

Commuting to placement: Impact on student learning, well-being and finances.

Susan McCool, Wendy Cohen, Jennifer Couper and Jamie Madden

Speech and language therapy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

Abstract

Work placements are becoming an increasingly prominent feature within higher education, in the drive towards enhanced graduate employability and as a pedagogical response to the desire to situate learning within real, practical contexts and applications. Little consideration is given to potential deleterious consequences for students, and the impact on learning and student well-being is under-explored. This project focused on one programme within the University of Strathclyde (Glasgow), where there is extensive student time on placement (the BSc Hons Speech and Language Pathology), as a means of understanding impacts of commuting to placement on students and disseminating that learning. Student interns with 'lived experience' of commuting to placement investigated the experiences of student speech and language therapists using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Findings indicate that commuting to placement, rather than to university, leads to significantly greater impact on academic work, health and well-being and student finances. There are implications for student information and support. Potential detrimental impacts of placements are often over-looked, but to ignore such impacts is perilous within a wider context of teaching excellence, student satisfaction and widening access.

Keywords: Placement, commuting, impact, student, well-being.

What this paper adds:

- Commuting to work placements can impact academic performance, student well-being and finances
- Increased student support is necessary to mitigate potential negative impacts
- While work placements offer benefits, careful consideration is warranted in their implementation.

Introduction

The BSc Hons Speech and Language Pathology programme at the University of Strathclyde provides training for entry to the speech and language therapy profession. Many students on the programme commute to university, often because of personal and financial circumstances and other responsibilities. Placements are integral to the programme, taking up over 55 days in total. As a result of a national shortage of suitable placements, 10 of the 14 regional NHS Health Boards in Scotland entered into 'Practice Placement Agreements' with the University. These agreements include a commitment to provide placement opportunities for SLT

students across the country. This means that students may be required to commute for up to 2 hours each way, in what can be a complicated daily commute to remote or difficult-to-access locations; and a proportion of students is required to travel further afield, requiring overnight accommodation. In years 2, 3 and 4 of the programme placements are scheduled for 2 days per week for up to 10 weeks; university attendance is required on the other days. This pattern suits the needs of placement providers and is considered to have advantages from both pedagogical and student support perspectives. Student feedback consistently indicates, however, that placement periods (whilst highly valued as learning experiences) can be disruptive and difficult in practical terms.

Project aims

The aims of the project were to explore the impacts (positive and less so) on student learning and satisfaction, as follows:

SLT students' experiences and perspectives

- Commuting to university: reasons, impacts and coping strategies
- Commuting to placement: experiences, impacts and coping strategies
- The impact of managing different commutes in the same week

Method

A mixed method approach was used to gather broad data via questionnaires and more in-depth information from semi-structured interviews. Data collection took place over 3 weeks in May/ June 2016.

A 44-item survey was designed using Qualtrics survey software, to allow comparative investigation of impact of commuting to placement and commuting to university. The survey was distributed to 102 registered speech and language therapy students via the Virtual Learning Environment and social media. 56 participants started the survey– a sign-up rate of 55%. Of those 56 participants there was a 79% completion rate; therefore 44 participants fully completed the survey. As the survey was anonymous it was not possible to remove answers from those participants who did not complete the survey.

An additional question at the end of the survey invited volunteers to opt in to take part in semi-structured interviews. 8 students responded to this request: 5 students were interviewed in person and 3 took part by video-call. Of the volunteers, 7 had just completed their 3rd year of study and one had just completed their 2nd year. 5 were mature students, 6 were home and 2 rUK students.

This paper reports the results of the survey, with additional detail provided from the interviews.

Results

Demographics

Figures 1, 2 and 3 outline the demographics of survey respondents.

