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# Why They Do Not Always Show Up: New Insights on Student Attendance

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**Abstract**

Post-COVID-19, it is widely reported that the attendance rates of higher education students have not recovered to pre-COVID-19 numbers. Initial internal investigations in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at Maynooth University suggested that factors relating to the cost of living, commuting, and working were impacting students' ability to attend university. In order to establish the degree to which these issues were influencing student attendance at lectures, tutorials, and with the academic support of mathematics at Maynooth University, we conducted an in-depth survey of first-year service mathematics students. This paper focuses on the qualitative experiences and perspectives of the 415 students who participated in this study. Using reflective thematic analysis, we identified two dominant themes across the survey responses: the weight of the 'financial burdens' that students were experiencing, and frustration with the 'poor infrastructure' that they encountered. As a result, a further three themes of students being 'time poor', feeling forced to make difficult 'decisions', and 'missing out' on academic and social life were also prevalent. These findings reveal the complex and systemic challenges facing students in their day-to-day efforts to attend university, and they emphasise the urgent need for both institutional specific measures and coordinated government policies to tackle these issues.

**Keywords:** student attendance; financial pressures; commuting; accommodation; crisis; part-time work

## 1. Introduction

Post-COVID-19, student attendance at in-person teaching and support has not returned to the levels seen pre-pandemic. For example, in the Mathematics Support Centre (MSC) at Maynooth University (MU), there were 7011 student visits in 2024–2025, down from 19,397 in 2018–2019. While some of this decline can be attributed to reduced weekly opening hours (from 27 to 22) it does not explain the remaining shortfall. In 2022, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland, forecast that

> *The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have an impact on equity of access, participation and success. . . In particular, the impact on engagement in post-primary education during the pandemic may have significant implications for transition to higher education in the years ahead.* [1] (p. 46).

Some subsequent studies have directly linked the post-COVID-19 drop in attendance to legacy issues from the pandemic, where students became accustomed to studying and working remotely and receiving online support [2]. In spring 2024, to investigate these issues locally, the MU Department of Mathematics and Statistics (the Department) issued a

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short internal anonymous undergraduate survey which focussed on attendance at lectures, tutorials, and the MSC, which are all on campus with no online alternatives currently available. Lectures and tutorials are considered compulsory, though students are not penalised for non-attendance. The MSC is an optional academic support. Responses ($n$ = 351) did not suggest any links between non-attendance and habits developed during COVID-19; however, students did report barriers to attendance. Some of these have been identified in previous studies at MU, in particular, fear, embarrassment, and timetabling issues [3,4]. Three other major obstacles were mentioned: cost of living expenses (including those associated with attending university), commuting issues, and the need for part-time employment. These three barriers largely confirmed what was contained in an unpublished Maynooth Students' Union study carried out in 2024. They also aligned with what staff were hearing from students and agreed with media reports at that time [5–7]. However, we were unable to find published research which had examined how the cost of living, commuting, and/or working intersect and impact on students' ability to attend university.

As a result, to provide an up-to-date contribution to understanding how these challenges impact student attendance in the current social and educational landscape, and to better inform our teaching and support of students, we decided to undertake a comprehensive study at MU. As the transition from secondary school to university mathematics poses a significant problem for many students [8], we focussed our research on first-year service mathematics and statistics students and their experiences during semester 1, 2024–25. Almost without exception, these students are registered for full-time degrees. While taking local, national, and international factors into consideration, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the financial and logistical barriers that students are facing and how they impact on their learning experience. This paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Are the costs of living, commuting, and/or working impacting students' ability to attend university?
2. If yes, in what ways?

## 2. Literature Review

This review begins by examining literature on the cost of student accommodation and then considers the strong demand for student housing and corresponding government initiatives to meet this demand. We then proceed to explore studies on the day-to-day expenses incurred by students attending university, followed by an analysis of the documented effects of commuting and/or working on students' ability to attend and engage fully with university life.

### *2.1. Cost of Accommodation*

For Ireland, one of the primary sources on students' social and economic conditions in higher education (HE) is the Eurostudent survey. This survey, conducted every three years, collates important information on issues such as commuting patterns, accommodation, income, expenditure, and student well-being. The latest survey in 2022, of approximately 21,000 students, established that '*The overall average monthly expenditure for all students was €1340. . .Accommodation is the largest single expenditure which accounts for 35 percent of all expenditure, and the average spend on accommodation was €469.*' [9] (p. 82). This figure of 35% is similar to the 32% reported in a separate study of Ireland's student grant scheme [10]. However, as neither of these reports provide institution-specific data, their reported average spend on accommodation may not be representative of that in the greater Dublin area, which MU is part of. For example, rental costs were highlighted by an online survey of

1886 students conducted by the Students' Union at University College Dublin (UCD) in November and December of 2023. They found that

> *There is a notable increase in the proportion of respondents paying €750 or more per month for accommodation during their time in college. Specifically, three-quarters of respondents who live away from home now incur this expense, compared to two-thirds when the survey was first conducted in 2021. This means that UCD students continue to pay for in excess of the national average (€469).* [11] (p. 5).

They go on to state that the cost of accommodation contributes to '*. . .a significant toll on students' mental health.*' [11] (p. 34).

The findings of these studies align with those in other countries. A comparison of all 25 countries where the Eurostudent survey was issued found that students spend an average of 37% of their monthly income on accommodation, with 26% of students spending 40% or more [12]. In the UK, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) reports provide a detailed breakdown of the accommodation situation across the UK [13,14]. Additional studies, for example, UNIPOL Student Homes and NUS [15] paint an equally grim picture regarding the affordability of student accommodation in the UK.

### 2.2. Lack of Accommodation

In Ireland, the HEA published a report on student accommodation demand and supply in 2015. Based on the then current and projected student accommodation needs, they stated that '*It is estimated that there is an unmet demand of about 25,000 bed spaces which has a significant impact on the private rental sector.*' [16] (p. 0). In response, the Irish Government published a National Student Accommodation Strategy [17], where they outlined their plans to construct 21,000 purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) bed spaces by 2024 over the baseline figure of 33,441 available at that time. While no primary sources report if this target has been met, secondary sources indicate that by 2024, 14,000 had been delivered with a further 2000 under construction [18]. At the time of writing, the 2025–2035 National Student Accommodation Strategy has not been published.

