

# The experience of homeless university students in London and how institutions can help



While successive government policies have made university education more accessible to groups that were previously excluded, those same groups are also most likely to experience homelessness. [Patrick Mulrenan](#) examines the impact of homelessness on students' wellbeing and performance, and suggests how universities can intervene.

One of the challenges of policymaking is identifying what the issue is. Say 'student housing' and many people picture young, single people living in self-imposed squalor (but with the helpful option of going back to mum and dad). In fact, there have been significant changes in the profile of students over the last 25 years. Successive governments have [encouraged](#) universities to widen participation, though top universities still face [criticism](#) that they remain bastions of the middle class and of the privately educated elite. There may be some truth in this, and to see the impact of widening participation policies you may need to look to post-1992 universities in the UK. These are new universities that are more likely to draw their students from the local area.

In these institutions you will find students from a very wide range of backgrounds. For example, nearly [two-thirds](#) of students at London Metropolitan University are from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds; and nationally, people from these backgrounds are now [more likely](#) to university than White people. Other groups entering higher education in [greater numbers](#) include those from lower income groups, single parents, people with disabilities, and people leaving care.

While this is a welcome development, it is important to note that the groups we are encouraging to come to university are the very ones that are most likely to experience homelessness. For example, [68% of households](#) accepted by local authorities as homeless in London are from ethnic minorities. The result of these changes means that it is now much more likely that students will be homeless, or will become homeless during their studies.

[My research](#) explored the impact of homelessness on these students through in-depth interviews and a focus group with 16 students. Reflecting the diverse body of students of a post-1992 university in London, 12 were from an ethnic minority background, 13 were women, and 11 had children. In terms of their housing situation, 10 were in temporary accommodation, one staying with relatives and one in a hostel; the remaining four had found rented homes following a period of homelessness.

These students found it hard to complete academic work because of the poor condition of their accommodation. One student in temporary accommodation said: *"We had no water, no taps in the bathroom, the entire flat was damp and wet. We lost clothes, we lost furniture."* Overcrowding was another challenge: students often shared one room with their families and had to wait until their children went to sleep to start their academic work. Students reported feelings of guilt, and hid their worries from their children: *"I get up in the night to cry. I can't let my daughter see me crying about being homeless."*

Unsurprisingly, focusing on their academic work proved very difficult: *"I start an essay, and the stress of poor housing, noise, unhappy children, everything floods back."* For many participants, coming to University at least provided a temporary respite from this pressure: *"You get inside [the University], you feel so much different, the pressure is gone."* But the relief was short-lived. Another student said: *"By the time you get home, it just gets to the stage where you are so depressed...you feel like you can't carry on."*

Living in homeless temporary accommodation is a costly and time-consuming business. Students were sometimes offered accommodation a long way from their children's schools, and had to ferry them to school before coming into University. One student noted she: *"Just travels, does lectures, works in the library, travels."* Another student had been moved eight times in seven years, on one occasion to a property 26 miles from the University campus.

It was a testament to the resilience of the students that they managed to remain at university despite these challenges. The research found that the key factor which influenced their determination to complete their studies was their relationship with their families. They were proud to be at university, and did not want to let their parents down. One noted that: *"I was the first in my family to go to university, and this was a way to be different from my mum. I grew up in poverty and I wanted to get out of that."*

But for the 11 participants who had children, their resilience was very much related to the desire to be a good role model for their children: *“Two weeks ago, my daughter said to me: ‘Mum I’m going to say something to you.’ I said ‘What is it, do you want a fiver?’ ‘No,’ she said, ‘Mum I’m really really proud of you.’ It brought me to tears.”* A student in the focus group noted: *“To me it is let down to tell your child you do not have anything. If you have something it also motivates your child to become someone.”*

Every student in the study had their own story to tell about how they became homeless, and how they coped with the experience while studying at university. They were rightly proud of overcoming many emotional and practical challenges to continue their studies. But their pride was also a burden. None had approached the University for help, and most had not even told their families and other students about their homelessness: *“I didn’t mention it to anyone...I just felt I did not want anyone to sympathise with me and I think that’s where I went wrong. The whole of the first year I never saw any lecturer...even my friends. I kept it to myself.”*

The research presents a number of challenges to universities. The first is to quantify the scale of student homelessness. It would be helpful if universities identified housing status in the same way they do with, for example, students’ socio-economic background and ethnicity. Homeless students should also be further encouraged to approach support services.

As well as identifying need, universities can build on the key assets that students have. A key finding of this research is the important role children play in encouraging their parents to come to university, and in decisions to stay at university. Half of the grant for this research was used in providing a children’s day at university. This provided an opportunity for nearly a hundred children to engage in fun activities. But it also allowed them to see where their parents go during the day, and why it is important to them. This was a great success, and is an example of a more positive, asset-based approach to promoting student success.

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Note: the above draws on the author’s [published work](#) (with Julia Atkins and Simon Cox) in Critical Social Policy. The research has also been featured in The Guardian, The Independent, and on news broadcasts.

### About the Author



[Patrick Mulrenan](#) is Senior Lecturer at London Metropolitan University.

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