

UNIVERSITY of York

Reclaiming the campus: Bringing students back to base

Professor Liz Thomas, Department of Education

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Overview

- Unpacking the challenge
  - Current situation
  - Structural challenges
  - Drivers keeping students away from campus
- Commuter student research
  - Student experiences
  - What students lose
- Making campus worth the commute
  - What students want: academic experience, wider experience and easing the commuting friction
  - Quick wins and longer-term changes
  - Institutional transformation



About me

- Professor of Higher Education for over 25 years.
- Research about widening access, student success, engagement, belonging, learning and teaching and institutional change.
- Director of the What works? Student retention and success programme (2008-2017)
- Currently working on a whole provider approach (building on work from 2017) to inform sustainable institutional transformation.
- In 2025 researched ‘commuter students’ experiences and recommendations for change in Ireland (building on work in England from 2017).
- Currently working with 4 Irish HEIs to learn mor about commuter student population and implement and evaluate changes.



Unpacking the challenge: The core paradox

‘Qualification without community’

- Less time spent learning, socialising, and developing alongside fellow students on campus.
- Reduced peer interaction and wider engagement.
- *‘I am happy just doing the work …’* (Thomas 2020).
- *‘I use my time more wisely…’* (Thomas 2018).
- *‘The social side of college is non-existent…* (Thomas 2025).
- Increasingly students seek the degree qualification, but are sacrificing the transformative experience of campus life.
- Miss much of the informal learning and development that produces ‘graduateness’.

European context

- Cost-of-living crisis: Inflation has increased cost of food, fuel, accommodation and travel which all impact on students.
- Increasing higher education tuition fees (in some countries).
- Reduced state funding and shifting the burden to individuals (e.g. loans).
- Economic instability makes it difficult for students to find part-time employment and to rely on parents for financial support.

Norwegian context

- Although Norway is a comparatively rich country, there have been significant increases in food and energy prices.
- To combat rising inflation, interest rates have been increased (4.5%, Sept 26), affecting mortgage repayments.
- Housing and rent costs have increased due to shortages of building supplies, cost of finance and increased demand (esp. Oslo and Bergen). 20% increase in rents over 2 years to 2024.
- For students, state loans and grants now fall thousands of kroner short of average student monthly expenditures. For most, basic support is depleted after paying rent and essentials. Student protests resulted in a 10% increase in maintenance support, but this is insufficient.
- Student welfare organisations have long wait lists for subsidised accommodation, pushing students into the private rental sector (and very high rents).
- If students live at home with parents the 40% ‘grant’ rule does not apply (i.e. remains as loan), but students are calculating that it is more affordable to live at home, as rent has increased in cost so much.
- Norway has one of the highest rates of term-time employment in Europe (~75% according to Eurostudent 8) and work is the primary source of income for more than half the student population.

What is keeping students away from campus?



- Pandemic experiences: Widespread experience with remote learning created strong demand for digital flexibility.
- Longer commutes: Housing costs push students further from campus or force them to remain in parental homes.
- Employment commitments: Expanded work shifts leave minimal time for non-mandatory campus activities.

Research on commuter students

England 2016-17

- Qualitative interviews with 60 self-defined commuter students, FG with staff and workshops with students.