However, there are several criticisms associated with the construction of PBSAs, including the rental cost and an associated inflation of land values (and therefore, of wider residential prices and future student rental costs) [19]. Other research suggests that PBSAs perpetuate societal inequalities and force some students to choose higher education institutions (HEIs) closer to their home due to the unaffordability of PBSAs [20]. Also, it has been suggested that planning for the construction of PBSAs has not progressed with sufficient ambition nor with adequate pace at government level [11].

In summary, it is clear that in Ireland as a result of 'the shortage in the rental sector, unaffordable rents and increased competition for accommodation, students who cannot afford the high rents are being squeezed out.' [19] (p. 38). Even for students who may be in a position to afford rental fees, they need

> *...to make difficult choices about whether to live close to their campus but pay a premium for this, or to live further from campus in cheaper locations, or alternatively remain living in their family home and have lengthy commutes to their higher education institution.* [9] (p. 93).

While this problem is not unique to Ireland, it is difficult to find precise information on the situation internationally, outside of multiple speculative reports from property developers and investment funds. In the UK, the aforementioned HEPI reports also discuss a shortage of affordable student accommodation [13,14]. A comparative analysis of four types of student accommodation for international students indicates that, similar to Ireland and the UK, '*Australia faces significant challenges in providing affordable, accessible, and student-friendly housing. . .*' [21] (p. 11).

### 2.3. Day-to-Day Expenses

In Ireland, the primary means-tested financial support available to qualifying students in HE is the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant [1]. Similar funding bodies are available in Northern Ireland [22], England [23], Scotland [24], and Wales [25]. With regard to the SUSI grant, rates are determined by a variety of factors, for example, the distance the student's primary residence is from their HEI (adjacent or non-adjacent rates) [26]. As part of an independent review of this support, Indecon Economic Consultants [10] conducted a student survey in 2021 which received just over 9000 responses. Survey analysis determined that '. . .general financial difficulties were reported as being widespread across undergraduate (64%), postgraduate (65%) and FET [Further Education and Training] (58%) learners.' [10] (p. 44). They concluded that

> *The rate of grants for undergraduate students has been unchanged over the last number of years, though their cost of living has increased by 25%, at a time when cumulative inflation in the broader economy was just 3%. Most of this difference can be accounted for by increases in rent costs which are a larger share of students' expenditure.* [10] (p. 87).

Similar financial concerns were reported in the 2022 Irish Eurostudent survey, for example, '*When the expenditure for each group of students is compared against their income it is quickly evident that expenditure largely outstrips income.*' [9] (p. 85).

Research from the UK indicates that students there are experiencing similar issues. For example, a survey of 1512 students conducted in the second semester of 2022–23 by the Students' Union at Sheffield Hallam University found that '. . .*students are being hardest hit by food, energy, socialising, and rent. Those who are impacted by travel, however, are deeply impacted.*' [27] (p. 5). Similarly, Dabrowski et al. [28] report on an analysis of interviews with 16 students at Liverpool Hope University between October 2022 and November 2023. They focussed on strategies that students were employing to '*weather the storm*' during the cost-of-living crisis in the UK, and the following themes were identified: Making Do With Less; Staying Cold; Challenges of Transportation Costs; Working Hard Without Playing Hard; and Living With Money Anxiety. They concluded '. . .*that HE students represent one of the most vulnerable groups affected by the cost-of-living crisis.*' [28] (p. 10).

### 2.4. Impact of Commuting

A recent report by Thomas [29] explored how being a commuter impacted on student experiences and outcomes at Technological Universities in Ireland. They held focus groups with 27 students and six staff from across three Technological Universities. Commuting students described long journey times and poor public transport. These factors often meant leaving home early, returning late and '. . .*feeling tired, with less time to study and a negative impact on their wellbeing*.' [29] (p. 9). Students also discussed how commuting impacted their attendance at lectures, often arriving late to campus or needing to miss classes due to a lack of alignment between their university and transport timetables. Furthermore, students commented on how they struggled to find time to engage with the wider student experience in their HEI and having little to no university social life. Thomas describes inflexible university structures that do not accommodate commuting students. For example, compulsory attendance policies or class materials not being made available online for those that may miss lectures for valid reasons. Thomas suggests '. . .*compassion for commuter students, and the need for both organisational and cultural shifts to address these issues.*' [29] (p. 9).

Prior to the report by Thomas, information related to students commuting to HEIs in Ireland tends to appear in research on related topics. For example, in their report on a 2023 student survey ($n$ = 1886) on accommodation, UCD Students' Union observed that

> *For many, the lengthy commute translates into missed lectures, late arrivals, and reduced study time. The constant fatigue and exhaustion resulting from early morning starts and late-night returns further impede students' ability to focus on their studies and maintain a healthy work-life balance. Additionally, for some, a lack of suitable study spaces at home compounds these difficulties, leaving students feeling drained and demotivated.* [11] (p. 29).

An earlier study at UCD, in 2011, had investigated the reasons for first-year students exiting their programme, via 25 student interviews. The researchers reported that

> *Nearly three-quarters of respondents lived at home and most commuted two hours per day. This impacted on respondents' motivation to attend lectures, particularly when they had only one or two lectures per day that were spread between early morning and late afternoon.* [30] (p. 5).

Furthermore, they found that commuting impacted on student ability to socialise and make friends.

Research has identified that students who struggle to form peer support groups are at risk of dropping out [31]. The importance of such social interactions for students has again been highlighted in recent research by Brown and Pawley [32] at the Open University, who found that students valued inclusion in academic and social communities.

