



# Studentification

## A continuing process of change

*Phil Banks examines the phenomenon of 'studentification' and its social, economic and environmental impacts upon some parts of the UK's university cities and towns. In more recent years the increased commoditisation of students has led to changes in accommodation available and to partial 'destudentification'.*

**Studentification** – the social and environmental changes caused by very large numbers of students living in particular areas of a town or city.

The tension between town and gown is as old as the existence of universities themselves. The appropriately named St Scholastica's Day Riot of 1355 was an actual battle between the students of the University of Oxford and the residents of the town. It ended with almost 100 people dead. The townspeople were found to be at fault and had to pay an annual fine to the university for the next 470 years!

The numbers of entrants to full-time (first) degree courses, postgraduate taught courses and postgraduate research courses in the UK have grown considerably. From 2006–07 to 2015–16, they increased by 31.2%, 30.5% and 25.7% respectively. Full-time young undergraduate entrants make up the highest proportion of all

entrants, and demand for higher education from 18-year-olds remains high. In 2016–17, there were 1.76 million undergraduates and 551,585 postgraduates. All of these students need to be housed somewhere, and many within houses of multiple occupancy (HMOs).

### What is 'studentification'?

Small university towns have always been hugely affected by their student population. Aberystwyth, for example, has a total population of around 19,000 that is boosted for 30 weeks of the year by over 9000 students, many of whom live close to the university. Studies carried out in larger cities and towns led to the establishment of the term 'studentification' in 2002.

In the vast majority of UK cities, between half and three-quarters of students live in HMOs or similar types of accommodation (Figure 1). Usually found close to universities, the concentration of student HMOs in certain areas has led to them derogatorily being called 'student ghettos'. For example, student accommodation makes up 75% of the Green Lane area of Durham, two-thirds

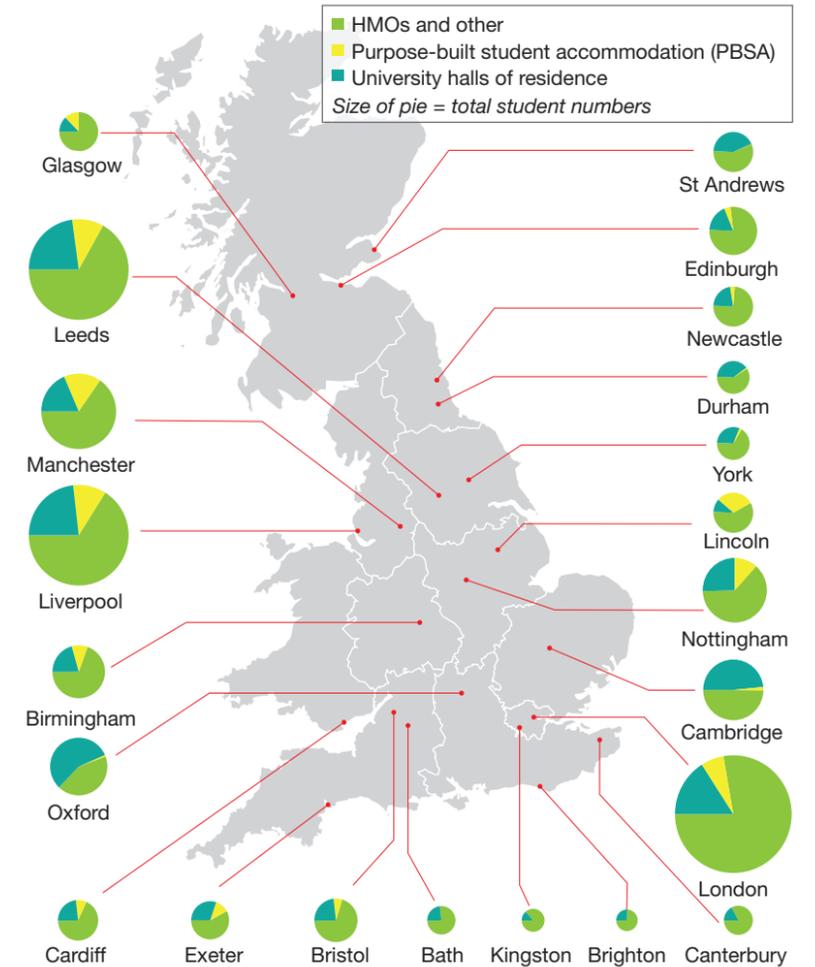
of Headingley in Leeds and as much as 90% in certain areas of Nottingham.

