

Outside the Bubble: The experiences of student commuters at the University of St. Andrews

..... Alyssa Morgan

ABSTRACT

The act of commuting and the subsequent effect it has on the quality of experience any one student will have at The University of St. Andrews is determined by many factors. It necessitates disconnect from the academic and social environment, contextualised based on the all-encompassing social integration that the small town allows. From my own experience as a commuting student living in Dundee, I became aware of and interested in the impact of commuting. Through grounded experience and conversation with fellow commuters, I explore the impact and consequences of conditions surrounding transport, space, time, personal wellbeing, and academic success to highlighting the good and the bad of what commuting means for the some of the students at St. Andrews.

INTRODUCTION

To be a commuting student at St. Andrews is to be outside the academic sphere. It necessitates disconnect from the academic and social environment, and the all-encompassing social integration that the small town allows. In the process of considering my options on what to focus on within this project, commuting was always an interest – largely due to its incredible impact on my own life and studies when I moved to Dundee. The distance that was made between my life and the academic environment led to disconnect and deterioration of aspects of life that I had learned to rely on when living in halls. Through this change I was made aware of how integral the non-academic aspects of student life are to academic success and personal wellbeing and so I began my ethnographic project.

BACKGROUND

I would like to place this ethnography upon a backdrop that acknowledges the great impact of class (Ishitani and Reid 2015:25) and familial support (Ishitani and Reid 2015:17) upon any student's experience, along with lack of housing which is apparent in St. Andrews. These are main components on a student's choice to commute and to its effects on their life. Though, in this ethnography, I will not be focusing as much on these aspects as I would if I were writing on a wider scale as this is true for university students across Scotland, not just St. Andrews and my project is concerned more intimately with St. Andrews as a unique setting for conversations around commuting. At the beginning of the ideas stage of this project, I had my own predictions for where it would lead me and that this would be quite advocative in nature, in that I would be shedding light on the struggles of commuting students for the sake

of showing the context of St. Andrews implies upon the student experience. Largely due to my own perspective on commuting myself and how drastic I felt the change was for me. However, when I branched out and got different perspectives, it seemed that it would not be so straightforward. The lens I started with was widened and became less about the personal experiences of commuting as a student, but how the spatial and social components of St. Andrews made for a particular idea of student-hood in the “bubble” which was flipped upside down when one stepped outside of the town.

METHODS

Due to the multiplicity of spaces that commuters occupy, my research did not rely on participant observation within a specific setting as much as may be expected. Place and the spatial conditions to the commuter experience are, however, still key to this project and will be acknowledged as such. My main form of fieldwork was one-on-one interviews with a few people who I knew had experience with commuting to St. Andrews and were open to sharing how it affected them. This process had a couple bumps along the way as I was learning and gaining the insight that built this ethnography. Something that I became aware of was how I played the role of ethnographer among friends and in the interview setting where the typical observer stance was not taken. I found myself, as with familiar faces and talking about a topic I had personal experience with, reacting to my interviewees with my feelings or thoughts and this worried me at first.

As I continued, this helped me understand and notice varying views held by my research participants. For instance, when Rachel was contacted about the project, she expressed wanting to speak to someone about commuting. This

suggested that it is not a common topic of conversation within friendships here despite it being a daily activity and a huge part of her university experience. This was assisted by the fact that I felt similarly and had a desire to talk about it. The issue that I had faced with feeling like I was talking too much during my interviews became a point of reference within my fieldnotes in addition to everything else. It re-iterated a feeling of isolation or loneliness within the commuter experience and a desire to feel understood.

I interviewed 3 people that I have and will continue to refer to using the pseudonyms: Lola, Aisling, and Rachel. Through my own experiences as well as those expressed by the people I was able to interview, there were a few topics of conversation that jumped out to me as important to the issue of productivity and wellness regarding commuting as a student at University of St. Andrews. The stress of the commute, the temporal impacts of daily travel, the town of St. Andrews as an academic space, academic success, and friendships.

Before delving into experiences of students in St. Andrews, I would like to acknowledge the differing definitions and treatments of commuting in literature. In this ethnography I am identifying commuting as any distance not walkable or easily cyclable. This is firmly based on the makeup of St. Andrews. The furthest, but still very common, place to live in St. Andrews is around Morrisons as it can be around a 30-minute walk to the centre, but even that is do-able, and the bus is about 10 minutes. With this, a basis on which wider university life is built on is made by the geography of St. Andrews. In Anna Jabloner’s ethnography titled, ‘Commuting as Americanist Time’, the writer states that “Many Northern Californians spend large portions of their lives commuting and even more time in conversation about their commutes. It seems

to be a structuring element of life” (2020: 86). In her writing, she studies commuting in America which can be said to be “the most car-dependent nation in the world” (Lutz 2014: 232) so commuting as I will identify it is much more common there. This supports the suggestion that the category of “commuter” may differ between institutions (Maguire and Morris 2018: 16). For example, some works on commuter students may distinguish between students living in their own private accommodation and ones who still live at home with family (Ishitani and Reid: 17–18). The similarity is seen when referring to the commute as ‘a structuring element of life’ (Jabloner 2020: 86) – one which I attempt to uncover throughout my encounter and with assistance from various pieces of literature.