Ireland 2025

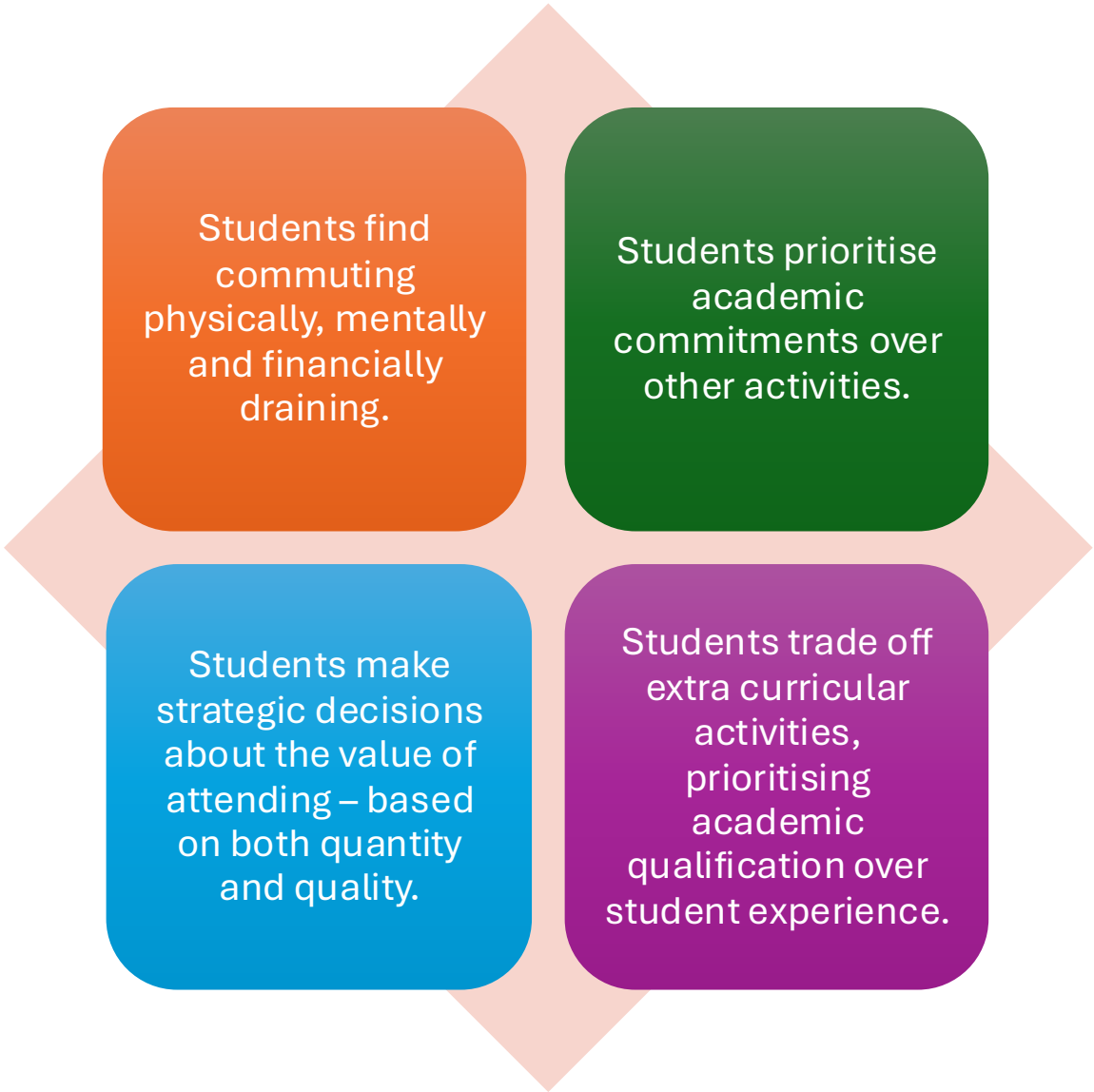
- Town Hall Focus Groups with 27 commuter students and 6 staff. Semi-structured review of HEI websites.

Commuter students is a poorly defined term. It refers to full-time, in-person students who attend campus regularly but live some distance away and commute.