Internationally, the impact of commuting on the student experience has also been investigated. Thomas and Jones [33] considered commuting students in England, with the main qualitative data sourced from 60 interviews at nine universities. Similar to the aforementioned recent Irish study [29], they found that students referred to commuting as '*. . .tiring, expens*[ive] *and stressful, and many had not fully appreciated this before they became commuter students.*' [33] (p. 7). Inadequate availability of secure lockers to store equipment, and issues with poor public transport, traffic jams, and lack of available on-campus parking were identified as barriers to attendance. They found that commuting students prioritised academic engagement over wider university experiences and '*. . .it was widely acknowledged that a trip to the institution needs to be 'worthwhile', thus students are making value judgement*[s] *about the efficacy of attending taught session*[s].' [33] (p. 7). The authors also reported that students were critical of a lack of empathy from university staff towards students arriving late due to circumstances outside their control.

Further afield, students commuting to ten post-secondary institutions in the greater Toronto and Hamilton area in Canada were considered by Taylor and Mitra [34]. Based on their analysis of a student survey and a one-day travel diary, completed by 7889 individuals, they concluded

> *. . .that students consider their commute to be a barrier to campus participation and academic success, and that student commute satisfaction is strongly and positively associated with campus attendance, course selection, participation in extra and co-curricular activities, and perception of academic success.* [34] (p. 12).

Elsewhere, in a scoping review of research on the impact of geographical location on course choice, completion rates, and achievement in HE, Brownie et al. [35] (p. 107) found that '*The longer the distance students are required to travel, generally the poorer their academic achievement and program/course completion rates.*'

### *2.5. Impact of Working*

Unlike previous sections of the literature review, there is less agreement across research on the impact of employment on student attendance and performance in HE. For example, the latest Irish Eurostudent VIII survey reports that '*Of the total full-time student population, approximately 57 percent work during term-time (40 percent throughout the whole semester, and 17 percent who only work occasionally), and 43 percent do not work at all during term-time.*' [9]

(p. 107). They also state that '*The majority of students who are employed during term-time would like to devote more time to personal study (51 percent), and a large proportion would like to spend less time working (25 percent).*' [9] (p. 122). At the University of Galway, analysis of a survey of 180 Engineering and Informatics students established '*. . .that full-time students who work part/full time, are often motivated by financial necessity rather than a desire for experience or to develop future employability skills.*' [36] (p. 5). Among working students, themes of stress and depression were also identified, as well as strong negative correlations between employment and academic performance. These findings resonate with a study of 800 Psychology students at the Open University, which determined that the effect of working part-time resulted in students experiencing '*. . .time poverty to avoid financial poverty. . .*' [37] (p. 514).

However, not all studies agree. For example, a survey of 634 first-year and fourth-year nursing students at four HEIs in Ireland concluded that '*Overall, engaging paid term-time employment did not have a negative impact on students' engagement or their perceptions of college supports.*' [38] (p. 14). Similarly, at the University of Alicante, an analysis of data from a survey of 464 students, along with university records, found that while students often associate working with having a negative impact on their academic performance, their results suggested that '*. . .in contrast to students' own perceptions, working habitually does not have a significant impact on academic outcomes.*' [39] (p. 299).

The complexity of the situation is captured in a systematic review that contained 5 papers with no negative connections between working and academic performance, 3 had only positive connections, 11 had only negative connections, and 15 found both positive and negative connections [40].

### *2.6. The Student Experience, Attendance, and Performance*

Links between the student experience and attendance have been established in previous research. For example, Menendez Alvarez-Hevia et al. [41] studied student non-attendance at taught sessions using qualitative data collected from 6 staff and 46 education students. They identified a tension between the compulsory aspects of university, such as attending lectures or assignment submission, and the students' lived experiences, including family, jobs, finances, and relationships. They suggest that '*Absenteeism is in many cases the materialisation of the struggle of some students to find a balance between personal life and university life.*' [41] (p. 1071). Similarly, using focus group data from 36 psychology students, Oldfield, et al. [42] also explored the reasons for non-attendance at university teaching sessions. They concluded that '*Students' feelings towards their attendance have been reflected in their sense of belonging, their views of the teaching and the fees they are paying, as well as their external pressures.*' [42] (p. 8). Facilitating a sense of belonging has been advocated by others, including Tinto [43], who emphasises the role of positive social networks and peer interaction in supporting student engagement and persistence.

Given that the student experience impacts on attendance, it is therefore important to consider whether attendance, in turn, is associated with student performance. Again, this has been extensively studied. For example, in a clinical pharmacology and therapeutics module, Irwin et al. [44] found a statistically significant correlation between attendance and exam performance, with student failures linked to attendance rates under 80% in 9 out of 12 cases. Similarly, in a class of electrical engineering students O'Dwyer [45] found that a 10% increase in student attendance at lectures resulted in a 3% improvement in examination performance. Taken together, the literature suggests a sequential relationship in which the student experience of university influences attendance, which in turn impacts on student performance.

## 3. Methodology

It was decided to adopt a mixed methods design, as outlined by Lodico et al. [46], in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously within a single survey. While a purely quantitative study would measure the impact of cost of living, commuting, and working on student attendance, it would not elucidate the specific barriers to attendance, and therefore capturing the students' voices through a qualitative component was deemed essential. Although collected concurrently, due to the breadth and richness of the dataset, in this first paper we will concentrate on the analysis of the qualitative responses. Analysis of remaining data will be presented in subsequent work.

