# Workshop to improve the engagement and success of commuter students: Resources

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## Introduction

### Updated resources and support

In response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) the pre-workshop resources have been extended to cover the workshop activities, and the post-workshop resources have been included. We recognise that institutional responses to the vary, and you may not be in a position to work collectively or individually to improve the commuter student experience, but some teams have indicated that they will continue taking this work forward. Further input and support will be made available to institutional teams in a number of ways: one-to-one feedback and guidance via email, phone or online; and either a face-to-face workshop or an online workshop. Please contact Liz Thomas in the first instance: liz@lizthomasassociates.co.uk.

### Context

Previous research (Thomas 2012) has found that students’ engagement and belonging are key to retention and success. Certain groups of students however find it more challenging to engage and belong (Thomas et al 2017), and this contributes to less good outcomes (Mountford-Zimdars et al 2015). Commuter students are one such group, who find it difficult to engage (Thomas and Jones 2017), and who have less good retention, attainment and graduate employment outcomes (Thomas 2019). Indeed, as they exhibit a range of non-traditional characteristics, local and commuter students and graduates have been identified by the Office for Students as a group that could be supported through institutional Access and Participation Plans[[1]](#footnote-1).

Commuter students experience a range of challenges associated with travelling to study (Thomas and Jones 2017); and while they often prioritise their academic engagement, commuters make strategic choices about the costs and benefits of academic engagement. Thus, there are implications for learning and teaching to improve commuter student engagement in the academic sphere (Thomas 2018). Furthermore, commuter students frequently de-prioritise engagement in the wider student experience despite their aspirations of achieving a good degree and securing graduate employment. This raises issues about how higher education providers can improve commuter student engagement in enhancement and social aspects of their higher education experience (Thomas 2019), and develop a whole institution approach to student success (Thomas 2017, Thomas 2020).

In the workshop and associated resources engagement is considered in three spheres:

* Academic: Engagement in students’ own learning.
* Enhancement: Engagement in co-curricular and enhancement activities (including representation, curriculum design and leadership roles) that contribute to personal and professional development; and
* Social: Engagement in formal and informal sport, social and leisure activities with HE peers.

### About the resources

The aim of the pre-workshop activities, the workshop, and the post-workshop resources is to support institutional teams to develop an evidence-informed approach to improving commuter student engagement in academic, enhancement and social activities throughout the institution, and across the student lifecycle, irrespective of where, what and how students are studying. The resources cover the key topics shown in the workshop overview (Fig 1).

Fig. 1: Overview of the workshop

### Using the resources

The pre-resources were shared a month in advance of the workshop, and teams were encouraged to meet to review the resources and work through the activities. Resources and activities have been added to cover the additional topics which would have been covered by the workshop and the pre-workshop resources. Ideally these should be discussed and worked through collectively, but the approach will be affected by the COVID-19 restrictions and will be facilitated differently depending on arrangements in each institution.

The text in bold and shaded indicates an activity or question for you to engage with. While you may choose to task smaller groups to complete some of the activities, we strongly urge you to report back and share the findings/conclusions with the team, and to collate alternative views and experiences.

## 1. Institutional data analysis

**Use the decision tree below to assess your institutional position with regards to data analysis, and identify gaps to be plugged.**

You do not need to complete all of this data analysis before the workshop, but an overview would be useful.

Institutional data analysis decision tree

#### Defining commuter students

Most institutions do not have an agreed definition of commuter students that can be used to inform data analysis. The most straightforward and common approach is to compare home and term-time postcodes to identify students who have not relocated. This can be refined by considering how far students travel in in miles or for how long in minutes (e.g. by public transport).

#### Participation analysis

Once a definition has been agreed it is possible to analyse how many students within your institution commute. This can be broken down by subject/discipline or faculty/school to given understanding of how commuter students are distributed and clustered within the institution.

#### Intersectional analysis

Commuter students are more likely to come from state schools, have low socio-economic status, be from an ethnic minority, be low income, be mature and to live in London or an urban area. They may be more likely to work part time, have caring responsibilities, have a disability, have entered with an alternative entry qualification etc. Analysis to explore the characteristics of your commuter student population will give greater understanding into the challenges these students face with engagement.

#### Outcomes analysis

Evidence from a number of studies indicates that commuter students tend to have poorer outcomes than residential students, in relation to a range of indicators. Compare your commuter and non-commuter student population in relation to continuation, progression, attainment, satisfaction and graduate employment.

**Q1: Based on your institutional data analysis, what are your priorities with regards to improving commuter student engagement and outcomes?** This may include developing your definition, further data analysis, focusing on sub-set of commuters, or a particular part of the lifecycle.

## 2. Commuter student voice

Analysis of the institutional data will give you insight the number of commuter students, how they are distributed across the institution, the characteristics of the commuter students and their outcomes in higher education compared to the non-commuter student population. It however valuable to understand more about commuter students’ experiences, including what is working well, what is challenging and what could be improved. This will contribute to developing evidence informed institutional responses.

National research can be a useful starting point.