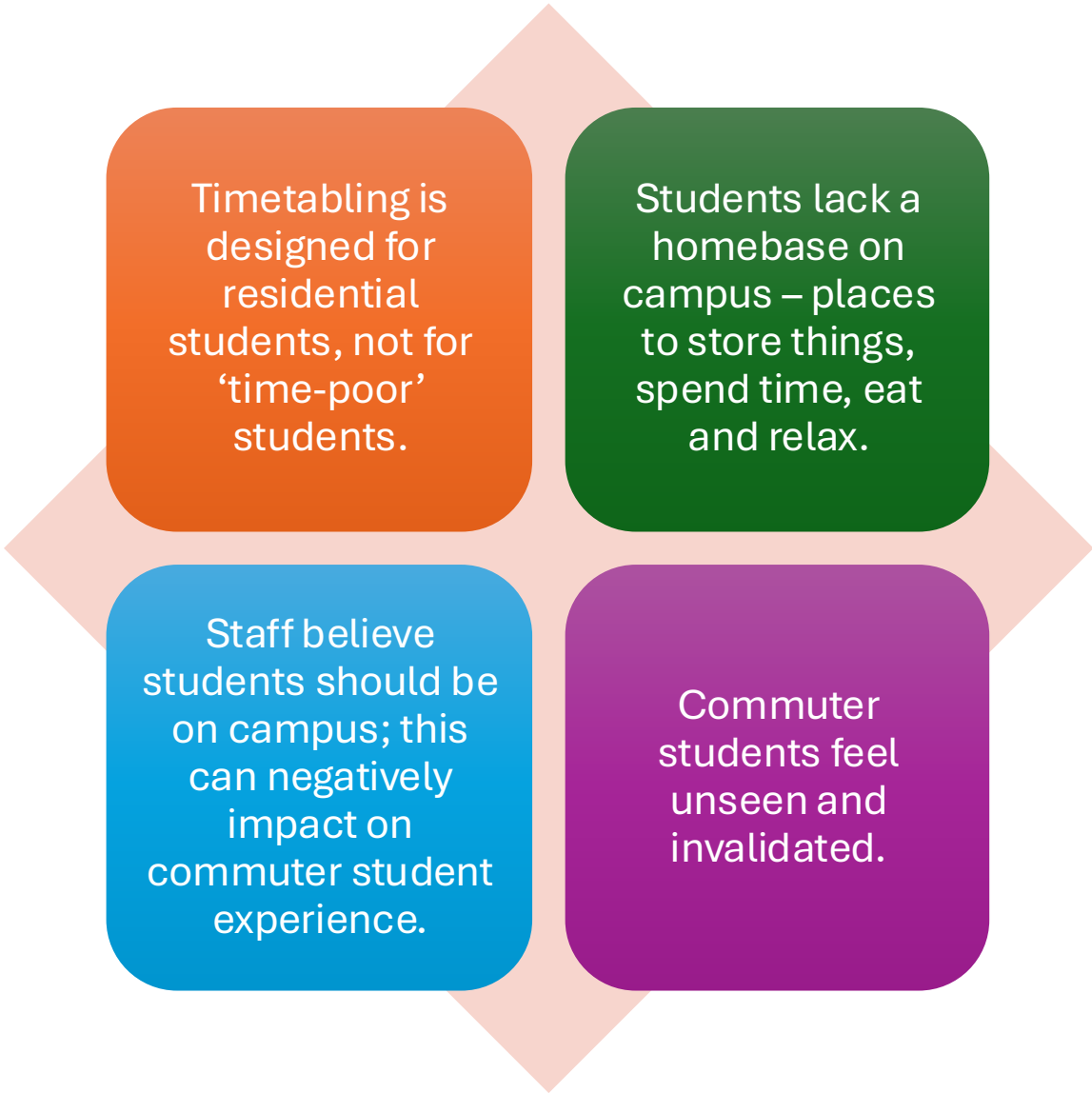




Findings


Students find commuting physically, mentally and financially draining.
Students prioritise academic commitments over other activities.
Students make strategic decisions about the value of attending – based on both quantity and quality.
Students trade off extra curricular activities, prioritising academic qualification over student experience.

Findings


Timetabling is designed for residential students, not for ‘time-poor’ students.
Students lack a homebase on campus – places to store things, spend time, eat and relax.
Staff believe students should be on campus; this can negatively impact on commuter student experience.
Commuter students feel unseen and invalidated.

What is sacrificed when students don’t come to campus?

- **Academic**: taught sessions (arrive late, leave early, strategic attendance); autonomous group working ; informal academic learning and hot knowledge; assessments; academic support and guidance.
- **Personal**: accessing additional student support and development opportunities; emotional support.
- **Social** : interaction with peers; participation in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities; and sense of belonging.
- **Professional**: Work placements, employer networking, graduate skills and contacts.
- **Outcomes**: Wellbeing, citizenship, academic success and progression to graduate jobs.

What makes campus worth the commute?

What changes could be made to the academic experience to make it more relevant and engaging to students who have other commitments and who need to travel?

