

# No Fixed Abode

## Student Housing & Homelessness Research Project



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## Project Overview

The UK's housing crisis is well documented and researched, but we are not aware of any specific, detailed study of how it is affecting students. We are particularly conscious of the socio-ethnic demographic of London Met students, many of whom are already likely to have been affected by the wider cost-of-living crisis.

We had a graphic example of these issues just before Christmas 2023, when one of our students confided that she and her four children were about to be evicted. This generated a highly damaging chain of events, which are on-going, but have, among other things, seriously affected the student's mental health and ability to study. (The story was covered by Vicky Spratt in "The Independent", 19th December 2023.)

The research aims to gain a deeper understanding of these issues by addressing the following questions:

- What impact is housing having on the lives of students, including their ability to study?
- What are the specific issues that students confront because of their housing situation?
- Is there a need for London Met to enhance support and advice services to students experiencing serious housing problems and if so, what needs to happen?

The findings from this study will contribute to developing a framework/ protocol for a potentially larger initiative utilising similar methods to explore one of LB Islington's strategic priorities of examining and supporting students and LGBT communities around housing needs. Following the completion of the pilot study, London Met will approach Islington to consider a larger scale project, which will be co-produced with LB Islington.

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## Research Methodology

- An anonymous questionnaire asking a series of questions about students' housing and its relationship to their university experience e.g. cost and condition of housing, travel time to university etc.
- At the end of the questionnaire, students were invited to participate in the second phase of the research – joining a series of PhotoVoice workshops. These workshops explore, in more detail, students' personal housing stories through photography.

**Having this information would help evaluate the effect that unstable housing circumstances have on education. Coupled with assessing the effectiveness of current university support services, this would help advocate for targeted interventions.**

## Student Housing Survey



### Introduction

Between early February and late April 2024, LMU students were invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire about their housing. The impetus for this exercise came from a student (and her four children) being made homeless just before Christmas 2023, with serious consequences for her private and academic life. We wanted to ask whether, in the context of a growing housing emergency, other LMU students are finding their lives and studies adversely affected by their housing situation and what, if anything, the University might do to help.

### Methodology

This project was undertaken as a pilot study, with a view to possible further research. Leaflets were distributed, linking to an anonymous online questionnaire. This produced a random sample of 80 responses, with the following demographic characteristics:

- Average age of respondents 32, ranging from 18 to 60.
  - 41% of respondents live in the Private Rented Sector (PRS), 21% as council or housing association tenants, 11% in student accommodation and 7% are owner occupiers.
  - Respondents were invited to describe their own ethnicity. Reflecting the LMU community, this revealed a very multi-cultural pattern, with a dozen different backgrounds described, approximately equally split between “white” and “people of colour”.
  - There was also a wide variety of living arrangements. 24% live with their children, 20% with their parents, 27% live alone or in shared housing with people they don't know.
  - 28% have dependent children.
  - Nine respondents describe themselves as having a disability.
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## Key Findings

This pilot research project has been sufficient to indicate that a significant number of LMU students have housing problems and that further research on the subject would be beneficial. The key findings were:

- 46% of respondents said their housing made studying “quite” or “very” difficult. Five respondents said their housing conditions made study “almost impossible”.
- 56% of respondents said their housing was either “average” or “poor”.
- 30% of respondents reported their homes as either cold, overcrowded, noisy or damp. 21% said their home had two of these characteristics.
- There was a wide spread of housing costs reported, ranging from below £500 per month, to over £2,000 per month. The biggest cohort (42%) reported paying between £501 and £1,000 per month for housing. 24% pay between £1,001 and £2,000 per month.
- 20% receive Universal Credit to help with their housing costs.
- 56% said it was “quite” or “very” difficult to afford their housing. Seven respondents said it was “almost impossible”.
- Seven students had experienced eviction.
- Twelve students were aware of LMU welfare support services, but only four had used them for help with housing problems.
- 27% of respondents live in outer London boroughs. 19% live in Islington.
- 49% of respondents spend between 45 and 90 minutes travelling to university.

## Analysis

While some of the key findings are stark and perhaps unsurprising, given the prevailing housing situation in London and the South East, there are also layers of complexity that warrant further inquiry and research.

- 13 respondents described their housing as “poor”. This was almost evenly split between different tenures, with the largest number (4) living in private rented accommodation. However, three of those saying their housing conditions were poor were living in student accommodation.