1. Thomas, L. & Jones, R., 2017. *Student Engagement in the context of Commuter Students*. London: TSEP

Students find commuting tiring, expensive and stressful, and many had not fully appreciated this before they became commuter students; there are specific challenges such as travel delays and cancellations, parking, security etc. Once on campus many commuter students do not feel catered for, there is nowhere to spend time, store things or ‘belong’; this includes storing and preparing food, as the food available is expensive and often does not cater for specific needs. Commuter students often prioritise academic engagement over engagement in enhancement and social activities, but make decisions about the costs and benefits of attending. The organisation of the timetable, opportunities for alternative modes participation, and procedures that require them to be on campus (e.g. to hand in work) can be challenging. Academic staff do not seem to recognise or accommodate the academic needs of commuter students, including but not limited to the allocation of placements. Students undervalue and tend to participate less in enhancement and social activities, although opportunities associated with their programme of study and that take place during the day are more popular.

1. Thomas, L. 2019 *Commuter students in London: Pilot study*. London: London Higher

This study found similarities with Thomas and Jones 2017, but more students framed commuting positively, valuing a separation between home and studying, and avoiding being distracted by peers. In this context studying tended to be viewed more like employment, and commuting was seen to contribute to maintaining a work-life balance. The issues of commuting and disability and mental well-being were discussed. Students identified positive features of their own institutional experiences and made suggestions for improvements.

Institutional insights

Individual institutions have developed a range of ways of engaging commuter students and listening to their voices, including:

* Commuter students’ forum.
* Social media groups.
* Student experience surveys.
* Interviews and focus groups.
* Student groups and elected representatives within the Students’ Union.

**Discuss the following questions:**

1. What do you already know about your commuter students’ experience?
2. Do you feel you need any additional information, especially to answer queries or address priorities identified in the analysis of institutional data?
3. To what extent do you have appropriate mechanisms to provide on-going opportunities for commuter students to voice issues relating to their experience?
4. What is engagement like with these opportunities? How could engagement be improved?
5. Whose voices are you not hearing?
	* Mature students?
	* BAME students?
	* Parents/carers?
	* Students who may commute due to religious or cultural reasons?
	* Disabled students?
	* Other student groups?
6. What are the implications of not hearing the voices of these commuter students?

**Q2: Having discussed commuter student voices from your institution what are your priorities for improving commuter student engagement?**

This might include undertaking research, introducing mechanisms to provide on-going opportunities for commuter student voices to be heard, or engaging with a specific sub-set of commuter students.

## 3. Institutional commitment

Improving the engagement and success of commuter students through a whole institution approach will require institutional commitment from all staff, however this will need to be driven from the top, i.e. senior managers, governors and student leaders.

Institutional commitment could include:

1. Explicit senior commitment within the institution and the union to the issue, including an agreed definition, setting targets (e.g. for participation or continuation rates) and prioritising this work.
2. Institutional policies and processes support the engagement and success of commuter students (this issue will be explored in more detail through the workshop).
3. Allocation of staff and financial resources to support this work.
4. Institutional performance indicators associated with key tasks.
5. All students, staff and managers recognising the importance of this area of work, and how they contribute to its success.

Institutional commitment can be secured by linking commuter student engagement and success to other priorities such as student experience, learning and teaching, Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, equality and diversity, Access and Participation Plans, Fellowships, promotion, service, representation, etc.

**As a team undertake an analysis of your institution’s current commitment to improving the experience and outcomes of commuter students by using a SWOT analysis to identify current strengths and weaknesses and potential opportunities and threats/challenges.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Current strengths with regards to institutional commitment** | **Current weaknesses with regards to institutional commitment** |
|  |  |
| **Future opportunities to strengthen institutional commitment** | **Potential threats or challenges to strengthening institutional commitment** |
|  |  |

**Q3: To what extent do you have institutional commitment to improve the engagement and success of commuter students, and in what ways can you enhance this?**

Dialogue Days enable students and staff to recognise diversity and plan for success through inclusive teaching and effective learning

## 4. Review of the current situation

The aim of this exercise is to identify interventions, approaches and strategies that are already in place within your institution and union, spanning the student lifecycle (from pre-entry to progression to graduate employment) and across the student experience (commuting, academic, enhancement, social and other which may include financial support).

 **Complete this table and answer the questions below.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Student lifecycle****Student experience** | **Pre-entry** | **Transition/induction and first year experience** | **On-course experience after the first year** | **Progression/ after graduation** | **Throughout the student lifecycle** |
| Commuting |  |  |  |  |  |
| Academic: Students’ own learning experience |  |  |  |  |  |
| Enhancement: Co-curricular and enrichment activities\* that contribute to personal, academic and professional development. |  |  |  |  |  |
| Social: Formal and informal sport, social and leisure activities with HE peers |  |  |  |  |  |
| Other (e.g. financial) |  |  |  |  |  |

**\*** Including representation, curriculum design projects, leadership roles e.g. within student societies, student services and support.

**Q4: What are your institutional strengths in terms of interventions, approaches and strategies?**

**Q5: What are the most obvious gaps or challenges in the support currently offered to commuter students based on this analysis?**

**Select one ‘example’ to share with others at the workshop.**

## 5. Types of institutional response

It is worth thinking about how your institution wants to respond to widening participation and diversity in general (Jones and Thomas 2005) and commuter students in particular.