The survey was comprehensive in scope. Questions sought to gather information on student attendance and engagement with lectures, tutorials, assignments, and the MSC. This was followed by questions regarding their financial situation, accommodation arrangements during term-time, commuting, and working. Students were also given the option to indicate their permission to allow the researchers access and use of their departmental records (tutorial and MSC attendance records, assignment results, midterm results, and final exam grades) in this study. The development of questions in the survey was informed by a review of previous studies (for example Kirby and Mc Elroy [47]), stake holders in our department (lecturers and tutors), and our own experiences as established education researchers. The survey was placed on Jisc Online Surveys, which automatically routed the students through the survey depending on the answers they provided to the questions. To test the readability and functionality of the routing, six second-year students and six tutors volunteered to test a pilot of the survey. Based on their feedback, minor changes were made, mostly correcting spelling errors and wording of questions.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the MU ethics committee. We choose to launch the survey at the start of week 3 of semester 2 on Monday 17th of February and it remained open until Wednesday the 5th of March 2025. This timing was chosen to allow students to accustom themselves to their new modules in semester 2 while still being early enough for their recollection of semester 1 to still be fresh in their minds. It also helped avoid survey fatigue that often accompanies end-of-module evaluations. The survey was placed on the Moodle pages of the four first-year service mathematics classes and publicised via in-class announcements and reminders on the message boards in Moodle. Additionally, the lecturer for the largest service mathematics module surrendered one of his lectures to facilitate students completing the survey in-class, if they wished to. Following this process, we received 415 responses to our survey. This corresponds to a response rate of 37%, which is slightly below the 44% average reported in a meta-analysis of response rates of online education surveys [48].

The data was downloaded from Jisc Online Surveys and imported into Microsoft Excel. The authors both have more than a decade's experience of teaching, supporting, and advocating for students in HE, and thus, a reflective thematic analysis approach [49] was utilised to inductively identify themes across the entirety of the data. Employing an iterative process, the open responses were read and re-read multiple times by each author to ensure a deep familiarity with the content. Initial codes were individually developed, and following several meetings, these codes were reviewed, combined, and refined, allowing for the development of meaningful patterns grounded in the researchers' interpretive engagement with the data.

The authors acknowledge the possibility of non-response bias in this study. Students most affected by the issues under investigation (cost of living, commuting, working) may have been less likely to participate. This could be due to being absent from lectures when the survey was promoted or from a lack of available time, both of which are consequences

of the very factors being studied. To mitigate this risk, several reminders were issued, and the survey was made accessible online to allow its completion at their convenience.

## 4. Results

Four hundred and fifteen first-year students completed the survey, and they identified themselves as: 42% (174) male, 56% (231) female, 1% (5) non-binary, and 1% (5) preferred not to say. In this section, we present the results of our reflective thematic analysis of their answers to the open response questions across the entire survey. No gender specific trends were identified in the analysis.

Following the method outlined in Section 4, the following five themes were developed: financial burdens, poor infrastructure, time poor, decisions, and missing out.

### *4.1. Financial Burdens*

It was clear from student responses that their financial situation represented a significant cause for concern. It impacted on every aspect of their lives, and many commented on the corresponding mental stress, both on them and their family. For example: '*I was constantly stressed about the tuition fees. I was always looking for a way to help my parents with this matter.*' (R75) and '*I have a twin so we both going to university but at different places so the cost was very expensive for my parents and since they both work* [we] *got no grants but money was very tight for us and caused a lot of stress.*' (R174). Financial concerns appeared to be especially impactful on more vulnerable families: '*I come from a single-income house of a mother who supports 3 children. The extra expenses put forth a major stress factor within the household.*' (R377).

This financial stress clearly negatively impacted on the student experience: '*I believe my financial situation led to extra stress on top of normal university stress which led to my insomnia which affected my attendance and performance.*' (R417) Some went to considerable lengths to try to alleviate their money problems:

> *To put it bluntly I was the only person in my family making money and it started to take a toll on me. I started trading crypto as a way to make money because I would go broke by the end of the month if I didn't. It was just a lot of unnecessary stress and took my focus away from what I really wanted to do.* (R152)

Students also referred to establishing rigid budgets which, while helping them to overcome the financial anxiety they experienced in relation to their costs of living, negatively impacted on their university experience and also revealed cases of food insecurity:

> *I had many anxiety attacks and it caused me to try outline everything I might expect in a week (food, transport, etc) in an excel sheet. I put the cheapest prices for everything, unwilling to take more money than necessary and this caused me to do things such as eating one chocolate bar for a 9 am–6 pm day without anything else because I didn't want to spend more. . . . always checking prices and unwilling to spend on things I needed (food, pens, notebooks,* etc.*) . . . it made me not want to go to events, soc events, personal events,* etc. *which I feel like negatively impacted my social life as well as my ability to focus during lectures.* (R374)

Given that 77.1% (320/415) of survey respondents identified themselves as commuters, it is unsurprising that the costs associated with commuting were an added complicating factor that many could not avoid:

> *From a family with very little income, the cost of commuting had to be carefully budgeted to make sure our bills were paid and we had groceries. There was a time I had to miss a day of lectures because I couldn't buy my bus ticket, having to wait until one of my parents got paid. Accommodation was something never even considered as the cost was just too high.* (R100)

In their attempts to deal with these financial challenges, students turned to a range of sources, with financial support from parents and or guardians being frequently mentioned. For some, this provided an extra incentive for them to succeed: '*Due to my parents paying for my tuition I did not want to fail the year so they didn't have to pay for me to repeat, this motivated me to study, attend lectures and to do assignments.*' (R256). For others, this financial commitment weighed heavily on their minds: '*I'm lucky to have my parents financially support me educationally but I feel guilty for them paying so much.*' (R115), though this was not true for all students.

Approximately half the respondents indicated that they had worked part-time during semester 1 to help cope with the financial costs of university. The majority of these worked only at the weekend: '*It made it more tiring as I am in college 5 days a week as well as having to study and work 18–20 h on the weekend not getting a break which made semester 1 mentally exhausting*.' (R40). The necessity to work, for a variety of reasons, clearly impacted on their university experience:

> *I have to fund my commute, food and college expenses (books, tuition* etc.*) My parents help me but I need to pay them back so I have to save while in college as well. It's hard to make friends because after class I need to leave to go home I can't stick around. It makes it hard to study because my free time is then used for assignments.* (R109)

In this survey 41.9% (174/415) of respondents indicated that they were in receipt of a SUSI grant and, in their comments, they referred to it as an invaluable lifeline. However, for many, the grant did not cover all their expenses, and they needed to use a combination of sources to overcome the financial challenges that they faced:

> *. . .I was also granted money from SUSI for my fees which was a huge help as I didn't have to worry about doing it on my own. However, I work part time and had to pay for all of the other costs that come with doing a science degree e.g lab costs, lab coat, goggles etc which at the beginning of semester 1 was a worry for me. My cost of commuting was covered by the child benefit* [child benefit is a non-means-tested social benefit provided by the state] *that my parents received. . .* (R138).

