



The role of Student Services and Support in attaining commuter students

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Introduction and Background

Kingston University, like many post-1992 Universities, has a very diverse student body. With just over 21,000 students based on 4 campuses, the majority of our students commute to University on a daily basis. There are many facts, figures and research available from national and international bodies and institutions with regards to student access, retention, and success. However when it comes to focusing on the particular group of commuting students, there is little evidence and research available in the UK. Some UK universities show positive steps towards providing specific information for commuting students (at pre-applicant and student level).

Student Engagement and Enhancement (SEE), one of the groups within Kingston University Student Services, wanted to consider the barriers to participation in overall university life, what the drivers are for possible drop outs throughout the students' time with us and how Student Services and other central/professional services can support these students to feel fully integrated in order to achieve academic success and be happy at university.

This report, co-written by the students and staff who have been involved in the Commuter research project at Kingston University, aims to summarise the work undertaken thus far by the group. It analyses and evaluates the current experiences of commuter students and proposes steps that the University, and in particular Student Services, can take to increase support offered to the commuting student population.

In order to research and investigate the above topics we felt it was imperative that this was done through a partnership with students and staff from within different departments of the University. We wanted to ensure that there wasn't just consultation with students, but that they would participate, drive and steer its progress and outputs because, after all, they are the 'experts' in their own experience.

Student interns

As soon as we were successful in gaining the research project support from AMOSSHE, SEE started the recruitment of 5 student interns to work on the project. We deliberately recruited commuter and non-commuter students so they could provide each other with a valuable and perhaps at times contrasting insight. All interns were each given a set amount of hours per week to work in a flexible manner on parts of the project which they had all agreed to at regular meetings. The SEE staff attended the group meetings in an advisory and supportive capacity and dealt with individual questions and queries (in person and via email) throughout the progress of the project. We encouraged the students to use their own initiative and be creative in a fairly loose structure.

The partnership has been pivotal in ensuring that we capture the experiences of our commuter students and perceptions of staff, give our students the opportunity to develop their employability skills and create a sense of partnership across the institution. It has also been the first step in effecting change in order to enhance the student commuter experience, which may be relevant to other groups of students who do not necessarily fall into the commuter category.

Outputs

1. To collate and substantiate the wealth of material available on commuter students and other relevant areas, project participants consisting of students initially undertook a literature review.

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines a commuter as “a person who travels some distance to work on a regular basis” (Stevenson & Waite, 2011). In a nationwide analysis of Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) found 19% of undergraduate students commuted: a significant portion of the student body (Tobin, 2011). There are a multitude of reasons concerning why students may choose to commute ranging from location and finance (BBC News, 2006 and Collier, 2013) to convenience, and social reasons (Morrisey, 2012). However, as Newbold, Mehta and Forbus (2011) note, commuting by its very nature has the ability to diminish student’s academic and social University experience. They suggest that Higher Education Institutions should adopt some form of support for commuter students, ensuring they receive as positive an experience as non-commuting students. As such, the substantial literature review undertaken established the challenges faced by commuter students, and examined support strategies other Universities (in both the United Kingdom and abroad) have successfully introduced. It concludes by summarising the support Kingston University currently offers commuter students, and highlight areas for possible future development. It found that effective commuter support systems are often necessary for the well-being of students. Support programmes employed by both foreign and domestic institutions range make it clear that there is a plethora of potential avenues for Kingston University to investigate.

The University of Minnesota (2013) lists some of the main issues likely to be faced by commuting students, chief among them time management issues and social integration. Qualitative evidence from advice websites such as GoAskAlice (2004) strongly supports the notion that commuter students can struggle with the social side of University, potentially leading to a sense of isolation and depression. Indeed, research by Kuh, Gonyea and Palmer (2001) found commuting was directly linked to lower levels

of student engagement and lower self-perceived levels of social integration with other students. More recent research by Dante, Fabris and Palese (2013) found that living over 30 minutes from campus was directly correlated with medical student’s likelihood of academic failure. State University (2013) suggests that commuter students lack the extra time to devote to finding resources or to talk to teaching staff. Considering these integration and academic challenges, one turns to how Universities have tried to tackle these ‘challenges’.

