Somewhere to live:

Why British students study away from home – and why it matters

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About the author

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About UPP

This report has been kindly sponsored by University Partnerships Programme (UPP), but editorial control was retained by the author and HEPI's staff, Advisory Board and Trustees.

Since 1998, UPP has grown to become the largest on-campus provider of student accommodation to the higher education sector, with 37,000 rooms under management or in construction. Over the last two decades, UPP has established long-term partnerships with 15 universities. UPP has taken responsibility for the design, build, finance and operation of new and existing student accommodation for periods ranging in length from 40 years to 125 years. UPP also provides stand-alone facilities management and support services to the UK higher education sector.

With over 900 employees, UPP works to deliver the very best student experiences, together with great universities. The organisation offers bespoke partnerships of typically 40 to 50 years which enable universities to make the most effective use of their assets, free up resources and improve services available to students. UPP designs and develops high-quality, affordable student accommodation on campus and this innovative approach means their interests are aligned with those of each university partner.

UPP has invested in excess of £3 billion in universities across the UK. UPP has established a long-term growth strategy to ensure the organisation remains well positioned to meet the growing demand for investment within the UK's higher education sector, whilst at the same time helping our partners achieve their long-term ambitions.

Foreword

By Jon Wakeford, UPP's Group Corporate Affairs Director and Chair of the UPP Foundation

This report makes an important contribution to current debates on higher education by exploring why Britain has adopted residential campus living for many students, what the impact of this has been and how this might develop in the future.

Professor William Whyte takes us on a fascinating journey from the medieval student experience to the present day, placing the development of student accommodation and campus living in its historical context. Learning from the past is crucial at this time, given that many of us involved in an ever-changing higher education sector are considering how it can continue to thrive and grow in future.

As highlighted by Professor Whyte, the higher education sector has benefitted from investment in student rooms through the years - with student accommodation now worth around £53 billion in the UK.

Student accommodation has become a fully-fledged and mature asset class, closely tracked by real estate investment analysts and rating agencies. It is a highly visible and often political sector – typically backed by long-term institutional borrowing – and it is one characterised by a number of different models of provision.

Through UPP's long-term, on-campus, partnership model, we have invested £3 billion in 15 leading universities across the UK over the last 20 years. The investment has empowered these institutions to make the best use of their assets, free up resources and improve student services.

However, despite this investment and the growth outlined in this research, there still remains a historic undersupply in student accommodation. This is compounded by the fact that a significant amount of the UK higher education estate requires complete refurbishment or replacement.

Demand for student accommodation remains strong, with many young people still wishing to leave home to benefit from a fully immersive higher education experience. In the case of international students in particular, accommodation represents a critical element of university marketing; part of the institutional 'shopfront' in what is a fiercely competitive global market.

Importantly, Professor Whyte outlines how the issue of the value-for-money of accommodation has emerged as a key area of focus for both the NUS and the Office for Students in the wider context of the affordability of going to university. We would support such a review and engage alongside our university partners with whom we agree rents annually.

The historical context provided by this paper, along with the excellent analysis of the present, will be invaluable as we debate these important and timely issues.

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Executive Summary

The overwhelming majority of full-time students in Britain leave home to attend university. This marks British higher education out as unusual when judged against most international comparators.

It means that most British universities have diverged from their past and from how experts have repeatedly expected them to develop in the future. It also means that they differ from what policymakers seem to want from them now.

This report traces the history of residence in British higher education, showing that the current situation grew out of student demand, institutional ambition, and the actions of the state. The creation of a national university system enabled mass mobility and widening participation actually encouraged the belief that student life should be lived away from home.

Such was the power of this ideal that it survived cuts in public support and rising fees. At present, it is even overcoming the growth in rent levels. It seems likely to continue, with important consequences for students, their families, universities and the communities in which they are based, as well as for government.

Given this, *Somewhere to Live* concludes by arguing that we urgently need to start a debate about student residence; not because it is necessarily bad, but because we have no clear sense of what it is for. Rediscovering the reasons why British students came to study away from home may allow us to rethink why and how they should do so in the future.

Introduction

Every autumn British teenagers undertake what David Willetts has termed a 'mass migration'.[1] More than a million and a half of them leave home to go to university. Most move relatively short distances, but some of them travel far and wide to reach their place of study, with the universities of Durham, Exeter and Falmouth recruiting over 70 per cent of their students from more than 100 miles away. For the overwhelming majority of UK undergraduates, attending university means leaving home.[2]

From the Robbins Report of 1963 to the Augar Review of 2019, it has been generally accepted that this is a natural – even an inevitable – state of affairs, especially for English students. 'Leaving home to go to university', the Augar Report declares, 'is a deep-seated part of the English culture'.[3] It is certainly a distinctive feature of British higher education, and one that marks Britain out from both its nearest neighbours and its most obvious comparators.

