

**STUDENT EXPERIENCE:
student community**

Research

The lived experiences of international students renting in the private sector in Brighton and Hove: an investigation into student experience to guide future practice

University of Sussex



Research into the international student experience in the UK
2017-18

**UK Council
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The lived experiences of international students renting in the private sector in Brighton and Hove:
an investigation into student experience to guide future practice.
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1. Introduction

This research project carried out by Housing Services at the University of Sussex investigated the individual stories of students who had rented in the private sector within the previous two years in order to capture the thoughts, feelings and experiences around the renting process and support available. Both home students and those from the EU or non-EU took part in a series of focus groups in order for researchers to compare and contrast experiences and gain a clear understanding of the unique challenges that international students face when renting.

The research aimed to develop a key understanding of the areas in which international students would benefit from additional support and services, as well as highlight areas where the University and other public sector services could intervene to make the private rented sector fairer for students and other international renters.

2. Research objectives

In conducting qualitative research, the study aimed to meet the following objectives:

1. Evidence the journey that students take when renting accommodation in the private sector, mapping the barriers faced and support services accessed throughout the process.
2. Assess the benefits of specific advice for international student renters.
3. Identify the impact of legislative changes on the experiences of international students renting in the private sector.

3. Motivation for research

In 2014, the National Union of Students (NUS) published their Homes Fit for Study report,

highlighting the often poor environments that students face in private sector accommodation and revealing that over a third of students had problems with the condition of their home (NUS, 2014). Additionally, research from Universities UK (2015) outlined the importance of the cost of accommodation to undergraduate international students in assessing the competitive advantages of study in the UK. When focusing specifically on students in the private rented sector, Rugg et al (2002) assessed the demand from students for private sector housing, with a focus on market dynamics, and Smith (2008) focused on the impact of high-density student populations on the communities in which student housing is situated. Private sector student accommodation is a widely researched area, allowing university housing professionals access to a wealth of information to help shape policy and decision-making within their services. In recent years however, a number of external political factors have influenced the student housing market, and anecdotally, Housing Services at the University of Sussex have come across markers of concern whilst advising international students and hearing about their experiences.

The introduction of Right to Rent legislation in England from February 2016 has created barriers for international students to renting and much confusion amongst landlords and letting agents around their obligations. Research conducted in February 2017 by StudentTenant.com, a year after the legislation was introduced, found that 23% of student landlords were less likely to consider a non-British tenant since the introduction of Right to Rent, and 76% would not consider a tenant if they could not provide Right to Rent documentation immediately. Additionally, the impact of Brexit is an area for concern amongst universities around the



Rebecca Nash (left) and Lucy Walker present their research findings at the UKCISA Conference in June 2018, University of Edinburgh.

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recruitment of international students, but little attention has yet to be paid to how it may affect the lives of international students that do choose to study in the UK once it has left the EU.

Like many institutions, the University of Sussex offers a wide range of support services for students renting in the private sector, including information and advice materials, events across the year and housing officer appointments to guide students through the renting process. However, these services are for all student groups, without distinction. With concern mounting around the impact of legislative changes on international students in particular, it is more important than ever to listen to the student voice and mould services in response to their lived experiences, creating tailored advice and support for different student groups.

4. Research methodology

The research took place at the University of Sussex, an institution with over 17,000 students, of which 24% are international fee-paying students. The research was granted full ethical approval from the Social Sciences & Arts Research Ethics Committee at the University, and an academic advisor was obtained to support the researchers in the design and implementation of the study.

As researchers aimed to learn about the thoughts, feelings and experiences of students renting in the private sector, qualitative research methods were employed in the form of in-depth focus groups, with questions designed to map the journey of renting from searching for a property, moving in, living in the rented sector, moving out and lessons learned. As students in groups quite often share the ritual of finding accommodation, a focus group method was preferred in order to examine the interactions between students when discussing private rented housing, as well as singular experiences. As highlighted by Kitzinger (1994):

“We are none of us self-contained, isolated, static entities; we are part of complex and overlapping social, familial and collegiate networks. Our personal behaviour is not cut off from public discourses, and our actions do not happen in a cultural vacuum.”