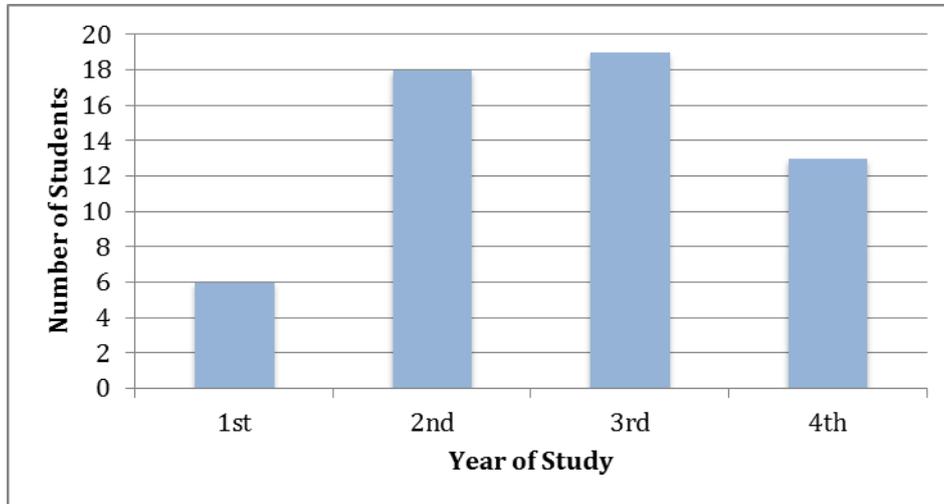


Figure 1: Year of academic study just completed by students participating in the survey. Total responses = 56

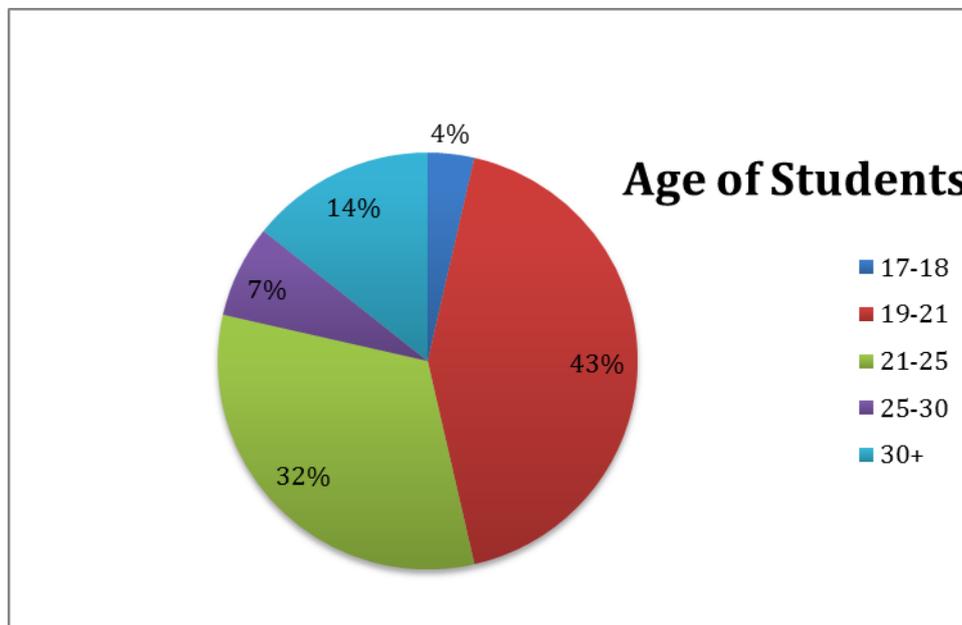


Figure 2: Age of Students participating in the survey. Total Responses = 56.