### *4.2. Poor Infrastructure*

This theme refers to student accommodation issues, deficiencies in the national transport systems (referring mainly to trains, and public and private buses), and insufficient parking facilities on campus.

The shortage and/or unaffordability of student accommodation was clearly a major issue:

> *I started looking for accommodation in the spring of 2024, starting with digs* [a student normally rents a room from a local family, with meals provided] *and shared accommodations as well as asking friends in other years if they could find me somewhere. Most digs were too expensive to stay in and I had no luck in any of the affordable places.* (R168).

Furthermore, student comments often revealed the challenges they faced in terms of the quality of accommodation available:

> *The offers for accommodation around here are either pay 800 euros a month to live in somebody's wardrobe or win the lottery with on-campus accommodation and still pay about 6/7 grand a year to live in a* (censored) *building with about 6 other students where walls are cracked or have holes in them, window blinds are ripped, there are about 50 different horror stories of mould or damp in the rooms. Genuinely insane.* (R228)

These issues with accommodation in Maynooth forced many students to commute. Irrespective of which modes of transport were available to students, they reported considerable challenges which impacted on their attendance. For some, it was the frequency and capacity of the service: '*Due to only two timetabled bus times home in evenings..., I must ensure I have nothing timetabled at 5 pm as the buses can be quite full, and if any delay, I could miss the final bus at 6 pm.*' (R349). For many, this '*. . .led to less time to socialise with friends and also more difficulty studying . . . and would benefit from more time in the evenings to use the university library.*' (R231). Some referred to missing class(es) altogether: '*I was constantly late. The bus is always late and there's a lot of traffic in the morning and evenings. Because the bus is every hour I missed my maths midterm.*' (R300). For others, even if frequent services were scheduled, they could not be relied on: '*There would've been times where the train that I commuted with was late or cancelled and I wouldn't be able to make it for that lecture but I would for the next. This did include the 9 am math lectures.*' (R220). Furthermore, depending on where students lived, there were often little or no direct transport services to MU: '*It makes it so awful, can we please make a bus that goes from Straffan to Maynooth. Why do I live a 20 min drive away but an hour and 40 min on the bus. ITS SO STUPID.*' (R33). Where students drove to campus, in addition to the problem of traffic congestion, they felt that on-campus parking facilities were inadequate:

> *Commuting to college by car was difficult as finding parking on campus is very hard between 10 am–4 pm so I would be driving in circles for at least 20 min looking for parking, it made me not want to come in.* (R169)

### *4.3. Time Poor*

This theme captures student responses which paint a picture of long days and weeks due to their various commitments. This theme was particularly prevalent amongst comments from commuting students:

> *. . .unable to study until the weekend as I would wake up at 6 am to go to college and get home at 8 pm and go straight to sleep due to the long day. It negatively affected my mood in my personal life and academic life. Being a commuter has turned college from something I was excited about to something I started to dread in first semester.* (R31)

These students continuously struggled to navigate a path between studying, socialising, personal time, and their daily travel. There was also evidence of student exhaustion and burnout, for example, commuting '*. . .drives me insane because it drains me of any energy I would have had to study or go to the gym or literally anything. I just fall in the door and flop into bed.*' (R66). Poor infrastructure, mentioned earlier, compounded this issue for many students:

> *I have to wake up at 5 o clock every morning to get a bus into town* [Dublin city] *then another bus to Maynooth. . .. It definitely negatively impacts my ability to learn, especially since lectures can go on till 5 pm, making me mentally and physically tired near that time. Then I have to take the bus back home and repeat the process all over again the next day.* (R218)

Students referred to commuting as a waste of time. While some tried to reclaim this time by attempting to study during their commute, in almost all cases, it did not seem to be particularly effective.

Workers, comprising 49.6% (206/415) of respondents, also reported significant challenges juggling their commitments:

> *I had to work as much as possible in order to pay for course fees and accommodation. I had barely any time at the weekends when I was home to see family or friends, I was*

> *wrecked from having to wake up at 6 on Saturdays and Sundays to get to work. Had to try fit in time to visit my grandparents, driving lessons, hobbies, assignments, study,* etc. *and that time just wasn't there.* (R201)

Workers repeatedly referred to their fatigue and lack of free time, and for those who worked during the week and at the weekend, the situation appears to be particularly challenging: '*Working late after college and all weekend is so so tough, it would lead to a constant burnout, only getting home at 12 am and then up for college the next morning.*' (R229). Similarly, comments from students who were both working and commuting often revealed how little time they had for anything else:

> *I needed to work in order to afford to commute and pay my phone bill to use moodle in college but this left me very little time to do assignments let alone study and I had/have zero social life aside from talking to my friends in between lectures* (R256).

### *4.4. Decisions*

Across student responses, it was very clear that many were forced to make difficult decisions, shaped by limited financial resources, long commutes, and work obligations, as they struggled to fulfil their academic commitments.

Students reported that they chose to skip classes and/or the MSC due to their commute. On days with fewer classes, some did not make the commute for financial reasons: '*Equipment and food costs would also mean I may miss a day where I would have only 1 lecture in order to save enough money for the next week.*' (R65). Others felt the effort of travelling was simply not worth it: '*If I had 1 or 2 lectures a day I wouldn't travel all the way up because it's pointless so I ask my friend to send the notes.*' (R87). Students also reported that large gaps in their timetables were a deterrent to attending: '*I missed a couple of lectures. If I had one lecture at nine am I would have to get a bus at 8:15 and then wait till 3 pm to get a bus home, I would not attend this lecture.*' (R94).