(Kitzinger, 1994:117).

Six in-depth focus groups, each lasting up to one hour 30 minutes were carried out, with a total of 13 participants attending in varying numbers across the focus groups. One of the intended focus groups changed into an in-depth interview as only one of the expected participants attended. The sampling criteria included current students at the University of Sussex, who had rented accommodation in the private sector within the previous two years. A mixture of home students, EU students and

international students were recruited to participate in order for researchers to compare and contrast their renting experiences. The researchers initially aimed for a larger sample size, but found that recurring themes appeared in later focus groups, giving confidence that many key areas were covered.

All focus groups were recorded on digital audio devices, and recordings transcribed for coding before being deleted from file to protect participants' anonymity. Thematic analysis of the data was carried out to identify key areas of discussion throughout the research.

5. Key research findings

Through thematic analysis of the data, six key topic areas emerged from students' experiences that reflect the research objectives and highlight the barriers that all students face when renting. The research findings also revealed clear distinctions between those challenges experienced by home students, and for those coming from outside the UK. Emerging themes are knowledge, experience and advice; Right to Rent; landlords and letting agents; financial and legal; homestay and lodgings; and networks.

5.1 Knowledge, experience and advice

Across all focus groups, there was an overall theme of a lack of knowledge and experience when embarking on the renting process. This is not surprising considering the demographic of participants and the nature of living away from home for the first time whilst at University. However, the lack of awareness around advice services available to students was concerning, with many learning 'on the job', through informal networks, or most worryingly, from letting agents or landlords themselves.

“I don't think I was particularly equipped, I just went on Google and started going. Once you had a look at a few you can kind of gauge, it doesn't take too long to kind of know what's what.”

As the University offers a comprehensive package of support, this may be an indicator that more awareness needs to be generated for students to access these services, or better relationship-building between the University Housing Service and students should be the focus, enabling students to feel comfortable to seek support. Previous experiences from home countries also contributed to the participants' approach to their private sector search, even if that experience was negative:

“But when I find out the contract was the whole year, and I had couple of bad experiences in Canada because I went there

a couple of months I didn't want to rent a place in which I wouldn't be physically so I preferred to find another way to stay in a place in which if I don't like it I can leave to something else."

The above student experience also highlights an additional barrier to the private rented market for international students. Many will only remain in their country of study for the academic year due to financial or visa restrictions, but would be expected to rent a property on a 12-month contract, leaving them to effectively pay for a vacant property for a number of months.

Many of the international student participants also reported difficulty in securing a room due to not being in the country to view the property before agreeing to take it, and so relied heavily on the knowledge and experience of others online to make informed decisions:

"The most difficult thing is because I was in my home country, I couldn't afford to come here just to find an apartment, and then leave just to come back. So I had to do everything via the web."

The importance of networks will be discussed in more detail later in the report, but it is interesting to note that many international students relied on their networks to gain knowledge for them. For example, one participant reported allowing her friends who were in the UK to make the decision on which house to choose without her present, and instead viewed the property virtually through a Skype chat during the viewing.

Almost all participants (both home and international) came to realise across their experience just how competitive the lettings environment is and how quickly properties come on and off the market. This added to the challenges faced by international students, as there is additional pressure to accept properties without taking the time to give them proper consideration.

"I was looking for something where I could have an easy commute to the University so something on the number 25 bus route. But I was pretty desperate so the area didn't matter too much."

What is troubling about this experience is that it highlights not only the lack of choice that international students perceive to have when renting, but also the urgency of the process, something that was observed amongst other participants:

"Things do go really fast here, so it was constantly searching and searching (for a property). Once we found one, it happened pretty quick. I was in Canada with family

looking online and because of the time difference, I was the first person to see it and grab a viewing."

From all participants, it was clear that they could have been better equipped with the knowledge of the renting process, common pitfalls and timescales needed to carry out a successful search. Although the University is a source of this information, it became clear from the research that this support needs to be offered more explicitly, through a wider variety of channels and at an earlier stage. The research also revealed areas in which the sector is not compatible with international student renters, such as the issues with 12-month contracts and lack of ability to view potential properties.

