
Homelessness Amongst Students in UK Higher Education: Time for a New Research Agenda?

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Introduction

The extent and causes of poverty and homelessness among students in UK Higher Education (HE) urgently require investigation and solutions, because the legacies of COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis have exacerbated pressures on students that have been growing for many years. The Higher Education Policy Institute (Hanna, 2023) reports that, in a website audit of the 140 Universities in the UK, 27% are operating a food bank, 11% are giving out vouchers, and over 50% offering discounts on food in recognition of rising poverty. A third of Russell Group universities – some of the most prestigious UK institutions – were found to be operating a food bank, compared with 26% of other universities. At their National Conference 2023, the NUS reiterated that there is a housing crisis for students across the UK who struggle to find affordable or suitable accommodation. While prices of rent and food have risen rapidly, student loans have remained the same. This means that more students are working long hours alongside their degrees, with international students, care leavers, and those estranged from family proving particularly vulnerable. Additionally, university study may be more challenging for students schooled during COVID-19, a greater number of whom are now reporting mental health difficulties. The impact of these conditions on students' health and academic performance has not yet been examined. Since this demographic will make up a significant proportion of our country's future workforce, their wellbeing, experiences, and abilities have far-reaching implications.

The Context of Homelessness in Higher Education

While there has been considerable research into homelessness since the 1980s, Mulrenan (2018, p.1) reports that “student homelessness [remains] a significant and an under-researched” problem. Although Buckner (2008) discovered 33 039 university students in the US who categorised themselves as homeless, Bader (2004, p.1) comments that data on the homeless student population is insufficient “because nobody thinks they are a priority”. At the time of writing, we are only aware of limited US and Australian literature on this topic, and a study in Germany and the Netherlands, where the Evict Project (2022) reported student homelessness in Utrecht, Maastricht, and Amsterdam, thought to be due to housing shortages and an influx of international students. In Scotland, a NUS (2023) survey of 1 281 international students found that they are significantly more likely to experience homelessness than domestic students. Homelessness among students in England and Wales has not yet been investigated.

A Changing Landscape for Higher Education

The HE landscape has changed significantly in the last 30 years, and greater understanding of the impact on students is required. HE in England has been dramatically altered by the 1998 introduction of – and subsequent rises in – tuition fees, which transformed students into anxious consumers, conscious of the debt they are amassing. The pedagogical relationship has become strained: the customer model is not in fact appropriate to the HE environment, since a product is not being bought, but students expect good customer service and results for their money.

Hillman (2018) argues that while rising fees have led to lower ‘value for money’ perceptions among students, the problems in HE are in fact,

[M]ore to do with the extra students that have been recruited in recent years. There are more students from disadvantaged backgrounds, with non-standard qualifications, and some Universities have lowered their entry standards. Some of these changes are welcome but students from underrepresented groups do need more support than others and they may not always be getting it in full. (Hillman, 2018, p.53)

Widening participation initiatives – a term first used following the 1997 Dearing report – had the laudable aim of improving access to HE for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and with disabilities, but the policies have had unforeseen consequences. In his 2013 Autumn Statement, George Osborne announced that the cap on student recruitment would be lifted entirely from 2015, meaning that thousands of students who used to fail to get a place each year would now be able

to go to university. This has led to a staff body who must secure good TEF, REF, and NSS¹ results, while under constant pressure to over-recruit and teach greater numbers of anxious students with a wider range of needs and higher expectations.