Commuters also reported that they often decided to leave campus early: '*Knowing even after being in college from 9–6 you still have a long commute home makes you more likely to want to leave early or not attend a tutorial or support centre* etc.' (R162). For others, there was no choice but to skip classes: '*My tutorial time would make me miss the last bus, and no other tutorial times were available for me.*' (R78).

As discussed earlier, many students had decided to get part-time jobs to ease the financial burden of attending college. Most of these worked later in the week and/or at the weekends and reported that this principally impacted on their attendance at the MSC and on their study. For the small number of students working during the college week, this also impacted on their scheduled classes: '*I start work at 6 so I'd have to leave college around 2/3 to make it in time for my shift. This made me miss lectures.*' (R300). Students also reported that on occasion, they had to decide between their working obligations and their coursework.

Some students faced food poverty, forcing them to make difficult choices about whether they could afford to eat, limiting how much they ate, and sometimes skipping meals altogether:

> *I prepared more food for days I believed I'd need more energy from and ate less on less heavy days. At times I would not eat lunch in between lectures as I would push through and save the food for dinner later.* (R53)

Some students were forced to divert money earmarked for buying food to service other priorities:

> *I often found myself cutting budget for food and other expenses to achieve the funds for commuting, As I commute I have to put aside a significant amount of money for travel costs, and my phone plan, to contact family if any issues with transport occurred. I also*

> *struggle with some significant health issues, paying for medication also impacted my funds to spend on food or other expenses outside of university. (R137)*

### 4.5. Missing Out

Throughout the earlier themes we have seen some indication of how financial burdens, poor infrastructure, time poverty, and decisions, impacted on students' ability to attend and fully participate in university life. The theme of students missing out, both academically and socially, is evident in the analysis of the data as a whole.

From an academic perspective, despite their best efforts, and often due to circumstances beyond their control, sometimes students were unable to attend class. This meant that for those affected, they were not having the same educational experience as their peers:

> *The expenses of attending college was a constant reason as to why I would not take part in many experiences. The price of commuting meant I had to be on campus and leave campus at certain times so I could not be there earlier or later for . . ., certain lectures and different events.* (R65)

Many students reported that lecture notes were not available online for some modules, which further hindered them staying abreast of class material: '*The notes not being online was not helpful, especially with so many early morning lectures for commuting when you weren't trying to miss the lecture or if you were sick it was frustrating.*' (R398). For commuters and workers, even when they did attend class, many reported that they were so tired, that they struggled to pay attention.

From a social perspective, students discussed how they missed out on joining clubs and societies, or indeed, on socialising in general:

> *My financial situation inhibited how much I would join groups and societies as they would go out after college and have food or go to the pub but if I did my savings plan would be changed for that week after.* (R198)

Getting home late from university was also mentioned as a barrier to participation. '*I was unable to join any clubs or societies as they were mainly on during the evenings and if I stayed any later than 6, I wouldn't be home until closer to 9.*' (R71). Furthermore, a shortage of time also prevented those working from availing of social opportunities:

> *I couldn't join any clubs or socs that had extracurricular activities as I didn't have time with work and assignments/study. I worried that I may not be able to continue my studies because I couldn't afford it, and that took some of the joy out of my studies and learning/college experience.* (R395)

As a result of the students' inability to attend clubs and society events, or indeed more impromptu social occasions, many students missed out on the typical organic opportunities to make friends and form peer support networks. For some, this was due to guilt associated with spending money provided by parents or, more broadly, due to their precarious financial situation:

> *The price of student fees, college fees, accommodation, etc were constantly hanging over and due to my parents having to pay I felt obligated to study and my social life has suffered and due to that I have not really made any friends and I'm very isolated.* (R413)

Making friends and forming social groups was also difficult for commuters due to their unavailability in the evenings:

> *I wasn't able to stay and do any of the activities during the evening. . . This impacted my ability to make friends and I felt very lonely the first few weeks which made me consider dropping out.* (R147)

Similarly, forging friendships was difficult for those with jobs, as they too were often unavailable in the evening due to work commitments.

## 5. Discussion

In this study, we set out to examine how the cost of living, commuting, and working influence students' ability to attend university. The five main themes developed in the results reveal a complex interplay among these factors, which combine to create barriers to both academic and social participation in HE.

Prevalent amongst responses in this survey was the theme of 'financial burdens', with students' financial situation being a constant distraction in their lives. Their stories of economic hardship resonate with the findings of both the 2022 Irish Eurostudent survey [9] and the Review of the Student Grant Scheme [10]. Within this theme, the mental stress that these financial burdens placed on both the students and their families was readily apparent. Unfortunately, this issue was also identified in other Irish HEIs, for example, UCD Student's Union found that '*Feelings of exhaustion, guilt over financial dependence, and the constant stress of managing finances permeate the daily lives of UCD students*' [11] (p. 32). Furthermore, international research related to the student experience has identified negative connections between these emotions and student engagement and success [50].

For many of the 41.9% of respondents who received a SUSI grant, it was a vital financial lifeline. However, most of these students made it clear that on its own, it is not sufficient to cover all costs associated with attending university. This agrees with a national study of the SUSI grant which states that '*Grant recipients are more likely than non-recipients to need additional support through the Student Assistance Fund, with 18% . . . of undergraduates . . . who receive a grant also being supported by the Student Assistance Fund.*' [10] (p. 13). The importance of supplementary incomes, such as the Student Assistance Fund, '*. . .is perceived by both applicants and institutions to be a very valuable mechanism in providing additional funding to students who might otherwise be forced to terminate their participation in higher education.*' [51] (p. 53). Furthermore, in our study 50% (87/174) of SUSI grant holders augmented their income through part-time employment.

