preferences, accessibility) requires significant coordination and computational capacity. (Chen et al., 2021; IUA, 2023; Page, 2021).

Institutional Responses and Future Directions

Dedicated non-contact time: Policy decisions to set aside protected slots (e.g., Wednesday afternoons) for societies, sports, volunteering, research seminars or other community-building activities enhance equitable access for all students.

Informed scheduling: Involving students and staff in timetable design through surveys and focus groups helps identify common challenges and tailor solutions. Student feedback and data analytics further inform timetabling decisions to refine scheduling practices.

Early and transparent communication: Publishing timetables in advance allows students to plan around work, travel, and caring commitments.

Protected teaching windows: Early starts and late-day lectures are widely associated with lower student engagement. Scheduling core teaching between 10:00 and 16:00 helps avoid the exclusion often caused by 9.00am starts or evening finishes, particularly for students who commute.

Conclusion

Timetabling is one of the most tangible ways students experience their institution, influencing not only attendance but also well-being, belonging, and academic success. In this context, flexible timetabling can serve as a strategic lever for promoting inclusion and engagement. A student-centred timetable recognises that time is a limited resource and that flexibility is essential for meaningful participation. For institutions with large commuter or working student populations, flexible timetabling becomes a foundation for equity, retention, and the development of belonging.

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7. Block or Immersive Teaching

Introduction

Student learning preferences have shifted markedly since the pandemic (Wilson et al., 2025), prompting growing interest in flexible and immersive teaching models. Often called "block teaching", "compressed delivery", or "intensive mode delivery" (IMD), these approaches replace traditional 12 to 15-week semesters with shorter, more concentrated periods of study. Instead of juggling multiple concurrent modules, students complete one or two modules at a time, typically over 4–8 weeks, allowing greater focus and deeper engagement. The literature positions this approach as a response to the rising numbers of part-time, first-generation and working students, as well as to institutional goals around retention, equity and student success (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020; Muscat & Thomas, 2023; Goode et al., 2023).

Drivers of Flexible / Block Teaching

Equity and retention goals: There is an increased number of "new majority" learners (e.g. part-time, working, mature) attending university. Therefore, institutions are rethinking teaching and learning practices to support engagement and attainment (Goode et al., 2023; Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021; Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020).

Changing student demographics: New majority learners, who must balance study with work and family obligations, typically do not find traditional courses convenient or attractive. This growing demographic has increased demand for flexibility, particularly post-COVID. Block teaching enables time-poor or remote learners to attend campus less frequently, focus on fewer units, and complete degrees more flexibly (Goode et al., 2023; Roche, Wilson et al., 2024).

Institutional reforms: Models such as Victoria University's (VU) Block Model®, Southern Cross University's immersive model, and similar pilots in UK universities (e.g. LJMU, Bedfordshire, MMU) illustrate large-scale transitions aimed at improving student success.

Impacts of Flexible / Block Teaching

Academic success and retention

- Evidence from Australia, the UK, and Europe suggests that block teaching models have improved pass rates, retention, and student satisfaction, especially for low socioeconomic status (SES), first-in-family, and part-time students (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Kwan et al., 2022; Loton et al., 2022; Roche, Wilson et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2025).
- Shorter timeframes can reduce cognitive load, enhance focus, and promote a sense of accomplishment, as well as helping students structure their time effectively and build self-efficacy (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Goode et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2025).
- Immersive learning allows students full immersion in the content without competing modules. On the other hand, workload intensity and "no margin for error" can increase stress, particularly if students miss classes or have inadequate support (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020; Buck & Tyrrell, 2022).

Flexibility and accessibility

- Block models give students the option to complete one or two subjects at a time, travel to campus less frequently, and better manage competing demands such as work or family responsibilities (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010; Muscat & Thomas, 2023; Roche, Wilson et al., 2024).
- Online and blended block delivery further extends flexibility, allowing students to revisit materials and engage asynchronously (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022).

Belonging and engagement

- Regular, extended interactions and smaller classes can strengthen students' sense of belonging and social connection (Samarawickrema et al., 2021; Long & McLaren, 2024).

Barriers to Flexible and Block Teaching

Workload intensity: Compressed schedules can increase the impact of absence due to illness, work, or caring responsibilities, potentially undermining deep learning (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020; Do Nascimento Rocha et al., 2025).

Disciplinary variation: Gains in retention and performance may not be uniform across subject areas. For example, computing, engineering, and health have shown mixed outcomes (Mason et al., 2025; Wilson et al., 2025), suggesting that more research is needed.

Pedagogy "lift and shift": Pedagogy has a strong influence over student satisfaction with immersive block models. Simply transplanting semester-based materials into a compressed format without redesign leads to poorer student experiences (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Goode et al., 2023).

Assessment pressures: Timing and integration of assessment must align with intensive delivery to avoid overload and disengagement (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020; Vieira Braga et al., 2024).

Institutional Responses and Future Directions

Whole-of-institution reform: Universities such as Victoria University and Southern Cross University have adopted block models institution-wide, supported by policy shifts, resourcing, and staff capacity building (Roche et al., 2025; McCluskey et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2025).

Blended and active learning: Combining block teaching with active and blended learning enhances flexibility and engagement (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; Kwan et al., 2022; Ambler et al., 2021; Roche et al., 2025; Long & McLaren, 2024; Winchester et al., 2021). For example, the VU Block Model's "relentless welcome" shows how this approach sustains commitment for on-campus and remote learners (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021).

Tailored approaches: Discipline-specific adaptations, inclusive feedback mechanisms, and rest periods between blocks, can mitigate intensity-related stress (Do Nascimento Rocha et al., 2025; Mason et al., 2025).

Professional development: Building staff capacity for active pedagogies, diversity competence, and curriculum redesign ensures immersive models are effective (Amber et al., 2021; Samarawickrema et al., 2024).

Equity focus: Immersive block models appear particularly effective for the "new majority" (working, mature, online, first-in-family students) but require careful design to avoid exacerbating stress (Kwan et al., 2022; Loton et al., 2022; Nascimento Rocha et al., 2025; Vieira Braga et al., 2024; Roche et al., 2024).

Evidence-based scaling: Institutions should monitor long-term impacts on satisfaction, retention, and employability across diverse disciplines and student groups (Mason et al., 2025).

Staff support and culture change: Implementing block teaching models successfully requires leadership, academic development, communities of practice, as well as technical infrastructure (Roche et al., 2024; Samarawickrema et al., 2024).

Integration with wider flexibility policies: Block and blended approaches should be part of a broader institutional strategy to support flexible pathways, commuter students, and students who work (Roche et al., 2024; McCluskey et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Models of block teaching represent a significant shift in higher education, driven by the need to support a more diverse student body and improve student success. The future of higher education seems likely to prioritise flexible and equitable learning, with immersive teaching models leading this transformation. However, the successful implementation of these models requires a holistic, institution-wide commitment. This includes a fundamental redesign of pedagogy and assessment, robust professional development, and continuous evaluation to ensure these models meet learners' diverse needs.


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8. Key Takeaways

Across these seven briefings, a clear picture emerges of the pressures shaping contemporary student life and future implications. The following seven takeaways distil their core insights to capture the intersecting pressures shaping contemporary student life and the systemic responses required.

1. **Student challenges are interconnected:** Student needs are changing rapidly but rather than presenting as isolated issues, they are increasingly intersecting, creating compounding barriers for many students.
2. **Structural pressures are major obstacles:** Financial hardship, long travel times, employment commitments, and reduced time on campus significantly restrict students' capacity to participate fully in university life and succeed academically.
3. **Time poverty is an underrecognised issue:** Students balancing work, commuting, and study experience chronic time scarcity, which undermines learning, wellbeing, and involvement in campus life.
4. **Belonging is a critical enabler:** Across all themes a sense of inclusion, connection, and recognition consistently emerges as central to student success, but is considerably constrained by structural pressures.
5. **Institutional responses are fragmented:** While innovative and scalable practices are emerging, many supports operate in isolation rather than as part of a coordinated approach.
6. **Strategic alignment is essential:** Student needs should be explicitly linked to strategic planning, curriculum design, timetabling reform, and cross-institutional governance for meaningful and sustainable impact.
7. **A sector-wide approach is necessary:** Supporting contemporary students effectively depends on shared, cross-sector frameworks aligning national policy, funding models, data practices, and cross-institution collaboration.

Chapters 3 and 4 build on this integrated view of the interconnected challenges shaping contemporary student life and present collections of case studies on institutional responses to the themes of student financial hardship and the commuter student experience, in particular.


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Chapter 3:

Institutional Responses in Practice: Strengthening Student Financial Wellbeing

1. Introduction

Across Ireland, rising living costs, housing pressures, and widening socioeconomic inequalities are increasingly shaping students' higher education experiences. Many students are responding by taking on additional paid work, reducing essential spending, or commuting long distances from home to manage costs. Viewed as a structural factor influencing students' access, engagement, and sustained participation in their studies, financial wellbeing also limits opportunities for full participation in campus life, affecting social integration, belonging, and overall wellbeing.

Recent research highlights the need for more coherent, long-term institutional strategies that embed financial wellbeing within student success and retention frameworks. Scholars argue that this requires coordinated, multilevel interventions that position financial wellbeing as a core element of the student experience (Sprung & Rogers, 2021; Soederberg, 2023). D'Andrea -Baker et al. (2024) suggest that one effective approach is the establishment of dedicated financial hardship or cost of living taskforces, which bring together student representatives, professional services, and senior leaders with a mandate to identify emerging needs and implement targeted supports.

