LSE Housing and Communities

Homelessness in Higher Education: Supporting Students in London

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Introduction

This report summarises the findings from three strands of work; desk-based research; including a literature review, analysis of existing provision to support students facing homelessness in London; and a roundtable event which took place on 25 March at the London School of Economics, bringing together relevant stakeholders to help universities in London better understand how they can support students who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.

Background to the Research

Recent figures from the National Audit Office show that homeless numbers in the UK are currently at record levels and expected to increase.[1] Students are directly affected, facing a student housing crisis, and living in some of the poorest quality housing. Moreover, for the first time in 2024/2025, the maximum London student loan of £13,348 is less than the average rent of £13,595 for student accommodation.[2] Despite this growing affordability gap in the capital and other popular student cities, student housing is rarely at the forefront of either higher education or housing debates. At the same time, the lack of affordable student housing sits at the intersection between three complex crises: London's housing crisis, the cost-of-living-crisis, and the growing financial crisis affecting UK universities.

London is home to the highest concentration of higher education institutions in the UK with nearly 500,000 students.[3] The capital also has the second highest purpose built student accommodation to student ratio at 3.4-3.6 students per unit, behind Glasgow at 3.8, pushing more students into a poor quality private rental sector owing to the lack of affordable student housing options.[4] In 2022, a severe student housing crisis in Glasgow saw the university place students in emergency accommodation, hotels, and Airbnb's. The situation led students, researchers, and charities, to drive changes in higher education policy and practice and call for government intervention.

Homeless students often sofa surf and fail to report themselves as homeless, with many not realising they could be considered homeless due to shame, stigma, and a lack of understanding amongst students. They face significant challenges in attending university,

[1] National Audit Office (2024), The Effectiveness of Government in Tackling Homelessness, HC 119. Available at: https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/effectiveness-of-government-in-tackling-homelessness.pdf

[2] Higher Education Policy Institute (2024), *Priced Out: The Accommodation Costs Survey 2024: London Edition*. Available at: https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Priced-Out-The-Accommodation-Costs-Survey-2024-London-Edition-1.pdf

[3] Higher Education Statistics Agency (2025), *HE Student Data: Where do HE students come from?*. Available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from

[4] Savills (2024), *UK cities need much higher rates of student housing delivery*. Available at: https://www.savills.co.uk/blog/article/358493/commercial-property/uk-cities-need-much-higher-rates-of-student-housing-delivery.aspx

completing their studies, and engaging with student life. While people may assume a homeless person is an older male rough sleeper, homelessness is increasingly affecting a wider range of people. In the case of students, the report centres on the most prevalent form of homelessness, hidden homelessness, which describes those without a place to call home but who are hidden from official statistics and are not receiving formal support.

Literature Review

We carried out a review of the existing research into student homelessness, and existing policy recommendations, to understand the background to the crisis, and to identify any specific gaps in research and policy.

The only established UK framework for supporting students at risk of homelessness focuses on care leavers and estranged students. A report by the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services found that one third of care leavers experience homelessness within two years of leaving care.[5] In the university context, an influential 2005 study, 'By Degrees', examined care leavers' experiences and led to policy recommendations adopted by government and universities.[6] The study highlighted the loss of support from local authorities when care leavers reach the age of eighteen, and the lack of adequate replacement structures. While universities do not take on the role of corporate parent, care leaver bursaries are now available. However, they remain insufficient, especially in London, where many care leavers remain in their local authority provided accommodation, limiting university choices and increasing isolation.

Recent research has expanded to include estranged students, those with little or no contact with their parents, who, despite also lacking family support, fall outside the care system. The 2015 *New Starts* report found that 14% of care leavers and estranged students had registered as homeless or considered doing so while in higher education.[7] The research by Stand Alone and the Unite foundation shows that university halls are often inaccessible to this cohort, with only 39% of estranged students living in halls, compared to 79% of their peers. Despite growing institutional awareness and support, significant gaps remain, such as the provision of summer accommodation and adequate bursaries.