1. The **academic** approach focuses on attracting the already suitably qualified students from target groups to an un-reformed HE institution, and the emphasis is on students adapting to fit in. The provision of information would help commuter students to adapt, engage and be successful in a conventional HE system.
2. The **utilitarian** approach is more pragmatic and acknowledges that students from target groups might also need additional support to engage and be successful. This support however is bolted on to an unreformed HE experience, rather than embedded and necessitating institutional change. Commuter students could be given information and be supported to spend more time on campus.
3. The **transformative** approach looks at changing the HE institution to offer a more relevant and appropriate HE experience. The transformative approach is premised on the principle that diversity is of value to an institution and the students that study there, and thus should be embraced and used to develop positively for the benefit of all students (see Shaw et al, 2007). Commuter students could be empowered to recognise their engagement outside of the institution, provided with opportunities to engage outside of the institution, and be used as ambassadors to make connections with local communities on behalf of the institution.

The type of approach your institution wants to adopt is likely to be informed by its values and mission, its historical context and external drivers such as Access and Participation Plan guidance and TEF criteria.

Three key types of approach to improving commuter student engagement have emerged through research in this area (Thomas 2019). Creating a ‘sticky’ campus; recognising and connecting with engagement outside of the institution; and developing engagement opportunities in commuter communities.

A **sticky campus** simply aims to keep students on campus for more time, and to engage them in a wider range of activities while they are there. This may include:

* Improving the relevance and value of teaching activities;
* Spaces, facilities and activities for commuter students on campus;
* Information about the value of engagement;
* Financial support or incentives to enable students to spend more time on campus (including bursaries, employment, free printing, free tea and coffee etc).

**Recognising and valuing** commuter students is an alternative way of levelling the playing field and valuing diversity. Commuter students may be developing graduate attributes, such as time management, problem solving, leadership and working independently, which are not recognised by them, their institutions or potential employers. These skills developed outside of the HE context could be more readily acknowledged through portfolio development, reflection and recognition to support commuter students to demonstrate their skills. Commuter students may also be engaging in activities outside of their institutions, and they are likely to have stronger links with their communities and might offer opportunities for other students to engage outside of the institution.

Higher education institutions could work more to develop **opportunities for academic, enhancement and social engagement within commuter communities**. This may include proactively setting up study groups (e.g. in local libraries), volunteering and social opportunities within areas where commuter students live, or supporting commuter students to develop these types of engagement and support in their communities.

**Discuss your institution’s response to widening participation, diversity and commuter students.**

Consider how your institution has tended to respond to widening participation and diversity in the past (academic, utilitarian or transformative), and how it should respond to commuter students, perhaps by reviewing the merits and draw backs of creating a sticky campus, recognising and valuing commuter students and creating opportunities for engagement in commuter communities.

**Q6: What principles should inform your work to improve the engagement and success of commuter students?**

## 6. **Review of practice**

Following a review of UK and international examples of interventions to support commuter students, the examples below have been collated. This list is provided to help stimulate ideas of interventions for your own institutions.

### Teaching, learning and assessment

1. Timetabling being sensitive to commuting students, blocking teaching and limiting the number of days on campus.
2. Timetables being predictable/available in advance to enable planning, including advance ticket purchase and arranging car-sharing.
3. Recording lectures.
4. Using the classroom and group work to help students get to know each other and create peer networks of support.
5. Being conscious of group tasks and coursework and the potential implications of this for commuting students, including the encouraging the use of online tools to facilitate engagement and sharing of documents, negotiating meeting times etc.
6. More flexible submission, including allowing commuter students to submit work via email or online rather than in person, or submission dates being days that students are usually on campus.
7. Supporting student learning both on and off campus via effective use of online resources.
8. Staff development to promote greater awareness and knowledge of commuters by academic staff.
9. Provide flexibility in office hours/availability to meet with students.
10. Having sensitive approaches to lateness to lectures.
11. More transparency in session descriptions so that students can make an informed choice about what is pertinent course content.
12. Placements arranged to take account of where commuters live.
13. Resources to support students who study while travelling.

### Personal, academic and professional support and development

1. Embedding academic development into the core curriculum and online learning resources.
2. Personal tutoring timetabled on days that students are on campus for lectures.
3. Online peer mentoring.
4. Offering telephone and online appointments with student services.
5. Financial support to facilitate wider engagement in developmental opportunities including volunteering and placements.
6. Careers advisor or specialist services to meet the needs of commuter students.
7. Volunteering in the local communities where commuter students live.
8. Opportunities for commuter students to have flexible employment on campus.
9. Representation roles to be developed to allow online engagement in training and participation in meetings etc.

### Social opportunities

1. Breakfast and lunch clubs for commuter students.
2. Commuter, mature, parent, carer student societies.
3. Social events during the day or immediately after lectures.
4. Opportunities for families to come onto campus.
5. Welcome cafes during welcome week for commuters, local or mature students, including a free hot drink.
6. Commuter student or live at home contact or officer within the Student Union.
7. Commuter student socials and networking events.
8. Use of social media and online communities to allow commuter students to be part of their cohort and to connect with other commuters or students with shared interests.
9. Celebrating commuter students and what they bring to the university- commuter student week.
10. A buddy/travel scheme to meet other commuting student.
11. All students including commuters being assigned a college or hall of residence to encourage a sense of belonging.
12. Pre arrival opportunities to meet other students who are commuting, to build networks and learn more about the campus. This could include a residential experience.