5.2 Right to Rent

Although Right to Rent was not mentioned explicitly by any of the participants, it is identified as a key theme within the research due to the lack of knowledge and confusion when researchers presented the term to participants. Almost all participants, whether home or international did not know what the Right to Rent check was, and when discussed further, many revealed that they had been asked to provide a student card, two international participants were asked for passports and only one had the full correct check. The findings indicate that not only are the students unaware of the legislation, but there was also a lack of correct knowledge from many landlords and letting agents carrying out the check.

When asked about identity documents provided, responses varied:

"Just a form with my name on. As I wasn't with an agency it was really basic."

"In my case, they just wanted contact details of someone else in case, I guess, if something happens to me or need to pay my rent."

The lack of knowledge amongst the student population around Right to Rent legislation is concerning as although none of the participants reported examples of some of the discrimination outlined in the literature, if students are unaware of the correct practice around Right to Rent, they may not identify when potential discrimination is occurring.

What is equally concerning is the variation between participants in checks by their landlords or letting agents. The number of students that reported needing to only show their student card as identification may indicate a trend amongst landlords to assume that the University has validated the students immigration status on their behalf.

It is clear that attention needs to be paid to Right to Rent in both the advice and information that University support services are disseminating to students, and in conversations with local regulatory bodies to ensure that landlords and letting agents are better equipped to carry out checks fairly and correctly. The small sample size of this study revealed only a single correct Right to Rent check, highlighting that it may be a widespread issue within the private rented sector in Brighton and Hove.

5.3 Landlords and letting agents

The relationship between students and their landlords and letting agents was a recurring theme in the data, however home students were far more vocal with regards to issues with that relationship than international students, particularly when it came to maintenance reporting. As discussed previously, this may be due to the competitive nature of the lettings market in Brighton and Hove and could be an area for additional research – are international students in the private sector less likely to complain due to a perceived lack of choice and security?

During the search for accommodation, international students reported difficulty in getting in touch with landlords and knowing who to trust without any prior knowledge of how the lettings process works:

“For me, the most difficult part was I have sent many emails to many landlords and they didn’t reply so that’s the most difficult because I didn’t know if they agree or not. Some did agree but they say I cannot join immediately they asked me to stay in Airbnb for some days and you can come later and some are on vacation for the summer and will be returning on this date so till then can you hold on for a bit.”

Once again, this flags a conflict between the academic year and the availability of some student properties, which for international students, provides a further uncertainty about where they will be living upon arrival in a new country.

One student, living in homestay accommodation spoke of the flexibility that her landlord afforded her due to her international student status:

“I need to thank my landlord a lot because I explained my situation and she just accepted that and said ‘give me the deposit when you arrive and we can do the paperwork when you arrive. Just come and rest and we can talk about it later’.”

Although the above is an example of a good-natured and flexible homestay host, it does highlight the lack of security that the particular student had upon arrival. The student was required to place a high level of trust in the landlord and as they

travelled to the UK without a contractual agreement for housing, the landlord could have reversed their agreement at any point, leaving the student without accommodation in a new country.

A further point to note from the research is that all but one of the international students studied lived in houses let by private landlords, host families or sublet. This could be due in part to additional barriers in place when renting through an agent such as requiring a UK based guarantor, large deposit requirements or needing to pay rent in advance. If this is the case, once again it reduces the level of choice that international students have in an already fast-paced and highly competitive private sector housing market.

5.4 Financial and legal

Many of the largest barriers that international students faced when renting in the private sector in Brighton and Hove were the financial and legal requirements placed upon them. Difficulty in finding a UK based guarantor was by far the most common of these barriers, with most participants stating that it was impossible to have one considering it was their first time in the UK. Difficulty in securing a guarantor forced international students to seek landlords who would not ask for one, sublet, or live with a host family as outlined in the previous section.

“They asked me for a UK guarantor which is crazy as I cannot have one. I haven’t been in the UK before!”