NUS Scotland's 2023 survey of 1,281 international students, the largest in the UK by a considerable margin, found international students are nearly twice as likely to experience

[5] Mike Stein and Marion Morris (2010), Increasing the Number of Care Leavers in 'Settled, Safe Accommodation'. C4EO.
https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/pubs/pdf/increasingKR.pdf

[6] Sonia Jackson, Sarah Ajayi, and Margaret Quigley (2005) Going to University from Care. Institute of Education.
https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10007011/1/Jackson2005Going(Report).pdf

[7] Becca Bland and Jenny Shaw (2015) New Starts: The Challenges of Higher Education Without the Support of a Family Network. Stand Alone and Unite Foundation.

homelessness as home students, at 21% compared to 12%.[8] This reflects limited access to student finance, the need for UK guarantors to secure private rentals, and weakened family networks. These vulnerabilities also expose international students to housing scams.

The lack of large-scale studies of student homelessness in the UK, particularly in England and Wales where no data exists, obscures the true extent of student homelessness. In the US, large studies offer extensive data, with one finding that 17% of a survey group of 86,000 students experienced homelessness.[9] Moreover, Moss et al. highlight that US researchers defined student homelessness as early as 1987.[10] However, the US literature tends to downplay questions of responsibility and overlook structural factors. For example, Moya et al. (2022), in stating that homelessness 'looks different for each of the people experiencing it' places onus on the individual student. This reflects a pattern Fitzpatrick outlined, where academics and sympathetic politicians create the impression that homelessness is 'fairly randomly distributed across the population'.[11] Although Moss et al. caution against comparative analysis, both US and UK studies underline students' resilience and determination to continue their education despite hardship.

Student Accommodation

A 2024 report for the Scottish Cross-Party Group, undertaken by the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE) situates rising student homelessness within broader housing pressures. The authors emphasise that purpose built student accommodation (PBSA) is often delivered in tight housing markets, overwhelmingly catering to higher-end demand while doing little to increase the supply of affordable housing.[12] In addition, the lack of social housing, the unaffordable private rental sector, and a growth period in student numbers also underpin problems of affordability in the UK student housing market. In Glasgow, the crisis sparked tensions and stoked anti-student sentiment due to limited available accommodation. The report recommendations to reduce student homelessness include: establishing city wide

[8] NUS Scotland (2023), International Students and the Cost of Living Crisis. https://assets.nationbuilder.com/nus/pages/543/attachments/original/1707405551/20230322_NUS_Scotland_Cost_of_Living_International_students_report.pdf?1707405551

[9] Sara Goldrick-Rab, Christine Baker-Smith, Vanessa Coca, Elizabeth Looker, and Tiffani Williams (2019), *College and University Basic Needs Insecurity: A National #RealCollege Survey Report*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/files/media/HOPE_realcollege_National_report_EMBARGOED%20UNTIL%20APRIL%2030%203%20AM%20EST%20(1).pdf

[10] Kate Moss and Gemma Moss (2024), 'Homelessness Amongst Students in UK Higher Education: Time for a New Research Agenda?', *European Journal of Homelessness,* 18.1. https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/2024/EJH_18-1_TP01.pdf

[11] Glen Bramley and Suzanne Fitzpatrick (2018), 'Homelessness in the UK: Who Is Most at Risk?', *Housing Studies*, 33.1. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2017.1344957

[12] The Cross-Party Group on Housing (2024). Student Housing Options and Experiences of Homelessness in Scotland: A Report by the Cross-Party Group on Housing. UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence. https://housingevidence.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/020425-Student-Housing.pdf

housing hubs; working with developers to ensure the provision of affordable PBSA; improving student tenancy protections whilst ensuring landlord participation; and greater collaboration between universities, housing providers, and local authorities.

Since the cap on student numbers was lifted in 2015, the total number of higher education students across the UK rose from around 2.3 million to 2.9 million in 2023/24.[13] The CaCHE report also links accommodation pressures to falling real-terms funding, which is down 19% per student since 2013. In light of this, universities are admitting more students, with a focus on international students, to offset funding deficits. As a result, universities have increasingly relied on volume-based growth - the more students the better - and partnerships with student accommodation developers have struggled to meet the new demand for student rooms. Universities also rely on special purpose vehicles (SPVs) as well as PBSA developers to supply and manage accommodation, with implications for affordability. SPVs are designed to facilitate complex off-balance sheet financing to attract investment and leverage debt.[14] In a similar fashion to student accommodation developers, SPVs prioritise high-end housing and lock in rent increases as part of their multi decade financing deals.