## Comments

Respondents were invited to say more about their housing conditions. Among those recorded were:

*“My temporary accommodation had mould. My son got croup. But we have moved into a 1 bed maisonette now!”*

*“My accommodation has been on the news recently for the state of rubbish in the communal courtyard, with rats present.”*

*“It is facing the high street and there are people who kick the door during the day and night. One day someone tried to get inside the house. There is damp, the wallpaper is peeling off and we have mice and ants.”*

*“We’ve been Islington council tenants for over 20 years and our home is well maintained.”*

*“One bedroom house with 4 people living in it. I have been waiting 14 years to be rehoused. The house is tiny and we do not have space for a cooker.”*

*“Overpriced, mentally draining, not safe.”*

*“The house is great and the location but the price is exorbitant.”*

*“I live in a small hotel room with children.”*

*“I just about manage to pay the mortgage each month and know I am very lucky. As a single parent though the struggle is huge. I study full time in a masters and also work four days a week. Many things that people take for granted are broken in my home and I cannot afford to replace them.”*

## Comparative Research

In 2016, Emeritus Professor Patrick Mulrenan contributed to a paper in the Journal of Further and Higher Education about the experience of homelessness on students and its impact on their retention on university courses (Mulrenan et al, 2016). Unsurprisingly, the research, based on a relatively small sample, found that being homeless represents a serious challenge to students' ability to complete their studies and recommends further research on this subject. However, the research focussed particularly on homelessness, which is only one aspect of the current housing crisis and has worsened significantly since 2016.

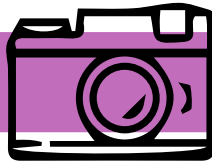
## References

Mulrenan, P., Atkins, J. and Cox, S., (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), pp.143-154.

Mulrenan, P., Atkins, J. and Cox, S., (2020) 'I didn't know what strong was until it was required': factors that promote retention among homeless students in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(2), pp.273-284.

Spratt, V (2023) 'No fault' eviction left care worker homeless one week before Christmas, The Independent, 19th December 2023.

## PhotoVoice Workshops



PhotoVoice workshops were designed with the assistance of professional photographer Em Fitzgerald to ensure that students' voices were not only included but also captured in ways that surveys might not be able to do. Students attended a series of three workshops in May and June 2024. They participated in discussions and activities to interpret the photographic images they created, aiming to tell their stories in their unique way. Participants used their own phone cameras to take photos, to be displayed in an exhibition at London Met in November 2024.

A significant aim of PhotoVoice as a research methodology is to question traditional research practices by addressing and reducing the power dynamics present in the researcher-participant relationship. Each workshop highlighted this goal and encouraged continuous dialogue. Participants were encouraged to take an active role in the production of knowledge, becoming co-researchers.

Throughout this process, the co-researchers identified eight main themes for the exhibition.

- Loneliness
- Help for One, Help for All
- Constraints
- Hope & Resilience
- Journey
- Home - Away from Home
- Dark Times
- Affordable Accommodation



## Co-researchers Recommendations

The project's main strengths are co-production and student involvement in a collaborative process. The questionnaire and Photovoice generated 8 recommendations on ways London Met could enhance the support services available to them:

- ★ **Make housing and accommodation support more visible and accessible.**
- ★ **Consider individual student situations no 'One Size Fits All' advice. Eg. mature students who are also parents, students who are new to London, and navigating the city can be overwhelming and confusing.**
- ★ **Establish a dedicated housing support team that can assist students with finding accommodation, understanding lease agreements, and resolving disputes with landlords.**
- ★ **Create a single point of contact for help instead of passing students between different teams.**
- ★ **Engage with students by holding meetings, visiting classes for a few minutes to remind them about available resources, and ensuring they know the department that assists with accommodation.**
- ★ **Increased availability of affordable housing by developing partnerships with local landlords or housing providers to offer more affordable, off-campus housing options.**
- ★ **Introduce financial aid packages specifically targeted at housing costs to reduce financial strain on students.**
- ★ **Work with local councils to influence housing policy in favour of student-friendly rental practices and regulations.**

## Podcast



In order to gain deeper insight into how housing challenges affect student education, we invited several co-researchers to join follow-up, open discussions with Donna Jones - **the No Fixed Abode Podcast**.

Through this podcast, co-researchers talk about their involvement with the Photovoice workshops and share their experiences and the impact on their studies of housing instability.

Scan the QR code to listen to the podcast!