### Facilities and communication

1. Providing information about commuting on the website.
2. Lockers, possibly to hire on semesterly or annual contracts.
3. Spaces to make hot drinks, keep food cool, warm up meals etc.
4. Space to relax in between lectures/seminars (common room or lounge area) with sofas, dining table, PC’s, printer, TV etc
5. Flexible and affordable accommodation available on campus, to allow students to stay over if they have an early exam or lecture, or if they have transport issues.
6. A commuter students essentials interactive map- water fountains, comfy seating, lockers, plugs to charge devices etc.
7. Travel bursaries and/or interest free travel loans.
8. Car parking for commuter students.
9. Car sharing scheme with priority parking.
10. Dedicated or bookable study space and lap tops for commuter students.
11. Alternative transport options, such as buses from transport hubs, commuter hot spots or between campuses.
12. Text messaging when lectures are cancelled at short-notice.

**Q7: Which of these examples might be useful within your institution/union, and how could they be developed?**

**Q8: Have you identified gaps that are not covered in the review of practice? If so do you have any additional ideas?**

## 7. Assessing progress towards a Whole Institution Approach (WIA)

The following section provides an overview about what a whole institution approach is and how it can be implemented (drawn from Thomas 2017 unless specified otherwise).

### Core features of a whole institution approach to widening participation in general and commuter students in particular

1. A whole lifecycle approach is adopted.
2. Staff from departments, services and units from across the institution are involved, and not just ‘professional widening participation’ staff.
3. There is a clear and explicit institutional commitment to commuter students, including defining the group, understanding current experiences and outcomes, and setting explicit targets.

Additional features to creating a WIA to widening participation were also identified, some of which are particularly relevant to developing a WIA to improving the engagement and success of commuter students:

* 1. Expanding the student lifecycle incorporating admissions, marketing, attainment, access to postgraduate study.
	2. Embedding an awareness and understanding about commuter students into all roles and considerations across the institution.

Financial support

Professional development

Personal and social well-being

Academic experience

Cross-institutional engagement is facilitated by culture, structure and evidence.

Institutional commitment to WP: target groups, values, practices and outcomes

Progression

Access

Student success

* 1. Involving students, alumni and the students’ union in understanding and including commuter students.
	2. Ensuring data, evidence and research inform all stages.
	3. Allocating financial and staff resources across the institution to support this work.
	4. An integrated rather than fragmented approach based on sharing, collaboration and co-ordination.

### Widening participation maturity model

Institutions can be seen to be maturing in their work to widen participation, initially relying on individual champions, then developing pockets of excellence, and striving towards a whole institution approach (this is depicted in fig 2).

Fig 2: Widening participation maturity model

From Thomas 2020.

An inclusive approach:

… necessitates a shift away from supporting specific student groups through a discrete set of policies or time-bound interventions, towards equity considerations being embedded within all functions of the institution and treated as an ongoing process of quality enhancement. Making a shift of such magnitude requires cultural and systemic change at both the policy and practice levels. (May and Bridger, 2010, p.6)

A whole institution approach requires alignment and consistency across the institution to create an inclusive approach which all students benefit from irrespective of where they are located within the institution, and which extends not just across their lifecycle, but throughout their daily lived experience, incorporating their academic experience, and also their personal and social well-being and their professional development.

### Q9: How mature is your institution in relation to its work with commuter students?

### Implementation

May and Bridger (2010) found that it was necessary to undertake changes at both the institutional and the individual levels to engage staff and bring about change:

… organisational change required to bring about inclusive policy and practice fell into two broad categories: institutional-level change: targeting institutional policy, strategy, structures, systems, processes and/or environmental factors, whether centrally or within departments/faculties; individual-level change: targeting individuals’ attitudes, awareness, knowledge, understanding, perceptions and assumptions, as well as practice. (May and Bridger, 2010 p36).

Kift (2009) calls this a ‘top-down, bottom-up’ approach, changing both the culture and the structure of the institution. Culture refers to the values, attitudes and practices of the staff (and students) within the higher education providers (HEP). These need to be ‘tightly’ defined to help create compatible understanding and action. Developing or changing the culture of the institution involves:

* Raising people’s **awareness and understanding** of the issues;
* Developing people’s skills and capacity which informs their **practice**; and
* Demonstrating the **impact** of people’s practice on commuter student engagement and outcomes.

Structure refers to the institutional policies, processes and organisation (e.g. of financial and human resources) of the HEP and its sub-units. This facilitates the institutional culture and contributes to consistency across the institution. Developing an inclusive structure involves:

* Ensuring policies, processes and organisation take account of commuter students (structure as **espoused**);
* Considering the extent to which policies, processes and organisation are **enacted** (i.e. they are implemented and move beyond paper-based aspirations or statements); and
* Assessing the impact or **effect** of the policy/process/ organisation on commuter student engagement and success.

The interplay of culture and structure should enable people to be sufficiently well informed and have the capacity and commitment to implement inclusive practices, while the structure both facilitates and ensures this, and provides co-ordination across the institution, promoting integration and consistency of outcomes – and avoiding duplication, fragmentation and gaps in provision.

Finally, there is a key role for data and evidence. For example, institutional data can be used to identify trends, and qualitative research to understand these issues. Monitoring data can be used to encourage staff and students to change their practices. Evaluation and research can be used to inform strategic and operational decision-making, and evaluate processes and the impact of interventions.