Overall, almost half of all respondents indicated that they were working during term-time, which is consistent with the proportion reported in the Eurostudent VIII survey [9]. However, similar to what was reported in Brennan and Dempsey [36], it was obvious from student comments that most were working as a response to their 'financial burdens' rather than for career development. Furthermore, we found that some students were often driven to extremes to try to alleviate these 'financial burdens'. There was evidence of strict budgeting which resulted in students limiting what they ate, not having coffee with friends, and deciding not to commute at all on certain days, all to minimise expenditure. It is clear that, due to their 'financial burdens', these students are in an extremely precarious situation, which is consistent with recent findings in the UK [27,28].

Also predominant across student responses were their frustrations about 'poor infrastructure', namely the shortage and unaffordability of student housing and the transport options available to them. For many, accommodation away from their family was never an option due to the costs, others described the poor condition of accommodation available. Students also outlined the sustained efforts they made to secure accommodation, but for these respondents this effort was often in vain. In particular, students referred to the difficulty of securing on-campus accommodation. Accommodation is in very high demand and students are often priced out of the market. This, combined with the relatively low number of PBSAs available, forced large numbers of respondents to commute (for the 2025–26 academic year, MU had 1262 accommodation spaces for a student population of over 16,000).

The accommodation crisis for HE students in Ireland has been widely reported but there is increasing frustration that, from government and universities authorities, '*. . . the sense of urgency simply has not been present and our rallying cry for radical action in our report published last year, along with other student representatives across the country, has ultimately been ignored.*' [11] (p. 8). Student bodies have called for the building of state-owned PBSAs because affordability can be enforced by the government and assert that '*PBSA is the only long-term solution to the student living crisis and must be outlined as such.*' [18] (p. 10). The targets in the National Student Accommodation Strategy [17] were not reached, and based on this study and other reports, they were not ambitious enough to solve the student housing crisis. A new strategy, due to be published in 2025, will require significant investment to improve the current situation.

Unlike the challenges that students faced in the sourcing of suitable accommodation, which were typically confined to certain times of year, it was clear from the survey responses that students who commuted experienced significant issues on an almost daily basis. Our findings confirm that students were often severely restricted by the limited scheduled availability of transport, forcing them to either arrive late or leave campus earlier than they would ideally choose. Other students reported having further extended journeys due to a lack of direct transport link.

To further exacerbate the problem, students referred to the unreliability of services, with buses or trains frequently arriving late, if at all, which resulted in students being late or missing classes altogether. Our findings are consistent with a wider dissatisfaction reported across Ireland with public and private transport systems. Studies repeatedly refer to issues such as lack of punctuality and traffic congestion [52]. For many students in our study, it was clear that their ongoing frustration with their transport options was not just from a punctuality perspective but also because delays and uncertainty were also contributing to their stress levels which, for many, were already heightened due to their financial circumstances. This echoes the findings in other research; for example, in a study examining commuting in Dublin, Cantwell et al. [53] (p. 18) concluded that '*High stress levels are also more prolific among respondents who commute using unreliable public transport services, most likely induced by a lack of control over the situation.*'.

In an attempt to avoid these issues, similar to other international studies, some respondents indicated that '*. . .they had resorted to considering private cars as their best solution. . .*' [54] (p. 11). While this appears to have ameliorated many of the transport problems previously mentioned, traffic congestion remained a major challenge. Furthermore, respondents who drove to MU voiced their irritation with the lack of parking on campus, with some indicating that it negatively impacted on their motivation to attend at all.

For a large number of respondents, the knock-on effects of their financial situation and dealing with poor infrastructure resulted in them being 'time poor'. The cumulative effect of rising early in the morning, followed by a long commute and a full day of academic activities significantly contributed to their fatigue and disengagement. For those also working part-time jobs, typically at the weekend, this further heightened their exhaustion and reduced their availability, leaving little or no opportunities for studying, relaxation, or socialising. Although some students tried to recoup time by studying on their commute, in almost all cases, this was unproductive. These findings strike parallels with recent research conducted in Ireland and the UK [11,55]. Research in this area suggests that there is a lack of awareness and/or acknowledgement from university leadership of the realities of the lived student experience and the significant time pressures that they are under. For example, '*. . . discussion on attendance and tiredness point to important organisational issues within HEIs.*' [29] (p. 47). Thus, it seems that students are '*. . . caught between the ambitions*

*and expectations of an education system . . . without the requisite and adequate supports, . . . [that] expects them to sink or swim. . .'* [56] (p. 145).

From our analysis of student responses, it was clear that the 'decisions' they were forced into, due to their circumstances, often had a profound negative impact on their educational experience. For example, many found in-person attendance sometimes difficult to justify for a variety of reasons including limited transport options, a clash with work, to save money, to save time, or simply to get some rest. Some students, when faced with a choice between paid employment and completing assignments, felt compelled to prioritise work as they needed the money due to their financial situation. This is consistent with research in the UK which concluded that the participants in their study '*. . .made value judgements about what to attend and engage with. . .*' [57] (p. 1149).

A concerning number of respondents referred to decisions they made in relation to rationing food or diverting funds intended for food to other priorities such as commuting; for example, students reported skipping meals or eating chocolate in lieu of a nutritious meal. While none of these respondents linked their food insecurity to their academic performance, other research has found that:

> *. . .the majority of students . . . had adverse academic experiences because of food insecurity, severely food insecure students had more adverse experiences, including not being able to concentrate in class or during an exam, or failing or withdrawing from a course.* [58] (p. 5).

Finally, the results of this study provide vivid accounts of students 'missing out' on their university experience both academically and socially as a consequence of the earlier four themes. Academically, many students reported having to miss lectures and tutorials, and that they were unavailable to attend the MSC or unable to conduct independent study due to their circumstances. Furthermore, similar to other research [29], students voiced their deep frustration about the unavailability of online materials provided by lecturers, highlighting, in particular, the lack of online lecture notes allowing them to catch up. These student comments allude to the ongoing debate on the best mix between online and in-person teaching and support [2,59]. Hyland and O'Shea [60] offer a balanced narrative on the provision of digital resources and add that '*It is crucial that insights from students are heard and incorporated into the delivery and assessment of mathematics moving forward.*' [60] (p. 473).