Therese Kenna and Ailish Murphy stress the role of PBSA in creating 'exclusive student communities' internationally catered to students seeking and consuming luxury lifestyles.[15] As an asset class, the attractiveness of student accommodation to investors undermines questions of affordability. PBSA is unique in that it stands at the cutting edge of the build to rent sector, providing superior risk-adjusted returns than UK property, stocks, and real estate investment trusts (REITs).[16] Importantly, student accommodation is a Sui Generis use class in planning which circumvents minimum space requirements and increases returns. Second, student accommodation is also a tax neutral asset class where the tax burdens of VAT and council tax do not apply. There is also the government's Student Loans Company which guarantees rental income through the provision of student loans. Overall, taken as a crucial but overlooked element of the surge of global investment flowing into London's housing

[13] Paul Bolton (2025). Higher Education Student Numbers. Briefing Paper No CBP 7857. House of Commons Library. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf

[14] Pinsent Masons (2022). Using Off-Balance Sheet Income Strips to Deliver New Build Student Accommodation, Out-Law. https://www.pinsentmasons.com/out-law/analysis/using-off-balance-sheet-income-strips-to-deliver-new-build-student-accommodation

[15] Therese Kennedy and Ailish Murphy (2021), Constructing exclusive student communities: The rise of "superior" student accommodation and new geographies of exclusion. *The Geographical Journal*. *187.2*. https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12380

[16] Graeme Newell and Muhammad Jufri Marzuki (2018). The emergence of student accommodation as an institutionalised property sector. *Journal of Property Investment & Finance, 33. 6.* https://doi.org/10.1108/JPIF-01-2018-0007

market, investors seeking rising and secure property values drive further increases in property prices and rents.[17]

Knight Frank's recent report into student housing shows that PBSA developers are piling into the UK, with a record £3.9 billion invested in 2024 even with a slight decline in international student numbers.[18] With nearly half of this sum accounting for land sales, this reflects the attractiveness and cost of land banking to investors, as PBSA bed delivery is still nearly 9000 beds a year short of the pre-pandemic average. The Mayor of London's 2021 Plan introduced new planning obligations to ensure affordable student accommodation delivery. However, real estate analysists argue the well-intended obligations effectively reduce affordable student beds by deterring investors, reflecting planning debates around the inclusion of section 106 clauses.[19] As the CaCHE report suggests, mid-range and affordable student accommodation development in London is unlikely to be delivered unless institutional investors, local authorities, the GLA, and universities collaborate to share both risks and objectives. [20] For example, greater collaboration could entail exploring strategic sites further from campus.

Lived experience studies

Turning to qualitative research into the topic, Moss et al., in an unpublished study, explored the causes, impact, and extent of student homelessness.[21] The researchers found private landlord evictions to be the most common trigger, alongside domestic disruption, bullying, and financial hardship, particularly for international students. Students often felt the university could not help. Homelessness was rarely acknowledged, highlighting the disconnect between public perceptions of student life and the realities of homelessness. Their data shows that 5.5% of respondents in a single school at the University of Wolverhampton experienced homelessness, which was largely hidden in the form of sofa surfing. Nearly a third of interviewees received no support, and many avoided disclosing their situation due to shame or fear of stigma.

Mulrenan et al. interviewed 16 students with experience of homelessness at a post-1992 university in London, finding that most had not discussed their experience of homelessness with university staff, friends or family, reporting a sense of shame.[22] Ultimately, higher

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[17] Joe Beswick, Georgia Alexandri, Michael Byrne, Sònia Vives-Miró, Desiree Fields, Stuart Hodkinson, and Michael Janoschka, (2016). Speculating on London's housing future: The rise of global corporate landlords in 'post-crisis' urban landscapes. *City. 20. 2.* https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2016.1145946

[18] Knight Frank (2024), *UK Student Market Update Q4*. *https://content.knightfrank.com/research/169/documents/en/uk-student-housing-q4-2024-11929.pdf*

[19] CBRE (2024), London Plan Policy Fails to Deliver Affordable Student Accommodation. Press Release. https://www.cbre.co.uk/press-releases/london-plan-policy-fails-to-deliver-affordable-student-accommodation

[20] CaCHE (2024).