One of the participants, a PhD student, reported a unique difficulty amongst participants in that the student was in receipt of a salary from the University and could afford to pay for housing, yet the agent still classed them as a student which caused difficulty in securing their accommodation:

“I couldn’t persuade them (letting agent) that I could afford the flat so the fact that I was getting paid from the University, because I am a PhD student I couldn’t prove that...I couldn’t persuade my landlord that I would get paid.”

Anecdotally, from advice given within Housing Services at Sussex, many students with children face a similar issue. They are not eligible to rent student properties because they have dependants, but then struggle to find non-student rental properties that will accept them as tenants because of their student status.

International student participants in the research also reported having to pay six to 12 months rent in advance without a UK-based guarantor, with some even paying the whole rent in advance, just to take the property off the market:

“I know some fellow international student friends who had to pay six months, one of my friends paid a full year in advance as he wanted to secure the place.”

Once again, this highlights the competitive nature of the private rented market for students and the power that landlords have when it comes to standards and setting of terms, as international students take extreme action to secure properties due to few other options.

The issue of a reference was also a barrier to renting reported by one of the international student participants, as although the student had rented in her home country, the concept of a landlord reference does not exist there and her previous landlord could not speak or write in English. One participant also spoke of the financial difficulty in having contracts cross over due to different start and end dates:

“Having two deposits killed me last year. That was hard. Almost £1,500 floating.”

This is clearly a large financial burden on the student, however if they choose instead to separate contracts, it can also be problematic:

“There’s not much help for what I’m meant to do when there is a month where I have no house. Sub-letting, which is obviously illegal, but that is what I do and that is what everyone ends up doing. There is nothing else you really can do.”

One of the points to note in this section is that many of these problems can be solved with support functions available at the University, for example, the University has a rent guarantor scheme. The rent guarantor scheme acts as a guarantor for up to 20 Sussex students a year and provides at least 20 homestay places to students who do not have UK guarantors. Places are offered on a first come first served basis and are subject to eligibility criteria. The scheme guarantees up to £135 per week (approximately £578.57 per month) of rent only, and does not guarantee bills. An additional support is letting to students on a short term basis over the summer. It is clear however, that this information is not reaching the student body effectively enough, leaving students to find often-stressful solutions to these issues.

5.5 Homestay and lodgings

Perhaps the most unexpected thoughts and opinions emerged when researchers questioned participants on homestay and lodgings. At the University of Sussex there is an active homestay and lodgings programme, recruiting over 200 landlords per year and advertising rooms to students as an alternative private sector option. It has been widely assumed that the flexible nature of



homestay and the lack of need for a guarantor or large deposit makes it an attractive option for international students; however, the data in this study speaks to the contrary. All participants in the study were asked about their opinions of homestay and lodgings as a private sector option, and none, either home or international, wanted to live with a host family. In fact, one of the participants currently living with a host family stated that they would not chose the option again.

Most participants commented that they felt living in homestay would be like living with their own family and that they wanted greater freedom:

“Definitely feel like I’m in someone else’s house. Because I have so many restrictions, I can’t cook in the evenings. This is the most difficult task for me. She doesn’t like me cooking in the evening but I come to Uni in the morning and return in the evening so whenever I have some food in the evening I can eat that otherwise I can’t eat at night as she said ‘if you want to cook, you cook in the morning or afternoon’ as she says she wants to rest.”

In the case of the above participant, once the focus group was complete, the student was offered alternative accommodation due to the concerning restrictions placed upon her by the homestay host, which was declined. At the University of Sussex, all homestay hosts are visited and sign up to a code of conduct preventing restrictions such as these, however this host was found through an alternative website, and the situation faced by the above

participant further highlights the often uncomfortable living situations that international students accept due to restricted alternatives.

Although none of the participants would choose to live in homestay, some stated that they are glad the option is there should they need it, however it is clear that more work should be done to ensure that all student groups have fair access to choice, rather than last resort options.

5.6 Networks

The final key theme that emerged from the research is that of the importance of networks when renting for students. Many of the participants spoke of utilising networks available to them; however, one of the barriers for some was finding a suitable network to access. For one international student participant that lived in the UK previously, it was much easier to secure a property as they had developed a network of people with whom they could live:

“I had lived in England before so I had experience of Right Move and different sites, so at the end of my first year I tried to do the usual student thing of finding people you want to live with and then looking for a house altogether.”

