Present Yet Distant: Institutional Belonging among Commuter Students at a Southern African University

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ABSTRACT

Commuter students have long been a point of concern for many universities. Current research has bridged the gap between on-campus and off-campus student experiences. However, their subjective experiences of how commuter students actually develop a sense of belonging compared to on-campus students remain underexplored. Belonging serves as a safeguard against feelings of isolation, depression, and attrition among students. This study aimed to investigate commuter students' lived experiences and how they foster belonging. It adopted a constructivist paradigm and a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand these experiences through four existential guides: spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with undergraduate commuter students at a public university and analysed using thematic analysis. The number of participants in the interview was determined by data saturation. Findings were that commuting is not only a logistical reality but an existential condition shaping experiences across space, body, time and relationships. Belonging is negotiated through transient campus spaces, embodied exhaustion due to transit, and relational dynamics between home and campus. The study concludes that commuting is both a barrier and a pathway to belonging and that by addressing spatial, corporeal, temporal, and relational challenges, institutions can transform commuter experiences from marginalisation to meaningful inclusion. Investigating the lived experiences of commuter students' sense of belonging creates a platform where commuter students' voices are heard and can be used to inform policy and practice. Without conducting this study, opportunities and challenges in commuter students' subjective experiences of institutional belonging would have remained underexplored.

Keywords: Institutional Belonging, Commuter Students, Lived Experiences, Social Innovation, Student Support, Off-Campus Students, Higher Education

BACKGROUND

Commuter students are a concern for many universities. According to Tett et al. (2025), off-campus students often feel they don't fit in at university. This feeling can negatively affect their sense of belonging, which is linked to emotional wellbeing, academic motivation, and progress in higher education. This study aimed to explore the differences in experiences between commuter students and on-campus students, focusing on how commuter students build a sense of belonging. This aspect has not been well studied in Zambian higher education institutions.

Many universities enrol more students than they can accommodate on campus. As a result, a significant number of students have to live off campus. Matipa and Nkhata (2019) discuss how the lack of accommodation at one of Zambia's public universities greatly affects student performance. On-campus students benefit from being closer to classrooms, easier access to libraries, campus internet, social interaction with peers, and sports facilities. In contrast, commuter students often miss out on these advantages. This situation led to the need to explore how commuter students feel a sense of belonging at universities that seem to favour those who live on campus.

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A sense of belonging is a basic need that everyone wants to fulfil (Allen et al., 2021). It refers to the emotional connection people feel with social groups and physical places, as well as shared experiences with others. This connection can help predict various outcomes related to mental health, physical health, social interactions, finances, and behaviour (Allen et al., 2021).

Other scholars agree that a sense or feeling of belonging involves three main parts (Tett et al., 2025). These parts include social connections, location, and politics. Social connections relate to feelings of familiarity, emotional ties, and having a safe and welcoming social environment. Location refers to physical aspects such as campus housing and the surrounding environment, and the political dimension is about how students view themselves in relation to the community they are part of.

The literature explored above shows that students living off campus may feel they have fewer advantages than those who live close to campus. This can lead to feelings of not belonging, which affects their overall student experience. Further, a gap in understanding how commuter students develop a sense of belonging based on lived experiences compared to those who live on campus has been established, and this aspect has not been explored much in Zambian higher education institutions. Feeling a sense of belonging can help protect students from isolation, depression, and dropping out. This study aimed to look into the lived experiences of commuter students and how they create a sense of belonging.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a constructivist approach where knowledge is built together by the researcher and participants. This process is influenced by context and how people make meaning of their experiences. It focused on understanding lived experiences, using a method that prioritises interpretation over description. This approach values depth and self-reflection to understand the experiences of commuter students.

To explore the essence of lived experiences, the study followed Van Manen's four guiding themes during interviews: spatiality (the space people live in), corporeality (the body), temporality (the time), and relationality (human relationships) (Mwanza, 2025).

A total of 14 participants were interviewed, and the sample size was based on when no new information was emerging, or data saturation. Participants were chosen through typical case purposive sampling for the first case and snowballing for successive participants. Typical case purposive sampling was used to select a participant who would illustrate typical, normal or average commuter students' experiences.

The participants were recruited based on being commuter students enrolled in the university for not less than a semester, commuting daily to and from campus. They were available to participate in the interview and to give consent. They were also to be comfortable expressing themselves in the interview about their experiences.

Data analysis involved looking for themes in the recorded in-depth interviews with undergraduate commuter students at a public university (Nyimbili and Tembo, 2021).

Findings

The Participants Demographic Profiles

Total Participants	Sex	Year of study
14	6 females & 8 males	• First year had 2 participants. • Second year had 7 participants. • Third year had 2 participants. • Fourth year had 3participants.

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Van Manen's four life worlds existential framework guided the conversations and interpretation of the lived experience of commuter students. Therefore, the findings are presented under each life world and the themes that emerged. The four life worlds are: spatiality (the space people live in), corporeality (the body), temporality (the time), and relationality (human relationships) (Mwanza, 2024).