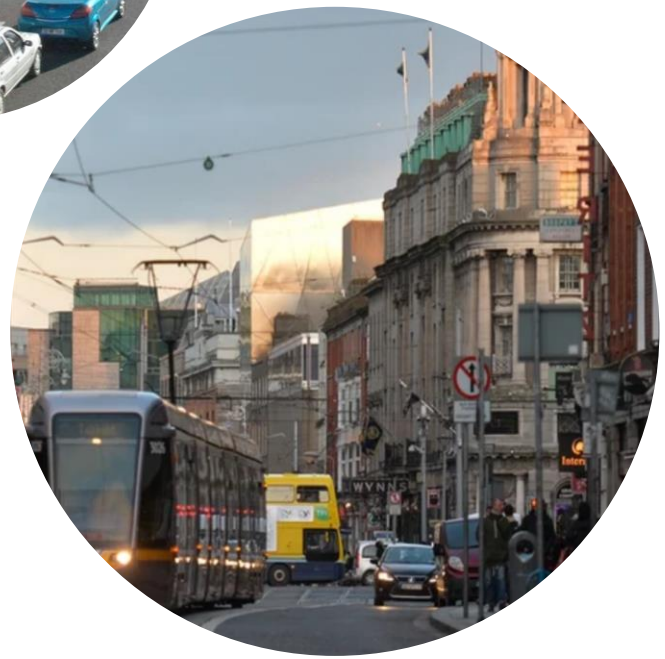
What steps could be taken to enable students to participate more and benefit from the wider student experience?

What improvements would ease the friction and stress of commuting?

What one step could you or your organisation take in the short-term to improve the experience of these students?

Commuter students want a compassionate academic response

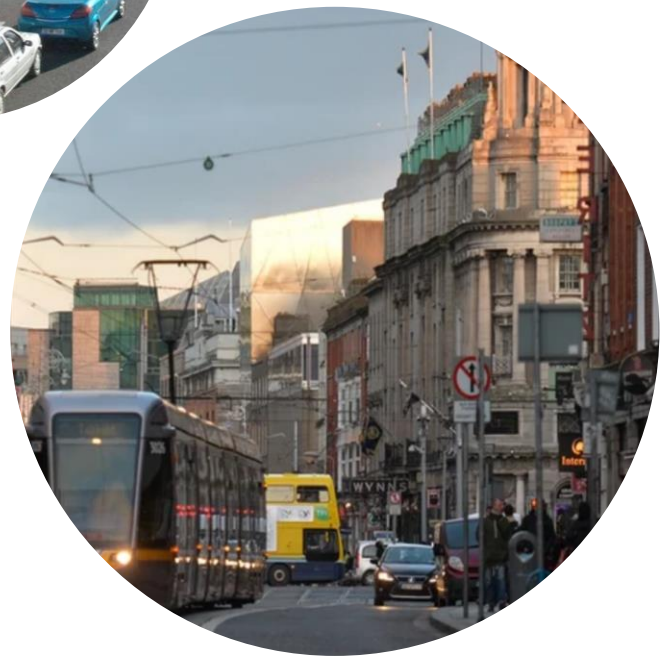




- Commuter compassionate timetable
- Commuter compassionate attendance policy
- Greater use of online learning resources and attendance
- Commuter compassionate timing of assessments
- More flexible academic support
- Group working guidelines
- Staff development

Commuter students want more flexible wider experience

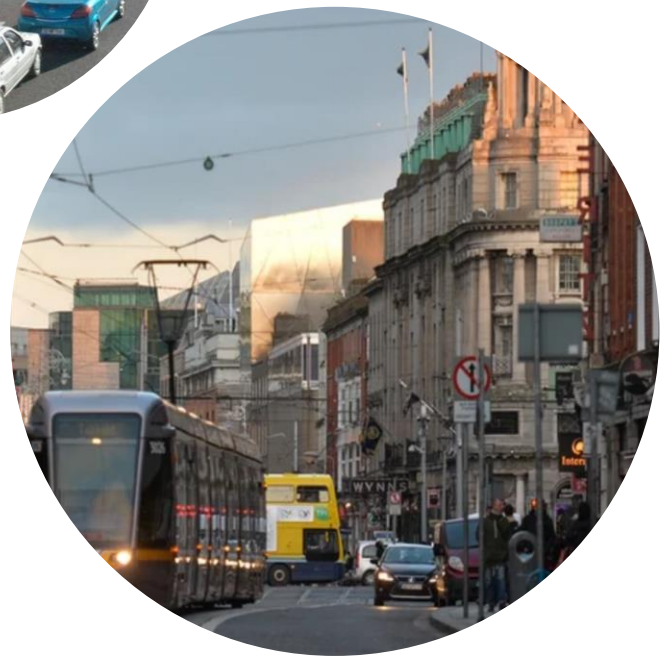




- Online student support services
- More information about the opportunities and support that is available
- Daytime events
- Alternative opportunities for engagement
- Commuter student voice and representation