One of the more common forms of support available for commuter students appears to be that of dedicated commuter organisations or groups. A robust example comes from New York University and their ‘Commuter Student Council’. In their own words, the council “strives to give voice, community, and opportunities to commuter and off-campus students through advocacy, programs, and philanthropy” (New York University, 2013a). Events led and/or organised by students range from introductory sessions during ‘Welcome Week’ to a specific ‘Commuter Awareness Week’ in spring (New York University, 2013b). To help students feel integrated with their local community, the University also runs the ‘Comm*Unity Project’ for First Year students. This constitutes students performing voluntary work amongst the community, forging strong connections for both the University and students with the general public. Students are also able to build strong leadership and team-work based skills (New York University, 2013c). Additionally, New York University offers five \$1000 scholarships specifically for commuter students, targeted at individuals who are most likely to contribute in enhancing the commuter student experience (New York University, 2013d).

Saint Louis University (2013) have a dedicated commuter student assistant position, occupied by a student. Akin to New York University, Rutgers’ Off-Campus Student’s Association (OCSA), focuses on both the community and student experience, but is entirely run and driven by student volunteers (Rutgers, 2013).

In examining British Universities, it would appear that very few have adopted a dedicated commuter support organisation. Support is often provided through a mixture of University and/or Students’ Union services. The University of St. Andrews (2013a) asks students to apply for ‘commuter’ status every year. If they are

successful, students are allowed to join the 'Townsend Society' which hosts special commuter activities for both students and family members. The University of Birmingham (2013a) offer the 'Fresher's Off-Campus Society', a student run organisation aiming to organise sporting social events for commuting students. Similarly, the University of Liverpool (2013) recommend students to become an 'Associate Member' of a Halls of Residence, allowing them to keep up to date with information and events occurring in those Halls. Finally, both the University of St. Andrews (2013a) and the University of Manchester ("Essential Support," 2012) offer support through social media, particularly Facebook.

In examining commuter support organisations more closely, one encounters a multitude of schemes and resources aimed at improving commuter's day-to-day interactions with the University. A key component of New York University's extensive support programme is their 'Commuter Assistant' initiative (New York University, 2013e). Its main aim is to pair more experienced 'upperclassmen' students with commuting undergraduate students. Each 'assistant' looks after multiple undergraduates and offers information on campus activities and provides rudimentary academic support (eg, time management advice).

Other initiatives provided by some institutions focus on the mode of transport students take to get to University. The University of Nottingham (2013) and the University of Leeds (2013) run 'Bike Buddy' schemes. The schemes aim to provide students with the most efficient cycling route to University, as well as socially engaging students with the peers, and gaining some familiarity with the local community.

Further support can be found in the resources Universities provide for commuter students. Several institutions have created common rooms just for commuter students, where they can work, eat and relax on campus (University of St. Andrews, 2013a, University of San Diego, 2013 and Seattle University, 2013a). Such a space would seem highly conducive to integrating commuter students with day-to-day campus life, as well as fostering strong relationships between commuter students. Drexel University (2013) allows students to provide on-line feedback about their common room, therefore reflexively changing what is available depending on commuters

needs. Uniquely, the University of British Columbia (2013) goes one step further and provides affordable, on-campus overnight accommodation for commuter students. This has the advantage of allowing commuters to partake in events and social activities occurring after the University has closed for the day.

Many universities provide locker rentals for all students, priced either per semester or year.



Photo by Emelie Helsen (2013)

In sum, the myriad resources created to enhance the commuter experience highlight numerous ways in which commuter student (and in some cases, non-commuter student) experiences can be improved.