In Britain, in the academic year 2017-18, just over 80 per cent of full-time students left home for study. Forty-eight per cent of these students lived in purpose-built halls and 52 per cent lived in private rented accommodation.[4]

In Ireland, by contrast, nearly half of undergraduates live with their parents and, in Australia, students are more likely to live in the family home than anywhere else.[5] Across Europe as a whole, the pattern is strikingly divergent from the British model: on average, 36 per cent of European students live in their parental home and only 18 per cent reside in student accommodation. Although some national systems – especially in Scandinavia

– do resemble, or even exceed, Britain in their enthusiasm for student mobility, it remains the case, as a recent and reliable report observes, that 'in 64 per cent of countries living with parents is the most common housing form.'[6]

Even in America, with its long tradition of residential universities and its growing industry of student accommodation providers, nearly 40 percent of students live at home and 77 per cent attend college in their home state.[7]

This report is an attempt to address the question why Britain adopted this distinctive mode of student living, what the impact of this has been, and how it might develop in the future. It is not merely a matter of antiquarian interest that UK students are more likely than almost all of their international equivalents to study far from home. It is a tendency that has had real consequences: for the students themselves; for their families; for those who fund them; for the institutions who teach and often house them; and for the communities in which they come to live.

More than this, the fact that British students leave home to study is a feature that is likely to have a serious impact on how British universities will develop in the future. As minister for higher education, David Willetts tended to be less sanguine about this 'mass migration' of undergraduates than he has more recently become. In interviews and speeches, he – like many other ministers before and since – saw this tradition as an expensive luxury that cost too much, acted as a break on innovation within the sector, and would soon be replaced by less expensive offerings. Instead of universities teaching their students for three years at a time far from home, he

argued that the future would see smaller-scale, more agile, more local provision. 'In his world', observed one profile in 2011, 'universities will soon be springing up everywhere, like branches of Starbucks.' Instead of all the investment in property and the provision of accommodation, someone would 'just rent an office block and say you could study here for five vocational qualifications.'[8]

This may still happen – but it has not happened yet. Indeed, expansion has simply intensified the trend that students leave home for higher education. Student accommodation is now worth something like £53 billion in the UK.[9] Struggling to keep up, even traditionally residential universities are having to invest millions in providing new housing – with Cambridge borrowing nearly £1 billion and Oxford recently agreeing a joint venture with Legal and General worth £4 billion.[10]

Moreover, and more interestingly still, the British pattern of leaving home to study is apparently becoming ever more attractive, despite its expense and even in countries that have not embraced it wholeheartedly before. Just as the turn of the twentieth century saw Ivy League institutions import the residential system from England; so, in the last decade, increasing numbers of Americans at less elite colleges have chosen to live on campus.[11] In 2013, nearly 60 per cent of US students planned to stay at home to study. By 2015, more than half hoped to fly the nest.[12]

The future, then, looks surprisingly like the recent British past. This has obvious implications – and not just for those who leave home and those who make this possible. Residence has an effect on the host communities, who may find themselves

irritated, changed and outpriced by the students who live within them. It also affects the people who, for whatever reason, do not go away to study. 'Commuter students', as a recent HEPI report revealed, 'do not always have such rounded and fulfilling experiences as other students, and they sometimes do not benefit from their higher education as much as those students who reside at university.'[13] If universities are to remain residential for most, they still need to think about those who are excluded or disadvantaged precisely because they do not share the same benefits as the overwhelming majority who do study away from home.

The rise and fall of residence

In the beginning, almost all students travelled far from home to study. The medieval universities were, by definition, made up of bands of travelling scholars. Mobility was in their blood. Students and their masters undertook arduous journeys to attend university – and universities themselves were highly mobile. The professors of Europe's first university moved from Bologna to Vicenza in 1204, from Bologna to Arrezo in 1215, and from Bologna to Padua in 1222. Many then moved from Padua to Vercelli in 1228.[14]

This hypermobility was sometimes dangerous. Indeed, the twelfth-century Italian teacher Buoncompagno wrote a whole chapter on the accidents that might befall a student on his way to university.[15] Travelling also raised issues for those who arrived in new and unfamiliar places looking for somewhere to live. The medieval scholar and future Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, warned that many rooms advertised with comfortable beds in Paris actually offered heaps of straw instead.[16]

Above all, the fact that students were foreigners proved problematic for the both university authorities and the communities in which they made a home. The bloody town and gown riots of the Middle Ages owed much of their aggression to the fact that townsmen objected to this incursion of outsiders, who were economically useful but socially much less desirable.

Such violence also speaks of the way in which universities struggled to control their students, many of whom were technically in holy orders but gave little evidence of virtuous

living.[17] 'When of books they should be thinking', wrote one medieval critic of university students, 'They go carousing, roistering, drinking.'[18]

For all these reasons, universities came to see accommodation as an important, necessary, and central part of their functions. Almost from the first, they set rents and inspected student lodgings. By the turn of the fifteenth century, students at Oxford, Cambridge and elsewhere were required to live within disciplined communities, overseen by respected scholars.

The establishment of colleges reflected an attempt to enforce discipline, with their strict statutes and strong stone buildings intended to corral students away from the temptations and hazards of the city and to coerce them into better behaviour.[19]

The growth of multiple, increasingly local universities across Europe eventually brought the mobility of the Middle Ages to an end. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would likewise witness a long, drawn-out decline in the importance of the colleges on the continent.[20] In Scotland, too, the last vestiges of student residence disappeared.[21] England, however, remained unusual. It emerged into the modern age with only two universities – Oxford and Cambridge – each of which had become dominated by their colleges.