Commuter students want support with travel





Financial support to help with transport costs and food on campus

Increase the number of buses, or provide private buses between HEIs and transport hubs or popular commuter locations

Encouragement and support for car sharing

Quick wins

a. Make commuter students visible on the website,.

b. Explicitly welcome commuter students to the HEI during induction to validate commuter experiences and celebrate what they contribute.

c. Create a point of contact for commuter students and encourage commuter students to identify themselves to the HEI.

d. Encourage commuter students to get to know each other so that they can travel together, car share, and meet on campus or in their local area.

e. Identify and promote a space for commuter students and considering offering breakfast or lunch.

f. Identify programmes with particularly high numbers of commuter students and develop a commuter 'compassionate' timetable.

g. Organise staff training to raise awareness of commuters' experiences, and encourage and support staff to find out about their commuter students.

h. Help teaching staff to acknowledge the existence of commuters in their classes, discuss their experiences, and make adjustments.

i. Develop guidance for group working using online platforms to encourage inclusion of commuter students.

j. Work with the Students' Union to organise commuter-friendly activities.

k. Ensure the institutional policy allows for and encourages the provision of flexible/blended one-to-one a tutoring and student support.

l. Find ways to allow commuter students to be heard and to shape institutional decision making.

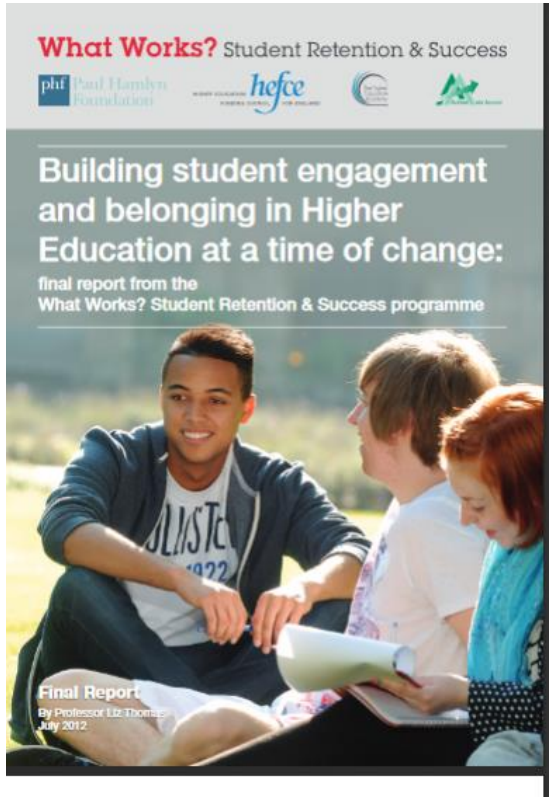
What pilot HEIs are doing as ‘quick wins’?

Raising awareness about commuter students with academic staff. Analysing institutional and survey data, sharing commuter students’ experiences, inviting staff to make changes to their teaching (drawing on the recommendations for academics entitled ‘how to be more “commuter compassionate” in your teaching and student support practices’), piloting some specific changes to explore if they improve the experience for commuter students.

Better communication with commuter students. Make commuter students more visible on websites, building information into pre- and post-entry induction sessions, student handbooks and campus tours, developing a commuter student information hub, enhanced communication about travel information and updates, and organising a commuter student town hall forum.

Creating more **commuter-friendly spaces** on campus. Breakfast clubs, early morning activities, sofas around campus, longer opening hours for campus services, and commuter student spaces (to spend time, store belonging, eat and wait for buses) to create a more commuter-compassionate campus.