This chapter presents a series of case studies that illustrate system, institutional, and student-centred approaches to supporting financial wellbeing. These case studies build on the research that informed this project's priority thematic areas of financial hardship and commuting students. This research included a systematic review of Strategic Plans, Teaching and Learning Strategies, and Student Success Strategies from leading institutions in the QS World University Rankings 2026, alongside a focused literature review of 124 academic articles. These analyses identified the structural, cultural, and policy factors shaping student experience and provide an evidence base for the examples that follow.

These selected case studies demonstrate how universities across the UK have developed governance models, student-led mechanisms, and practical supports to respond to escalating financial pressures. Although our research was international in scope, we focus on UK case studies because this is where the most developed and well-documented institutional responses currently exist. The UK's acute cost-of-living pressures and limited state support prompted coordinated national and sector-wide action, generating stronger evidence base than was available elsewhere. On the other hand, European institutions have taken a more structural, preventative approach, with stronger emphasis on mobility, commuting infrastructure, and sustainability, but these measures are typically framed within broader national agendas rather than explicitly as institutional financial wellbeing strategies.

Section 2 explores governance and leadership approaches, including taskforces and student-led mechanisms, and practical supports to respond to escalating financial pressures. Section 3 highlights student-centred initiatives that use data, centralised hubs, and peer-led guidance to provide responsive, accessible, and sustainable financial support. Together, these examples offer transferable insights for the Irish context.

2: Governance & Leadership: Creating Taskforces to Address Financial Hardship

2.1 Student-led Governance

Case Study 1: The Student-Led Cost-of-Living Response at University of Manchester

Context: The University of Manchester (MU) is one of the UK's largest and most research-intensive universities. A Russell Group institution, it has a large and diverse student community and is recognised for academic excellence, innovation, and civic mission. MU responded to rising costs of living by adopting a governance approach centred on student leadership. Rather than positioning students solely as consultees, the institution assigned their Students' Union (SU) responsibility for collecting data and proposing solutions. This approach ensured interventions were informed by real student experiences.

Approach/Actions: The MU model was structured around partnership governance where the SU was treated as an equal institutional partner, that could submit policy proposals but also retained the independence necessary to act as a 'critical friend.' The approach was operationalised through a working group that initially involved a large number and broad range of staff and students but later evolved into a smaller group which could establish subcommittees when specific issues required more focused attention.

A defining action within this model was the SU-led Cost-of-Living Survey in 2022. The scale and speed of responses (3,000 responses within one hour and 5,000 overall) generated a robust dataset that provided immediate evidence of need to strengthen the case for institutional action and enabled timely decision-making. The resulting report, published by the SU, concluded that a substantial number of students were "experiencing immense financial hardships." Its large dataset provided the SU with compelling, institution-specific evidence that:

- Hardship was widespread and worsening.
- Students' mental health was deteriorating.
- Many students were forced into unsustainable working hours.
- Existing support was insufficient or poorly signposted.

The scale and urgency of the survey was a pivotal catalyst for action and, as a result, the University rapidly introduced one of the largest cost-of-living support packages in the UK. Interventions included:

- A £9 million support package;
- Creation of a new Money Advisor role within the Students' Union;
- Expansion of practical cost-saving measures such as:
    - Cosy Campus spaces offering warm study areas;
    - Free breakfast on Wednesdays;
    - Low-cost food options and free hot water/microwave facilities;
    - Free showers and free period products;
    - Removal of library fines and provision of free e-books.

Impact and Key Learnings: This case demonstrates how student-led governance can enhance the credibility and relevance of institutional responses. By positioning the Students' Union as both a core decision-making partner and a critical friend, the governance model enabled genuine collaboration without diluting the SU's advocacy role. Central to its success was the large-scale, rapid Cost-of-Living Survey conducted by the SU, which provided an immediate, student-owned evidence base. The speed and volume of responses not only captured the lived realities of students but also generated institutional momentum and heightened accountability. The effectiveness of this model was later shortlisted for a Times Higher Education Award for "Outstanding Support for Students".

Case Study 2: The Critical Friend Governance Model at Buckinghamshire New University

Context: Buckinghamshire New University (BNU) is a modern public institution that achieved full university status in 2007. Known for its strong vocational and professional focus, the university is also recognised for its commitment to widening participation and providing robust student support.

Approach/Actions: BNU responded to the cost-of-living crisis by committing to a genuinely student-led approach, ensuring that institutional decisions were shaped by a broad and representative range of student perspectives. A key strategic choice was to recognise that the student voice should extend beyond those who typically engage through Students' Union structures. As a result, the governance model combined strong student leadership with multiple feedback channels, ensuring that students with diverse experiences and levels of engagement could meaningfully influence priorities.

As a multichannel model, student perspectives were also gathered in a variety of ways. BNU tasked the Students' Union with collecting evidence and proposing solutions, thus reinforcing student leadership in shaping institutional priorities. It also set up formal institutional mechanisms such as a Student Experience Committee, and a Student Forum (designed as an open platform for discussion), as well as conducting analysis of National Student Survey (NSS) trends. As a result, SU-led evidence helped identify areas of acute need and shaped institutional priorities. This approach led to several concrete institutional actions such as:

- Financial Interventions.
  - Accommodation subsidies, scholarships and bursaries.
  - Adoption of the Real Living Wage for student employees.
- Targeted daily supports.
  - Free meals.
  - Catering discounts.
  - Free hygiene and period products in bathrooms.

Impact and Key Learnings: By drawing on multiple feedback channels, BNU was able to capture both the views of formally represented student groups and broader student sentiment and perspectives. This strengthened the representativeness of student input and ensured that decision making was visibly grounded in student experience. The combination of SU-led evidence, formal committees, open forums, and NSS trend analysis enhanced the credibility of institutional actions by demonstrating that responses were informed by diverse student insight.

BNU received the 2023 Whatuni Student Choice Award for Cost-of-living Support. In responding to the award, the University's vice chancellor highlighted that the recognition reflected strong partnership working between the institution and Bucks Students' Union, emphasising their shared commitment to delivering the best possible student experience.

2.2 Taskforce-led Governance

Case Study 3: The Cost-of-living Taskforce at the University of St Andrews

Context: The University of St Andrews is Scotland's oldest university. Consistently ranked among the top universities in the UK, it is a small, research-intensive institution with a strong global reputation for teaching quality and student satisfaction.

In 2022, in response to escalating living costs and the growing impact on student wellbeing, the University of St Andrews established a Cost-of-living Taskforce.

Approach/Actions: Recognising that rising living costs affected not only students' finances, but also their ability to fully participate in learning and university life, the aim of this taskforce was twofold: To offer immediate support to students facing financial hardship; and to put in place longer term measures to embed financial wellbeing into the overall student experience.

This centrally coordinated taskforce model placed student feedback and continuous responsiveness at the heart of its approach. Rather than relying on one off measures, the university committed to an ongoing, adaptive process shaped directly by students lived experiences. To support this, it established structured mechanisms for gathering student input. For example, students could submit concerns and suggestions through an online form, giving them a direct line to the taskforce and ensuring their needs drove decision making. The university's interventions combined immediate support with practical, day-to-day provisions, demonstrating a sustained institutional commitment to implementing actions based on student feedback. Immediate support measures included discretionary funding that offered students flexible assistance with living and study costs. This funding was strengthened through alumni donations and designed to be responsive to changing circumstances by allowing students to apply as often as needed.

Alongside this, the Students' Association developed a **comprehensive resource** to provide accessible advice on budgeting, practical support, and discounts. A dedicated online hub featuring a regularly updated **Cost-of-Living webpage** brought these supports together. Additional initiatives, including subsidised meals and the provision of warm spaces in heated university buildings, recognised that wellbeing and basic needs are central to students' capacity to engage academically.

Impact and Key Learnings: The approach at St Andrews improved relevance and accessibility of support by establishing a clear central governance structure informed by the student voice through robust communication routes. Flexible discretionary funding enabled rapid responses to shifts in student needs, while supplementing core funds with alumni and philanthropic contributions strengthened long-term sustainability. However, the university also ensured that practical measures, such as subsidised meals and warm spaces, remained an integral part of its offer. Clear, consistent communication, delivered through guides, online hubs, and ongoing feedback mechanisms, ensured that students were able to shape initiatives, understood the supports available to them, and felt confident in accessing help when needed. Overall, this example demonstrates the value of a coordinated taskforce in delivering a holistic, student-centred response to financial pressures.

3: Student-centred Approaches and Practical Interventions

The following case studies highlight responses to financial pressures delivered in partnership with students and Students' Unions and shaped by student-led insight and lived experience. Whether through largescale student surveys, centralised cost-of-living hubs that simplify access to help, or peer-led financial guidance models, each example shows how institutions are increasingly recognising students as active agents rather than passive recipients of support. Together, these approaches demonstrate a shared shift toward student-centred, partnership-driven models that make support more visible, relatable, and actionable.

Case Study 4: Insights from the Russell Group Cost-of-living Survey

Context: University College London (UCL) is one of the largest universities in the UK. UCL is a member of the Russell Group, recognised globally for its research strength and interdisciplinary focus. Russell Group Students' Unions collectively act as a national student advocacy network, collaborating to raise shared issues, coordinate research, and amplify student perspectives.