[21] Kate Moss, Gemma Moss, Paramjit Singh, and Kate Williams (2020), An Investigation of Homelessness in One Midlands University. Unpublished paper sent to the authors.

[22] Patrick Mulrenan, Julia Atkins, and Simon Cox (2018), '"I Get Up in the Night to Cry": The Impact of Homelessness on Higher Education Students in London, UK', *Critical Social Policy*, 38.1. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018317724524

education was seen as a source of purpose which drove them to graduate despite the difficulties.

The literature shows that the causes of homelessness are both personal and structural. Drawing on Fitzpatrick's 'critical realist' perspective to bridge these contrasting understandings, Mulrenan et. al found that students targeted by widening participation efforts are at increased risk of homelessness, including BAME students, parents, and carers.[23] Moss et al.'s focus on inequalities and cumulative disadvantage expanded on this, emphasising how university marketisation, marked by increased tuition fees and numbers of admitted students, increased the risk of homelessness among marginalised groups. Taken together, the researchers found that while efforts have expanded access to university, their support systems have not kept pace.

The students experience, in terms of immediate academic progression, mental health, and long-term outcomes reflect both socio-economic changes and failures in the governance of university housing systems. However, universities overlook how negative housing outcomes, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged students, undermine their commitments to their widening participation brief, a strategy which began in 1999 to increase access to higher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

In the first study to utilise stakeholder interviews, Moss et al. identify a culture of denial around student homelessness, often aimed at avoiding responsibility or reputational damage.[24] It is not clear whether the university, local authority, or charities should be responsible. In London, this is further complicated by the overlap between universities, local authorities, and local charities across 32 boroughs. Additionally, institutional responsibilities are often unclear because responsibility is spread across accommodation, finance, welfare, and student union teams.

Policy recommendations

Greg Hurst of the Higher Education Policy Institute argues that universities have a civic duty to address homelessness.[25] Similarly, the CaCHE report calls for a joined-up approach between universities, councils, students, communities, and government to better identify and tackle the issue.[26] These suggestions resonate with the government's independent 2019 Review of Post-18 education and funding. It stated that universities 'retain a responsibility for overall student welfare and delivering value for money'.[27] Philip Augar, in his report, made clear this

[23] Mulrenan, Atkins, and Cox (2018).
[24] Moss, Moss, Singh, and Williams (2020).
[25] Greg Hurst (2022), Could Universities Do More to End Homelessness?. Higher Education Policy Institute. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Could-universities-do-more-to-end-homelessness.pdf
[26] CaCHE (2024).
[27] Wolf, A., Augar, P., Crewe, I., de Rojas, J., Peck, E., & Robinson, B. (2019). *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding: Independent Panel Report.* Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

responsibility extends 'to university accommodation, whether or not they are the direct provider'. Nonetheless, subsequent government inaction following the report's recommendations underscores the pervasive ambiguity in the sector. For example, the government has failed to conduct a 'comprehensive financial analysis' of student housing providers to understand the profits made from student rents.

The literature shows an urgent need to improve data collection on student demographics and their housing needs. Surveys are required to estimate students' needs or any causal determinants of housing insecurity. While there is a consensus around a lack of data in reporting and monitoring student homelessness, experts reach different conclusions about what to prioritise to bridge this responsibility gap.

One way in which these data gaps can be closed is through an adaption of matriculation data, the data collected when students first enrol at university, to include housing status. Moss et al.'s qualitative study found that 8 out of the 25 students who had experienced homelessness had done so prior to entering university.[28] Closing this data gap would provide an indication of the number of students requiring support. CaCHE also highlights a significant data gap where local authorities are failing to integrate student housing demand into local housing strategies.[29] The lack of data in relation to private rental and HMO properties stops universities or local authorities from making informed housing market decisions. We also found that the data the Higher Education Statistics Agency collects via universities on student housing provides a broad picture of the infrastructure and operational performance of student accommodation across institutions. However, there was no data collected on insecurity, affordability pressures, or informal living arrangements.