The results of this survey also highlight students 'missing out' socially due to their inability to experience extra-curricular activities associated with attending university. Respondents indicated that this, in turn, limited opportunities to make friends and form social support groups. Some students stated that they could not afford simple activities such as going for coffee or lunch with peers. Others commented on how they did not join any clubs or societies as they felt they could not afford the associated activities. For commuters, either due to the length of their commute or the unavailability of transport options, they too felt they could not participate in clubs or societies as many events take place in the evening. Those who worked during the week also missed out due to prioritising work over social activities. An abundance of international literature focussing on the student university experience has highlighted the importance of peer support and the student need for a sense of belonging both to the institution and to social groups [43,50]. Research at University College Cork (UCC), found that '*Anxiety about making new friends in unfamiliar surroundings predominated in students' accounts of the transition and their early weeks at university.*' [61] (p. 10). A study at the University of Brighton suggests that equal emphasis should be allocated to integrating students both socially and academically to university. They discuss that '*Emotional support from friends provides a sense of belonging and can also help students when they face problems.*' [62] (p. 718). Furthermore, in our study, when describing missing out, respondents referred to their difficulties in making friends, their experiences of

loneliness, and how this caused them to consider dropping out. Again, this is consistent with other research which states '*. . .that the presence or lack of social support networks and supportive interactions is a major factor for students in deciding whether to stay or leave.*' [62] (p. 720).

## 6. Conclusions

Student non-attendance in HE has long been a point of concern for educators and policy-makers. The results of this survey add weight to these concerns and, in addressing our first research question, clearly demonstrate that the cost of living, commuting, and, to a lesser extent, working, was impacting respondent attendance at MU. Our second research question sought to identify how these factors were impacting on student attendance. Our reflective thematic analysis developed five themes, 'financial burdens', 'poor infrastructure', 'time poor', 'decisions', and 'missing out'. It was readily apparent from this analysis that the first two themes were most dominant, and the fact that their impact was evident throughout the remaining themes highlights the complexity of the circumstances that students found themselves in.

For at least the last decade in Ireland, researchers have repeatedly called for a nation-wide co-ordinated approach to tackle the systemic challenges facing students in HE, such as financial support and the availability of affordable accommodation including PBSAs. Our findings reinforce the urgent demands for '*. . .root-and-branch reform in the funding of higher education, . . . financial support of students,* [and in] *housing policy... These are all matters for national policy, and must be addressed by the government, not left to be tackled by the isolated student.*' [56] (p. 145). These issues extend beyond Ireland. For example, in the UK, recent research has highlighted, not for the first time, the urgency of the situation, advocating for '*Targeted and immediate government reforms are therefore essential in alleviating student hardship triggered by the cost-of-living crisis.*' [28] (p. 9).

At local level, in the short to medium term, effective interventions are possible. For example, our findings reinforce previous recommendations that institutions recognise commuting and/or working as necessities rather than choices for many students [11,36], and that

> *. . .organization, design and pedagogy could support students to use their time more wisely by reducing the need for unnecessary travel, increasingly the value of time spent on campus, and facilitating wider student engagement* [57] (p. 1148).

Respondents to our survey referred to being demotivated to attend campus due to the challenges of getting to early lectures on time, having long periods between classes, and having certain days with very few scheduled classes. Based on this, it would seem prudent that given the high number of commuting students, institutions give careful consideration to restructuring the student timetable and engaging with transport providers to improve the availability, scheduling and frequency of services.

While Thomas [29] offers practical recommendations for institutions on how to better support commuting students, these approaches are not solely the remit of university authorities and need '*. . . to be underpinned by the development of staff understanding of, and attitudes towards, commuter students. . .*' [57] (p. 1148). The main recommendation from respondents to our survey on how their situation could be improved was the provision of online lecture notes to assist with their learning. While there is a documented reluctance [2] from teaching staff towards the provision of online materials, in light of our findings, there is a significant danger in attendance figures continuing to fall and, therefore, students may turn to uncurated online alternatives, such as generative AI, if notes and resources are not provided [63]. While local investigations of student use of these online alternatives is ongoing, the use of these resources may not merely reflect student preferences but could also indicate a symptom of the position commuters and/or workers may find themselves in, and

highlight deficiencies in the support structures and policies identified previously [29,56,57]. Research has established a concern that these technologies bring with them a host of pedagogical and ethical uncertainties, particularly around assessment integrity, fairness, and transparency [64], and therefore inaction around these issues is ill-advised as they directly impact student retention [30].

While some recent studies have looked at specific aspects of the challenges facing students in HE in Ireland [11,29], to the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to simultaneously consider the effects of costs of living, commuting, and working on university students. Our findings elucidate how these factors intersect and impact on student attendance at Maynooth University. To better situate these results within the larger national and international context, we advocate that similar research be carried out at other institutions and across other academic disciplines. By using a suitable framework— for example, Kahu and Nelson [50]—it would be interesting to also explore how the themes developed in this study impact the broader on-campus and in-class student experience. The next step in this research project is to quantify the cumulative impact of the barriers identified in this paper by investigating potential links between student attendance, performance, and retention. Approximately 75% of respondents provided their consent for the collation or their survey feedback with their departmental records (tutorial and MSC attendance records, assignment results, midterm results, and final exam grades) from semester 1, 2024–25. The authors' expectation, based on the findings from this first part of the study, is that the next stage should provide further evidence '*. . .of the links between student non-completion and other public policies including the operation of the student grants system and transportation planning.*' [65] (p. 9).

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

| | |
|---|---|
| MSC | Mathematics Support Centre |
| MU | Maynooth University |
| HEA | Higher Education Authority |
| HE | Higher education |
| UCD | University College Dublin |
| HEPI | Higher Education Policy Institute |
| PBSA | Purpose-built student accommodation |

| | |
|---|---|
| HEI | Higher education institution |
| SUSI | Student Universal Support Ireland |
| UCC | University College Cork |

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