In 2023, UCL's Students' Union collaborated with Russell Group students' unions across the UK on one of the largest student cost-of-living surveys to date, gathering almost 9,000 responses nationally and 2,247 responses from UCL students.

Approach/Actions: Survey data across participating universities highlighted widespread financial strain, its report noting that only half of students felt confident they could meet basic living costs, one in four regularly skipped food or essentials, and many had just £50 per month left after expenses, placing them near the UK destitution line. Over half of respondents reported that financial pressures harmed their academic performance, and 17% of working students were working more than 30 hours a week to cope.

Among UCL respondents, 97% reported experiencing stress and 75% noted negative impacts on their mental health. Four in five students reduced socialising, and more than half stopped taking part in extracurricular activities, undermining community, wellbeing, and their sense of belonging. Yet only one in three students knew how to access advice or support related to money and finances.

Impact and Key Learnings: Following the survey, UCL joined other Russell Group universities in investing tens of millions of pounds in additional hardship funding and targeted financial support for students at risk. It also implemented measures to reduce essential costs for students, such as subsidised food options, provision of warm spaces during winter months, and expanded access to facilities which were previously time limited. In addition, UCL developed and launched a cost-of-living Hub to centralise guidance, resources, and support for students (see Case Study 5).

The Russell Group survey showed the value of large-scale, joined-up data, enabling UCL to understand both national and UCL specific financial pressures, such as widespread financial strain and wellbeing impacts. Combining national and local insights created a full picture of student need and comparative insights that individual institutions cannot gather alone. Collaboration with national Students' Unions strengthened the evidence base, amplified advocacy for policy change, and directly informed UCL's actions.

Case Study 5: UCL Cost-of-Living Student Hubs

Context: A Cost-of-Living Hub is a centralised, student facing online portal that brings together key information, services, and supports students may need when facing financial pressure. Its purpose is to provide a single, recognisable starting point designed to make support easy to find, easy to understand, and easy to access. Examples of this model include the University of Nottingham's **cost-of-living pages**, Queen's University Belfast's **cost-of-living site**, and UCL's **Cost-of-Living Hub**.

Approach/Actions: In practice, cost-of-living hubs act as a single webpage where students can access links to the main strands of cost-of-living support, commonly including:

- Financial support: e.g. hardship funds, bursaries, and short-term emergency help.
- Advice and guidance: e.g. budgeting support and guidance on working while studying.
- Wellbeing and student support routes: e.g. drop-in clinics, welfare supports, and referral pathways.
- Practical supports: e.g. study supports, food discounts, and warm space provision.

Recognising that students often need both immediate help and longer-term guidance, a key design feature is that hubs bring these domains together rather than treating them as separate entities. For example, UCL's hub signposts practical support such as laptop loans and study support alongside financial guidance. Queen's cost-of-living site similarly signposts across categories like food and drink discounts, library support, part-time work, and wellbeing advice. University of Nottingham's hub integrates financial advice with practical resources like microwave access and community cabinets offering free essentials. This approach ensures students can find both immediate and long-term support in one place.

Impact and Key Learnings: Even when institutions offer a wide range of supports, students may struggle to access them if information is dispersed across multiple offices, webpages, and systems. A well-designed hub reduces this fragmentation, lowers the effort required to locate assistance, and increases the likelihood that students will reach the most appropriate service. By centralising support and framing financial wellbeing as an integral part of mainstream student services, these hubs can enhance transparency and help normalise help seeking.

Case Study 6: Student Financial Guidance: Peer-Led Advice and Pathways to Support

This case study spotlights two complementary approaches to enhancing student financial guidance: a student-led, integrated model at the London School of Economics (LSE) and a centralised hub plus peer mentoring model at the University of Northampton (UON). Both aim to make money advice practical, credible, and easy to act on, linking tips and tools to clear pathways into support.

1. London School of Economics (LSE) is a globally recognised social sciences institution based in central London attracting a diverse, often international, student body. LSE takes an integrated approach to financial guidance, blending financial literacy and institutional advice on cost of living with relatable, student-generated content. Its **Student Budgeting Advice** hub curates a wide range of student-led blogs and vlogs offering practical guidance on budgeting, weekly spending, food shopping, and navigating London on a tight budget. By combining peer-led content, institutional guidance, and clear pathways into support services, resources such as a **Guide to Working Part-time Jobs as an LSE Student** are strengthened through complementary materials. This includes vlogs such as like **What I Spend in a Week**, links to relevant support services, and official LSE Careers advice on part-time employment, including recommended working hours and current vacancies. This integrated approach blends practical, student-authored tips with authoritative institutional guidance, enhancing credibility while enabling students to access support and opportunities quickly.
2. University of Northampton (UON) is known for its commitment to community engagement and supports a large proportion of first generation and widening participation students. Their central resource hub, **Money Matters**, helps students manage money by bringing together information on funding entitlements and hardship alongside practical budgeting tools and advice. A linked initiative is **Student Money Mentors** where trained student volunteers provide peer-to-peer financial guidance to help fellow students manage their money more confidently and access further supports and services. Described as "personal finance buddies," the mentors share practical, lived experience insights on topics such as budgeting, understanding bills, cooking affordable meals, finding student discounts, or planning low-cost social activities. This approachable, student-led model helps students navigate financial challenges in a supportive and relatable way.

Impacts and Key Learnings: These models illustrate how student-led, relatable content can increase the likelihood that students will act on it. Peer-led initiatives can also reduce stigma and improve engagement, as students are often more inclined to access approachable, student-authored formats over traditional, policy-focused communications. They further demonstrate the value of integrating authentic student voices with official institutional advice, creating clear pathways that link practical, lived experience tips with formal support services.

Case Study 7: Sheffield Hallam University & Students' Union – A Comprehensive, Equity Driven Cost-of-Living Model

Context: Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) is recognised for its commitment to widening participation, enrolling more students from under-represented backgrounds than any other UK university. When rising living costs disproportionately impacted these cohorts, SHU adopted a whole-institution and Students' Union (SU) partnership approach to reducing financial barriers, meeting essential needs and supporting academic success.

Approach/Actions: SHU's joint cost-of-living response integrates university-level financial supports with Students' Union-led practical provision spanning emergency aid, daily essentials, participation, and wellbeing. The university introduced a suite of financial measures, including expansion of its hardship fund and international emergency fund. A dedicated sports hardship fund enabled financially constrained students to participate in university sport, recognising its value for wellbeing and belonging, and increases to student success scholarships helped ensure that students could access essential academic and living cost supports. Alongside institutional investment, SHU also encourages philanthropic engagement by sharing student stories and inviting donations through its Student Success platform. Additional supports include:

- Free access to the top 100 e-books, removing the need to purchase core textbooks.
- Funding for graduation costs, covering gown hire and two guest tickets for students facing financial hardship.
- Low-cost food provision, with catering outlets offering £1 food and drink items throughout the day.
- Ongoing provision of free period products across campus.

Complementing the university's financial package, SHU Students' Union operates a successful Cost-of-Living Shop, with key components including:

- Community Fridge, offering free food donated by local retailers, open to all students, with real-time updates shared via SU social media.
- A variety of Swap Shops, where students can exchange clothing, books, arts materials or accessories for free or accumulate "swap credits" for future use.
- Free essential items, including period products, condoms, and pregnancy tests.

Impact and Key Learnings: The SHU model of shared ownership enables a comprehensive response to rising living costs: the university provides financial mechanisms (e.g., bursaries, emergency funds, fee related subsidies) which the SU complements with practical, community-based provision that meets students' day-to-day needs. This joint model ensures that strategic financial support is tightly connected to accessible, student-led services like the Community Fridge, Swap Shops, and the provision of free essential items, strengthening student ownership and community participation.

4. Conclusion

The case studies presented here demonstrate that supporting students' financial wellbeing requires coordinated action across governance structures, institutional processes, and student-facing services. Small-scale, practical supports can make an immediate difference to students' daily lives, reducing barriers to participation and signalling institutional commitment to inclusion. Focused operational interventions, such as cost-of-living hubs, large-scale surveys, and peer-led guidance, address more embedded challenges by improving the visibility, accessibility, and coherence of financial supports. At the broadest level, system-level reforms, including governance alignment and taskforce-led approaches, create the conditions for sustained and strategic institutional responses.

These case studies illustrate how institutions can develop inclusive, student-centred strategies that not only mitigate hardship but also enhance participation, belonging, and academic success. For the Irish higher education sector, they provide a clear set of transferable approaches to strengthening financial wellbeing as an integral component of the student experience.