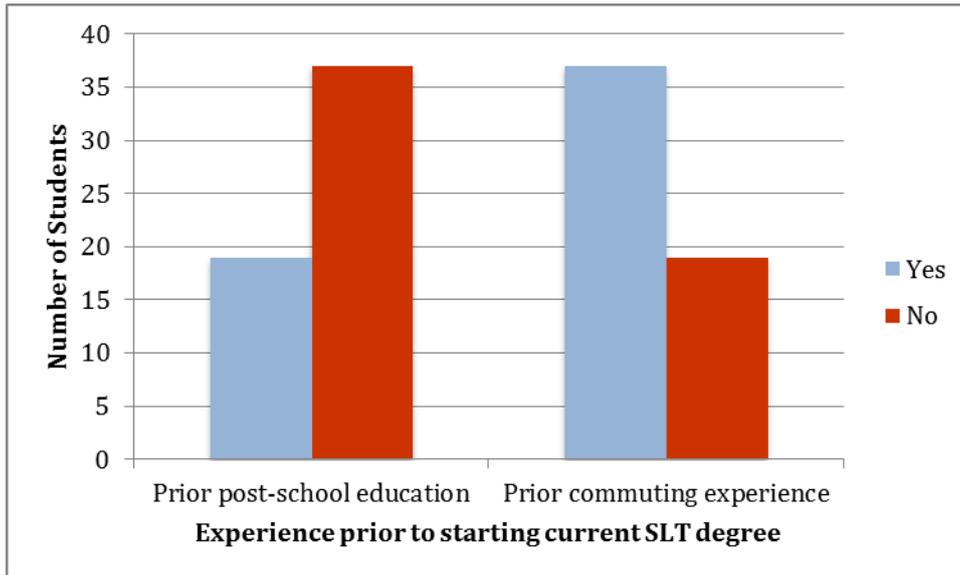


Figure 3: Number of students with prior post-school education and prior experience of commuting. Total responses = 56

Forms of transport used to commute

Figure 4 indicates the forms of transport used to commute to university and to placement.

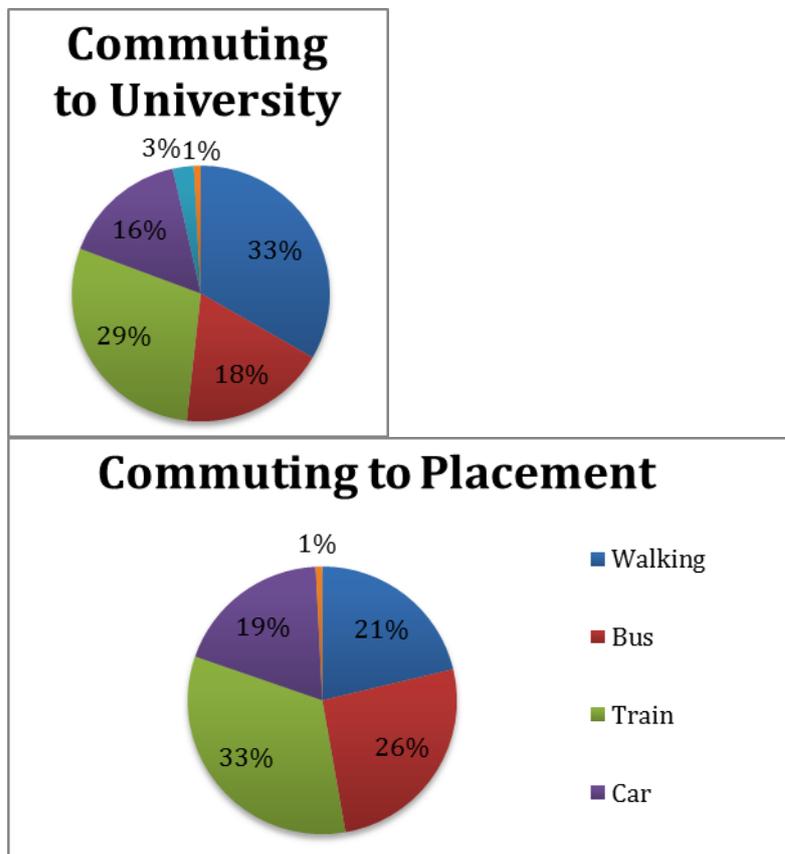


Figure 4: A comparison of forms of transport used to commute to university and placement. Total Responses = 55 for university and 49 for placement.