The final method in which Higher Education institutions can engage with commuter students is through the internet. Even if Universities have no dedicated commuter support organisation, a web-page linking to resources relevant to commuters is a simple and effective means of communication. Even though New York University (2013h) has a comprehensive commuter support system, they still parse the majority of information through an on-line web hub. The current review found British Universities largely favoured this method of support, with many focusing on local travel advice. The University of Sheffield (2013) and the University of Birmingham (2013b) provide testimonials from other commuter students, allowing students to gauge how difficult their commute is likely to be, before committing to the University.

In conclusion, there are many different manners in which Universities can engage with and support commuter students. Although large-scale commuter support organisations may take longer to implement, 'buddy' schemes, transport sharing, resources such as common rooms and web-based support offer easily implementable alternatives. As with many British Universities, Kingston University does not offer a lot of support for commuter students. Currently available options include a web page, with information about local transportation and information concerning travel discounts available to the general public from Transport for London. The University also provides a free local bus service and re-charging points for electric cars. As evidenced by American institutions (particularly New York University), this should not be seen as a disadvantage, rather a new opportunity for University engagement with both students and the local community. Most activities appear to be aimed at identifying commuter students before or during 'Fresher's' week, and ensuring they are supported throughout the first year of study. A possible area for concern is support for second and third year commuter students, as well as those in postgraduate or doctoral education, as they appear to be an overlooked population.

In considering the steps taken by other Universities, one should also be mindful of recent efforts and initiatives for commuter students. The University of Sheffield (Student Development and Support, The Student Services Department Sheffield Union of Students, 2010) recently analysed their existing support for commuter students, specifically aiming to improve their relationship with local and mature commuter students. The University of Glasgow (Browitt & Croll, 2012) propose a project similar to Kingston University's current events, with emphasis on commuter student engagement before 'Fresher's' week. They hope to minimise commuter student 'drop-out' rates and increase their academic success. Outside of academic research, the University of Minnesota (2013) is encouraging staff to take a more active role in supporting commuter students, with several guidelines designed to facilitate commuter-staff interactions. Similarly, the University of Tulsa (2013) and the University of Memphis (2013b) have targeted parents, in the notion that a commuter's home environment is likely to be just as important as their academic environment. Taking all of this information into consideration, it is clear that there are many avenues for Kingston University to pursue.

2. Based on findings from the literature review, the student interns tested ideas and suggestions through sounding boards and other one off conversations. This dialogue aimed to uncover current opinions on the commuter student experience and attitudes towards some of the support on offer, or what may be lacking. It was considered important to do this through conversation instead of via a survey. Students were also able to relay their own recommendations on how to improve their commuter experience.

The discussion was designed to gather information from the students in regard to understand the range of locations students commute from; to understand factors that affect students' choice of transportation; to understand varied students' experiences with the University Bus services. It also aimed to better understand ways in which the students' commute has affected student engagement or other aspects of their student experience and to become informed of possible services or products that could improve students' experience. Lastly it was also used to collect students' opinion of suggestions as devised by the student commuter project interns further to recommendations and suggestions from the literature review.

Participants revealed that their choice of transportation was dictated by proximity, financial capabilities, traffic and time of the day. Participants were also asked about the University's bus service and seemed to express a mixture of frustration and satisfaction with the service. In both groups, participants however did agree that the service could improve through: earlier start times, buses touring more destinations, buses stopping at more stops and buses running during weekends and between breaks, to ensure that students are able to get to and from the Learning Resource Centre during exam periods.

In asking how the participants perceive their commute as affecting their engagement and overall university experience, one participant told how she had to move closer to the University as she found she had to spend up to £150 a month on travel alone. Further to this, she said that even then, the inconvenience of travel means that during exam times, she finds herself staying on at the library till 4am before going home. Others reported having to miss many lectures as they were unable to



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make it in for the early starts due to traffic congestion, which they said one could not always 100% plan for. One other expressed that extracurricular activities such as sports are areas of interest which he feels he is unable to participate in due to their late starts in the evening, as he would otherwise be late getting home and therefore unable to study for his classes.