England also exported to its colonies the idea of establishing residential colleges as a means of exerting discipline and control. When the first North American foundation, Harvard, was set up in 1636, it provided accommodation, but no spaces for socialization, for fear that this might encourage the students to engage in drinking, betting, fighting or worse. Just

in case this architectural constraint was not enough, Harvard professors continued to employ corporal punishment until the end of the eighteenth century.[22]

In the 1820s, the Oxbridge monopoly on English higher education was finally broken, with the establishment of what was intended to be the University of London and which actually became UCL. The issue of whether students should live on site or reside at home was one of many that provoked fierce debate.

Critics saw the absence of residential colleges as proof that this was no real university. Its promoters, by contrast, argued that life at home was considerably better than any sort of institutional accommodation. 'If the student lives with his family,' wrote the Whig historian T. B. Macaulay, 'he will be under the influence of restraints more powerful and, we will add, infinitely more salutary and respectable, than those which the best disciplined colleges can impose.'[23]

Partly through principle, and partly through poverty, UCL consequently operated without any student accommodation. As a student, the geologist Joseph Prestwich walked eight miles daily to and from his home in Lambeth in order to attend lectures.[24] UCL's great rival, King's College, had ambitious plans to house its students when it was founded in 1829, but these degenerated into 14 small, uncomfortable, and unpopular bedrooms in an attic. Nor did the foundation of a truly residential university – Durham – in 1832 change matters much.[25]

The development of non-residential higher education was institutionalized in the charter of the University of London in 1836 and confirmed in further reforms from 1858 onwards.

Designed to oversee UCL and KCL and to offer education to those outside the capital, the University of London unexpectedly became the first great distance learning provider in British history, enabling students all across the country – and the globe – to graduate without ever leaving home.[26]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, therefore, two traditions of university education had come into being in England. There was the centuries-old pattern of college accommodation embodied in unreformed Oxford and Cambridge. There was also a much newer challenge to this model: the modern, non-residential University of London. This second approach looked like the future. Surprisingly enough, it was not.

The renaissance of residence

The new universities of the nineteenth century initially followed the lead of the University of London, assuming that student residence was unnecessary, perhaps even undesirable. Indeed, it was generally accepted that modern students would visit their place of study for lectures and then leave – as quickly as possible.

At the newly established Queen's College Belfast, recalled one undergraduate, 'If you were adrift between lectures, the only place where you could even sit down was on a wooden bench in a small severe room off the main hall.'[27] At Cork, also founded in 1845, the only concession to comfort seems to have been a 'barrow with refreshments', acquired as late as 1856 to discourage students from visiting the pub.[28]

The change in attitude is typified by Manchester, which became the model for most modern universities. In 1789, proposals were made for a Mancunian university, one that was intended to offer three years of residential education.[29] By 1836, however, when the idea was proposed again, its proponents assumed that 'the student's moral progress will generally keep pace with his intellectual' only if he remained at home, subject to 'parental solicitude' and 'domestic habits'.[30]

Eventually established in 1851, Manchester had no accommodation and little provision for student life. It was regarded as a radical reform when it began to provide coffee.[31] When it moved to a new home, which has remained the main university campus, the site was chosen with the needs of commuter students in mind. It was, noted one report of 1868,

well situated for 'the several Railway stations' which brought undergraduates into the city to study.[32]

Yet even as new buildings went up on Manchester's well-connected Oxford Road, attitudes were beginning to change. There was talk of halls of residence and in 1868 the student magazine bemoaned the 'entire absence of *esprit de corps*' in a non-residential institution.[33] In 1875, the authorities resolved to encourage halls of residence – and a year later the first, Dalton Hall, was opened by the Quakers. In 1887 Hulme Hall was opened by the Anglicans. Others would follow.[34] The majority of students continued to come from Manchester and most lived at home, but something was undoubtedly changing. The assumption that residence was inherently wrong had clearly begun to wane.

What explains this change? To some extent, it was the product of changes in other parts of the world of education. The mid-nineteenth century witnessed major public school reform, with a new emphasis on moral education, school sports and clubs, and the creation of that *esprit de corps* which the students of Manchester found so lacking in their own institution.[35]

These developments in secondary education had an impact on Oxford and Cambridge, where the colleges began to think anew about the social and educational as well as the disciplinary function of residence. A novel emphasis on student culture encouraged sporting activities, societies, sociability and publications that had been previously prohibited as threats to order.[36]

The reformed colleges of England's two ancient universities spawned imitation overseas – and especially in the United States, where dislike of the existing dormitory system and anxiety about the growth of higher education prompted a wave of interest in collegiate life which would eventually lead to new Houses at Harvard and Colleges at Yale.[37] It is not hard to see that idealisation of the Oxbridge system also influenced the new universities of England. Indeed, it was precisely the 'Colleges of Oxford and Cambridge' that was proffered as a telling example of the value of residence by the students of Manchester in 1868.[38]

But debates over residence at Redbrick were about more than mere imitation. It is noteworthy not least that the first halls in Manchester – and elsewhere – were founded by faith groups, who hoped to inject some religious life into what were seen as secular institutions, providing a properly pious environment for the sons of their fellow believers. The admission of women to university also encouraged the foundation of halls intended to secure a safe haven away from the threats and temptations of co-education.[39]

More generally, it is clear that the new civic universities and colleges – especially those with a local population too small to provide enough students – hoped to attract outsiders with their accommodation, securing their future by widening their catchment area.[40]

Above all, it was the differences between Oxbridge and the newer institutions that licensed the creation of university accommodation in the latter. Precisely because the civics catered to a local rather than a national constituency; precisely

because their students had not attended the grand boarding schools that prepared people for the ancient universities, residence came to be seen as an especially important desideratum: providing opportunities for a full education which their students, it was believed, had been denied before.[41]

Writing in 1906, one commentator summed up this understanding in his call for more and better student residences in the civic universities. They were needed, he said, because 'There can be no doubt that when a youth attains the age of 18 or 19 years it is best that he should escape from … home-surroundings'. Only in purpose-built university accommodation, he went on, could such a student 'live a new life, learning new ways, making new friends, acquiring habits of independence.'[42] This was a radical reversal of the arguments against residential universities made half a century before, but it was a claim that would influence higher education policy throughout the twentieth century.