The most notable observation from figure 4 is the decrease in those walking to placement, as opposed to university, and the subsequent increase in other forms of transport, namely bus, train and car use. For commuting to university the 'other' represented use of the subway/underground. For commuting to placement the 'other' represented use of a ferry.

Journey times

Figure 5 indicates the length of the round trip commute to both university and placement.

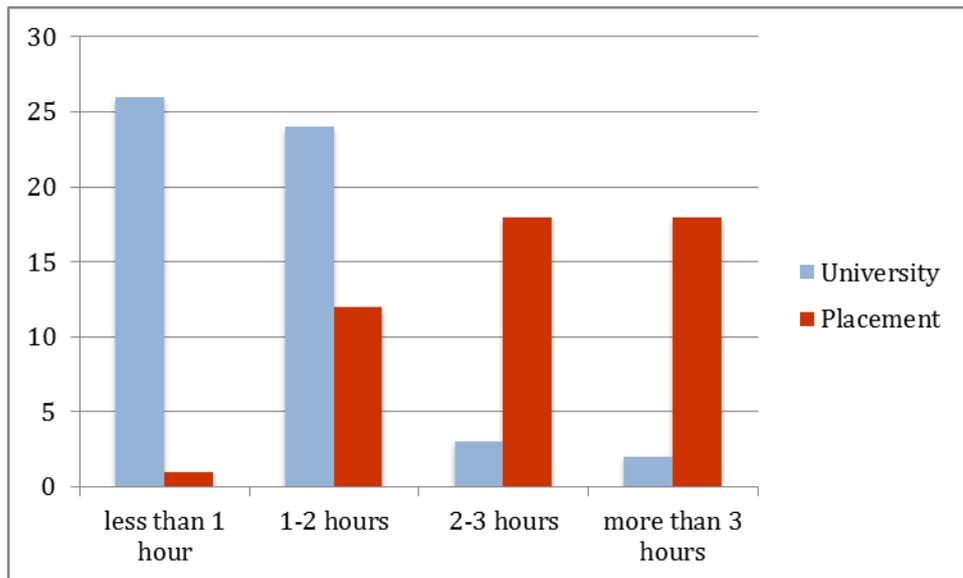


Figure 5: Commuting times (round trip) to university and placement. Total responses = 55 for university and 49 for placement.

What is evident from Figure 5 is the relatively large number of people travelling for more than 1 or 2 hours to and from placement, in contrast to the relatively small number of people who travel for more than 2 hours to get to university and back.

Impact of Commuting to University and Placement

Students were asked to indicate which areas of their lives were impacted by commuting to university and placement. These areas are shown in Figure 6.