In 2018, the Higher Education Statistics Agency reported that drop-out rates amongst university students within the first 12 months had risen for the third year in a row, meaning that 26 000 students studying for their first degree in 2015 did not make it beyond their first year. Drops in retention, attainment, and outcomes – issues that are doubtless impacted by widening participation and the increasingly difficult economic and social conditions for students – have led, not to attempts to improve finance or housing for students, but to new OFS benchmarks for universities to meet. On 3 October 2022, OFS published Condition B3, which will make universities responsible for their students' attainment, progression, and graduate outcomes. In other words, from September 2024 universities must ensure that 85% of students on a course make it to their second year, 75% complete their course, and 60% secure a graduate job or go on to further study – or face regulatory action (Office for Students, 2022). These measures are designed to identify poor quality courses (commonly referred to as Mickey Mouse courses) that lead to weak outcomes (meaning lower-paid jobs). Such benchmarks can prompt positive institutional changes, but they can also increase workload and reduce the time staff have to support struggling students. They also place extra pressures on staff teaching newer subjects and/or in new universities, where retention, progression, attainment, and outcomes can be lower because they serve students arriving with lower grades, from non-traditional pathways, and more deprived backgrounds. On the other hand, this new benchmark means that universities now have a vested interest – beyond receiving tuition fees for three full years – in understanding and solving barriers to student engagement, attainment, and completion. This means that universities are now likely to welcome research that can help them to tackle problems, such as poverty and homelessness, that impact their metrics for Condition B3.

Whilst Collini (2018) and Fleming (2021) have analysed the problems in 21st century HE from the perspective of university staff, who struggle with increasing workloads due to over-recruitment and students requiring greater support, we have found no comparable discussion of the effect on students. Internal metrics from UK universities show that students recruited from disadvantaged backgrounds – numbers of which have increased in the wake of widening participation initiatives – are more

¹ The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is a national scheme run by the Office for Students that aims to encourage higher education providers to deliver excellence in teaching, learning and achieving positive outcomes.

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the UK's system for assessing the excellence of research in UK higher education institutions.

The National Student Survey (NSS) gathers students' opinions on the quality of their courses.

likely to struggle academically and financially, and therefore more likely to become homeless. Many students were also pushed into poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a 2021 NUS report, as COVID-19 restrictions were being lifted, over a fifth of students struggled to pay rent in the short term and 70% had concerns about paying rent in the coming year.

As job insecurity, rents, and living costs rise, greater numbers of HE students could find themselves homeless in future. Measuring homelessness among students and documenting their experiences is, therefore, one way that the most severe ramifications of the changing economic and HE landscape (including widening participation, rising tuition fees, stagnating maintenance loans) can be measured and better understood. So far in the UK, only one small unpublished pilot study has been carried out by the authors, supported by the British Academy (Moss et al., 2020). Prior to this, the only other investigation in one London university was carried out by Mulrenan et al. (2018, p.1) who reports that “the impact of [student homelessness] is far-reaching in terms of their emotional wellbeing and ability to fully participate in university life, including pressure on time and financial resources, inability to fully focus on studies, and limited engagement with fellow students and the wider university experience.” The scale of homelessness and street-based sleeping amongst students in HE is largely hidden, and thus absent from organisational attention. There is currently no research or data known to the authors on the prevalence, causation, duration, and experiences of homelessness amongst students in the UK, so it is more important than ever to understand both the extent of student homelessness and the importance of engaging with students who have experienced it to determine what actions could help alleviate the problem.

Definitions of Student Homelessness

It will likely prove useful to arrive at a working definition of homelessness or street-based sleeping among students as we seek to learn more about the problem since no formal definition yet exists in the UK. In the US where – as in Britain – there are high tuition fees and high levels of student debt, research in 2018 showed that in a survey of 86 000 students, between 14-18% were affected by homelessness (Jones, 2019). Student homelessness has been legally defined in the US since 1987 by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (section 725). A useful starting point toward a definition in the UK could perhaps be informed by Kushel and Haas (2006, p.1), who describe differing forms of housing instability including “difficulty paying rent, moving frequently or living in overcrowded or unsuitable conditions.” Although there is some evidence of the phenomenon of student homelessness in both the US and Australia (Spencer, 2020; Conroy et al., 2021; Koziol, 2018), Pleace (2016, p.1)

has warned against imbuing this data with too much significance, since “European academics have relied too heavily on American research and evidence, and... there are dangers in using these ideas and data to interpret European homelessness.”

