Low SES students at the COVID crossroads: Persist with digital resource deficiency or risk public transport exposure

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There is a new dilemma looming for low socioeconomic status (SES) university students. With the easing of COVID-19 restrictions and anticipated reopening of university campuses in the second half of the year, low SES students now have to square up two new risks—do they persist with online learning despite inadequate digital resources or do they return to campus and risk heightened exposure to COVID-19 on public transport?

As has been established in the widening participation literature, geographic proximity to campus can be the deciding factor as to whether a student from a low SES background goes to university or not. Public transport plays a critical role in participation and success at university for low SES students from metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Private vehicle ownership and associated operating costs are often out of the reach of many low SES students. Add limited car parking spaces and parking fees to the equation, and it is not hard to see why many low SES students rely on public transport to travel to and from campus. Public transport is the linchpin to participation and success in higher education for these low SES students.

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While the monetary costs of public transport are comparatively less than private transport, non-monetary costs of public transport such as long travel times and navigating infrequent schedules can deter use. In addition, there may be psychological risks associated with safety and security on public transport. Research into public transportation organises its shortcomings into access and accessibility factors. Access refers to an individual's ability to engage the service (e.g. fare affordability, distance from home to a stop or station). In contrast, accessibility refers to the suitability of a transport network to get the user to their desired destination.

As the country transitions towards the new normal, concerns about COVID-safety on public transport are increasingly prevalent in the media. The negative impacts of COVID-19 will be
greater for students from equity groups, and low SES students may find themselves in a difficult predicament when campuses reopen. The transition to online delivery of courses has drawn widespread attention to the digital divide and the need for digital equality, exposing the lack of access to digital resources, such as reliable internet and devices, particularly for people from low SES backgrounds and illuminates what is a global social justice issue.

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Low SES university students currently find themselves in a COVID conundrum as they prepare to enrol in their courses for the next semester or trimester. Continuing to study online for the remainder of the year with inadequate digital resources may lead to sub-optimal learning. However, returning to campus to optimise their learning means they may have to take their chances on public transport and the associated heightened risk of exposure to a second or third wave of COVID-19 transmission. Many will be faced with these two equally undesirable alternatives. Providing dongles and SIMs to low SES students in need may provide a quick, short-term digital fix, but some will see this as a band-aid approach addressing the symptom rather than the cause. There is no one-size-fits-all remedy. The likelihood of this dilemma leading to higher university withdrawal rates is cause for concern. The slowly built gains that have resulted from over a decade of dedicated widening participation endeavours are at risk, and public transport use by low SES students requires attention.

Professor Maria Raciti was a 2018 NCSEHE Research Fellow and is currently an Adjunct Fellow with the Centre. Her Research Fellowship report and 2020 Impact Bulletin are available here: Research Fellowship final report: Career construction, future work and the perceived risks of going to university for young people from low SES backgrounds

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