ETHNOGRAPHY

The first interview I had was with Lola, a third-year STEM student driving from Edinburgh most days to partake in the long contact hours that come with studying the sciences. She expressed the most enthusiastic attitude towards wanting to bring light to the commuter experience in St. Andrews. As the officer of the university’s group speaking on commuter issues as well as other groups such as mature students, she was the face of efforts to make changes within the University support system. She also authored the ‘Commuter Report’ and the ‘Commuters’ Motion’, both of which she sent me and were enlightening shows of collective opinion on commuter matters within the University population. We met via a video Teams call as neither of us had class on the day of the interview so were not going into St. Andrews. This decision itself made me reflect and brought to light the first factor towards the disconnect felt by commuters. The travel time and surrounding preparation to go into St. Andrews does not always feel worth it un-

less there is a class to attend, adding to the isolation. This additionally emphasises an important point about commuter experiences as a university student – academic success and how different needs are prioritised for commuters versus residential students. Due to Lola’s particularly long commute to St. Andrews from Edinburgh, she feels that her “potential isn’t being reached” as the 4 hours each day spent driving cuts into time she can work. Not only that, her personal life and wellbeing is being affected. She stated in the commuter report that “commuting is a consistent, unavoidable activity that consumes a significant amount of personal time and resources”, re-iterating the persistent and inflexible nature of the commute.

One thing I can say about the commute itself and the related stressors it is that people have different experiences and attitudes towards travel, and this makes for variety when speaking on commuting generally. For example, I get travel sickness most of the time, but most intensely in the morning which makes the morning commutes much worse for me. Whereas Aisling, one of the research participants found the morning travel time to be pleasant, peaceful, and a chance to enjoy a coffee and wake up properly before heading to class. This difference between personal attitudes to the activity of the commute can be reflected in Maguire and Morris’s *Homeward Bound* (2018: 10). Additionally, as supported by Tuvikene et al, I find that the bus can be constructed as another public space that I occupy as well as classes, the library, and the commuters’ lounge (2023: 2966). It does not feel like a restful place – rather a strange liminal space in which I just wait the 30-minutes until my day can start/continue. This links to the theory around stress and the commute for people using public transport as it has been said that control is ‘the most powerful predictor of commuting stress’ (Spo-

sato, Röderer and Cervinka 2012: 581) and that “high impedance can cause commuters to feel less control and thus more stress” (Chatterjee 2020: 9). In either case, town buses and cars are settings in which it is difficult if not impossible to be academically productive, cutting down on time for both academic and personal tasks.

The decrease of productivity that commuting leads to cannot be questioned as the time it takes alone has an impact on a student’s life, but in terms of the impact on academic achievement I have found that, from my experience and the feedback from Aisling and Rachel, academic success isn’t the first thing to fall upon having to adapt (Mellon and Stalmirska 2022: 3). The interest I have with academic productivity is St. Andrews for commuter students is informed by the fact that the University and its students are very driven due to high expectations and busy days. Something that is unique to St. Andrews is that classes are often scheduled close together due to the ease at which students can get between classes and other study spaces in town. This also makes it easier for commuting students to make a whole day of their travels rather than feeling unmotivated by not being able to make the most of their journey home and back.

On the other hand, the high demand of contact hours and classes in pre-honours, often starting before 10am and sometimes finishing after 5pm, makes commuting students more likely to fall behind. As written in related literature, suggesting that, to accommodate for commuters, “formal teaching activities should start after 10am” (Mellon and Stalmirska 2022: 7) as it makes the “working” day for commuting students more realistic and achievable and in turn motivates them. Along with long days at university, commuter students’ have additional mental load including making lunch to save money, organising their home chores as they cannot

pop home between classes. Aisling, for example, stated that she ate less when commuting and was more tired due to having to wake up early and not having time to make a lunch to go or getting back too late to make dinner. On top of everything else, this made her less likely to go into St. Andrews. From this it is apparent that “the commute experience ‘spills over’ into how people feel and perform at work and home” (Chatterjee 2020: 22). All of this leads to long-term exhaustion from energy being is drained throughout a full teaching day as well as the commute (Maguire and Morris 2018: 33). Other potential commitments such as caring or employment, which are increasingly likely to be present for commuters (Mellon and Stalmirska 2022: 1), may also result in lowered motivation to go to class or do other work as well as a decrease in general personal wellbeing. Within the Commuter Report, it reads “From my own experience, pressure due to university workload and commuting time have often led to my wellbeing becoming negatively impacted after only two weeks of term” and the overall conclusion made by research on commuting across the board is that life satisfaction is generally damaged as a result (Maguire and Morris 2018: 33).