The triumph of residence

The increased importance of student residence was made absolutely apparent in 1925 when the recently-established University Grants Committee considered its priorities for the future. 'Many Universities', it concluded, 'would be the better for new or larger laboratories, lecture rooms, etc., but in our view the most urgent and widespread need is for more residential Halls, or Hostels.'[43]

A steam of publications and policy statements in the following decades echoed this conclusion. Experts argued, on the one hand, that students needed to leave home in order to be educated and, on the other, that a non-residential university was a sort of contradiction in terms. 'A University without hostels,' declared the National Union of Students in 1938, 'is not a University.'[44]

The proportion of those leaving home to experience higher education varied widely, as did the percentage of those who were able to find places within halls of residence rather than private lodgings. In 1938, for instance, 79 per cent of students lived in university accommodation at Exeter, while only 9 per cent were in lodgings and 12 per cent at home. At Liverpool, by contrast, 10 per cent lived in halls, 20 per cent in private accommodation, and 70 per cent at home.[45]

Universities without substantial accommodation increasingly felt the lack. At Sheffield in 1936, it was acknowledged that 'there is ample evidence to show the University has lost a considerable number of able men and women … through the absence of such opportunities for residence in a Hall.'[46]

Lack of funding was the great barrier to change for both universities and their students. Without money, the universities could not build halls and, without financial support, the students could not afford to live away from home. But from the 1940s onwards, grants become more widely available and any restrictions which required recipients to attend local universities began to be lifted.[47] The government also began to underwrite more student accommodation.

The effects of this investment were apparent as early as 1953 when it was noted that fewer than half of students now came from within 30 miles of the civic universities.[48] Ten years later, the statistics were stark: at Leicester 97 per cent of students came from more than 30 miles away; at Liverpool, fewer than one-in-ten came from within the city.[49] At Leeds, too, the trend was undeniable, with two-thirds of students coming from within a 30 mile radius in 1938 and two thirds coming from outside it twenty years later.[50]

Many of these migrants were housed in student lodgings. In 1963, it was noted that although the proportion of British students living at home had fallen from 42 per cent to 20 per cent in the past two decades, the number of those living in lodgings had risen from 33 per cent to 52 per cent.[51]

Nonetheless, government funding also enabled some significant building projects on campus, too. Between 1944 and 1957, 67 new halls of residence were built across the country.[52] Moreover, the new universities of the 1950s and 1960s were completely reliant on students' ability and willingness to travel to them. They lacked the distinctive 'catchment area' that had characterized previous foundations; indeed, in 1959,

the proposal for a university in York declared boldly that 'The question of a *local* catchment area for students would not arise … the catchment area would be the English-speaking world.'[53]

This meant that post-war Britain saw the creation of a genuinely national system of higher education, with students now much more likely to leave home for university than not. It was a process both confirmed and encouraged by the creation of a national applications system – the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA, now UCAS) – in 1961.[54] And it was a process encouraged by experts like the author of the first *Which University?* guide in 1964, who observed 'many people now feel that for students to live at home is a negation of the idea of university education.'[55]

University expansion did little to challenge these assumptions. Indeed, the Robbins Report simply rearticulated them, presuming that students would overwhelmingly want to leave home and that the growth of higher education would require 'a very great increase in the housing provided by universities.'[56] The great building projects of the 1960s were the result: intended not simply to house all these extra students, but to create community and foster culture.[57]

In that way, however modern they looked, the brutalist megastructures of Essex and the University of East Anglia (UEA), of Leeds and Manchester, all shared a similar motivation – one that had begun to be formulated at least a century before.

The resilience of residence

By 1973, the transformation of England's higher education was all but complete. At Manchester only 16 per cent of students came from within 30 miles of the university, compared to 43 per cent in 1955, 59 per cent in 1948 and 73 per cent in 1908. At Bristol, over the same period, the change had been even more remarkable: a decline from 87 per cent in 1908 to only 8 per cent in 1973. Even UCL, that pioneering non-residential foundation, had experienced something similar. Less than a quarter of its students now came from within 30 miles of London's Gower Street.[58]

It was not a change welcomed by everyone. In 1967 the *Manchester Independent* expostulated in the most offensive terms that:

> *The University and the City are combining to create a situation comparable to that of a Negro ghetto in a North American city. The ingredients are the same – a large influx of population, mostly disorientated, lack of adequate social facilities, lack of communication between the ghetto and the rest of the city – one cannot prove by analogy, one can only warn and wait.*[59]

Radical students, at Manchester and elsewhere, were equally critical, condemning what they saw as the narrowness of 'hall spirit'.[60] By 1969 even the Federation of Conservative Students believed that the expensive, strictly policed, single-sex halls of the past had become 'obsolete'.[61]