Across all models, several principles emerge:

1. **Student partnership:** Supports are most effective when students are treated as partners rather than consultees. Across the cases, Students' Unions and student leaders play central roles in governance, evidence gathering, and advocacy, helping to shape responses that are both credible and relevant. Embedding diverse student voices in decision making ensures that interventions reflect lived experience and meet real needs.
2. **Multilayered governance:** Universities that establish formal, structured governance mechanisms (such as taskforces, student experience committees, or SU-led working groups) are better positioned to act quickly and maintain oversight during sustained financial pressures.
3. **Evidence informed decision making:** Effective interventions are grounded in robust student data. Structured feedback processes (surveys, forums, open reporting channels) highlight urgent needs and enable institutions to respond with speed and confidence. This strengthens relevance, improves accountability, and builds internal momentum for action.
4. **Peer-led and student-generated content:** Students are more likely to act on guidance that feels authentic and relatable. Peer-led budgeting advice, money mentor schemes, and student-authored content, such as blogs and vlogs, make financial wellbeing initiatives more accessible and actioned.
5. **Practical essential supports:** Everyday supports such as subsidised meals, warm spaces, free period products, microwaves, community fridges, and swap shops meet immediate, tangible needs. These universal access supports also reduce stigma and normalise help seeking.
6. **Philanthropic and external partnerships:** Mobilising alumni, donor networks, and local community partners (e.g., retailers supplying community fridge food) can expand available resources, enhance sustainability and broaden the scale of support.
7. **Centralised access hubs:** Cost-of-living hubs or consolidated resource pages improve communication clarity, reduce fragmentation, and significantly increase the likelihood that students will locate and access available supports.
8. **Holistic models:** Integrated models that connect financial, academic, and wellbeing supports are better positioned to sustain student participation and success.

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Chapter 4:

Institutional Responses in Practice: Supporting Commuter Students

1. Introduction

Commuter students constitute a substantial and growing proportion of the higher education population in Ireland and internationally, yet their needs and experiences are not always explicitly reflected in institutional structures or educational design. As higher education becomes increasingly diverse, universities face growing pressure to ensure that their policies, teaching models, and support systems are responsive to students who balance study with travel, work, and family commitments.

The case studies presented in this chapter build on the research that informed the project's priority thematic area of commuting students. This research included a systematic review of Strategic Plans, Teaching and Learning Strategies, and Student Success Strategies from leading institutions in the QS World University Rankings 2026, alongside a focused literature review of 124 academic articles. These analyses identified the structural, cultural, and policy factors shaping student experience and provide the evidence base for the examples that follow.

This series of case studies illustrates how institutions across several national contexts are addressing the challenges faced by students who commute to campus, often long distances. The examples range from small-scale practical actions to targeted operational interventions and comprehensive system-level reforms. Together, they offer transferable insights for the Irish context. For institutions seeking to enhance commuter students' engagement, belonging, and academic success, these cases provide evidence-informed approaches that can support meaningful and context-sensitive enhancement.

2. Understanding the Commuter Student Experience

Many students today live at home and travel long distances to campus each day, often while balancing study with work, caring responsibilities, and financial pressures. These daily demands can create significant time poverty and fatigue, which in turn affect students' capacity to engage fully with academic and campus life. While a strong sense of belonging is widely recognised as critical to student success, commuting can make this more difficult to achieve. Students who commute often have limited time on campus, fewer opportunities for informal interaction, and reduced access to extracurricular activities or social networks. These constraints can affect integration, participation, wellbeing, and academic engagement.

To support this cohort more effectively, the UK's Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) identifies eight priority areas through which institutions can strengthen the commuter student experience:

1. Agree on a Common Definition – Establish a clear and consistent understanding of "commuter student."
2. Gather Commuter Insights – Use structured feedback to understand their needs and experiences.
3. Offer Travel Support – Provide practical transport information and advocate for improved travel options.
4. Create Timetable Flexibility – Cluster classes and reduce peak-hour travel where possible.

5. Upgrade Campus Amenities – Improve access to lockers, kitchen facilities, quiet study spaces, and other essential resources.
6. Enable Belonging – Ensure events are accessible and support commuter-focused communities or societies.
7. Recognise Local Students – Acknowledge their presence and contribution to university life.
8. Expand Local Recruitment – Strengthen connections with surrounding regions.

(Adapted from Freeman, 2023; HEPI Report 163.)

These priorities provide a framework for understanding the pressures faced by commuter students and help contextualise the case studies that follow.

3. Small-Scale Practical Initiatives

3.1 The role of Low-Cost, High Impact Actions

Small-scale, practical actions or initiatives often serve as a starting point for institutions fostering inclusion and belonging among commuter students. Sometimes called "quick wins", these are highly visible, practical, and easy to implement low-cost actions designed to make an immediate difference for commuter students. While addressing systemic challenges may be beyond the scope of these initiatives, they nonetheless send a strong message that commuter students are valued members of the university community, and they can act as a catalyst for further change by building momentum and evidence for larger reforms. The following examples spotlight how these initiatives look in practice.

Case Study 1: The Big Deal at Buckinghamshire New University

Context: Buckinghamshire New University (BNU) is a university known for vocational and professional courses, strong links to industry, and a high proportion of local and commuting students.

Approach/Actions: When students reported concerns about belonging and loneliness, compounded by financial barriers to participation in campus life, BNU launched The Big Deal initiative, removing costs for sports clubs, societies, and Students' Union activities. Actioned and marketed by the university's Student Union, BNU students have free access to:

- Societies and clubs (career, academic, cultural, recreational).
- Competitive and recreational sport teams ("Sport for Fun").
- Workshops (e.g., CV-building, creative skills).
- Events and entertainment (live music, social activities).
- Support for student representation role.

Funding was managed centrally, with extra support for high-performing societies.

Impact and Key Learnings: The Big Deal initiative reflects a commitment to widening participation and reducing financial barriers to student life. With students saving approximately £200 annually, participation in extra-curricular activities increased significantly. Covering the costs of membership, coaching, events, or equipment removes financial barriers and promotes engagement from all students, especially commuters.

Case Study 2: Study Together Programme at UEA

Context: University of East Anglia (UEA), a research-intensive university and member of the 1994 group, is a mid-sized university known for strong student experience, interdisciplinary teaching, and a campus-based model. UEA introduced the Study Together initiative post pandemic to support belonging, especially for mature and commuting students, who were struggling to engage with campus life due to work and family commitments.

Approach/Actions: When UEA launched Study Together, it was initially a weekly drop-in workshop combining study support, wellbeing activities, and networking. Over time, it evolved to include creative sessions (e.g., knitting, sewing, journalling) to help students relax and connect. These sessions proved popular with students, especially mature students and students who commute.

Impact and Key Learnings: The Study Together initiative contributed to improvements in students' sense of connection and engagement with campus life by creating shared points of connection across diverse student groups. The informal, low-pressure environment encouraged increased peer interaction, particularly among mature and commuting students or those with work, caring responsibilities, or travel constraints. As attendance grew, the sessions helped cultivate a "sticky campus" effect where students stayed on campus beyond scheduled classes, using the space to study or socialise. Providing non-academic activities that are flexible and low commitment can create welcoming entry points into the university community and increase campus presence.

4. Focused Institutional Interventions

Universities can make a meaningful difference for commuter students by concentrating on a specific operational area, moving beyond quick wins to address structural barriers within a defined domain without requiring a full institutional overhaul. These focused initiatives are typically scalable, relatively low risk, and offer an opportunity to pilot and refine changes before embedding them more widely. The next section highlights initiatives that focus on 1) gathering student data and insights to inform strategies, and 2) timetabling.

4.1 Using Data to Understand Commuter Needs

Understanding commuter students' lived experiences is essential for designing effective interventions. One critical starting point is gathering data and insights. Evidence-based approaches ensure that interventions are informed by real student needs rather than assumptions. Several universities have prioritised data-driven approaches to understanding the needs of their commuting students.

Case Study 3: The Commuter Students in London Project

Context: London Higher is a membership organisation representing universities across London, where commuting is the norm (approximately 80% of students at these universities live at home or travel significant distances). The Commuter Students in London pilot project, led by London Higher, adopted a cross-institutional approach to better understand the experiences and outcomes of commuter students across the capital.

Approach/Actions: The project involved six London higher education institutions and sought to examine the relationship between commuting patterns, student belonging, and academic continuation. The project used a mixed-methods approach to collect quantitative and qualitative data on students' journeys, motivations for commuting, barriers to engagement, and personal commitments such as caring responsibilities and part-time work. It also combined standardised analysis of travel time data with focus groups and student workshops, ensuring that measurable outcomes were understood alongside lived experience.

Impact and Key Learnings: The project demonstrated that longer commute times were significantly associated with lower continuation and progression rates, highlighting commuting as a structural barrier to student success. In response, it identified several priority areas for improvement, including more coherent timetabling, enhanced on-campus facilities, flexible learning provision, and commuter focused social activities. These findings not only informed institutional approaches to supporting commuter students but also helped shape national guidance for the sector. Key recommendations emerging from the pilot project include campus facilities, flexible learning provision, and commuter-focused social activities. These findings not only informed institutional approaches to supporting commuter students but also helped shape national guidance for the sector.

This project demonstrates that comprehensive data enables the development of tailored interventions and can drive both institutional strategies and sector wide recommendations.

Case Study 4: Data-Led "Sticky Campus" principles at Sheffield Hallam University

Context: Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) is a large post-1992 university in South Yorkshire, where over half its students commute.

Approach/Actions: SHU analysed institutional student demographic data, commuting patterns, and cost of living survey findings to identify key challenges faced by commuting students, including transport affordability and levels of campus engagement. Working in partnership with its Students' Union, the university drew on cost-of-living survey evidence and student feedback to understand how travel costs, paid employment, and timetable design influence students' attendance and ability to engage with campus life.

Impact and Key Learnings: These insights informed the development of principles underpinning Sheffield Hallam's "sticky campus" concept, which focuses on creating welcoming, functional spaces that encourage students to remain on campus for longer periods for both study and social interaction. In parallel, the university reviewed timetable flexibility and supported campaigns for cheaper transport. Measures such as more condensed timetables, increased hybrid delivery, and enhanced campus amenities helped mitigate the impact of travel costs for students unable to afford multiple journeys to campus each day. Students' Union-led campaigns, directly informed by cost-of-living survey data, also strengthened collective advocacy for more affordable public transport, ensuring student perspectives were represented in regional transport discussions.