Although some understandings of homelessness have moved away from taxonomic, structuralist, and pathological explanations, challenges still remain in recognising individual agency and the importance of the *context* of homelessness. There is still a need for research that challenges negative preconceptions and stereotypes about people who become homeless. Moss and Singh (2015) have commented that homelessness is not necessarily the result of negative stereotypes (people experiencing homelessness are lazy or choose to be homeless), but can happen to anyone. Pleace (2016) shows that negative preconceptions still exist in relation to who becomes homeless and why. Most recently of course the former UK Home Secretary commented on X (formerly Twitter) that homelessness was a ‘lifestyle choice’ (Otte, 2023).

Research that contributes to understanding homelessness within its social context is acknowledged to be critically important. People who become homeless find themselves marginalised, and in order to overcome negative stereotypes, it is crucial to acknowledge the interlocking systems of power that contribute to this social problem. Research would do well to be informed by pioneers such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, who, in 1989, coined the term ‘intersectionality’ to describe the complexity of individual identities, acknowledging how age, race, gender, sexuality, economic background, education, and more need to be taken into account to understand an individual’s experience of the world, and how they are acted upon by social forces, which can work to privilege or denigrate different aspects of each person’s complex identity. Peoples’ multifaceted identities contribute to how they are treated by others and shape their experiences of the world, from their experiences during education to their job prospects, pay, and housing. While research into homelessness in HE needs to approach students as a population likely to share some experiences, such research also needs to understand the complexity of identities and lived experiences if it is to produce practical, specific, and appropriately targeted recommendations for change.

Traditionalist conceptions of homelessness ought to be challenged in yet more ways. It is not just the backgrounds and behaviours of students that need to be considered, but the social and economic environments they are contending with, as well as the practices of universities. For example, Hills (2010, p.1) explains that “despite the elimination and even reversal of the differences in educational qualifications that often explain employment rates and relative pay, significant differences remain between men and women and between ethnic groups.” Hills also highlights that women and people of colour continue to experience lower

employment and lower pay, despite frequently having higher qualifications. This data indicates that difficulties experienced by individuals when engaging with institutions, such as the workplace or universities, are not always due to an individual's incapacity, but the result of complex social forces prohibiting their success. Further, inequality is cumulative over an individual's lifetime, and is often carried from one generation to the next.

As such, the material and ideological environments of universities and their practices need to be investigated to fully understand homelessness among students. Theories of cumulative disadvantage and inequality could prove useful for predicting the life course trajectories of HE students, and how such factors shape their experiences at university and beyond. Further research is necessary and would be timely: the impact of university fees, housing costs, and the growth of the private sector rental market, which Clapham et al. (2014) suggest is having an effect on the aspirations of young people, should also be considered.

Research should also consider the context of changes in the rental market in England and Wales, and the impact of widening participation. Homelessness, poverty, and housing insecurity – which undoubtedly impact achievement for those students affected – are being contributed to by successive governments who have reduced social housing and encouraged the private rental sector. Such moves disproportionately impact students, whose short-term rental arrangements, often in popular areas and cities, leave them particularly exposed to the vicissitudes of the market. Widening participation initiatives, meanwhile, have led to greater recruitment of students without domestic or financial support – and with lower grades, meaning they find the work more difficult as well as having to support themselves financially. Students experiencing such difficulties will find challenging rental markets more difficult to contend with, putting them at greater risk of poverty and homelessness. This, in turn, negatively impacts their chances of progression and their graduate outcomes.

The Need for Further Research

More in-depth research is needed in this area, and a more ambitious study of the issue is warranted, given that it may affect graduate careers for those least familiar with and resourced to deal with the problems attendant upon university life. Current policies regarding higher student fees and the recruitment of students from diverse backgrounds who are sometimes ill equipped for study at university level, or who do not have the necessary support at either a domestic or institution level, are

resulting in students experiencing homelessness and that in turn impacts upon their chances of progression and retention together with the attendant problems associated with that.