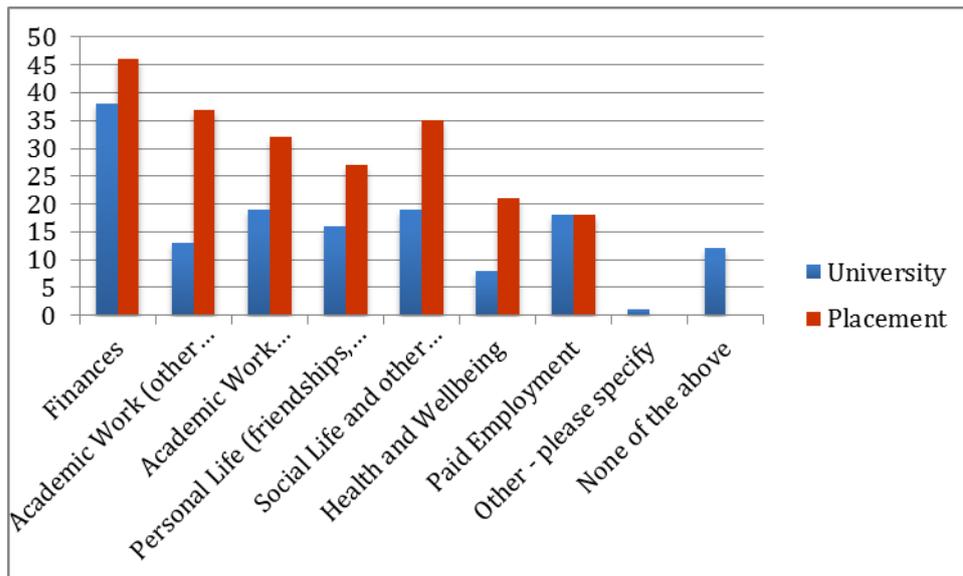


Figure 6: Number of students affected by each impact area for commuting to university and placement. Total responses = 54 for university and 49 for placement.

Participants were asked to rank their impact areas from greatest impact, to least impact and asked to rank the top 3 which had the biggest impact on them. As can be seen from Figure 7, a greater number of students were impacted in the different areas when commuting to placement rather than university. Notably, every student was impacted in some way by commuting to placement while 12 out of 54 students reported that commuting to university had no impact on them.

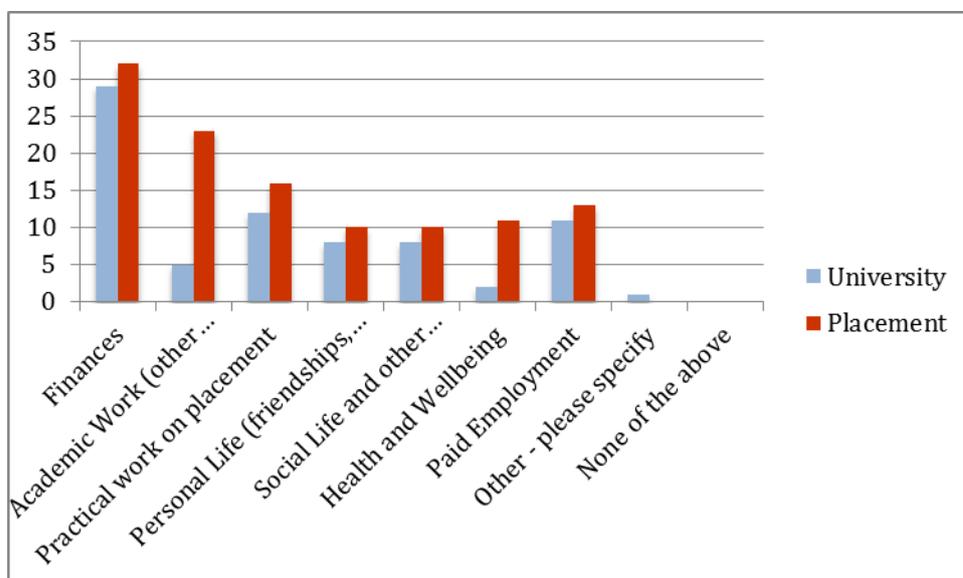


Figure 7: Number of students who ranked each of the impact areas in their top three areas of impact.

Financial Expenditure

Finances were ranked as the top impact area for both commuting to university and placement. 94% of responses indicated that finances were impacted due to

placement commuting while 70% of participants cited this in relation to commuting to university.

Students reported a variety of expenses for university and placement commute including train tickets, petrol, parking, bus fares, childcare costs and car maintenance. Accommodation costs were cited as an additional financial burden while on placement.

With regards to car expenditure, petrol was listed as the main cost incurred, as well as car maintenance. 8 students used their own car for travel, and 3 used someone else's car. For train expenditure 11 students paid daily fares, 10 purchased a young person's railcard and 1 person purchased a monthly rail pass. For bus expenditure, 16 students paid daily fares, on person already had a bus pass, while one person purchased a bus pass

Students managed this through a variety of different means, most commonly by using student loans. A number of students also worked, while another relied on savings. Budgeting of finances featured highly as a method for managing finances. Additional strategies included purchasing a railcard to take advantage of reduced fares, relying on family for financial support, and car sharing to save on costs. While on placement, students reported also using money from their savings. 3 students had their expenses reimbursed; 1 used childcare funding and 1 used a credit card to manage finances.