The approach at SHU demonstrates that collecting and analysing institutional data provides robust evidence base for understanding the "sticky campus" principles that support sustained campus engagement, and for designing practical, purposeful structural improvements for commuting students.

4.2: Timetabling and Structural Flexibility

The following examples spotlight focused interventions on timetabling, a significant factor affecting commuter students' experience. Timetable flexibility is increasingly recognised as a key enabler of belonging and engagement for commuting students. Predictable, efficient schedules reduce commuting burdens, allow students to plan work or family commitments, and help ensure that time spent on campus is purposeful.

Case Study 5: Three-Day Teaching Weeks at University of Roehampton

Context: University of Roehampton is a London-based post-1992 university with a high proportion of commuting students. Known for its strong commitment to widening participation and supporting diverse student groups, Roehampton University identified the need for timetable changes, initially focusing on its first-year commuting students.

Approach/Actions: Roehampton introduced tailored timetables for first-year students, scheduling teaching no more than three days per week. Students are informed by July which specific days their classes will occur, allowing for early planning ahead of the September term. Roehampton complements this approach with commuter-friendly facilities, including free parking, bike storage, showers, and "Pocket Lounges" equipped with microwaves, fridges, lockers, and charging points.

Impact and Key Learnings: Roehampton markets itself as a "commuter friendly" university, with teaching timetables intentionally structured to reduce the number of days students must attend campus. The university reports that this enhanced flexibility not only reduces commuting burdens but also supports wider student needs, such as balancing work and family commitments and personal study time. Combining timetable reform with practical amenities increases campus engagement by giving commuters reliable, comfortable spaces to spend time between classes and remain on campus for longer. Starting with one year group is an effective way to trial timetable reform before scaling up.

Case Study 6: Inclusive Timetable Design at Kingston University

Context: Kingston University (KU), a London post-92 institution, serves a diverse student body of commuters from across London and surrounding areas. It is known for its diverse student population, and its emphasis on inclusivity and student voice in shaping policy and practice.

Approach/Actions: KU's inclusive timetable strategy was informed by an institutional research project involving 550 students, which used questionnaires and focus groups to understand how timetable design interacts with ethnicity, gender, age, and mode/distance of travel. The research found a strong negative correlation between travel time and timetable satisfaction, with ethnic minority students travelling twice as far on average. Based on these insights, KU introduced an inclusive timetable strategy, introducing priorities such as later start times and guaranteeing one free day per week.

Impact and Key Learnings: By supporting a more predictable weekly rhythm for students and reducing timetable-related stress, Kingston University has reported greater inclusivity and improved student experience for commuters and other underrepresented groups, and enhanced perceptions of fairness. KU's work demonstrates how timetabling can operate as a structural equity lever.

5: Responding to Changing Student Realities: Institutional and Multi-Institutional Approaches to Supporting Commuter Students

5.1 Introduction

The following three complementary case studies examine strategic responses to supporting commuter students at institutional and multi-institutional levels. While situated in different national contexts, the three cases explore how curriculum design, policy frameworks, and institutional culture can be realigned to foster belonging, equity, and academic success. Together, these case studies demonstrate how improvements in outcomes for commuter students can be achieved through coherent, evidence-based, student-centred, system-level responses. Collectively, they illustrate how institutions can design policies, and teaching and learning environments that better reflect the realities of contemporary higher education.

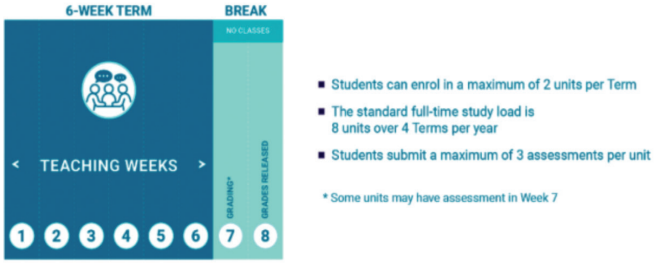
Case Study 7: Southern Cross University Whole-of-Institution Curriculum Reform

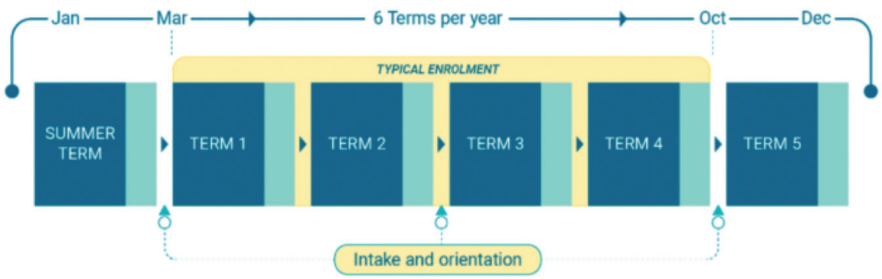
Context: Southern Cross University (SCU) is a regional public university in Australia serving approximately 18,000 students across undergraduate, postgraduate, and enabling programmes. In 2019, institutional data indicated that SCU's student population was increasingly characterised by a "new majority" cohort. This included a high proportion of first-in-family students, students from regional and remote locations, online learners, and students balancing study alongside work and caring responsibilities. Only a quarter of students entered SCU directly through traditional school leaver pathways.

University leadership identified a misalignment between the traditional 13-week semester model and the realities of their student cohort, particularly in terms of retention, progression, and academic success. External pressures, including the COVID-19 pandemic and rising cost-of-living, further intensified the need for a learning model that could better support flexibility, engagement, and success while maintaining academic standards. In response, SCU undertook a whole-of-institution curriculum reform, culminating in the introduction of the Southern Cross Model (SCM).

Approach/Actions: SCU implemented an immersive block teaching module where teaching terms are six weeks long followed by a two-week break, with four terms per academic year. Full-time students study two units per term, while part-time students study one unit per term. Total credit points and completion timelines remain equivalent to those of a traditional semester structure (See Figure 1 reproduced from Roche, Wilson & Goode, 2024. P. 9)

Figure 1:
Teaching Terms in the Southern Cross Model





This reform incorporated a pedagogical reset, including the removal of lectures and examinations (where accreditation permitted), and the redesign of units for interactive blended and online delivery. Teaching is structured around weekly tutorials or workshops (either online and/or face-to-face), and supported by authentic, scaffolded assessment tasks and timely feedback.

Crucially, the reform was enabled through a whole-of-institution approach rather than through incremental or piecemeal change. Key enablers included: strong strategic leadership, clearly articulated governance and accountability structures, and comprehensive policy and process redesign across areas such as assessment, academic workload, quality assurance, academic integrity, and special consideration. Dedicated resourcing, such as academic designers, analysts, and change leaders, supported implementation, while Communities of Practice were established to sustain engagement and support academic staff through transition. Technical systems were also adapted to enable compressed teaching cycles and streamlined administrative workflows (Roche et al., 2024).

Impact and Key Learnings: Evaluation of the Southern Cross Model drew on multiple indicators, including student success rates, satisfaction, retention, and progression.

- Evidence demonstrated significant improvements in student success outcomes following implementation. Overall success rates increased by 9.3 percentage points, with particularly strong gains for part-time students (+13.5 percentage points) and online learners (+10.8 percentage points). Gains were significantly larger than control groups, suggesting the model helps close gaps between full-time vs. part-time students and on campus vs. online students. (Roche et al., 2024).
- Student satisfaction remained broadly stable during the initial phases of implementation, despite substantial gains in success. Teaching satisfaction among on campus students increased modestly, while lower satisfaction levels were observed among students transitioning mid-programme from a semester-based structure to the block model.
- Subsequent analysis indicated that satisfaction improvements lagged behind success gains due to adjustment periods but improved over time as delivery was refined and both staff and students became more accustomed to the model (Wilson et al., 2025).
- In addition to student outcomes, the reform also resulted in operational efficiencies, including faster assessment turnaround times and streamlined quality assurance processes.

The Southern Cross University case demonstrates that whole-of-institution curriculum reform can deliver measurable improvements in student success, particularly for equity-priority and non-traditional cohorts, without compromising academic standards. The evidence suggests that immersive block models are most effective when supported by aligned leadership, governance, policy, and technical infrastructure.

Key takeaways for the sector include the importance of designing policy and process environments that enable effective pedagogy; investing in technical capacity to support compressed academic cycles; planning for uneven adoption; and investing in sustained professional development. Of note is the important role that Communities of Practice played in embedding change and maintaining teaching quality. Finally, the case highlights the need for continuous review and refinement of policies, processes, and platforms as new models mature and scale, ensuring they remain responsive to both student needs and institutional contexts.

Case Study 8: Victoria University. Block Model Pedagogy for a New Generation of Learners

Context: Victoria University (VU) is a Melbourne-based public university with a highly diverse student population, including substantial proportions of students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds, non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), and students who are first in family (FiF) to attend higher education. Many students balance study with work and caring responsibilities and face challenges related to financial pressure, language, and academics.

In response to persistent challenges in student engagement, retention, and success (particularly among equity cohorts), VU undertook a major organisational transformation. Central to this transformation was the introduction of the Victoria University Block Model (VUBM), designed to place student learning needs at the centre of curriculum design while differentiating the institution within an increasingly competitive higher education market.