What works? Student retention and success (Thomas 2012, Thomas et al 2017)







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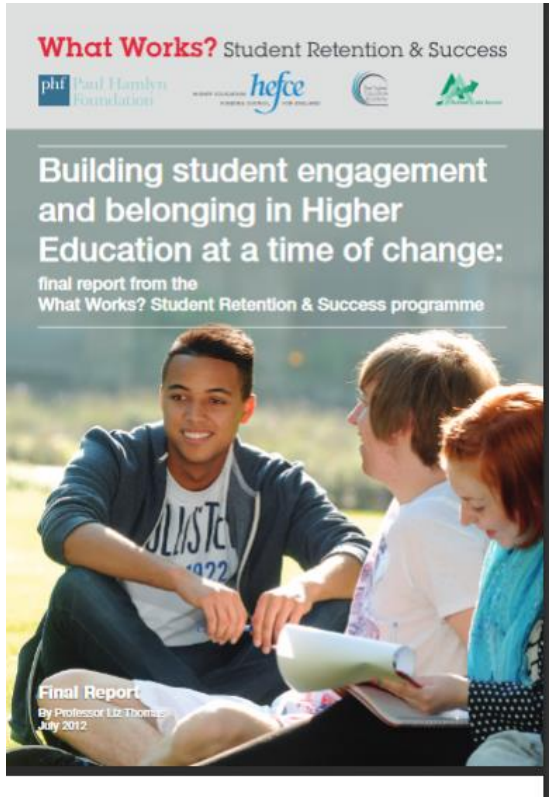
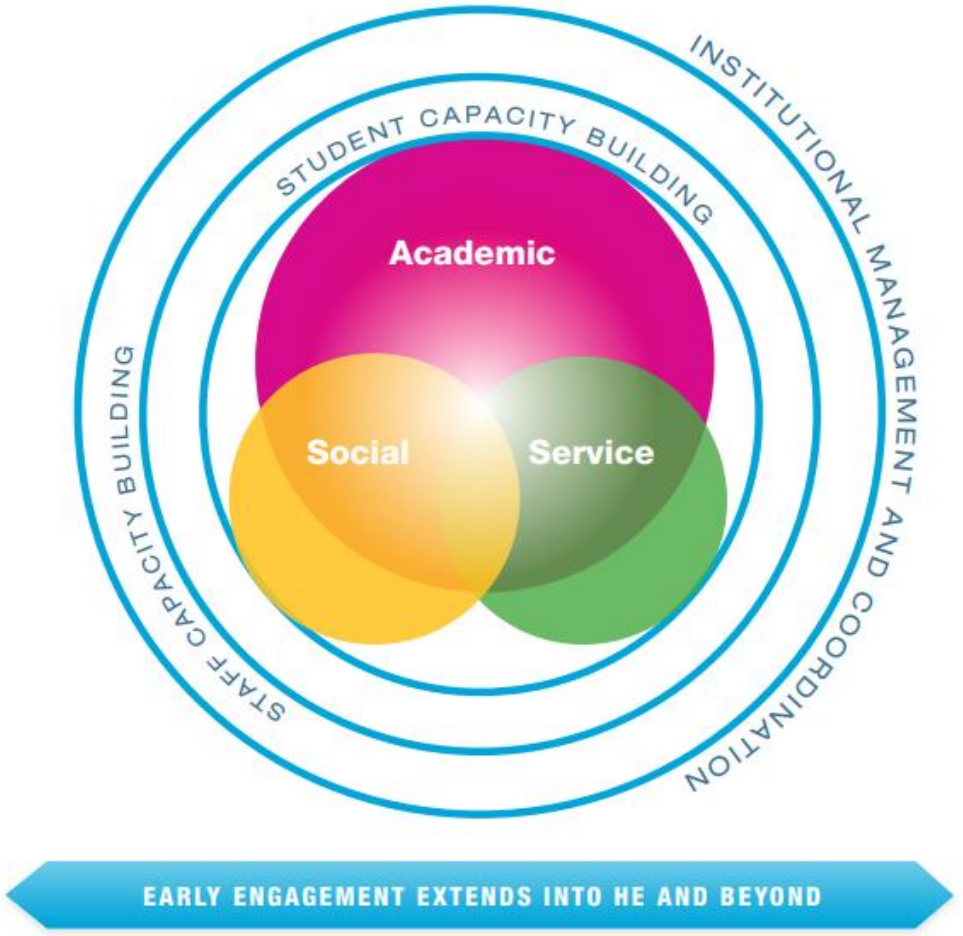