Student Financial Support for travel to placement

18 people made an application for funding while 27 did not. Reasons given for not applying for funding included: students already being aware that they were not eligible (through either parental income or being an rUK student); students not being aware that they were able to apply for this funding; the application process being viewed as a lot of hassle; and having made previous unsuccessful applications.

Figure 8 below illustrates the proportion of students who did make an application for funding, along with the success or otherwise of that application. Figure 9 shows how students perceive the ease of the application process.

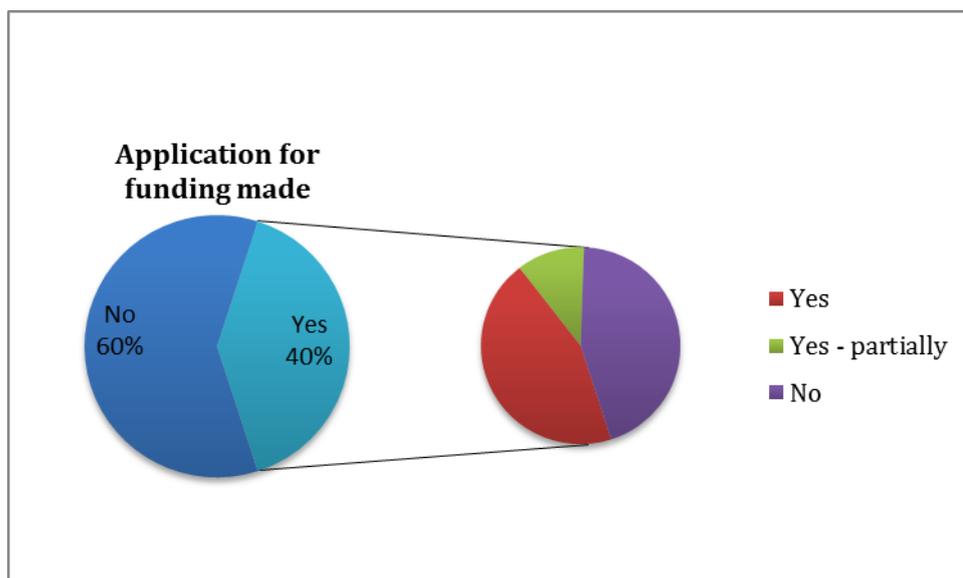


Figure 8: Applications made for funding and the success of applications that were made.