For this student in particular, their church network also allowed them to find a UK-based guarantor and gave them access to advice and support through many who had rented before.

Participants also highlighted the risk of trying to meet people online and develop appropriate networks to secure a group of housemates:

“I started to look at Spare Room and everything but these websites if you are overseas are difficult because actually you are not in the country, you face a great risk.”

One participant felt that by using University tools, such as the dedicated, monitored student house-hunt Facebook page, they felt more secure in the knowledge that they were speaking to other students, highlighting the importance of the University as a network that can be utilised and trusted during the house-hunt.

Students also spoke of the importance of networks that they were a part of as a student:

“Within the international community on campus, if most international students hang out with international students we might not get all of the full information, whereas I have a network of UK based people, I’m lucky that, if I didn’t I can’t imagine that it would have been much better to find a place and do it calmly.”

It is clear that the creation of useful networks is an area that University housing and advice departments can develop further to offer international students peer-to-peer advice, support and companionship throughout the rental process that could reduce some of the barriers and stresses that are currently faced.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

It is clear from the data presented that international students are facing unique pressures when renting accommodation in the private sector, often forcing these students to take extreme measures to secure accommodation, or ‘settle’ for housing that they do not desire or are comfortable in. For institutions without an abundance of university managed accommodation to offer to international students, these private sector challenges must be fully explored, accounted for in advice services and in many cases lobbied against.

As predicted in undertaking the study, Right to Rent poses challenges to renting for international students, and it is important that housing advice services bring attention to the legislation when disseminating advice, as only with a full understanding of their rights, can a tenant know when those rights are being ignored. Although this research did not generate any explicit examples of discrimination in response to other legislative changes, it should be noted that the small sample size may not be generalizable and does not mean discrimination is not happening and so further research is required.

Within Housing Services at the University of Sussex, this research has been incredibly enlightening and the service is committed to continuing to listen to students throughout their private renting searches to ensure that support is as relevant and useful as possible. The Housing Service is very good at collecting data from students that live in University-managed accommodation, however this UKCISA grant-funded research has enforced the equal importance of measuring the support the service offered to students who do not. As such, the research recommendations are presented below, along with the University of Sussex Housing Services commitment to set an example through our own practice:

1. Create advice and support materials and services that are tailored to the international student experience when renting in the private sector.

University of Sussex Housing Services are now committed to developing specific printed and online materials for international students, private sector webinars and Skype advice appointments that consider the geographical barriers faced. A

review of the awareness of housing advice services amongst students will also take place to identify ways to spread the word.

2. Generate relationships with relevant stakeholders to lobby for change to unfair practice in the private sector.

University of Sussex is a founding member of Rent Smart Brighton & Hove, a service offering advice and support for renters that also joins stakeholders such as Universities, Brighton and Hove City Council, Citizens Advice, Landlords Associations and other partners to lobby for fairer renting practice:
www.rentsmartbrightonhove.org

3. Survey and interview students prior to arrival, across the academic year and after advice is given to review practice.

The research stated within this study will continue through the next academic year and beyond in order to respond to new challenges as swiftly and effectively as possible. The Housing Services team at the University will fund small scale focus groups, of up to 20 people in total, twice a year. The funding will go towards incentives for students to take part, as the Housing Services team will carry out and transcribe the focus groups, which means no external funding will be required.

4. If you are able, offer international students a guarantor service.

The findings of this research will contribute to a review into the University of Sussex guarantor service to see if it can be advertised more effectively and support more students.

5. Facilitate the creation of networks to offer support to international renters.

University of Sussex Housing Services will invite colleagues from other relevant services across the University to explore the idea of the creation of an online network for student renters, offering peer-to-peer support, advice from University services and clear information to help with a private sector search.

We hope that the research carried out inspires others to think about their own offering of housing support and how although home and international students experience many of the same challenges, international students face unique barriers to renting that with the right support can be overcome effectively.

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UKCISA gratefully acknowledges the financial support it receives from the Department for Education, and from the Scottish Government.