1. Spatiality (the space people live in)

The findings indicated that commuter students create a sense of belonging through selected spaces, but also indicated that alienation from the institution is felt when the geographical areas start to limit access or become unsafe for them. Some of the areas that commuter students noted as adding to the sense of belonging to an institution were places like open benches in the lawns, spaces associated with quiet, spaces that provide privacy, and places that encouraged peer interactions, like eating in cafes. Some areas that were noted to affect their sense of belonging negatively included first-year orientation, getting lost, unsafe walking paths at night, and crowded transit to and from campus.

Benches are found to be motivating spaces as they provide for shared space, where students can share academic discussions and socialise. A student stated that: "*The benches opposite the hostels, it has a good breeze and seeing other students discussing their school work is motivating."*

Limited ownership in open spaces that provide refuge but lack permanence, as the spaces are used by all students. Another participant added that;

"A quiet bench outside the library. It only feels 'yours' because it is the only place I can sit down to rest, but it has no privacy or real comfort."

Some participants noted being lost on campus, especially during first-year orientations where they felt unsure of what was happening. Leading to feelings of disorientation in unfamiliar campus geography. A participant noted, *"Orientation Day, I was new, and I felt lost."*

2. Corporeality (the body)

The findings indicate that the body plays a central role in the negotiation of commuter students' experiences, as they embody their commuter identity both literally and symbolically. This identity significantly influences their preparedness for learning as they arrive at the lecture halls. Among the common physical tolls they endure are the burdens of heavy bags filled with laptops and other essentials, long walks to campus, and the exhaustion from using public transport, which can lead to sweating, sore feet, bruised shoulders, and overall fatigue before classes even begin.

Some of the physical exhaustion was found to undermine readiness to learn, as seen in the embodied struggles. A participant stated

"*My feet are sore, my back hurts from my backpack, and I feel sweaty. I feel like I need a rest before I can even start learning."*

Other struggles came from the burden of carrying tools, including laptops, books and things to use. A participant stated;

"*My PC is heavy, and I carry it every day so it's noticeable."*

Public transport was found to have a huge toll. Transit fatigue was found to be a drain on physical energy as students rush to attend class. A participant added;

"Public transport is always exhausting, so moving from home to school took a lot of my energy."

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3. Temporality (the time)

The findings indicate that, for a commuter student living off campus, time can be both oppressive and transformative. It is oppressive in that the student must navigate strict schedules, exams, and the stress of rushing through traffic, all while managing the anxiety of potential lateness. Additionally, there are challenging moments spent wandering through campus with no private space to rest, often sitting on benches and coping with rescheduled classes. Conversely, time can be transformative as it necessitates a transition for the commuter student, requiring a mental shift that enables them to balance life in a boarding house with their responsibilities as a student.

Panic about lateness, compounded by other factors like weather, was found to affect belonging, as some students felt they faced mismatched disadvantages compared to students living on campus. A participant noted that:

"Last Tuesday, it rained heavily right before my test. I had to run through the mud to make it on time. I arrived soaked, stressed, and unable to focus."

Empty hours created by rescheduled activities take a toll, as commuter students don't have a private space to spend time and rest; as a result, the empty times feel like wasted time.

"Gaps feel like wasting time. Boarding students go to their rooms to sleep or cook, but I just wander around campus or sit on cold benches with my heavy bags."

Other issues found to affect the creation of a sense of belonging included the transition from home to student identity and a symbolic threshold of belonging. A participant argued that:

"The shift happens when I pass the campus gate. I have to quickly forget about the tiring walk and force my tired body to be ready for lectures."

4. Relationality (human relationships)

The study revealed that relationships play a crucial role in shaping commuter identity as individuals engage in campus activities, challenging the common misconceptions they might encounter at home. This dynamic creates a dual negotiation of belonging. Positive relationships on campus that foster a sense of belonging include supportive lecturers, peers who assist with learning and help catch up on missed work, and inclusive group discussions. Conversely, several factors can negatively impact this sense of belonging, such as feelings of loneliness, being overlooked in crowds, leaving campus events early to walk alone, and families' perceptions that underappreciate the challenges faced by commuters.

Supportive and positive relationships with faculty were found to help with recognition and belonging. A Participant added;

"*My anatomy professor is a very welcoming and kind person. Every interaction feels good."*

Good peer connections were found to be positive, while those with disconnection from peers and those who felt invisible in the crowd had their sense of belonging affected negatively. A participant said;

"During my 1.1 orientation, I felt alone and small among my peers."

Other findings showed that some struggles came from family misconceptions, where there was a disconnect.

"They think it's all rosy and fun and going out every day."

Peer support was found to mitigate disadvantages that students living off campus experience. The human relationships were found to be compensatory to the deficits that commuting experiences.