Following this, participants were then asked to give realistic suggestions of possible services that they believed could improve their commute and general experience. Suggestions given were mainly about social space that would fill the gaps between lectures and would provide an opportunity to interact with others. It was also suggested that the University could form a partnership with a taxi company that would offer discounts to University students; saying this might help during late night studies or attendance at society events.

Participants were then asked their opinion and input on potential services or support that could be explored in the long term, for which some inspiration was drawn from the literature review. They were: a free university distributed food container or drink flask, a commuter resource centre, a commuter space or lounge, a commuter specific Buddy scheme, discounts on campus meals, and a student commuter society.

The sound board discussions were truly edifying, as a wide range of issues were raised that would not have necessarily come up during the intern meetings or from the literature review.

Students have provided feedback on an anecdotal basis on recurring issues in the following areas: food on campus, (intercampus) transport, academic-related matters, facilities and provision. The majority of these issues affect most students and not only commuters. These issues have become apparent at Student Staff Liaison Committee meetings and Faculty Forums and through further feedback from Course Representatives, and may have been ongoing for a while. They have perhaps not been addressed during the last few years as the student demographic may have changed and it is felt that the procedures and structures Kingston University uses are still very much tailored to what used to be known as a 'traditional' student.

Other initiatives and suggestions to develop in the long term include a Student commuter help line, the Monthly Breakfast club,



**Portland State University
Transportation and Parking
services for students
and staff**



Loyola University Chicago's new Damen Student Center



Photos by Emelie Helsen (2013)

Commuter Meal Plans

Specific meal plans that entitle commuters to obtain valuable meal deals so they are encouraged to eat on campus and do not need to head into Kingston town. Eating on campus would offer them the opportunity to mingle with other students and staff, make friends and feel connected.

The Student Commuter Blog

There are various (official and unofficial) blogs and tumblrs written by commuter students on the internet. On these blogs students share their stories which not only provide valuable insight to staff and fellow students who may not commute, and express their emotions around particular issues that affect them.

Commuter awareness programmes

Both mature and commuter students have expressed that they feel they would like to be more connected with the University, but that sometimes staff do not understand their experience. This may be because the Kingston student body (and that one of the UK as a whole) has changed a lot during the last decade that perhaps institutionally changes to be live to this have not been made. In collaboration with the Academic Centre and the Students' Union an awareness campaign and sessions could be set up to ensure the university community is live to particular student commuter issues.

3. Another output from the project is the interactive infographic tool that has been developed by a student. The tool aims to map the population of enrolled Kingston University students across the UK, and aid in visualisation of the day-to-day commuter experience. This infographic was also created with the intention of being able to see student term time locations, based on key demographics and proximity to available transportation. By utilising this tool, key strategic areas can be focused on to enable a richer commuter student experience.

Students come from all over the UK and beyond to study at Kingston University. Many choose to live close to their respective campus so they can travel into university quickly and easily. However for a wide variety of reasons many other students commute into university via public transport, car or bike - the reasons to choose for this option are varied.

The commuter journey undertaken varies greatly in complexity and length, so anything that can be done to improve the commuter experience is vital - though currently it is hard to visualise where the most popular student residential areas are. In order to resolve this an infographic has been devised that shows all students' term time locations on an interactive map. Along with this, student demographic data have been included as well as transport data; this has all been overlaid to see areas that could be focused on to improve the student commuter experience.

The tool has been created in order to easily understand where our commuter students come from, to have leverage with businesses, companies and organisations to demonstrate the use by students, to tailor our services and promote initiatives that are relevant to those students particularly and to see if any systems or initiatives can be established to improve the overall (including co - and extra - curricular) student experience for and retention of those commuter students.