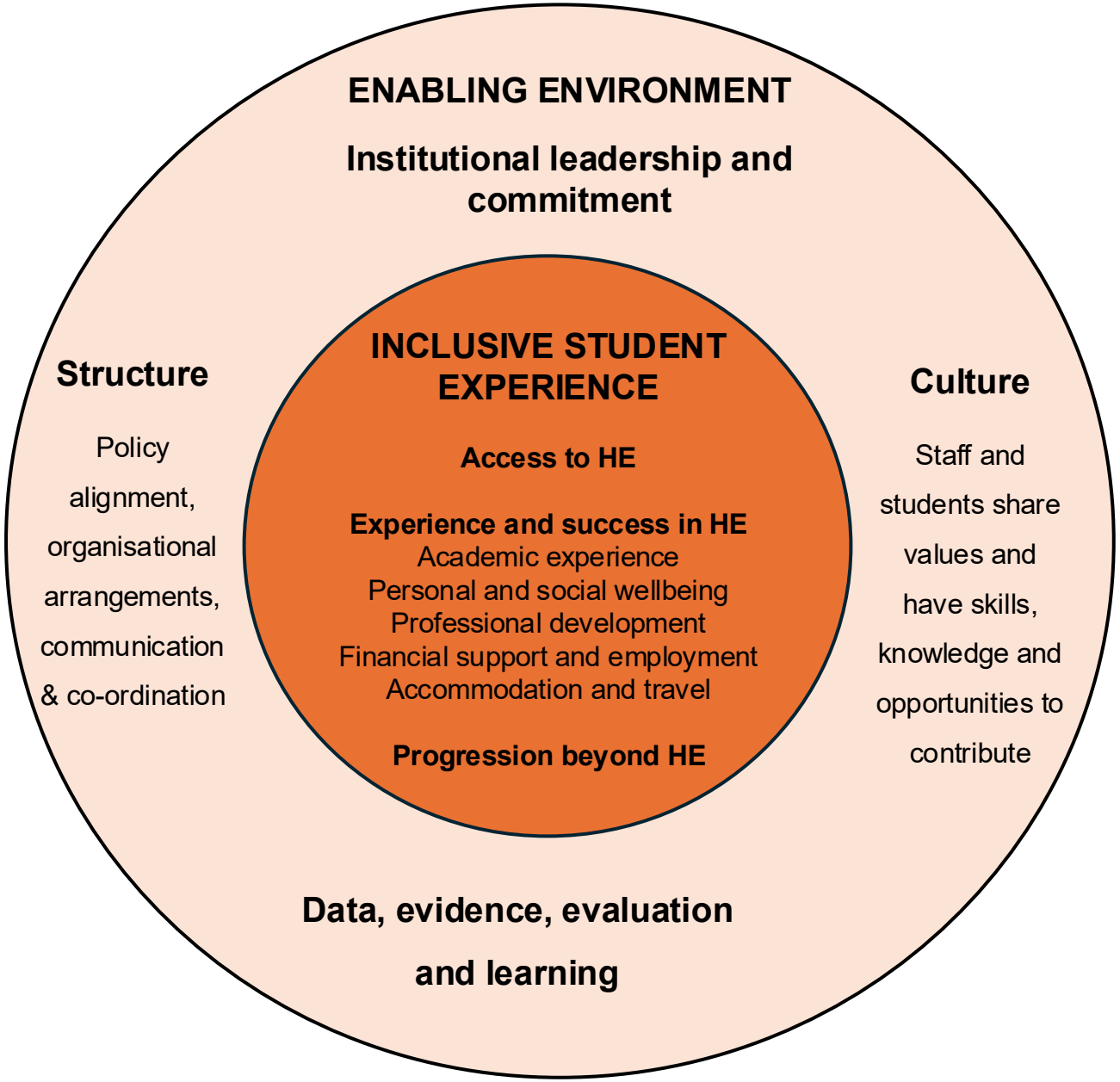
Figure 1: Model of student retention and success from 'What Works?1'