Research is needed to document the extent, and better understand the context, of homelessness among students, so that appropriate responses to the problem can be developed. Useful research could, for example, clarify in greater detail the dimensions and occasions of personal vulnerability, and how this vulnerability in the particular context of university students maps onto existent literature on vulnerability more generally (Leiberwitz, 2021; Ecclestone, 2016). This would facilitate policy and practice recommendations for universities. The outcome of research into student homelessness, whether it revealed a major or a limited problem, would help students, HE institutions, policy makers, and service providers to improve and strengthen knowledge and the evidence base in a field where there is currently no data. It would also provide a clearer picture of the extent of the issue of student homelessness and the specific issues students experience to provide a well-developed body of knowledge about how best to assist students and the extent of coherence of policies, multi-agency working, and sharing of best practices between HE and other organisations. Such research might illuminate the need for a holistic approach that includes adequate prevention and support strategies, as well as preventive education that aims to empower students who are increasingly at risk of homelessness.

There is potential to flag up the need for greater political commitment and greater acceptance by policy makers that this is a problem that has partly been influenced by high tuition fees, withdrawal of maintenance grants, poor housing stock, and lack of affordable accommodation especially in student towns and cities near higher education institutions. Further awareness raising about the need for organisations to work together toward changing perceptions and values in relation to removing preconceptions about who becomes homeless and why, as well the removal of negative stigmas of homelessness, may also be helpful.

For universities experiencing changes in the profile of their student intake, challenges remain in ensuring the retention and performance of students from increasingly common demographics. Whilst universities can claim some success in attracting greater numbers of 'non-traditional' students, there are significant challenges for many students in their journey through HE. Pleace (2016, p.37) suggests, "our challenge as researchers and as social scientists is to fully acknowledge, respect and understand the human beings at the heart of homelessness and to understand as much as possible about the environment in which homelessness occurs." One of the questions this importantly raises is how further research should position student homelessness itself: to what extent is it an HE problem, largely

contingent on the policies of HEIs, to be remedied by their actions; and to what extent is it the result of wider social inequalities and requiring broader social and political action? In US studies, agencies that provide grant assistance to students reflect the provision of welfare through 3rd sector routes in that country. In the UK, where students are positioned as a 'market' by policy, the emphasis on student fee loans has perhaps overshadowed the weakness of maintenance grants and other welfare provision in supporting student subsistence.

A Structural Issue?

Homelessness should be seen as a structural problem for which structural, institutional, and legal solutions should be sought. Homelessness is a form of precarity, which Butler (2009, p.25) describes as “the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks [...] becoming differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.” Homelessness is consequently dangerous for individuals and has far-reaching social consequences. Structural issues affecting homelessness across the UK will affect students – such as insecure employment, low wages, challenging rental markets, housing shortages, and government cuts to mental health services and domestic abuse shelters. A 2020 NUS study in the UK, for example, reported that in a survey of over 4 100 students, 21% were unable to pay bills in full over the past four months, while 19% were unable to pay their rent. It would be interesting to know whether students in universities across Europe are experiencing similar issues.

Specific factors affecting HE students and young people who are becoming homeless need to be acknowledged. Examples of student-specific factors may include the declining value of maintenance loans and grants against inflation, the prices and conditions of the student rental market, problems with university-managed accommodation, difficulties experienced at university that affect physical or mental health, being away from home for the first time, lack of knowledge about services and support, difficulties with academic work, difficulties managing academic workload with part time employment, or feeling lost, lonely, or disenfranchised in the HE environment. Further information gathered about student-specific factors would help to identify additional agents, actors, and stakeholders who have the power to create change (such as student letting agencies, private landlords, social services and charities, Student Finance, banks, university accommodation offices, student wellbeing services, or schools), as well as identify possible solutions and barriers to change.