Initially data was retrieved from the University's student information database consisting of student postcode, campus and 4 key demographics. These demographics consisted of:

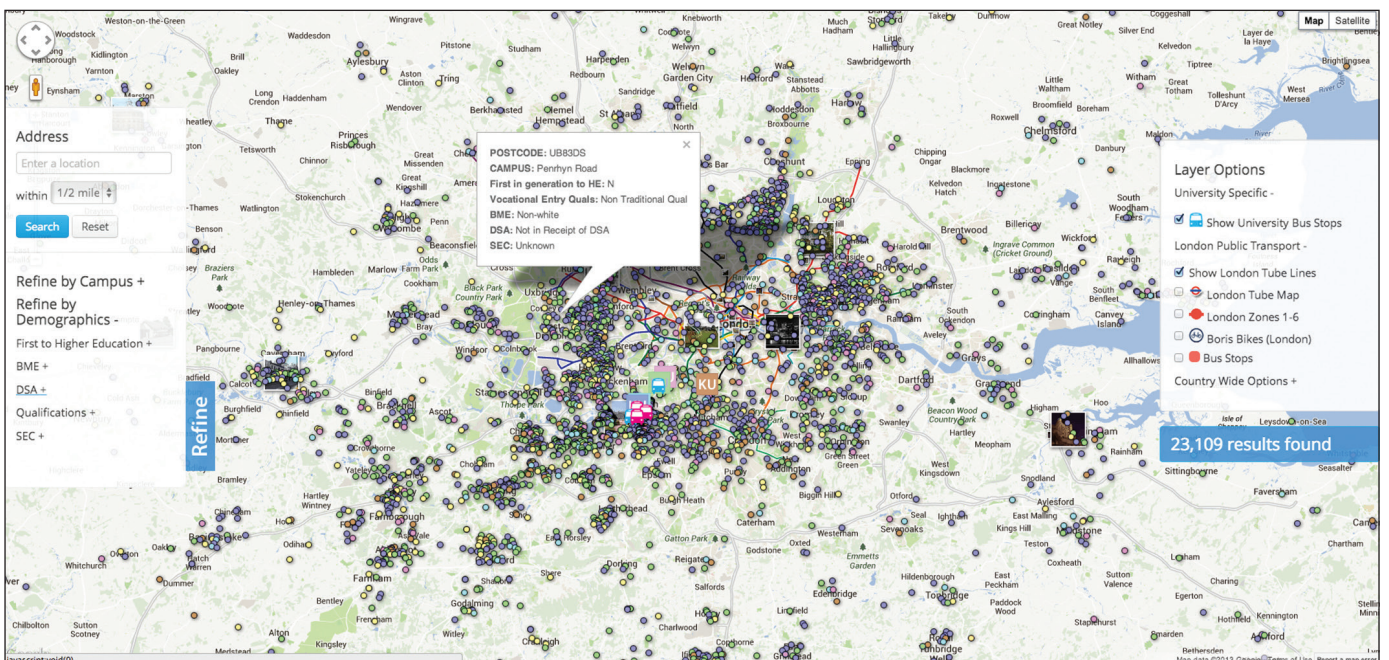
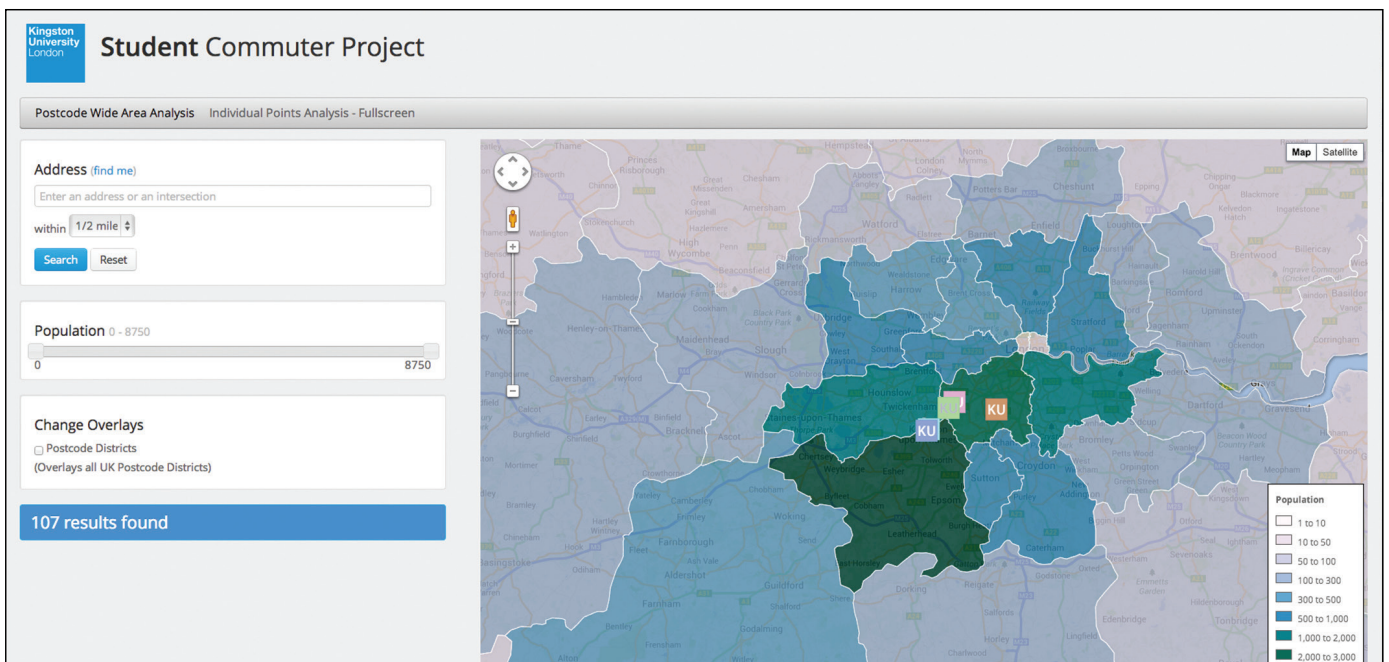
- Disabled Student Allowance - DSA
If student was in receipt of it or not