Discuss these questions:

1. Are there interventions or processes to improve the engagement and success of commuter students throughout the student lifecycle and across the breadth of the student experience? Where are the gaps?
2. Is the engagement and success of commuter students an institutional priority for the leadership at all levels?
3. To what extent do policies and the allocation of resources reflect this commitment and priority?
4. Do all staff understand their contribution and have appropriate skills and capacity to improve the engagement and success of commuter students?
5. How is data and evidence used and shared to improve commuter student engagement and success, including evaluating interventions, monitoring student engagement and outcomes and holding staff accountable?
6. How is the commuter student experience work co-ordinated to share practice, promote consistency and avoid gaps and overlap of provision?

**Q 10: What is your institutional vision statement?**

Consider and discuss what your overall goal is for the commuter student experience and outcomes within your university or college over the next 5-10 years?

* This should be future facing, rather than what you are currently doing or planning to do in the short-term;
* It should be optimistic, even ideal;
* It should describe what success looks like.
* It is not the activities you will undertake you will achieve the vision.

Whole institutional approach review: Use this table to help identify priorities

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Is there good institutional understanding about your commuter student population (data and qualitative)?(See sections 1 and 2 in the pre-workshop resources) | No: Undertake further data analysis and qualitative research to develop an understanding of the issues. (See sections 1 and 2 in the pre-workshop resources) | Yes |
| Are there interventions to engage commuter students taking place widely across the institution, or just in limited pockets?(See section 4 of the pre-workshop resources) | No: Work with champions to develop some bottom up interventions and quick wins across the institution.(See section 6 of the pre-workshop resources) | Yes  |
| Are there interventions across the student lifecycle?(See section 4 of the pre-workshop resources) | No: Focus on developing interventions and quick wins in parts lifecycle that have little or no activity.(See section 6 of the pre-workshop resources) | Yes |
| Is the engagement and success of commuter students monitored and evaluated? | No: Consider how data is used to improve the interventions and the impact on commuter students. | Yes |
| Are there effective mechanism to enable commuter students to share their experiences and contribute to institutional development? | No: Develop mechanisms to give commuter students a voice within the institution and union.  | Yes |
| Are interventions aimed at improving the engagement of commuter students co-ordinated? | No: Develop mechanisms to disseminate, replicate and co-ordinate work across the institution. | Yes |
| Is there strong institutional commitment to improving the engagement and success of commuter students?(See section 3 of the pre-workshop resources) | No: Build the case for institutional commitment and plan interventions to promote this. | Yes |
| Do you have principles and a strategy to inform your work with commuter students across the institution? (See section 5 of the pre-workshop resources) | No: Develop principles and work towards an institutional strategy including mission, activities and outcomes | Yes |
| Do you have an inclusive institutional culture for commuter students? (See section 7) | No: Look at ways of developing the understanding and capacity of staff to contribute to improving the engagement and success of commuter students. | Yes |
| Do your institutional structures facilitate commuter student engagement and success, and promote an inclusive culture? (See section 7) | No: Undertake a structural review and work towards improving institutional processes. | Yes: You are well the way to whole institutional approach. Use the WIA toolkit to evaluate your work. (Thomas 2017) |

## 8. Identifying and agreeing priorities

In this section the aim is to move beyond both assessing the current situation and imagining a vision for commuter student engagement and success in your institution, and to identify your priorities moving forward by reviewing gaps and opportunities, and making choices about what to focus on.

Activity

Review your pre-workshop activities and your responses to the activities in section 7 about a whole institution approach, and develop a long-list of things to achieve during this project to improve the engagement and success of commuter students. Work together will colleagues to create an agreed long-list.

Review each item for suitability, feasibility and risk.

* Suitability: Does this activity contribute to your overall vision? Is the team interested in achieving this goal? Can you achieve this activity within 12-18 months?
* Feasibility: Do you have sufficient staff, student and financial resources to achieve this? Is this activity dependent on another activity taking place?
* Risk: What are the risks involved? How can you reduce or mitigate them?

Discuss your long-list to agree:

* Activities or changes to be implemented in 2020-21
* Activities or changes to be implemented in the medium term (e.g. by 2024-5)
* Activities or changes that are not current or medium term priorities

## 9. Planning interventions, approaches and strategies

The first task here is designed to promote clarity about what you want to achieve and how through this project, including determining your timeframe[[2]](#footnote-2). The first aim is to develop a concise summary of your work using a Message Map framework. Once this has been written, you can move onto to the planning stage using a Theory of Change approach. You may however with to re-write your key message, at the end of section 9.

### Message Map

The aim of a message map is to convey a concise and clear message to people, initially very quickly to hook them in, and then it is expanded; it aims to answer the question What’s in it for me? (WIIFM). The information is often presented visually, as in the figure below.

**Key Message**

Describes what the project is

Statement of problem that is being addressed (optional)

**WIIFM: What’s in it for me? (Consider your key stakeholders)**

It achieves this through (3 supporting messages)

Example of a message map from #Ibelong Erasmus+ project:

**Dialogue Days** are interactive lectures that facilitate discussion between students and staff, demonstrating institutional commitment to diversity and promoting the success of all students

Lack of awareness of diversity amongst students and staff and how it affects engagement, belonging and success

Dialogue Days enable students and staff to recognise diversity and plan for success through inclusive teaching and effective learning

Empowers students to be successful in their learning

Staff can adapt teaching to be more inclusive

A

safe space for staff and students to share experiences

As a group discuss your intervention or strategy to be developed:

* **What are you going to do?** Succinctly describe your activity, intervention or new approach. This should be a very brief and punchy summary of your proposed work. (Key message)
* **Why are you doing it?** What problem are you addressing and what do you hope to achieve? (Problem statement)
* **Who will be involved?** Identify groups who will be involved and affected, how they will benefit from it and why they should participate. (WIIFM)
* **How will it work?** Provide more details about what each group will do or be affected by this work. (Three supporting messages).