More significant changes for HEIs

a. Agree an institutional definition and classification of ‘commuter students’.
b. Collect or extract institutional data about commuter students.
c. Produce accessible data about commuter students and train staff how to use the data.
d. Review how you communicate with students about expectations and changes that affect them.
e. Review institutional policies to consider how they may disadvantage commuter students and build consideration of commuter students into the development of future key strategic documents.
f. Prioritise reviewing policy and guidance around lecture recording, hybrid lectures and the role of the VLE in enabling students to learn.
g. Initiate timetable reform.
h. Introduce comprehensive staff development to enable commuters to be included.
i. Work with the Students’ Union to provide some inclusive opportunities.
j. Address transportation and safety issues and look for accommodation solutions in the region.
k. Review the financial support for commuter students, including loans or grants.
l. Pilot interventions for commuter students.

‘Whole Provider Approach’ model



Four enabling pillars

Institutional commitment: Proactive senior leadership, active executive governance, strategic resource allocation, and explicit value alignment across all levels.

Aligned structures: Integrated policies, organisation of delivery, validation and quality assurance processes and cross-departmental coordination.

Inclusive culture: Reframing equity as "everyone's business," building staff capacity, and empowering students as co-creators.

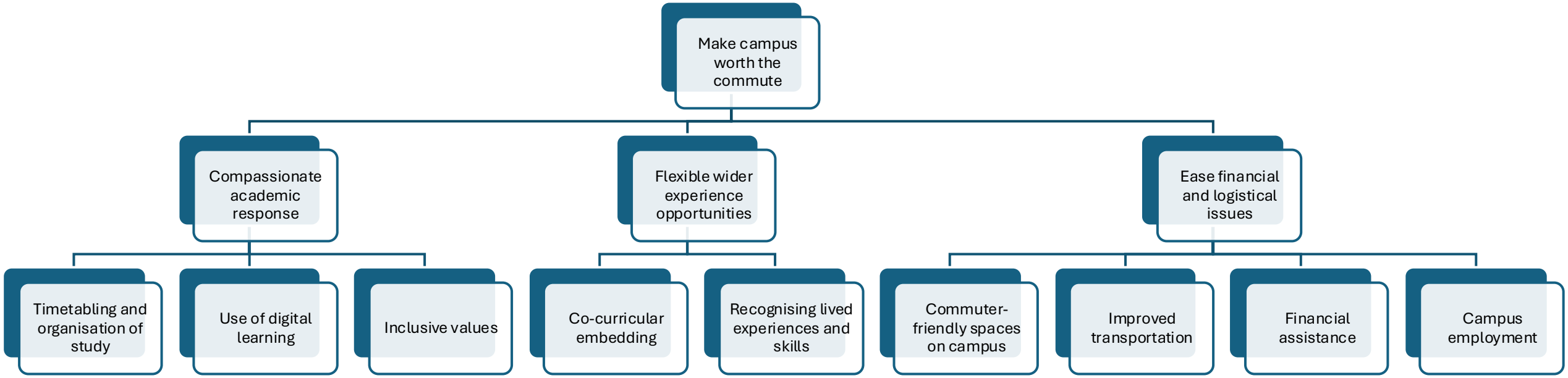
Evidence-informed decision-making: Systemic tracking, real-time monitoring, evaluation of impact, student voice and institutional learning.

Conclusions

Structural changes outside of higher education have created conditions that negatively impact on students:

- **Living further away from campus**: Living at home or in the private sector further away from campus requires more travel time and increased costs; this contributes to ‘strategic attendance’.
- **Need to work longer hours**: Many students are forced to work long hours to cover their living costs, and they spend time travelling. The have less time for studying and wider student engagement.
- **Increased stress and anxiety**: Time pressure and financial worries can lead to significant stress and anxiety, affecting students' mental health and well-being.
- **Poor academic performance:** Less time spent studying can result in difficulty completing assignments and lower grades.
- **Less well-developed community, citizenship and graduate skills**: Wider participation contributes to broader personal, social and professional development for future life.
- **Higher withdrawal rates:** These factors combine and may lead to longer time to complete degree, or withdrawal from study programme.
- **Greater inequality**: Students from certain backgrounds are disproportionately disadvantaged, and this reinforces inequality and widens equity gaps.

Solutions: Make campus worth the commute



Thank you.
Comments and questions welcome

Liz.Thomas@york.ac.uk



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