Approach/Actions: The VU Block Model represents a whole-of-institution pedagogical and organisational shift. Under the model, rather than managing multiple subjects concurrently, students study one unit at a time over a four-week block, completing 11 teaching sessions per unit. Teaching blocks are interspersed with scheduled breaks to manage intensity and support student wellbeing (see Figure 2).

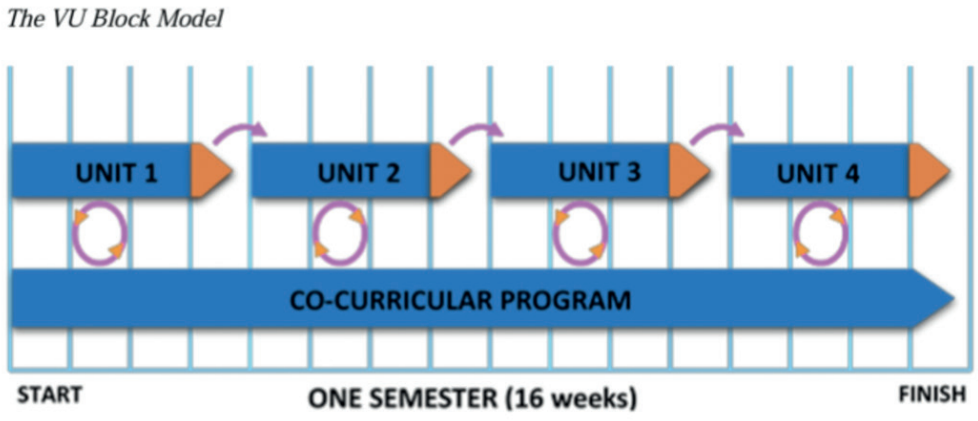
Figure 2:
Block Learning at VU (Reproduced from Samarawickrema et al., 2024, p.15).

Delivery of the model is hybrid, combining face-to-face workshops with structured online learning, and class sizes are typically capped at approximately 35 students to support active, collaborative learning and strengthen staff-student relationships. Assessment is continuous and scaffolded, guided by seven core design principles, including active learning, rapid feedback, authenticity, and progression.

A distinctive feature of the model is the integration of a co-curricular "spine" which is embedded within the curriculum rather than delivered as an add-on. This includes Study Essentials (Year 1), Course Essentials (Year 2), and Career Essentials (Year 3), ensuring that academic, personal, and employability skills development are systematically supported across the student lifecycle.

Implementation of the Block Model was supported by changes in governance, quality assurance, curriculum design processes, and institutional culture. Over time, the model evolved from an initial focus on first year transition to a more mature, system-wide framework embedding inclusive teaching and assessment practices across programmes.

By 2024, Block Teaching at VU had become embedded in policy, curriculum design, quality assurance processes, and cocurricular provision. The following table identifies key points of comparison between the early and more mature stages of implementation, highlighting how the Block Model evolved in design, policy, and practice over time.



Comparative Analysis: What Evolved from 2021 to 2024

	2021: Early Stage	2024: Systemic Maturity
Focus	Differentiation, early performance wins.	Equity gains, institutional normalization.
Evidence	Pass-rate improvements.	Cohort-level comparisons (gains in LSES/NESB/ FiF).
Design Emphasis	Active learning, small classes, and continuous assessment.	Hybrid model, integrated co-curricular spine.
Change	New timetable + governance (Focus on First Year Cohort to support transition; Establishment of a Connected Learning Unit to support academics in curriculum development and pedagogy.)	Policy frameworks embedding inclusive teaching and assessment standards; QA routines; cultural adoption across programmes.
Challenges	Workload intensity for students; need for rapid assessment turnaround.	Sustainability; pace for students and staff.
Mitigations	Proactive student advising; centralised assessment support; streamlined feedback design.	Teaching breaks between units; professional development; QA cycles.

Impact and Key Learnings: Evidence from the initial implementation phase demonstrated substantial improvements in student success.

- Early evaluation showed first year pass rates rising to 87%, representing a 13-percentage point improvement compared with the prior semester-based model, alongside a significant reduction in fail grades. Students reported higher motivation, improved confidence, stronger time management skills, and greater resilience (Tangalakis et al., 2021).
- Subsequent analysis, conducted after two years of implementation, demonstrated that improvements extended across the broader student population, with particularly strong gains for equity cohorts. Students from LSES, NESB, and FiF backgrounds experienced greater relative improvements than their peers, indicating that the model helped close longstanding achievement gaps (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2024).

The Victoria University case demonstrates that short, intensive, and well-supported block-based curricula can significantly improve student success outcomes, particularly for traditionally underrepresented and equity priority groups. The effectiveness of the Block Model lies in the integration of timetable change with pedagogy, assessment design, co-curricular support, and institutional culture. While early challenges included workload intensity and the need for rapid assessment turnaround, these were increasingly addressed through scheduled teaching breaks, centralised assessment support, and ongoing professional development for staff.

Key lessons for the sector include the importance of student-centred curriculum design, smaller class sizes, rapid and meaningful feedback, and embedding academic and employability support within programmes rather than treating them as supplementary. The case also highlights the need for strong governance, quality assurance mechanisms, and sustained professional development to ensure consistency and sustainability as reforms scale.

Overall, the Victoria University Block Model illustrates how coordinated pedagogical innovation can deliver both equity gains and institutional differentiation, offering a scalable approach for institutions seeking inclusive, high-impact teaching and learning models.



Case Study 9: The Commuting Student Experience in Ireland: Insights from a National NTUTORR Project

Context: Commuting students constitute a significant proportion of the higher education population in Ireland. Professor Liz Thomas of York University led a project which examined the experiences of commuter students across the Technological Higher Education section. It was funded by the University of York's Economic and Social Research Council's Impact Acceleration Account and implemented with the support of the Technological Universities Association (formerly the Technological Higher Education Association) and the National Technological University TransfOrmation for Recovery and Resilience (N-TUTORR) project. The research sought to understand how commuting affects student engagement, wellbeing and academic outcomes, and to identify how higher education institutions can better support this cohort. It addressed the questions:

i. How does being a commuter student impact on student experiences and outcomes in higher education institutions in Ireland?

ii. How can higher education institutions improve the experience and outcomes of commuter students?

Approach/Actions: The project adopted a mixed-method approach. This included a semi-structured review and thematic analysis of institutional websites to assess the visibility and recognition of commuter students within policy and practice. In addition, online "town hall" focus groups were conducted with students and staff, to enable a more qualitative exploration of lived experiences of students who commute. Of note is the project's engagement of a "student jury" of commuter students who played an active role in shaping recommendations.

The study identified seven priority areas for institutional action, reflecting needs voiced directly by students. These included timetabling and attendance practices; the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs); flipped, individual and group learning approaches; and the flexible delivery of academic and pastoral support. The research also highlighted the need for broader institutional changes to enable commuter student participation in the wider higher education experience. A significant outcome of the project was the development of the Quick Wins Guide, which provides institutions with immediately actionable steps to improve commuter students' experiences. The guide outlines practical interventions across the following areas:

- Recognition and Visibility
- Communication and Information
- Timetabling and Academic Flexibility
- Flexible, Blended and Inclusive Learning
- Campus Space, Facilities and Practical Supports
- Travel, Transport and Financial Considerations
- Belonging, Engagement and Student Life
- Student Voice and Feedback

Impact and Key Learnings: This research revealed systemic under-recognition of commuter students across institutions, including limited acknowledgement on websites and in formal policy documents. Key findings aligned closely with existing international literature, demonstrating that long commuting times reduce opportunities for social engagement, limit participation in extra-curricular activities, contribute to fatigue, and can negatively affect academic performance. The research also highlights that many of the challenges faced by commuter students stem from institutional structures, with students frequently reporting feelings of invisibility within campus culture. A distinctive feature of the methodology was the establishment of a commuter student "jury", which played an active role in interpreting the findings and shaping the resulting recommendations.

The project shows that relatively small, targeted interventions can have a meaningful impact on commuter students' experiences. The Quick Wins Guide provides clear, practical actions for institutions seeking to foster a more inclusive campus culture. However, it also acknowledges the need for longer-term structural reforms and an institution-wide approach, in which commuter students are recognised as a core student group and supported through inclusive policy, practice, and design.

6. Conclusion

Commuter students make up a large and growing share of the higher education population in Ireland. These case studies indicate that improving outcomes for this cohort is most effective when institutions adopt a multi-level approach, combining immediate, practical measures with targeted operational reforms and, where appropriate, longer-term system-wide redesign.

These case studies illustrated a spectrum of interventions spanning small-scale actions, focused operational changes, and large-scale systemic reforms:

Small-scale, low-resource interventions can yield immediate and tangible benefits for commuter students by alleviating practical constraints and enhancing access to campus life. These initiatives are especially meaningful for students balancing travel, work, and family responsibilities. They also help cultivate trust and momentum, illustrating the institution's commitment to responsive and student-centred practice.

Beyond quick wins, more focused institutional interventions address deeper structural challenges by enabling universities to adapt operational practices in ways that create more accessible and responsive learning conditions for commuter students. Evidence across the case studies underscores the importance of grounding these decisions in robust student insight, ensuring that institutional responses are closely aligned with students lived experiences.