Use your answers to the questions above to prepare a message map or project summary (this can be used within your institution, and will be shared amongst participating institutions).

### Action Planning using a ‘Theory of Change’ (Toc)

In this section the aim is to develop your message map to develop an action plan, by critically engaging with the ‘theory’ or logic behind what you are trying to achieve. The ToC will ask you to questions to be answered as a group, such as:

* What exactly are you doing?
* Why are you doing this?
* What evidence/research underpins your commuting student project?
* Who will be delivering this project and what resources are needed?
* How will you know you’ve succeeded?
* What will indicate that your project is having an impact?

**What is Theory of Change?** Theory of Change (ToC) is a way of thinking about and representing the changes being implemented and the impact that is to be achieved, by thinking about the ‘big picture’. ToC’s are used widely for planning and evaluating interventions of all sizes and types, and can be used to help define our long-term goals and then map backwards to identify what preconditions are necessary to produce these desired changes – and to identify intermediate outcome indicators (short-term benefits and medium-term outcomes). It also encourages us to make explicit and question our underlying assumptions about the intervention, which may identify flaws on gaps in the logic, or point to the need for additional activities. Thus, this approach enables action planning of small, medium, and large activities and changes to all feed into the ‘big picture’ goal we are aiming to reach. It can also be shown visually as a logic chain, where the first three sections of the chain relate to implementation and the last three sections focus on impact evaluation. At the planning stage it is important to think about both implementation and impact evaluation.

Fig. The logic underpinning project planning and evaluation

**Why is a Theory of Change needed for our Commuting Student project?** The Office for Students (OFS) stated in recent evaluation guidance for 2020-2025 Access and Participation Plans (APP) that there is a minimum requirement for all Widening Participation (WP) activity to have *‘a well-articulated intervention logic for your programme theory (such as a theory of change or logical framework) which describes how your activities will lead to the outcomes you hope to achieve, and the processes involved in bringing about the positive improvements’*. Although commuting students are not a Widening Participation student group stipulated by OFS in APP guidance, many institutions have begun including commuter students within APP work as commuter students can often have one or more WP characteristics and experience inter-sectional disadvantage. Therefore, adopting a ToC approach is good practice, it promotes evidence informed reflective practice and collaboration, it encourages strategic planning, and it ensures that time and resources are deployed in the most strategic way.

**How is a Theory of Change produced?** There is no set guidance regarding what a Theory of Change model should look like. They exist in multiple formats and can be amended as required. We have provided a template for you and your team to follow for your proposed commuting student project. A version that includes prompt questions is provided, together with a blank copy for your team to complete. You will need to work through the boxes within the template in numerical order, you may choose to scale this template up to A3 to make it easier to complete. This process of completing the template should be a conversation between all members of the project delivery team or even more widely – this is a very important part of the process. Thinking about the benefits, outcomes and impacts of your commuting student project at this stage is useful now to clarify thinking, and will contribute to planning the impact evaluation of the project in the next stage.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **(1) Overall Aim** |
|  | *What is your commuting student project aiming to deliver?**[Insert a sentence or two explicitly stating what your project is, and its overall aim]* |
| **(2) Resources** | **(3) Activity** | **(4) Outputs** | **(5) Short-term or** **immediate benefits** | **(6) Medium-term outcomes** | **(7) Longer terms impact** |
| *What people/teams are involved in delivering this project?* *Who is responsible for what?**What physical space(s) are needed to deliver this project?**Are any other resources needed? (Printed materiels, IT equipment etc)**What budget is available?* | *Provide a clear summary of the activity/ activities that your project will be delivering to commuting students at your institution.* | *What are immediate intended direct output(s) or deliverables of this project?* *Example: X students attend X activity X times a semester*  | *What are the immediate /short term benefits that you’re aiming to achieve as a result of the outputs?**Examples:**Awareness**Skills**Friendship* | *What are the medium-term outcomes that you’re aiming to achieve as a direct result of the outputs/ short-term benefits of your project?**Examples:* *This is often a change in behaviour, e.g.**Increased attendance or engagement**Spending more time with HE peers**Sense of belonging* | *What is the ultimate impact of the project you’re delivering?* *Examples:**Improved retention**Improved attainment**Improved degree outcomes for commuter students.*  |
| **(8) Assumptions 1** | **(9) Assumptions 2** | **(10) Assumptions 3** | **(11) Assumptions 4** |
| *Explain why you think these activities will lead to the outputs in the next column. What research/evidence is underpinning your projects design?*  | *Explain why you think these outputs will lead to the short-term benefits stated in the next two columns? What research/evidence underpins this?*  | *Explain why you think these short-term benefits will lead to the medium-term outcomes stated in the next column. What research/evidence underpins this?* | *Explain why you think these medium-term outcomes will lead to the longer term impact stated in the next column. What research/evidence underpins this?*  |
| **(12) Context** |
| *What factors will influence the delivery and success of this project? E.g. number of commuter students, distribution across the sector, mode of study, campus location, financial support, commuter hot-spots, travel hubs and options, parking restrictions, employment opportunities, etc, etc.* |

|  |
| --- |
| **(1) Overall Aim** |
|  |
| **(2) Resources** | **(3) Activity** | **(4) Outputs** | **(5) Outcomes****(short term/ immediate impacts)** | **(6) Outcomes****(medium term impact)** | **(7) Outcomes****(longer term impact)** |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **(8) Assumptions 1** | **(9) Assumptions 2** | **(10) Assumptions 3** |
|  |  |  |
| **(11) Context** |
|  |

## 10. Planning the impact evaluation

The activity you have completed will allow you to start planning in more detail your impact evaluation. This involves reviewing and refining your indicators and selecting your research methods.