The key difficulty I have noticed commuter students face has been the lack of social integration, added to with reference to personal overall wellbeing and life satisfaction. As stated by Mellon and Stalmirska, “prioritisation of the academic engagement among commuter students comes at an expense of their social integration.” (2022: 7). When all time is spent in classes and studying, then at home away from St. Andrews, students can have perfect grades but be completely isolated from many other facets of student life. As casually stated by a PHD student and one of my former tutors, in St. Andrews “the only thing you can do is hang out with friends, if you find your people

living here is great". This gave insight into the views out people living here and validated my experiences as moving the Dundee left me very isolated from friendships I had made before, especially during busy periods of study. This was also a point that was brought up by two of my research participants as Lola stated that young students' social lives are impacted by commuting – making the holistic student experience far from expected or deserved (Maguire and Morris 2018: 5), and Rachel stated that she has more of a "fear of missing out" now as she has to plan her life around bus times and she can't go out with friends with much comfort as she either has to stay at a friend's or leave early due to very limited night bus options. This all touches on an overarching theme throughout the limited literature on student commuting: the lost or missing sense of belonging that can stem from isolation from student life aside from the academics (Mellon and Stalmirska 2022: 3).

Another topic that is key to speaking about the student commuter experience in St. Andrews is highlighted in one article as commuters were referred to as "learn and go students" (Mellon and Stalmirska 2022: 2). This definition of the commuter student alone brings to light an issue felt by commuter students of St. Andrews – that the town is a place of study and the environment itself is an important contributor to motivation in students. So, the distance made between students and their place of student as well as their peers makes for a lost "sense of belonging" (Giacalone and Perrelli 2020: 180) and a disconnect with the wider student identity. One way the university has attempted to amend this is by introducing commuters' lounges as a place commuting students can keep their things, heat up meals, and rest.

The main topics that Lola advocates for are to better the state of the commuters' lounge

and to better the student support for commuters. The commuters' lounge has been a frequented place for me this year as a commuter from Dundee, and, although it's a handy place to eat lunch and having a locker is good for keeping an extra bag or jacket I must bring sometimes, it isn't always comfortable, clean, and it's not a practical place to do quiet work in. This lounge is the only place that acts as a "home away from home" for commuters – playing the role accommodation would throughout the day for people living in St. Andrews. As I have acknowledged, St. Andrews in its entirety is a scholarly environment unique to other city universities as the student population overtakes that of the locals. For students in St. Andrews, their private accommodation acts as an extension of the academic environment similarly to how university accommodation would (Mellon and Stalmirska 2022: 3). This is partly because they are always close to their university grounds, but also because of the limited housing – people often live very close to one another, making it easy to spend time together and build or keep close friendships.

One of my research participants whom I interviewed in St. Andrews Library [Rachel] had a lot to say on her experience within the student environment and the commuters' lounge. She highlighted that the separation and distinction of St. Andrews as "studious" lead to a subconscious distinction as home/Dundee as "not studious" and therefore it made it harder for her to work there versus working in her flat in St. Andrews. Despite the purpose of the commuters' lounge being to act as a pseudo-accommodation throughout the day, Aisling expressed that there is a lack of privacy that one feels as a commuter: while the library can be overwhelming and very busy, leaving one feeling the need for space, the commuters' lounge doesn't feel comfortable, and the Wi-Fi con-

nection isn't always sufficient. The space has not changed in over a decade even with an increase in students commuting (Figure 1), and it is not kept in great condition. For example, the dishes piled up (Figure 2) and it began being especially unpleasant to spend any amount of time in there due to it, and other frequenters of the lounge shared similar opinions. Although personal use of the dishes should be each person's responsibility, I had to spend my own money for communal soap and sponges for this which I believe should not be the case within a University Managed communal space.

This is why the Commuter Report states:

“Commuter student spaces act as hubs for rest, study, and refuelling, therefore focusing on improving commuter rooms/spaces is important to student experience. Commuter rooms must be dual purpose spaces, that act as a home from home capable of hosting several students, with a diverse range of needs”.

As underscored by Lola as I asked her more about her work on advocating for commuter students in St. Andrews, she stated that the University had been helpful in hearing the issues of commuting students and that they were open to acting upon this, though it comes with a long process. Additionally, the University has acknowledged the increase in people commuting within the study body: “We know that this has grown to over 1,500 commuter students in recent years with students commuting” (University of St Andrews Student Association). Therefore, there may be potential for longer-term changes for the infrastructure and support put in place for commuting students, however the social aspects that make up the study-body environment of St. Andrews isn't likely to change which is likely to be a challenge for anyone who commutes and

it looking to build meaningful friendships alongside their studies and other commitments.

CONCLUSION

To conclude on my findings throughout my short-term ethnographic fieldwork, the overlapping fallout of commuting to and from St. Andrews has adverse effects. Part of why I believe these experiences are not accounted for is due to the “relatively little” known about commuter students in the UK (Maguire and Morris 2018: 6), but this is increased ten-fold by the academic environment that St. Andrews has established and that has its own unique impact on student commuters. Going forward, I think that this study could be a contributor to filling this gap in information – with more interest in the experiences of individual students (varied in distance) that can then reflect wider trends as well as considering the town and surrounding student life. Even with the variation in opinion and experience, commuter students at St. Andrews are a valuable group within the student body and their lived realities as students at the University are important and worth keeping in mind.

FIGURES:



Figure 1 The University of St Andrews ca. 2010–2012A



Figure 2

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