More importantly, financial problems meant that the universities were never able to keep pace with student

recruitment. The ambition, articulated in the Robbins Report, was to provide accommodation for something like 60 per cent of the undergraduate population. In 1974, perhaps half of that number were actually living in halls of residence or the equivalent.[62] As a result, students remained more likely to rely on lodgings: lodgings that were become ever harder to find and which offered far less attractive living conditions than either halls of residence or the students' own homes.[63]

Yet despite all this, students continued to leave home for university – and to do so even when it was not obviously clear that this was entirely necessary. A study in 1979 showed that more than half of undergraduates could have studied at a university within 90 minutes of their parental home, but chose instead to move, sometimes substantial distances, away. Only one-in-five of these did so because they were attracted by a particular course or institution, and surprisingly few thought that their work would be improved by relocation. Rather, the majority of migrants believed that this transition would enable them to 'establish a new life'.[64]

Such was the power of this long-standing ideal that it even survived the removal of the financial framework which had previously sustained it. The Thatcher government unpicked the student funding settlement of the 1960s, ending the grants that paid for travel to and from university, abolishing the minimum maintenance grant, removing students' rights to unemployment and housing benefit.[65]

Declining higher education funding had an equally significant effect on student accommodation, with further expansion putting extraordinary pressure on universities to house their

students. The start of each academic year was consequently marked by first-years living in temporary caravans (at Leeds), holiday camps (at Cardiff), the Senior Common Room (at Manchester), and a host of other expedients elsewhere.[66]

And still they came. Indeed, they left home in even greater numbers than before. The notion that residence somehow created community and fostered education proved hard to sustain – especially when most students lived off campus. The old, often rather strictly controlled hall life also withered away, with halls losing their formal functions, their curfews, their gowns. Many also lost the academics who used to act as wardens.[67]

But the idea that student life almost inevitably meant leaving home was strongly felt. Thus, when university guides of the 1990s envisaged the typical undergraduate, they conjured up 'Steve Student', living away from home in a rented house with no central heating, who graduated with a disappointing 2:ii because 'it was too cold to work at home and the library was overcrowded.'[68]

The strength of this model of university life was such that it came to influence a set of institutions deliberately designed to embody a different approach to higher education. The polytechnics grew out of local technical colleges and art schools – and they were intended to remain local institutions, serving the real needs of their local communities. As such, it was assumed that their students would generally live at home, travelling in to study. The polytechnics were thus a deliberate challenge to the universities: non-residential, local institutions overseen by a national examining body. In many respects, it was a revival of a nineteenth-century ideal.[69]

Just like those nineteenth-century foundations, the polytechnics gradually came to embrace residence. Nottingham provides a good example of how a local institution became a national, even international, centre for higher education. Chartered in 1970, the Polytechnic initially celebrated its city centre site because it enabled students from the surrounding area to commute to it easily. Yet, within five years, it was estimated that 70 per cent of full-time students actually lived 'outside daily travelling distance.' Plans were consequently made to accommodate 'a minimum' of 2,000 students in polytechnic halls, allowing the place to attract the best students from across the country.[70]

Nottingham's experience was reproduced all across the country as polytechnic students proved just as likely to travel as their university counterparts – a tendency aided from 1986 by the creation of PCAS, the nationwide polytechnic admissions system. Yet even before this, such was the assumed universality of this mobility that by 1981 at least one polytechnic Students Union actually advised its members to become landlords themselves. 'Houses are very cheap to buy in Leicester', it observed, 'and if you buy a house, and let the other rooms to other students, you will have very cheap and comfortable accommodation.'[71]

The new universities of 1992, in other words, were not as new as all that. Like the polytechnics from which they emerged, they cleaved close to the residential model, building halls of residence to attract and house ever more students. Between 1990 and 1995 the higher education sector as a whole consequently spent £1 billion on student residences.[72]

Expansion, whether of student numbers or of the number of universities, did little to challenge the resilience of residence. Rather, it entrenched the assumption that students should move away to study. This was an assumption shared by the universities, by the students themselves, by their parents, by commentators, and by policymakers more generally. It was the assumption articulated by the Robbins Report back in 1963, that 'If the expansion of higher education … is to be achieved, students must be found somewhere to live.'[73]

The resurgence of residence

The development of UK higher education since 1997 has been extraordinary – and unprecedented. Devolution has created four separate and diverging systems. The expansion of student numbers has led both to the growth and to the further multiplication of institutions. Students also come from a more diverse range of backgrounds than their predecessors. At the same time, especially in England, new fee regimes have raised the cost of university education for them, and diminished the level of public support they receive for their maintenance.