### Indicators

Indicators are a way of testing whether your theorised change(s) have occurred or not, and understanding progress towards your longer-term impact, or understanding why things have not worked. The longer-term impact indicators can be the easiest to identify, as they are often the reason for implementing change, for example to improve the satisfaction, continuation, attainment and progression of commuter students, but you don’t always achieve these impacts within the lifetime of the project.

Intermediate indicators are used to help you map and measure the relationship between your activities and outputs and your longer-term impact. It can be helpful to divide intermediate indicators into short-term benefits (i.e. things that you would anticipate that people would benefit from during or immediately after your intervention has been delivered). Again, these are usually quite straightforward to identify. Medium-term outcomes are changes that occur between the short-term benefits and the long-term impact, and are usually the trickiest to make explicit and then to find a suitable indicator for. It can be helpful to think what people (e.g. students, teaching staff, etc) will *do* differently as a result of participating in the intervention.

For example, you want to improve the degree outcomes of commuter students, and so you decide to implement an in-class activity to unpack the assignment brief and provide clarity to the whole cohort of any issues of under-certainty (see Thomas et al 2017) for each assessment in the first year. The longer-term impact indicator relates to improving the degree attainment of commuter students (compared to non-commuters, and in comparison to historical trend data), but you will have to wait three years for this data. The output is delivering the activity during a core lecture for each assessment during the first year (e.g. all students read and discuss the assignment brief, identify things they don’t understand, share them anonymously, and clarification is delivered to the class). The short-term benefits are that students have better understanding of what is required for each assessment. But what is the medium-term outcome? How would you know if this intervention is likely to improve attainment in three years? What will students do differently? What will staff do differently? In the medium term you might anticipate a higher submission rate and attainment on each assignment by students, and you might anticipate that staff will improve the clarity of their assignment briefs. Indicators therefore might relate to: assessment submission rates, pass rates and attainment in each module or at the end of the first year, but they might also include improved quality of assignment briefs, or the provision of opportunities by staff for students to clarify issues they are uncertain about.

The indicators you select must relate to the *impact* you are expecting – in the short, medium and longer-term. Often people measure outputs or deliverables rather than outcomes, i.e. that activity has taken place, or the number of people who participated, rather the benefit or impact that it is expected to achieve).

“It is helpful to think of performance indicators as being used either as dials or as tin openers. Implicit in the use of performance indicators as dials is the assumption that standards of performance are unambiguous, implicit in the use of performance indicators as tin openers is the assumption that performance is a contestable notion.” (Carter, 1989)

Using indicators as tin openers allows us to understand more about what is happening and why; and if the intermediate indicators suggest that the expected changes are not happening, they this can prompt further investigation or changes to the activity or additional support. For example, do staff need guidance to assist them to improve the clarity of assignment briefs.

### Evidence

Collecting evidence, especially qualitative evidence, is time consuming, and so it is worth considering what evidence already exists, or could be collected easily, e.g. through some minor tweaks to an existing survey; you should aim to only collect new evidence if it is essential. Interviews with colleagues in Scotland implementing learning enhancement interventions identified the following potential sources of evidence:

* Module evaluation forms and student feedback on courses
* Institutional surveys, including additional questions, free responses
* Minutes from staff-student liaison meetings and other committee meetings
* Staff applications for promotion or AdvanceHE fellowships
* Institutional data: attendance, continuation, progression, number of submissions, attainment, resits, VLE engagement
* Staff annual monitoring / review of own performance, course, etc
* Course documents, periodic review, quality processes, TEF narratives
* Withdrawal reports
* Student-led teaching award nominations

Activity: What evidence do you already have that might be useful in evidencing the impact of your interventions? Think about: the institution and the Student Union; data, survey and qualitative evidence; meeting minutes and similar.

### Baselines

A baseline provides a benchmark, against which performance is compared or measured. It is not essential to have a baseline, but it can be useful to help build the case that your intervention has had an impact. Broadly there are two types of baseline:

* **Historical**, i.e. with previous years, ideally an average from 2 or 3 years previous. This is useful for whole institutional changes, or if no suitable comparison can be made.
* **Comparative**, e.g. with other courses or student groups or staff groups. The comparative group needs to be sufficiently similar, e.g. entry criteria, background characteristics etc.

### Collecting and analysing new evidence

If you decide you need to collect new evidence, you need to think about the type of data and the source. It may be useful to collect the views of staff or students, as this might be crucial to providing evidence about your intermediate indicators (short-term benefits and medium-term outcomes). You can utilise either qualitative or quantitative research methods to collect new data, or a combination of the two. If you decide to collect new evidence, you also need to consider how you are going to analyse it. Also be aware that you are likely to need ethical approval from your institution to undertake primary data collection.