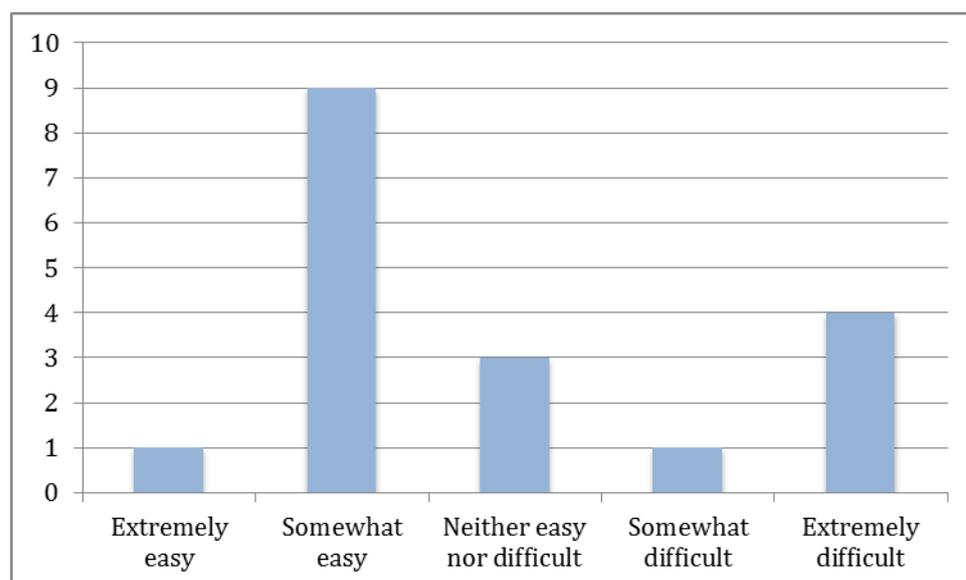


Figure 9: Accessibility of the application for funding for travel costs.

Academic Work (other university modules) and Academic Work (placement module)

Regarding the impact of commuting on academic work (both placement module and other modules) the two themes that came out strongly were a lack of time, and increased tiredness resulting from commuting, which then meant students had less time and energy to spend on both types of academic work. One student noted that *'I didn't manage it, I didn't keep up with my other academic work as well as I should have'*, while another noted that after commuting *'I was exhausted and just wanted to relax for an hour before it was time for me to go to bed'*.

Commuting to placement had a greater impact on academic work. 37 out of 54 participants reported that placement commuting affected their academic work for other university modules while 13 students reported this for their university commute. 32 felt that their performance on the placement module was affected by commuting to placement while 19 students reported this for their university commute.

Strategies employed by students include managing time by studying on transport and going to the library before and after university. During placement time additional strategies employed included reducing social life and other commitments, studying during placement breaks and also catching up on academic work after placement has finished.

Personal Life (friendships, family, relationships)

For both commuting to placement and commuting to university, student's personal lives were affected in the same ways – the commute impacted them either seeing family, seeing friends, or resulted in issues with relation to childcare. For commuting to university 8 people noted one of these areas as being impacted. For commuting to placement this increased to 10 people citing one or more of these

issues. One student noted that less time with family and friends has '*occasionally led to increased tension at home due to time taken by travel*'. One strategy was given for how to manage this impact: the student would organise more things at weekends.

Social life and other commitments

8 people cited social life as being in their top 3 impact areas for commuting to university, while for commuting to placement 10 people listed this as being an impact area. Time was listed as a factor as well as limited travel options for travelling home having attended social events, or university unions in Glasgow that went on later into the evening. Students made sure to forward plan their social lives. One student also suggested being flexible, and '*trying to do one thing per week*'.

Tiredness was listed as a factor in impacting social life during placement. One student noted that they '*found it really hard as my flatmates and friends had a lot more free time and didn't seem to understand that I was having to get up early to then do an 8 hour day*'.

Health and Wellbeing

11 students listed health and wellbeing as being a 'top three' impact area for commuting to placement in comparison to only 2 regarding commuting to university. Fatigue was reported as the biggest contributor, followed by stress, anxiety and sleeplessness. Consistent bed times were used to manage some of these areas as well as accessing the University's student counselling service.

Student Paid Part-time Employment

18 students reported difficulties in relation to paid part-time employment – 11 making this one of their top three concerns in relation to commuting to university and 13 in relation to commuting to placement. Inflexibility was reported as the main issue – in terms of difficulty in fitting part-time employment in around the lengthened days caused by their commute and additionally because of the heavier timetable for SLT students. While on placement, 2 people were unable to attend part-time work altogether, 3 were not able to find part-time work and 4 had to reduce their hours due to their commute.

Strategies used included discussing flexibility with their employers, working fewer hours during the semester, and moving work hours to the weekend instead of during the week, taking unpaid leave or holiday time (e.g. while on placement).

Overall impact of commuting

Students were asked about the overall impact of commuting. 100% were impacted by commuting to placement while just over 50% were impacted by commuting to university (see Figure 10).