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"*A classmate shared their notes when I arrived late due to bad weather. It felt good, but it made me wish I lived on campus."*

In summary, the findings presented have shown that commuting can be a lived condition that shapes space, body, time and relationships. Students living off campus navigate the dual relationships of home and university, thereby creating a tension in relationality and temporality. Other embodied struggles, such as physical exhaustion and carrying weight, serve as metaphors for the broader burden of transiting off-campus students. Some of the physical spaces found to aid belonging, as they acted as spaces of refuge, included libraries, open benches, and cars, as they became symbolic sanctuaries that commuter students reclaim.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Spatiality: Claiming and Contest Campus Spaces

Experiences of students living off-campus illustrate that physical spaces on campus serve as both areas of belonging and sources of alienation. These locations can act as communal zones that foster academic identity, while others report feelings of displacement. Such tensions resonate with Van Manen's concept of space functioning both as an enabler and an estranger (Montas-Sosa and Castillo-Sanguino, 2024). Similarly, Bradford (2026) observed that commuter students often lack private, personalised spaces and instead rely on transient areas like libraries or benches. These findings highlight how spatial dynamics simultaneously influence feelings of belonging and exclusion. A call for student support and managers of institutions of higher learning to consider this when programming.

Corporeality: the commuter's body

The body emerges as a central site for experiencing life. Findings indicate that physical exhaustion is prevalent. The strain of carrying laptops, books, and food on a daily basis highlights the embodied costs of commuting. Van Manen emphasises corporeality as a means through which lived experiences are mediated by the body (Fuster, 2019). In the context of commuters, the body is not merely neutral; it is burdened, shaping one's readiness to learn. Studies have confirmed that physical fatigue and stress disproportionately affect the engagement and wellbeing of commuter students (Bradford, 2026). These lived experiences have a bearing on creating a sense of belonging to the institution for the commuter student.

Temporality: time as pressure and transition

Time was discovered to be both oppressive and transformative, fostering a sense of belonging. The study revealed a tyranny of schedules and highlighted the vulnerability of commuters to external disruptions. On the other hand, temporality also signifies transitions; Van Manen's concept of lived time emphasizes that temporality shapes meaning beyond mere clock time, encompassing anticipation, reflection, and change (Montes-Sossa and Castillo-Sanguino, 2024). Research indicates that commuter students frequently experience time as fragmented, juggling academic responsibilities alongside home obligations (Fuster, 2019).

Relationality: Negotiating Belonging and Disconnection

The study demonstrates that relationships play a crucial role in shaping commuter identity and fostering a sense of belonging. Positive interactions enhance this sense of belonging, while disconnection can be equally impactful. Van Manen's concept of lived relation illustrates how belonging is co-constructed through interactions with others (Bradford, 2026; Ndhlovu & Mwanza, 2024). Additionally, both existing literature and the findings of this study reveal that commuter students frequently navigate the dual environments of campus and home. This navigation leads to divergent relational expectations, resulting in both support and misunderstandings (Fuster, 2019).

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that commuting for students extends beyond logistical considerations; it is deeply existential. The interplay of spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and rationality shapes the lived experiences of commuter students. Through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology, we see commuting as a

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fundamental condition that influences identity, belonging, and well-being, reinforcing Van Manen's focus on lived experiences as both pedagogical and ethical.

CONCLUSION

The study uncovered that commuting transcends simple logistics; it embodies an existential condition that profoundly influences the lived experiences of students across various dimensions space, physicality, time, and personal relationships. Commuter students find themselves negotiating a sense of belonging through fleeting spaces on campus that often lack permanence. They regularly grapple with the physical fatigue that accompanies daily travel, which drains their energy and impacts their overall well-being. Time itself manifests as a dual-edged sword, serving as both a relentless pressure and a transitional phase that defines their student life. Additionally, these students must skilfully navigate the intricate dynamics of their relationships, balancing the contrasting realms of campus life and home. The findings underscore the significance of commuting as a pivotal element of student identity, shaping not only their academic engagement but also their sense of belonging within the institution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this study and are meant to enhance belonging.

i. Institutions of Higher Learning need to establish commuter-friendly lounges and study areas to provide consistent, personalised spaces that foster inclusion and belonging.

ii. Institutions of Higher Learning need to reduce the physical burden of commuting by providing lockers and ergonomic facilities to ease corporeal strain, enabling students to arrive ready to learn.

iii. Institutions of Higher Learning need to offer time-sensitive support that enables flexible scheduling and structured activities during gaps to transform wasted time into opportunities for engagement.

iv. Institutions of Higher Learning need to invest in relational integration that expands mentoring and peer support programs to bridge commuter-resident divides and strengthen belonging.

Implications for Practice

Institutions of higher education need to acknowledge that commuting is a lived experience that significantly affects students' sense of belonging, beyond merely their attendance. View instances of lateness and fatigue during activities as signs of the need for more inclusive practices, rather than personal shortcomings. Consequently, institutions should incorporate commuters' perspectives into their welfare frameworks, ensuring equitable treatment for both resident and non-resident students.

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