This has had an effect on student mobility. It seems to have encouraged the underlying tendency of Scottish students to remain in their home country. More generally, the newest institutions and students from families with the least experience of higher education show the lowest levels of mobility. Disadvantaged students are less likely to leave home. They are more likely to attend universities where the majority are likewise living at home: places such as the University of the West of Scotland or Newman University, where over three-quarters of students commute from home to study.[74]

More striking than this change, however, is continuity. Although academics have pointed to an increase in the number of students staying put for a least a decade, the truth is that the proportion of students living at home has simply returned to the post-war norm, after a short anomaly during the Thatcher years.[75] It was around 20 per cent in the early 1960s, around 10 per cent in the 1980s, and has been about 20 per cent since 2001.[76] Similarly, although recent reports have rightly noted

that the majority of students who do move for university tend to travel relatively short distances, this too is hardly a new development. In 1979, around 54 per cent of students living away from home could have easily commuted. The equivalent figure in 2018 was just over 55 per cent.[77]

Just as importantly, the assumption that university study necessarily entails migration appears to remain strong – indeed, it may even have strengthened. Each year, the advice for students entering Clearing assumes that, as the *Guardian* put it in August 2019, 'Once you've sorted your clearing offer, the next step is finding a place to live.'[78] University staff, students, parents, and others continue to share the sense that those who do not migrate are somehow missing out.[79]

The result can be measured not just in a huge rise in the demand for accommodation, but also a staggering increase in its provision. The number of purpose-built student bedrooms in Britain grew by more than 31,000 in the academic year 2018/19 to reach a record 627,115. It is expected to grow by a further 36,000 in the year to come.[80]

Nor is this solely a British phenomenon. As recent reports show, US institutions have also reiterated the importance of residence. Some, like Tulane, require it for the first two years of study. Others, like Iowa, have reformed their dorms. At the University of Denver, a whole new 'residential village' is being built, intended to foster community and improve student success.[81]

Driving this investment in accommodation is the competition for students: a competition which has become ever-more

intense as it has become genuinely international.[82] In Britain, in particular, the large-scale provision of new student housing has been made possible by private finance. Indeed, in recent years a revolution has taken place, with the private sector now owning or managing more than half of all student rooms – up from a third in 2014.[83]

Private sector involvement has undoubtedly raised standards. Not a month goes by without another story on luxurious university accommodation. The 'Top Ten Instagrammable Student Halls' include the Stay Club at Colindale, which enables its inhabitants to 'Live your life like a movie star' and Scotway House in Glasgow, 'furnished with playful neon art, millennial pink velvet seating and lush green hanging plants.'[84] But even more modest provision in halls or on campus has improved.[85]

Costs, however, have also risen – and risen sharply. Overall, the average weekly rent has increased by 31.3 per cent since 2011. The general levelling up of standards has also meant a substantial decline in the availability of low cost accommodation provided by institutions and their private partners.[86] Students can now expect to pay nearly £6,400 a year for their rooms – a figure that rises to nearly £8,900 in London. On average, rent levels thus account for 73 per cent of the student loan, up from 58 per cent only six years ago.[87]

It is a situation that has provoked much hostile comment – and occasional rent strikes from students.[88] Yet the rival, private housing sector, is often more expensive and the quality frequently much lower. In its annual surveys, the NUS finds numerous examples of unsafe properties, of landlords acting in breach of the law, and a general problem of poor maintenance

and low standards across the country.[89]

Even this, it seems, is not enough to deter student mobility. The obvious alternative to costly halls or crummy digs is living at home, yet this is something only one-in-five full-time students seems willing to do. The others – the overwhelming majority – share the continuing belief that to be a student is to leave home.

The future of residence

How sustainable is this system? How powerful is the tradition of student mobility likely to remain in the long run? Previous predictions have proved wide of the mark, underestimating its strength and over-estimating the attractions of virtual alternatives to the university.[90] Even the very real experience of rising student fees has had no discernible effect on most students' decision to leave home for study.[91]

In time, the assumption that students will always expect to move – and always be willing to pay for accommodation as a result – may be undermined, especially in those universities which struggle to recruit for other reasons. Investors, too, may find that their returns diminish or that occupancy rates are not what they expected. Certainly, there have been some notable failures. In 2013, one developer went bankrupt, leaving debts of £3 million. In 2014, another developer, FreshStart Living, reached a settlement with its investors, handing over tens of thousands to make up for unpaid rent.[92]

For the time being, however, the tendency of students to see mobility as synonymous with university life seems likely to endure. Indeed, there are good reasons why they may be right to leave home for study. Students who remain at home find it harder to become fully engaged in university life – and students who both live at home and attend universities where the majority also live at home find it harder still.[93]

As the recent HEPI report observes, these commuter students tend to 'obtain poorer outcomes from their higher education, and will be less engaged and satisfied with their academic

experiences.'[94] There is also, as a Sutton Trust investigation noted in 2018, a 'migration premium': 'it is those who are most mobile who are most likely to find success', in the words of Peter Lampl.[95]

While this remains true, it seems scarcely credible to imagine that student mobility will suddenly cease. But, of course, if it is true, then the implications for universities and for others interested in higher education are clear. It becomes hugely important that this mobility is available to everyone. It is equally important to ensure that those who do not choose – or are simply unable – to move are not disadvantaged by this decision.[96]

What this means in practice is that students need to have access to the range of support that will enable them to make a choice about moving. In some cases, this may simply mean the provision of reliable information about the real costs of accommodation, but it seems likely that more may need to be done.