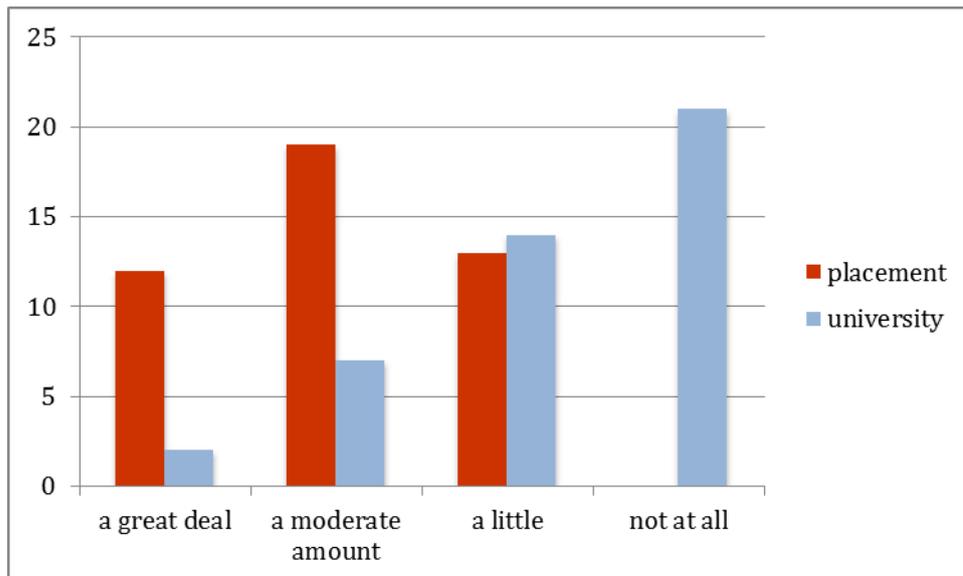


Figure 10: Overall impact of commuting to placement and university. Total responses = 44

Advice to upcoming year groups

Suggestions mainly centred on employing good time management skills and also planning ahead. Specific advice included being on time for placement and university, using the commute productively – whether for sleep or study, going to bed early, planning ahead financially, saving money and being aware of what help is available from student support services – including applying for funding if eligible. Different personal priorities emerged: one student advised choosing the easiest, least stressful transport mode, while another suggested choosing the cheapest and yet another advised choosing the fastest route.

With specific reference to commuting to placement, students advised checking with the University School Office that the student's address is up-to-date, considering learning to drive and doing a practise run of the commute. More general advice included being prepared for the impact that commuting has, and taking steps to simplify life while on placement.

Time management and coping strategies

Suggested time management strategies centred on doing some form of studying while commuting, such as listening to audio recordings/books, reading/writing up notes, listening to SLT podcasts and also thinking and reflecting on the day. One student reported that using the time on transport productively '*means the "dead" time involved in travelling can be used constructively and lessens the impact on daily life*'.

There were various coping strategies suggested by students that were used to manage the commute such as employing good time management techniques, being organised, building in time to rest, going to bed early, and making time for some fun.

Conclusions

Commuting to placement has a greater overall impact on students than their daily commute to classes in the university:

- **Academic work** is affected more by placement commuting than by travel to university. This is explained by placement being full days, with commuting time on top. Academic work can be neglected during periods of placement
- **'Health & wellbeing'** was reported as affected by commuting to placement more than to university. The heavier timetable for SLT students combined with the long days on placement increases fatigue and contributes to stress and anxiety
- **Extra financial expenditure** is related to commuting to placement rather than University: directly through additional travel, accommodation and/or childcare costs, and indirectly through reduced availability for part-time work.

Implications

- **Enhanced information for prospective students:** information currently available on web pages and other communications should be reviewed to help applicants make better informed decisions and preparations in relation to costs and disruptions associated with placement
- **Information for current students:** increased partnership working with central student support services should facilitate greater awareness about sources and processes of financial and other support
- **Student-suggested coping strategies:** these have been used to create a resource "Survival Guide When Commuting Placement": distributed to all current and future students with the intention of helping to make future commutes more productive and less demanding where possible.