Further studies in this area could situate student homelessness in the broader context of the operations of, and recent changes within, UK HE. These changes are not singular to the UK and are likely to be relevant across Europe in the current economic climate, meaning that datasets compiled would be useful beyond their UK context. One example addresses the BAME² attainment gap, with non-white and international students reporting feeling isolated and disenfranchised in HE environments (Leslie, 2019; Bunce et al., 2019). Informed by Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (1989) that acknowledges the variety of ways individuals with complex, multifaceted identities can be marginalised, further research could also help to document the experiences and demographics of students experiencing homelessness to increase understanding of how race, age, sex, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and mental health interact with the HE environment and issues connected to student homelessness. This would increase understanding of the social, political, and institutional factors affecting the marginalised, precarious, homeless student population, and identify what mitigation measures are being taken by HE providers both within and outside of the UK, particularly through equality, diversity, and inclusion strategies, and other stakeholders identified as relevant.

What Could Further Research Look Like?

One of the most effective ways to examine the extent and causes of homelessness among students would be a mixed-methods, national, multi-wave survey of students across England and Wales in one academic year. This type of survey methodology would facilitate the collection of large-scale data on the populations' demographic profile, the extent, temporality, and nature of the problem, factors impacting students being homeless, and descriptions of individual experiences. The results of such a survey would be suitable for communicating messages to a wide audience, drawing on the interface between findings and policy recommendations to make a 'real-world' difference.

To be successful, this type of multi-wave national study of both undergraduates and postgraduates would need the facilitation and buy-in of the National Union of Students Insight Team. Given the current level of saturation for students in terms of filling in forms, it would probably also be advantageous to employ a targeted social media campaign with incentive payments for student participants in respect of their time and economic circumstances to ensure a good response rate.

The survey data could be supplemented with case studies based on emerging evidence from the multi-wave national study based on geographic locations, types of university, and student populations. This type of qualitative investigation could

² Black and Minority Ethnic.

be supported by a statistical profile of the region to provide relevant contextual information – such as ONS data on statutory homelessness and applications to local authorities for relief to prevent homelessness. In each case study region, further in-depth interviews with HE administrators – for example, estates, accommodation, or those managing student wellbeing and financial services – local service providers, and other relevant stakeholders. This would elicit information about the assessment of local student homelessness and housing insecurity and relevant in-house procedures and challenges or opportunities relating to student homelessness in the region.

It would also be important to conduct focus groups with students who have experienced homelessness across the academic year. Participants could be recruited from the national survey based on being enrolled at an HE institution in the respective case-study region. Carrying out this type of study would provide important data and qualitative information not just on student experiences of homelessness, but also on student homelessness, housing, and welfare provision.

It would be possible to analyse and compare data from the quantitative and qualitative work to identify trends connected to institutional and structural variables and student homelessness and put this information into dialogue with students' accounts of their experiences in order to identify and articulate solutions to student homelessness and consider what factors may assist in the early prevention of student homelessness.

Conclusion

The impact of student homelessness is considerable for both students and HE providers, and is symptomatic of complex problems in UK Universities. It has never been more imperative for universities to understand the factors affecting student wellbeing and achievement, as progression, retention, attainment and graduate outcomes are set to be monitored by the Office for Students. As of academic year 2024, Universities will be required to meet the Condition B3 targets – for 85% of students to continue into their second year, for 75% of students to complete their qualification, and for 60% to go into professional employment or further study (Advance HE, 2022; Office for Students, 2022) – or face regulatory action. At the same time, the pressure on Universities to attract and retain fee-paying students can lead to drops in entry requirements, and increased opportunities for students to re-take failed assessments and or entire academic years. This can result in students struggling on courses for which they are unsuited, and in a tough economic climate, at the expense of their financial, mental and physical health.

Further research is required, and has the potential for a range of positive impacts on students and HE providers by increasing understanding of the problems facing students, providing data and case studies to inform the development of solutions, and by illuminating University and Government policies that might be impacting students. Such research could help Universities to make policy decisions that help them to meet the targets set by the OfS, while also benefitting students and empowering them to succeed.

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