The NUS has pointed to the problems faced by poorer students in securing guarantors for private rental agreements and the growing gap between rents and student loans – especially in expensive cities like London.[97] The modern system of student mobility was first made possible by student grants, travel bursaries and then by access to housing benefits. The HEPI report called for a re-examination of whether these could be re-established.[98] The Augar Review similarly concluded that increased maintenance support is necessary.[99] Augar, however, did not go very far in considering how this might be done, and it is evident that more work on the subject is urgently required.[100]

For those students that do stay at home, thought needs to be given about how they can be integrated more effectively within the university community. This will mean flexibility with timetabling and consideration for support off-campus. It should mean access to the student services – counsellors, GPs and the like – which are provided as a matter of course for students living away from home.[101] It should undoubtedly mean that they are provided with information about events and welcomed to attend social activities on campus, something which is not universally the case today.[102]

This will mean thinking about how they can be given space – a home – when attending university. At its foundation in 1964, the University of Essex sought to avoid what the vice chancellor described as an 'academic *apartheid*' – a division between 'the privileged minority' living on site and the 'unprivileged majority' living elsewhere – by providing studies for the latter in close proximity to the former.[103] It was a short-lived and not entirely successful experiment at the time. But the principle is undoubtedly right, and it is an experiment worth attempting again.

More generally, universities need to begin a debate about the purpose and function of residence. Although the vast majority of students do still leave home to study, the motivation for doing this is far removed from the ideology that first legitimated this great migration. For more than a century, it was assumed that residence was necessary to create a university community, to foster student education, and to enculturate undergraduates – especially those who had not experienced boarding school. As the sociologist and warden of a Leeds hall of residence, Bryan Wilson, put it in 1965, residence was intended to ensure that

students were 'introduced to the traditionally highly valued aspects of our civilization.'[104]

As this suggests, there were serious problems with this old idea of student residence. It was classist, sexist – even racist, with the warden of Saint Anselm Hall in Manchester airily observing in the 1930s that 'I refuse all coloured gentleman'.[105] The assumption that students need to be taken out of their homes and sequestered away from the community rested on a particular idea of the university as a place set apart from the world, filled with a self-conscious elite.

Nor was this a process that always worked, even within its own terms. Research in the 1960s showed that halls of residence were often divided, that behaviour was frequently bad, and that both the cultural and academic uplift they were intended to provide was sometimes negligible.[106]

But it is hard not to feel that our current experience is little better – and may be rather worse. Beyond a general sense that moving to university will grant the 'freedom to be oneself' and a more or less accurate belief that life is more fun away from mum and dad, it is difficult to say what migrating from home is intended achieve – especially given the relatively short distances most students actually travel.[107]

It is this current, consumerist model that has underwritten the modern market for student housing, a market that is stratified strictly by wealth. 'Poor?' observes one commentator,

Here's the manky old room from the 1960s. Rich? Here's the penthouse suite, a private dining experience, on-site gym and all the facilities of a five-star hotel. Just sign the contract for £20k a year.

For him, this inequality is 'arguably grotesque', but even if one does not go as far as that, it is worth asking whether this hierarchy helps create a cohesive or dynamic university community.[108]

Moreover, it is far from clear that this fundamentally individualistic approach is good for students themselves. In the midst of what is widely described as a 'mental health crisis' in supporting students is becoming better appreciated. 'Most students spend their first year living in large and impersonal halls with few communal spaces,' complains one writer. They are,

doomed to sitting alone in their bedroom if they don't make friends easily. There tend to be few older 'grown-ups' around, save for the security guard or the postgrad who gets free board in exchange for just being there. It is easy to see how many students might fall through the cracks of human contact.

The answer – at least for this journalist – is 'Smaller groupings of students, perhaps, with a mentoring older adult more closely aware of what these (still very young) people are up to day-to-day'.[109] It is, in other words, a revival of something close to the older idea of a residential university environment.

The sheer scale of modern university accommodation also means that institutions urgently need to rethink their

relationship to the wider community. As we have seen, anxieties about student 'ghettos' surfaced as far back as the 1960s. Middle-class students showed themselves well-able to price out poorer families in the search for housing as early as the 1970s.[110] And by the 1990s, one Oxford resident went so far as to attribute a reduction in the number of owls in the city to the concentration of rowdy polytechnic students there.[111]

Owls notwithstanding, today's student villages are still larger and even the smallest accommodation block can make a major impact on a place. Gated and guarded, it is a world unto itself. Objecting to further development in Glasgow, for instance, one MSP observed that 'there is no reason for students to come out and mix with the community because everything's inside'. Indeed a Glasgow student described their experience of accommodation 'as like going into a prison – you go inside but you don't want to come back out.'[112]

Anxieties remain about students dominating the local housing market, too, and the UPP Foundation Civic Universities Commission found the 'crowding, nightlife, and restriction on local housing that universities generate to be major frustrations', especially in smaller towns and cities.[113] There is a danger – a real danger – of recreating an almost medieval situation in which students are economically valuable but socially undesirable outsiders.

Now, there are signs that institutions are increasingly thinking about how to address these issues. Some are creatively considering how to support commuter students.[114] Many work hard to create a cohesive university community and to sustain a corporate life within student halls. Support for charities like

Student Minds and a commitment to sign the Civic University Charter are all evidence of universities beginning to think about what student residence actually means – and what it should achieve.

In particular, universities will need to think hard about how student residence can be used to serve their surrounding communities: not only by sharing facilities and encouraging volunteering; but also by supporting their graduates to remain in the areas to which they have moved. This is a vital way of sustaining public services and also of regenerating local economies.[115]

Within the university, too, there is still more work to be done. Recent debates in Bristol about pastoral provision in student accommodation are a good example of that. There, in the middle of real anxieties about student support, the University proposed removing the older students, or senior residents, from the halls and replacing them with teams of professional counsellors. Initially keen on the idea, the Student Union reversed its support after vociferous criticism by the students themselves, with thousands signing a petition against the change. 'Without my senior resident living at the end of my corridor I wouldn't be here', observed one.[116] The policy has now been amended, but real questions about what the halls are for, how they are meant to support their students, remain.