Large-scale, system-level reform provides the strongest foundation for transforming commuter student outcomes. Whole-institution curriculum re-design aligned governance structures, and cross-institutional collaboration can reshape the conditions under which students learn and participate. These approaches not only support improvements in retention, progression, and equity, but also signal a broader cultural shift in how institutions understand and respond to the realities of the contemporary student body.

Ultimately, improving the commuter student experience is about acknowledging the diversity of student lives and ensuring that all students can participate fully, succeed academically, and experience a genuine sense of belonging in their university community.

Across all levels, a shared set of principles becomes evident:

1. Student voice and partnership are fundamental to designing interventions that are credible and responsive to lived experience.
2. Flexibility is central to enabling meaningful engagement for students managing complex schedules and travel demands.
3. Belonging should be intentionally embedded within institutional culture, policies, and everyday practices.
4. Evidence-informed, equity-focused approaches underpin the most sustained, impactful, and meaningful improvements for commuter students.

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Chapter 5:

Research Synthesis

This research synthesis brings together insights from this project to consolidate understanding of how higher education institutions (HEIs) are adapting to evolving student needs in the broad areas of financial hardship and commuting. Rather than offering prescriptive recommendations, this synthesis identifies the patterns, principles, and institutional levers that emerged consistently across the project's thematic analysis, institutional strategy review, literature review, priority theme briefings and case study series. Collectively, these insights offer a transferable evidence base that Irish institutions can adopt, sustain, or scale, depending on their local context and strategic priorities.

A. Multi-Level Approaches to Student Support

Across emerging themes, the evidence shows that students' ability to participate, engage and develop a sense of belonging is shaped by financial strain, time poverty, commuting pressures, and work obligations, as well as by structural and pedagogical features of teaching and timetabling. We have grouped institutional responses into three levels:

1. Small-Scale, Low-Resource Actions

These consisted of a range of "quick wins" to support students navigating time poverty, long commutes, part-time work, or caring responsibilities. These small-scale, low-cost measures provided immediate relief in areas such as:

- subsidised meals, microwaves, warm spaces, lockers.
- commuter hubs, accessible lounges, and informal connection spaces.
- free essentials (period products, e-books, low-cost food).
- recorded lectures, asynchronous resources, and basic timetable adjustments.

By increasing the visibility and accessibility of essential supports or offering universally available, stigma-free resources, these actions demonstrated institutional responsiveness to reducing everyday barriers to participation, but also often acted as catalysts for broader cultural and structural change.

2. Focused Operational Reforms

These institution-level adjustments typically focused on addressing one or more structural challenges such as:

- Student data: grounding decisions in robust student insight (e.g., SU-led cost-of-living surveys, student forums, mixed-method studies).
- Timetables: enhancing timetable flexibility through clustering classes, minimising gaps, avoiding early/late sessions, early timetable release, integrating cocurricular "noncontact" time.
- Hybrid and blended learning: lecture recordings, online advising, extended hours service, flipped learning, asynchronous access, curriculum design for digital learning.
- Joined-up support ecosystems: cost-of-living hubs, commuter hubs, extended-hours services, integrated advice pathways.

By concentrating on a specific operational area, universities could ensure that changes were shaped by meaningful student insight and reduce risk through piloting solutions, gather feedback, and refining approaches before embedding them institution-wide.

3. Large-Scale, System-Level Reform

The most transformative responses involved institution-wide reform, in areas such as:

- Block or immersive teaching: enabling deeper engagement, fewer concurrent demands, and fewer days on campus for commuters or working students.
- Governance alignment: such as cost-of-living taskforces, student-staff working groups, cross-departmental coordination.
- Culture change initiatives: incorporating belonging into institutional strategy, induction, pedagogy, and staff professional development.
- Integrated models: acknowledging that barriers intersect and compound across academic/financial/wellbeing.
- Sector-level collaboration: including national surveys and multi-institutional pilots.

System-level reforms positioned institutions to respond proactively to evolving student needs. They established durable frameworks that supported long-term student success, and provided a stable platform for policy, planning, and continuous improvement.

Taken together, actions across these levels showed that:

- Quick wins are important but insufficient on their own.
- Focused operational reforms create more accessible and equitable learning environments.
- Strategic, system-level action produces the most sustainable improvements.

B. Cross-Theme Patterns

The research undertaken as part of this project identified a range of challenges and approaches capable of influencing student engagement and success and revealed a set of recurring patterns that intersected these approaches. Key project takeaways included:

1. Know your students: The strongest interventions started with an evidence-based understanding of who students are now. Institutions that systematically gathered and analysed data about their students, supplemented by external research, avoided reliance on traditional or assumed student profiles. This data-informed understanding enabled more targeted, relevant, and equitable responses.

2. Student partnership deepens trust and impact: Effective responses treated students as partners and leaders, not passive recipients. Partnership sharpened decision-making, and student-generated evidence and content increased relevance and peer buy-in.

3. Evidence-informed governance enables action: Taskforces, working groups, cost-of-living surveys, student forums, and mixed methods studies were critical to identifying emerging needs, prioritising action, and enabling rapid and accountable decision-making. Institutions with multilayered governance mechanisms responded most effectively to evolving pressures and moved interventions from being reactive to strategic.

4. Flexibility is a key institutional lever: Flexibility in timetabling, teaching delivery, assessment, and service provision consistently emerged as a foundational requirement for students who commute, work long hours and/or are experiencing financial strain. Institutions that took these constraints into account saw improved engagement and participation.

5. Practical supports strengthen belonging: Universal, low-barrier supports (microwaves, subsidised meals, period products, community fridges, warm spaces, travel supports) reduced stigma, met essential student needs, and were consistently linked to improved well-being and social connection.

6. Holistic approaches address interdependencies: The most effective interventions were those that recognised barriers to student success often intersect and compound. For example:

- financial hardship → need to work → time poverty → reduced participation → lower belonging → weaker mental health → lower academic success
- commuting → fatigue → reduced social engagement → lower mattering → disengagement

Institutions that connected financial, academic, well-being, and social supports created environments where belonging could be built sustainably.

C. Future Directions

As this synthesis demonstrates, HEIs are already adapting in meaningful ways to address the evolving realities of contemporary students. Yet, the evidence also highlights opportunities to deepen and broaden these efforts. The themes below outline areas where future development may be especially valuable.

1. **Deepening student insight and partnership:** Institutions may wish to strengthen student-staff partnership approaches and expand the use of robust, mixed-method student data insights to support decision-making and reflect the lived realities of the new majority student population.
2. **Strengthening flexible, inclusive learning environments:** Building on sector momentum and a strong, current evidence base around flexible timetabling and block/immersive teaching, institutions could explore ways to embed structural flexibility across curricula and support systems.
3. **Enhancing practical and preventative supports:** Future work may focus on expanding low barrier, practical, universal supports that reduce financial strain and remove day-to-day participation barriers. Institutions might also consider more integrated approaches that link financial, academic, wellbeing, and social supports.
4. **Supporting sector wide learning and collaboration:** There may be opportunities for coordinated multi-institutional collaboration, strategy work, or shared pilots across the sector. Joint initiatives could enable more consistent, scalable, and sustainable responses.

Conclusion

To conclude, this synthesis indicates that addressing evolving student needs requires coherent, system-level institutional approaches grounded in student partnership, high-quality student insights, and structural flexibility. These approaches recognise who students are (often time-poor, commuting, working, and balancing multiple responsibilities) and respond through aligned changes to governance, curriculum, timetabling, and student-facing services. Collectively, these insights offer a transferable foundation for future strategy, policy development, and sector-wide planning across Irish higher education, one that can be adopted, sustained, and scaled according to local context.


Ionad Teagaisc agus Foghlama
Centre For Teaching and Learning

Appendix 1

Financial Wellbeing – Overview of Chapter 3 Case Studies

Institution	Governance Model	Key Mechanisms	Headline Interventions	Notable Outcomes / Awards
Section 2: Governance & Leadership				
University of Manchester	Student-led partnership	SU as equal institutional partner and critical friend; working group with sub-committees; large-scale Cost-of-Living Survey (5,000 responses)	£9m support package; Money Advisor role in SU; cosy campus spaces; free breakfasts; low-cost food; free showers and period products; removal of library fines	Shortlisted for Times Higher Education Award for Outstanding Support for Students
Buckinghamshire New University	Multichannel student-led	SU evidence-gathering; Student Experience Committee; Student Forum; NSS trend analysis	Accommodation subsidies; scholarships and bursaries; Real Living Wage for student employees; free meals; catering discounts; free hygiene and period products	Winner, 2023 Whatuni Student Choice Award for Cost-of-Living Support
University of St Andrews	Taskforce-led	Centrally coordinated Cost-of-Living Taskforce; online student input form; dedicated Cost-of-Living webpage hub; alumni and philanthropic fundraising	Flexible discretionary hardship fund; subsidised meals; warm spaces; Students' Association budgeting resource hub	Holistic, adaptive model combining immediate financial aid with sustained practical and wellbeing supports