London University Policy

To help us gain a better understanding of the picture across London, we analysed the policies from ten London universities to support students experiencing or at risk of homelessness, focusing on institutional recognition, financial support, welfare provisions, accommodation options, and relevant signposting. In doing so, we identify best practices, gaps in provision and areas for improvement. We anonymise the universities for the purpose of the study.

We selected ten universities according to four criteria. First, the sample accounts for London's institutional variety, including redbrick universities founded in the nineteenth century, plate glass universities established in the 1960s, and post-1992 universities that began as polytechnics. Second, the sample included both Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities. Third, all institutions had a minimum student population of 10,000. Fourth,

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5ceeb35740f0b62373577770/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf

[28] Moss, Moss, Singh, and Williams (2020).

[29] CaCHE (2024).

geographical diversity was maintained by selecting universities from across inner and outer London.

It is important to note the variance between well-funded, research-intensive universities and lesser-resourced institutions in terms of support for students facing housing crisis. We acknowledge this is a simplification, but it provides a useful basis for analysis. Our findings show that better resourced Russell Group universities often provide multiple targeted funds, including accommodation bursaries, while the post-1992 universities offer moderate financial support through smaller hardship funds. There is an inversion of the support required, as post-1992 universities take on more students at risk of homelessness, as Mulrenan et al. highlighted.[30] However, one of the post-1992 institutions in our study scores highly in terms of provision and institutional recognition. While universities are experiencing a funding crisis, if they are to meet their commitments to the student body, they must reassess their support for students facing housing problems.

All universities in our study support care leavers. Importantly this framework acknowledges and attempts to mitigate poor housing outcomes. Across the ten universities examined, all offered care leaver bursaries, but the level and accessibility of these schemes varied. Bursaries ranged from small payments of £1,000 to membership of the Unite Foundation Scholarship Scheme, which provides three years of free housing for 80 care leavers and estranged students a year. Four of the universities surveyed, including a post-1992 university, are part of Unite's scheme and more universities could look to join. The foundation represents the charity arm of Unite Group, the largest purpose built student accommodation developer which oversees 70,000 student beds and an £8.7 billion portfolio.[31] Although the scheme is effective in supporting care leavers, the scheme does little to address mismatch between market-led delivery and affordable housing needs underpinning the broader crisis.

In order to address the crisis of student homelessness, universities must first recognise the issue. While recognition alone is ineffective, it is the first step towards accountability and resource allocation. Moreover, signposting by universities, including student union pages, encourages students to come forward when facing a housing crisis and receive targeted support. Seven universities in our study recognise student homelessness as part of their housing advice or student union advice. Degrees of signposting vary across seven universities. For example, one outer London post-1992 university has an obscured FAQ section signposting students to Shelter while another post-1992 university with similar resources has a web page on homelessness offering concise and direct advice which incorporates a broad definition of homelessness including 'sofa surfing'. Arguably the most comprehensive supporting university

[30] Mulrenan, Atkins, and Cox (2018).
[31] The Unite Group PLC (2024). Interim Report. https://www.unitegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Unite-Group-2024-Interims-statement-vF.pdf

provides details of the process triggered by a student reporting homelessness and a run-through of the support available internally and externally.

Demonstrably, the availability of financial support and its accessibility is crucial in supporting students facing homelessness. While finance teams are aware of students making use of emergency finances to cover rent, more can be done to recognise and allocate this funding, given the growing housing costs associated with university. All universities we analysed provide some level of financial support, primarily through hardship funds. However, access to funds and the amount of funding vary significantly. On the upper end, two universities offer multiple targeted funds, including accommodation bursaries and emergency grants, while the lowest level of hardship fund was £500, which may not even cover two weeks of student rent in London. The capital could follow the example of some universities in Scotland which have begun to ring fence and offer targeted housing funds such as a Scottish university's Housing Support Fund. Given the increased risk of homelessness for international students, efforts to extend student finance, bursaries, and hardship funds to all students irrespective of their country status are critical. Encouragingly, one wealthy Russell Group offers a hardship fund of up to £2500 to students irrespective of their status and recognises housing costs as students' largest expense.