- Socio Economic Class - SEC
The values were: high, low, unknown or refused
- Ethnicity - BME
The values were white, non-white or unknown
- First to higher education & Qualification Type
The qualification types were traditional (A-level), non-traditional or unknown

This data was then cleaned up and turned into data that could be geocoded (turn postcodes into coordinates)

and queried upon. The chosen platform for the infographic was the web and using html and JavaScript the data was displayed on a Google map.

Of course, just displaying over 23,000 markers on a map would not be meaningful, so two separate maps were created. The first one displays the population of students per postcode district (eg, KT5). Each district was then overlaid and assigned a colour value depending on the total number of students. This can be seen below.



Along with this a search function has been implemented including a population slider that can be used to refine the map by only displaying areas with a particular population of students. Each area can then be clicked on and information will be dynamically loaded below the map like using JavaScript.

A postcode map has also been developed. This page is a full screen map displaying all the student data as shown opposite.

There are two panels overlaid on the map. The left allows the results to be refined by a specific area by typing in an address. The results can be also refined by campus and demographic by using the checkboxes.

Lastly the right panel has the ability to enable and disable layers on the map. These include:

- London Tube Map
- London Train Stations Zones 1 – 6
- All Oyster Bus Stops
- Google Photo Library of Landmarks

The tool is to be further developed beyond the research project timeline as it is aimed that staff within Student Services will be using it as part of their planning and evaluation cycles. In order to make staff fully understand what the commuter experience may be from a statistical and personal point of view, SEE is considering our next steps to be

- Brief and train staff in all Student Services to use the tool and tailor their offer to those students where relevant
- Promote the tool with Student Support Officers within faculties in order to tailor specific activities for support in locations and at times relevant to commuter students
- Promote the tool with the Students' Union so they can use it where they see fit

KT5 HAS 1429 students

It is situated in **Kingston Upon Thames**

On average it would take **17 mins** to

Cycle
 to
 Kingston University

Top 5 Most Populated KT areas

KT1 2498

KT2 1855

KT6 1550

KT5 1429

KT3 496

EDUCATION

QUALIFICATIONS

FIRST TO HE

Currently there are 502 first-generation students and 927 others enrolled at Kingston University

ETHNICITY

This year KT5 has a total population of 1429 students enrolled at Kingston University of which 66.90% are White and 32.05% are of another ethnicity, while the other 1.05% choose not to disclose that information

DSA

In this area of 1429 students, 58 are receiving the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)

NOT IN RECEIPT OF DSA

95.94%

IN RECEIPT OF DSA

4.06%



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- Include windows that will display videos & information about the commuter journey so it becomes more personable
 - Make an in depth analysis of our commuting student body and the routes they frequent to consider opportunities for engagement and employment closer to their home
4. The final output is a short video that briefly represents the commuting life of various commuters. The video is an informative piece on demonstrating the trials and tribulations of commuter students captured in real life, as well as tips for individual students to make the most out of their university life while being a commuter.

If you want to find out more about the tool and use it, please visit
<http://atomfruit.com/commuter/KU-District-View/>

The video can be found on
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XbIOiY16aw and will be further developed by staff and students ahead of the new academic year so this can be shared during Welcome and Enrolment.

Evaluation of the research project

As staff members we have been humbly surprised by the positive attitude, creativity and pace of the group. We hope this initial project will lead to more topical Student Services research projects conducted by undergraduate and postgraduate students from different faculties, which will have recommendations that will lead to implementation across the University, by having an evidence based qualitative approach through peer-to-peer conversation away from the usual surveys.

As staff we have also seen the confidence and skills of the group grow, and are able to support them on their personal development in work experience related to their overall university experience that isn't necessarily academically linked but is of course still a valid form of experiential learning while they are at university. We have for instance linked the research project participants with Kingston University Talent staff to offer further support and coaching for their future career prospects ahead.

As students, as the project was about the student commuter experience, involving students in the project was an important aspect, as whom better to understand and relate to it than the end recipient themselves. The project undertaken had many deliverables with each requiring different forms of contributions and involvement from both students and staff alike. Working in partnership with the staff instead of for them, gave us, (the students) a sense of inclusivity and shared value that in a traditional staff-student relationship is often not fully nurtured. Rob said that "I felt that being able to engage and shape the project, lead to the development of a shared purpose, mindset and even personal stake. This was further improved by focusing on the strengths of each team member that had only been discovered because of this partnership through shared insights and ideas at meetings." While this partnership grew, students working on the project believe that important skills including social and interpersonal matured. This was achieved through the varieties of different forms of communication and methods that were present during scheduled meetings & other exchanges. "All of this combined has reshaped my perception on how best to

deal with different forms of working relationships and to also embrace partnerships in the working environment." So what's next for us?

- Create a structure for sounding boards that allow the presence of those in charge of decision making so feedback can be provided directly, and ideas can be discussed in depth. We want to move from students as consultants to students as change makers.
- Further test the ideas and suggestions made from the students so far. We need to ensure the suggestions made are relevant, valid and representative of the commuter body. For this we will approach the Students' Union to collaborate through course representative and other structures.
- Ensure all the outputs of this report are seen by decision makers across the University, particularly when it comes to initiatives where investment in resources is needed - these are the Vice Chancellor, the Estates Department, KUSCO, the Dean of Students and Heads of Groups within Student Services, to name a few.