Institution	Governance Model	Key Mechanisms	Headline Interventions	Notable Outcomes / Awards
Section 3: Student-Centred Approaches and Practical Interventions				
UCL / Russell Group Students' Unions	Multi-institutional survey collaboration	Joint Cost-of-Living Survey across Russell Group (c. 9,000 responses nationally; 2,247 UCL responses); national advocacy network	National comparative dataset; strengthened institutional and policy advocacy; directly informed UCL's hub development	Shortlisted for Times Higher Education Award for Outstanding Support for Students
UCL / University of Nottingham / Queen's University Belfast	Centralised access hub	Single online portal consolidating financial support, advice, wellbeing routes, and practical resources	Hardship funds; bursaries; budgeting guidance; drop-in clinics; food discounts; laptop loans; warm spaces; community cabinets with free essentials	Reduced fragmentation; lower access barriers; normalises help-seeking by mainstreaming financial wellbeing support
London School of Economics & University of Northampton	Peer-led financial guidance	LSE: student-authored blogs and vlogs integrated with institutional advice and careers guidance. UON: Money Matters hub with trained Student Money Mentors	Budgeting tools; peer-to-peer financial guidance; part-time work advice; links to hardship funds and support services	Increased engagement through relatable, student-authored content; reduced stigma around financial help-seeking
Sheffield Hallam University	Whole-institution & SU partnership (equity-driven)	University financial mechanisms combined with SU-operated practical community provision; philanthropic fundraising via student stories	Expanded hardship and international emergency funds; sport hardship fund; free top 100 e-books; graduation cost support; £1 food items; SU Cost-of-Living Shop: Community Fridge, Swap Shops, free essential items	Enrols more students from under-represented backgrounds than any UK university; model demonstrates how university-level finance and SU-led community provision can be complementary

Appendix 2

Supporting Commuter Students – Overview of Chapter 3 Case Studies

Institution	Student Profile	Intervention Type	Key Actions	Outcomes & Evidence	HEPI Priority Areas Addressed
Section 2: Governance & Leadership					
Buckinghamshire New University UK	High proportion of local and commuting students; vocational focus; widening participation	Financial barrier removal - extra-curricular access	▸ Free access to all societies, clubs, sport teams, workshops, and events ▸ Funded centrally; extra support for high-performing societies ▸ Covers membership, coaching, equipment, and events	▸ Students save approximately £200 annually ▸ Significant increase in extra-curricular participation ▸ Reduced financial barriers for commuting students	5 - Upgrade Campus Amenities 6 - Enable Belonging 7 - Recognise Local Students
University of East Anglia UK	Mid-sized research university; mature, commuting, and widening participation students	Belonging and peer connection initiative	▸ Weekly drop-in sessions combining study support, wellbeing, and networking ▸ Creative and informal activities (knitting, journalling, sewing) ▸ Low-pressure, flexible format accessible to students with caring or travel constraints	▸ Improved sense of connection and campus engagement ▸ Increased peer interaction among commuting and mature students ▸ Sticky campus' effect: students stayed on campus beyond scheduled classes	5 - Upgrade Campus Amenities 6 - Enable Belonging 7 - Recognise Local Students

Institution	Student Profile	Intervention Type	Key Actions	Outcomes & Evidence	HEPI Priority Areas Addressed
Section 4: Focused Institutional Interventions					
4.1 Using Data to Understand Commuter Needs					
London Higher (6 member institutions) UK	London universities; ~80% of students live at home or commute significant distances	Cross-institutional data collection and analysis	▸ Mixed-methods pilot across 6 institutions examining commuting patterns, belonging, and continuation ▸ Standardised travel-time analysis combined with focus groups and student workshops ▸ Examined motivations, barriers, caring responsibilities, and part-time work	▸ Longer commute times significantly associated with lower continuation and progression rates ▸ Findings informed institutional strategies and national sector guidance ▸ Identified priority areas: timetabling, campus facilities, flexible learning, commuter social activities	1 - Agree on a Common Definition 2 - Gather Commuter Insights 3 - Offer Travel Support 4 - Create Timetable Flexibility
Sheffield Hallam University UK	Large post-1992 university; over 50% of students commute	Data-led 'sticky campus' strategy	▸ Analysed demographic data, commuting patterns, and cost-of-living survey findings ▸ SU partnership to understand how transport costs and timetabling influence attendance ▸ Developed 'sticky campus' principles: welcoming spaces encouraging longer campus stays ▸ SU-led campaigns for more affordable public transport informed by survey data	▸ More condensed timetables and increased hybrid delivery introduced ▸ Enhanced campus amenities mitigated impact of travel costs ▸ Student perspectives represented in regional transport advocacy	2 - Gather Commuter Insights 3 - Offer Travel Support 4 - Create Timetable Flexibility 5 - Upgrade Campus Amenities

Institution	Student Profile	Intervention Type	Key Actions	Outcomes & Evidence	HEPI Priority Areas Addressed
4.2 Timetabling and Structural Flexibility					
University of Roehampton UK	London post-1992; high proportion of commuting students; widening participation focus	Timetable reform - three-day teaching weeks	▸ Teaching scheduled on no more than three days per week for first-year students ▸ Students informed by July which days their classes will occur ▸ Complemented by commuter facilities: free parking, bike storage, showers, 'Pocket Lounges' with microwaves, fridges, lockers, and charging points	▸ Reduced commuting burden and improved scheduling predictability ▸ Supports work and family commitments alongside study ▸ University markets itself as a 'commuter-friendly' institution ▸ Combining timetable reform with amenities increases campus engagement	4 - Create Timetable Flexibility 5 - Upgrade Campus Amenities 6 - Enable Belonging 7 - Recognise Local Students
Kingston University UK	London post-1992; diverse student body including commuters from across London and surrounding areas	Equity-informed timetable redesign	▸ Institutional research project with 550 students using questionnaires and focus groups ▸ Examined how timetable design intersects with ethnicity, gender, age, and travel distance ▸ Introduced later start times and guaranteed one free day per week	▸ Strong negative correlation found between travel time and timetable satisfaction ▸ Ethnic minority students found to travel twice as far on average ▸ Greater inclusivity and improved student experience reported for commuters ▸ Timetabling demonstrated as a structural equity lever	2 - Gather Commuter Insights 4 - Create Timetable Flexibility 6 - Enable Belonging 7 - Recognise Local Students

Institution	Student Profile	Intervention Type	Key Actions	Outcomes & Evidence	HEPI Priority Areas Addressed
Section 5: System-Level and Multi-Institutional Approaches					
Southern Cross University Australia	Regional university; 18,000 students; high proportion first-in-family, regional/remote, online learners, and students balancing work and caring	Regional university; 18,000 students; high proportion first-in-family, regional/remote, online learners, and students balancing work and caring	▸ Six-week immersive teaching blocks with two-week breaks; four terms per year ▸ Full-time students study two units per term; part-time students one unit ▸ Removal of traditional lectures and exams (where accreditation permitted) ▸ Interactive blended/online delivery; authentic scaffolded assessment ▸ Enabled by aligned governance, policy redesign, dedicated resourcing, and Communities of Practice	▸ Overall student success rates increased by 9.3 percentage points ▸ Part-time student success up 13.5 percentage points; online learners up 10.8 percentage points ▸ Gains significantly larger than control groups ▸ Operational efficiencies: faster assessment turnaround; streamlined quality assurance	4 - Create Timetable Flexibility 6 - Enable Belonging 7 - Recognise Local Students
Victoria University Australia	Melbourne-based; highly diverse; substantial LSES, NESB, and first-in-family students; many balance study with work and caring	Melbourne-based; highly diverse; substantial LSES, NESB, and first-in-family students; many balance study with work and caring	▸ Students study one unit at a time over a four-week block; 11 teaching sessions per unit ▸ Hybrid delivery; class sizes capped at ~35 for active, collaborative learning ▸ Continuous, scaffolded assessment guided by 7 design principles ▸ Co-curricular 'spine' embedded across all three years: Study, Course, and Career Essentials ▸ Governance, quality assurance, and curriculum design processes all realigned	▸ First-year pass rates rose to 87% - a 13-point improvement over prior semester model ▸ Strong relative gains for LSES, NESB, and first-in-family students ▸ Students reported higher motivation, confidence, time management, and resilience ▸ Model helped close longstanding achievement gaps for equity cohorts	4 - Create Timetable Flexibility 6 - Enable Belonging 7 - Recognise Local Students
N-TUTORR Project (7 institutions) Ireland	Technological University sector; commuter students constituting a significant proportion of the Irish HE population	National mixed-methods research project - student voice and Quick Wins framework	▸ Semi-structured review of institutional websites for commuter student visibility ▸ Online town hall focus groups with students and staff ▸ Student 'jury' of commuter students shaped recommendations ▸ Quick Wins Guide developed covering 8 action areas: Recognition, Communication, Timetabling, Flexible Learning, Campus Facilities, Travel & Finance, Belonging, and Student Voice	▸ Systemic under-recognition of commuter students across institutions identified ▸ Long commute times found to reduce social engagement, increase fatigue, and affect academic performance ▸ Many challenges shown to stem from institutional structures, not student behaviour ▸ Quick Wins Guide provides immediately actionable steps; longer-term structural reform also recommended	1 - Agree on a Common Definition 2 - Gather Commuter Insights 3 - Offer Travel Support 4 - Create Timetable Flexibility 5 - Upgrade Campus Amenities 6 –Enable Belonging 7 –Recognise Local Students 8 – Expand Local Recruitment

HEPI Priority Areas Key (adapted from Freeman, 2023): 1 - Agree on a Common Definition 2 - Gather Commuter Insights 3 - Offer Travel Support 4 - Create Timetable Flexibility 5 - Upgrade Campus Amenities 6 - Enable Belonging 7 - Recognise Local Students 8 - Local Recruitment




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