Within universities, support varies between teams. Residential life and accommodation teams play a vital role in alleviating student homelessness, especially for first year students, who are more likely to live in student accommodation, by providing emergency housing or 365-day student accommodation, such as for care leavers. However, our research found that accommodation teams are less transparent compared to other student services, which may discourage students from presenting as homeless. In our study, eight out of ten universities did not publicly advertise any form of emergency accommodation, with one explicitly noting that support is only available outside of peak term times.

Where accommodation is offered, it tends to be discretionary and dependent on spare capacity. While the support systems available are unclear, they allow for discretionary wiggle room for stretched accommodation departments. We found that universities rely on internal referrals from other teams, such as welfare, and motivated individual staff members who take it upon themselves to provide support. Support is often very ad-hoc and we found that discretionary emergency housing often becomes available when term progresses. This lack of formal structures reflects the institutional overlap between universities, charities, and local government. However, one older Russell Group stood out for clearly outlining an emergency accommodation procedure and timeline on its website.

Student unions advocate for homeless students, pushing for change on behalf of students. Indeed, half the universities sampled have active SU involvement, including advice services and financial aid. However, many lack SU initiatives addressing student homelessness which could be an area for potential development.

All universities surveyed that recognise student homelessness direct students to local authority emergency provision. Numbers of Londoners requiring temporary accommodation have reached the highest level ever recorded, with one in 50 in temporary accommodation, but homeless students are often unable to prove they have a local connection and are told to apply to their home council for support.[32] This process can cause severe disruption to studies, even for students who are able to find temporary accommodation in London. Alternatively, unoccupied rooms in both university and private halls are more suited to students and could be used to plug gaps. However, asking universities about available support for students at risk or experiencing homelessness, one university informed us that they are 'reluctant to advertise' or 'operate a homeless service', suggesting a fear on the part of universities of being swamped.

Securing a UK Guarantor is an obligatory part of the process in securing private rented accommodation and students from international or disadvantaged backgrounds often struggle to find one. As Moss et al. highlight, students view guarantor schemes as one of their top priorities in tackling student homelessness.[33] Only three of the universities sampled offer rent guarantor schemes for students. At a larger Russell Group university that does offer the scheme, 1200 students have taken up this offer since 2017, which has helped reduce their risk of homelessness. Others either partner with, or signpost to, third-party guarantor companies that provide the service at a significant cost for international students.

Overall, there is no uniform policy or practice in London's university sector. Our findings reveal the uneven and fragmented systems of support for students experiencing homelessness that mirrors the wider institutional trends shown between councils, universities, and charities. To change the situation from students feeling shame to one in which they feel supported, universities can draw on the framework that supports care leavers' housing outcomes, expanding support to students at risk of homelessness while also reaffirming their commitments to care leavers. To do this, universities should take a more proactive approach to coordinate support within their overlapping support services. Universities should move beyond discretionary and 'below the radar' practices. They should recognise and challenge the lack of affordable student housing and collaborate with partners in the university sector. Formalising definitions, improving data collection, and clarifying signposting will help legitimise and spur a much needed sector-wide commitment to students facing homelessness.

Roundtable findings

Our roundtable included representatives from Russell Group and post-1992 universities from across London, relevant charities, and students. The university representatives worked in

[32] London Councils (2024), London's Homelessness Emergency. *https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/londons_homelessness_emergency_october_2024.pdf*

[33] Moss, Moss, Singh, and Williams (2020).

accommodation, finance, counselling, and student union teams. Among the universities invited, most responded positively and professionals who supported students both informally and formally attended. Recognising the complexity of the issue and the sensitivity required to support students, there was a consensus around the importance of individualised support and collaboration with third-sector organisations.

Our discussion focused on practical ways to address homelessness, drawing on the expertise of teams managing issues of housing insecurity in London. We asked about the levels of discretionary support in place, when students sought support, the barriers they face in coming forward, and examples of best practice.

Interestingly we received a stronger response from the better-funded Russell Group universities, perhaps reflecting the increased capacity and resources when compared with post-1992 universities, mirroring findings from the desk-based research. However, it was clear from the discussion that despite difficulties in funding and resources limiting the support that many can offer, individual staff go above and beyond their remit to support students. Across all the universities, participants stressed the need for greater recognition, funding, and above all affordable accommodation for homeless students.