We need a more general, national discussion about what we think we are achieving when students leave home for university. We need to think about how their experience can be supportive, educationally enriching and open to all. We also need to think about how this can be true for those who do

not leave home – how they can get access to the environment offered to resident students. This means developing more cohesive and more porous communities, universities which are open to the wider, surrounding community too.

These are big, but vital questions – questions that universities, parents, students and policymakers alike will always need to ask so long as we assume that, as part of their higher education, students must be found somewhere to live.

Recommendations

British universities look likely to retain a residential model. It is popular with students and their families. It is regarded by policymakers as an essential aspect of higher education here. More than this, the data suggest students who remain at home have a worse experience and poorer outcomes than their more mobile contemporaries.

This does not mean, however, that the current system is working as well as it should. There are problems with the provision of adequate accommodation. Some areas are now saturated with half-empty developments.[117] Others lack enough rooms. This autumn, more than 1,500 undergraduates were required to find temporary accommodation at very short notice because their student housing schemes were unfinished.[118]

The cost of residence is also an issue – and one that is becoming ever more significant. One HEPI survey confirms that the cost of living is now a higher priority for students than tuition fees.[119]

The cost of residence is not just financial. As the Minister for Universities, Chris Skidmore, has noted, 'The quality of accommodation can affect student welfare'.[120] In a recent interview, the mother of a Bristol undergraduate who took his own life pondered whether his problems owed much to the shock he experienced in moving to a massive, anonymous tower block far from home. 'It wasn't the accommodation they show you on the open day,' she observed.[121]

There also remains the problem of those who do not benefit from residence. The Vice-Chancellor of Manchester

Metropolitan University has written of the support 'required to compensate for the absence of a residential experience.'[122] The needs of local residents and of those many people who will not attend university similarly need to be acknowledged.

To that end, this report concludes with the following recommendations:

1. Although there are some examples of good practice, universities as a whole must do better at providing appropriate information about accommodation to prospective students.

This means offering accurate details about the true cost of living and the real conditions in which students will live. It means a willingness to publish the range of buildings and locations in which students are likely to find a home and an openness to revealing the costs of travel for those who live further away.

2. Universities should review how they support their students: both those who live on campus and those who do not.

There is a need to integrate commuter students better. This is likely to involve changes to timetabling and the provision of better information about events. It may also necessitate physical adaptations: the provision of spaces and places for commuter students to work and relax. Even the acquisition of a locker can be transformative.

Universities likewise need to be more proactive in providing support for students living in private rental accommodation. Many report a lack of sustained pastoral help and an absence of useful information about choosing a house or dealing with landlords.

Students living in university accommodation can also slip through the cracks. Especially in their first year, they need sustained support and help to negotiate the transition from home to adult life.

3. The design of accommodation should be reviewed by universities and other providers alike.

As a report published in 2019 outlines, many developments have not been designed with student wellbeing in mind.[123] There has been an over-emphasis on cellular accommodation and an under-appreciation of the need for communal and shared space.

There is also a need to consult students more fully as part of the design process. At present students' voices are often ignored and their experiences disregarded. Their expertise and their interests should not be discounted any longer.

4. Both government and accommodation providers need to address an increasingly unsustainable rise in rents.

The cost of living is a growing problem for students, yet it is one that has not been fully acknowledged by government or the universities. A key element in this is the rapid increase in accommodation costs.

Government should now consider shouldering the burden of providing greater maintenance support. But, by the same token, providers should explore other models of finance which do not require rents to rise so precipitously. Universities, in particular, should think hard about how they choose the partners who will build or service accommodation and how

this relationship can offer less expensive options for students.

There is a need for more inexpensive accommodation and an increasing lack of low-cost rooms which needs to be addressed.

5. Universities should review how their accommodation policies affect the local community and how their resources can be shared.

Student accommodation is one of the big points of contention between universities and the wider community. There is often resentment of student privilege and a distaste for student behaviour. Accommodation can serve to isolate students from the world around them.

Universities should take seriously their civic duties by exploring how their resources can be shared, how their students can be encouraged to engage in positive encounters with the local community and how both the planning and design of accommodation can overcome any sense of separation between the institution and the world around it.

6. Above all, there needs to be a thorough debate about the nature and purposes of residential higher education.

Our current system of mass residential university life is rather unusual and relatively new. What was an elite – and elitist – model has been opened up and made available to the 50 per cent of younger people who now attend higher education. There are undoubtedly benefits to this, but its implications have not been sufficiently explored.

We have tended to ignore the 50 per cent of teenagers who

do not attend university and have disregarded the one-in-five students who do not leave home. If travel is a good in itself and if the evidence suggests that there is a measurable 'migration premium', then how should we support these groups?

Finally, what of those British students who do study away from home? What is the value they get from this? It was once thought that residence would be an education in itself, creating community and offering opportunities to enculturate undergraduates, affecting them even more effectively than any formal teaching. Do we still believe this? I suspect not. But if not, what purpose does the residential model serve? If this document provokes a debate about that, it will have served its purpose.

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