Collecting and analysing new evidence has resource and expertise implications. You may wish to draw on research or evaluation expertise in the institution to assist with the ethics application, research design and tools and analysing the new evidence. Such expertise might be in an academic department such as education, psychology or sociology, or in your widening participation team or an evaluation unit.

Qualitative research in particular is often time intensive, so consider if you have colleagues or students who could collect this evidence, and look for innovative solutions. For example, you can involve students in this process in a number of ways:

* The Students’ Union can often facilitate access to students to participate in research or distribute surveys.
* Students can be trained and supported to collect evidence, and you should consider paying them for this work.
* The research can be embedded into a course, for example, students can interview each other to generate data, or the project can be offered a dissertation topic.

Other innovative approaches include an evaluation workshop, where you bring together the stakeholders and through various activities explore the impact of the intervention. It can save time to bring everyone together to collect evaluative evidence.

### Unintended consequences

The evaluation approach used here encourages us to spell out the expected benefits, outcomes and impact of our work. There may however be unintended consequences. Frequently these are positive, but sometimes they can be negative and may help to explain why things have not worked as anticipated. Spend a few minutes considering how you could discover unintended consequences.

### Developing a plan

When you are planning your evaluation process consider the following questions:

1. Who will co-ordinate the evaluation work?
2. What existing and new evidence will you use?
3. Who will collect the new evidence (if applicable)?
4. Who will analyse new and existing evidence?
5. How will you ensure these people have sufficient time and expertise?
6. When will each of the evaluation activities take place?
7. Do you have the necessary ethical approval?
8. How and when will you evaluation findings be shared with the team?
9. How will you use the findings?
10. How will you share your findings more widely e.g. with your institution and the HE the sector?

## 11. Short-term benefits

Review the short-term benefits you listed above (activity x).

Use the following questions to critique these benefits and develop a set of indicators and methods of collecting the evidence:

1. To what extent do these indicators reflect the benefits that you would expect to find immediately after the implementation of the activity?
2. Are there any other benefits that you anticipate? If so add them to your list of indicators.
3. How could you demonstrate that these benefits have occurred?
4. What evidence can you use to demonstrate that these benefits have occurred? Can you use any existing evidence, or do you need to collect new evidence? If you are collecting new evidence, what methods will you use and how will you analyse the data?
5. Is there a baseline that can be used that will improve the quality of the evidence? For example, a poll that demonstrates people’s awareness of an issue before and after your intervention.
6. In what ways can you make the indicators more specific to demonstrate impact? Indicators do not need to be numeric, but this can be helpful, or you can expect an increase in relation to specific skills or knowledge, or increased confidence to do something different in the future.
7. How will capture information about any unintended consequences (either positive or negative)?

Complete the table below with your short-term indicators:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Benefit expected** (Brief description) | **Indicator**  | **Evidence to be used** | **Will you use a baseline?** (Yes or no) |
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## 12. Medium-term outcomes

Review the medium-term outcome indicators you listed above (activity x).

Use the following questions to critique these outcomes and develop a set of indicators and methods of collecting the evidence:

1. To what extent do these indicators reflect the changes or outcomes that you would expect to find sometime after the implementation of the activity but before you would expect to see the longer-term impact? (Often these are actions that staff or students go on to take).
2. Can you think of other changes, e.g. that other groups such as students, teaching staff, unions, services, might also make? If so add them to your list of indicators.
3. How could you demonstrate that these changes or outcomes have occurred?
4. What evidence can you use to demonstrate that these outcomes have occurred? Can you use any existing evidence, or do you need to collect new evidence?
5. Is there a baseline that can be used that will improve the quality of the evidence? Using existing evidence, such as a student survey or module reviews might provide a useful baseline. You could also consider comparing students who participated with students who did not, but be careful, as the reason for non-participation may also explain differential outcomes.
6. In what ways can you make the indicators more specific to demonstrate impact? Indicators do not need to be numeric, but this can be helpful, or you can look for qualitative changes that can be evidenced.
7. How will you capture evidence about any unintended consequences (either positive or negative)?

Complete the table below for your medium-term outcome indicators:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Change or outcome expected** (Brief description) | **Indicator** (e.g. numeric or describing improvement) | **Evidence to be used** | **Will you use a baseline?** (Yes or no) |
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## 13. Longer-term impact

Review the longer-term impact indicators you listed above (activity x).

Use the following questions to critique these impacts and develop a set of indicators and methods of collecting the evidence:

1. To what extent do these indicators reflect the longer-term impact you are trying to achieve?
2. Are there any other impacts, e.g. to the staff or the institution, or that are more qualitative in nature? If so add them to your list of indicators.
3. What evidence can you use to demonstrate that these impacts have occurred? Can you use any existing evidence, or do you need to collect new evidence? (Often you can use institutional data)
4. Is there a baseline that can be used that will improve the quality of the evidence?
5. How will capture information about any unintended consequences (either positive or negative)?

Complete the table below for your longer-term impact indicators:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Change or outcome expected** (Brief description) | **Indicator** (e.g. numeric or describing improvement) | **Evidence to be used** | **Will you use a baseline?** (Yes or no) |
|  |  |  |  |
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1. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/events/insight-event-fairer-access-and-participation/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We suggest the academic year 2020-21 for some changes, and perhaps the end of the Access and Participation Plan period (the end of 2024-25) for other priorities, but you may wish to align your work with other institutional priorities and cycles [↑](#footnote-ref-2)