Participants were clear in the discussion that emergency accommodation is crucial in supporting students who find themselves homeless. This provision gives students breathing space while they get back on their feet. In most universities, some accommodation is usually available but not advertised. What is available for students tends to be on a discretionary basis at the behest of accommodation teams that assess levels of occupancy of rooms. One problem raised was that students sometimes retained emergency rooms after their allotted time expired, creating backlogs, and preventing other students from accessing emergency accommodation. Several universities placed the onus on local authorities to house homeless students.

The roundtable highlighted several challenges staff face in supporting students at risk or experiencing homelessness. For example, some universities have sold their halls and now offer accommodation to students via private companies. Not only do for-profit organisations rent to maximise profits, but universities also guarantee rent increases above inflation levels through their SPVs. Moreover, the student housing policies give accommodation teams less power to house people in empty rooms as they have little say over the management of privately owned and run buildings.

With little control or influence in the student private rental sector and ongoing coordination issues regarding London's temporary accommodation crisis, there was total agreement that universities must do more to help students facing homelessness. To manage these challenges teams from different universities regularly communicate through formal events and informal communication channels. Participants felt that more cross-university collaboration would

help. The University of London Housing Service was identified as a potential vehicle for cross-sector cooperation and coordination, with the potential to coordinate housing support.

As to why students were not coming forward as homeless, attendees stressed the impact of stigma, challenges in evidencing homelessness as a student, and fear of risking visa status or their place on their course. One stakeholder highlighted this explanation for the severe under-reporting of international student homelessness. Another attendee emphasised that students face tough choices in bad circumstances, such as leaving their course to seek refuge after experiencing domestic violence.

Experts felt that, as teams are institutionalised, they offer less collaborative wraparound support. A possible way forward would be for universities to have greater working relationships with homelessness charities in the capital, such as New Horizon Youth Centre, to provide wider support to students experiencing homelessness. It was striking that some participants displayed the dynamism required to utilise formal and informal structures to deal with the growing housing crisis students face. Participants were passionate about supporting students, working outside the remit of their roles, and looking for creative solutions to offer support. Professionals recognised that, at times, this means working outside official guidelines in order to support homeless students.

The recommendations that experts prioritised included: international guarantor schemes; city wide hubs through the University of London housing service; and guarantees of emergency accommodation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our desk-based research, analysis of a sample of London universities, and roundtable findings all highlight that student homelessness is an ongoing and growing issue that remains under-researched and under recognised in higher education policy. While larger and older institutions tend to provide greater support, this was not universal. Across the board, the level of support and recognition of student homelessness is inadequate. However, post-1992 universities, with more disadvantaged student populations, tend to have fewer resources and offer less comprehensive support.

There is a widespread lack of understanding about the true scale of student homelessness. The help that is available is often unclear and inconsistent across organisations. Although discretionary and informal approaches support students facing homelessness on a case-by-case basis, they are not fit for purpose. Not only does this framework create confusion for students in crisis and place significant burdens on individual staff, but it also obscures the systemic issues that drive increasing levels of student homelessness.

To change the situation from one in which students currently feel shame about their homelessness to one in which they are supported, universities can draw on existing

frameworks, such as care leavers' support, thereby expanding support to students at risk of homelessness while also reaffirming their commitment to care leavers. To do this, universities should take a more proactive approach to coordinating support within their overlapping support services. Universities should move beyond discretionary and 'below the radar' practices, recognise and tackle the problem of affordable student housing, and develop more collaborative working partnerships with charitable organisations in the capital. Additionally, clarifying definitions, improving data collection, and signposting of available support will help legitimise and spur the needed sector-wide commitments to students in difficulty.

Based on our work we recommend universities adopt the following measures to better support students at risk of homelessness:

- Greater publicity around student homeless issues and awareness raising.
- Provision of emergency accommodation that is readily available and easily accessible.
- Creation of city-wide one stop housing hubs.
- Provision of specialised counselling and confidential support from experienced professionals.
- Expansion and enhancement of targeted financial assistance for those in need.
- Bridging knowledge gaps through data collection, education, and outreach.
- Greater collaboration with local authorities and charities.
- A clear mission to address student homelessness in all its forms.