Darren Smith (2002) has classified the impacts of this concentration of student accommodation in the following way:

- **Social impacts:** A transient, generally young and single social grouping replaces and/or displaces established residents. Common perceptions of change in student areas point to an increase in low-level anti-social behaviour. This can sometimes include issues such as noise nuisance emanating from houses, streets or gardens, vandalism of vehicles, street furniture and private property, and vomiting and urination in the streets.
- **Cultural impacts:** Research has shown that when large communities of students become deeply embedded within a location, significant cultural change may occur. The expansion of HMOs in traditional owner-occupied, family areas can lead to a change in the nature of communities. Transient occupation engenders a lack of community integration and cohesion as well as less commitment to maintain the quality of the local environment, eventually leading to an increasing unpopularity of the area for families wishing to bring up children.
- **Physical impacts:** A general decline in the proportion of owner-occupiers can lead to physical changes including generally unkempt properties, squalor and dereliction. Some neighbourhoods can also suffer more permanent 'street blight', which may include estate agents' letting boards, neglected/concreted-over front gardens and unsightly extensions. Large concentrations of young people living in households with a high density can contribute to physical mess and noise, increased pressure on public services (policing, cleansing, etc.) and traffic/parking problems.
- **Economic impacts:** The inflation of property prices and changes in the balance of the housing stock results in neighbourhoods becoming dominated by private rented accommodation and houses of multiple occupation, with decreasing levels of owner-occupation.

This was summed up in a national newspaper:

As student numbers have grown, so parts of Leeds, Birmingham, Nottingham and Newcastle have been taken over by a transitory population of young people who aren't interested in tending the gardens or cutting the hedges. Moreover, they keep odd hours, throw late-night parties and spend much of



their time elsewhere... Some streets resemble slums; the roads are potholed and litter-strewn, the grass uncut and the fences broken.

**Figure 1** Types of student accommodation in a selection of university towns

### Recent changes in the student accommodation sector

According to a 2017 student accommodation report, there were 602,000 purpose-built bed spaces available to students and yet the UK had 1.04 million students attending university and not living at home. With the number of people being accepted onto university courses growing year on year, plus a rise in international student numbers, this is only going to get worse. The number of HMOs is insufficient to fill the shortfall in accommodation provision, a problem that is becoming even more acute given the new 2018 regulations that require stricter licensing of such properties. One council, the London Borough of Bexley, stated that:

The Direction will allow the Council to manage the fast growth in small HMOs and the resulting loss of family housing, enabling the Council to control

An example of a town centre service that is catering for the needs of students





Advertisement for a town centre PBSA scheme

the number and distribution of small HMOs via planning, determine the appropriateness of new HMOs on a case-by-case basis and ensure they contribute to sustainable neighbourhoods.

As well as this, opposition from resident groups to student neighbours has placed pressures on local politicians and planning departments to enable **purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA)** to be developed in other parts of towns and cities, often with the aim of dispersing students away from these classically ‘studentified’ neighbourhoods.

The consequence of the above has been an increase in PBSA schemes. This is housing specifically built for university students by private developers. Properties usually take one of two forms:

- self-contained studio or ‘cluster’ flats with private kitchens but shared living space;
- modern halls of residence containing ensuite bedrooms with shared kitchen, dining and living facilities.

Town/city centre high-rise developments such as Horizon Heights in Liverpool, the 37-storey Liberty Heights in Manchester, Sky Plaza in Leeds or Chapter Spitalfields in London result in a small ‘footprint’ where a large number of students are concentrated. This self-contained accommodation is changing the ‘look’ of university cities and can separate students from the rest of the town or city. Local services such as small supermarkets and takeaway food outlets may go into decline.



Horizon Heights, Liverpool – an example of a PBSA scheme

There has also been a growth in ‘student villages’ on or close to university campuses. These can either belong to the university itself or be part of the private sector. One northern university estimates that an on-campus self-catering accommodation block will pay for itself within seven years.

### ‘Destudentification’

The phenomenon of ‘**destudentification**’ can be seen in some small university towns where PBSA schemes have been developed on or near the university campuses. This is not always popular. For example, in Aberystwyth the local Chamber of Commerce was opposed to the building of extra student accommodation about 1.5 km out of the town. The chairman stated:

You can see the effect in the amount of vacant properties in town now, whereas the town before had no vacant properties. So those students are not in town. They’re up the hill, and what’s the incentive for them to come down?

The Chamber of Commerce warned that businesses could close if student spending is focused on campus.

The concentration of students in these communities may mean that they become increasingly (socio-spatially) segregated from other social groups, and this can have negative consequences.

### Conclusion

In the last 25 years, successive governments have advocated the expansion of higher education. The resultant growth in student numbers has naturally increased the need for accommodation. HMOs have long been seen as the solution for housing students, free from the halls of their first year. Second and third years can try their hand at living independently for the first time.

However, changes in planning rules, general housing shortages, increased numbers of wealthy overseas students and higher expectations of British students have led to the ‘commodification’ of students where they are seen as a potentially valuable source of income for investors in residential property. This has in turn led to the growth of PBSA schemes and student villages. The double jeopardy of increasingly isolated student populations and empty former student HMOs can only increase the problems experienced by towns and city centres because of other changes in society. **TE**

## REVIEW

### Key points

- Ever since universities began, there has been some level of tension between the host town or city and students.
- Student numbers are high and continue to grow.
- Accommodation for students has evolved with the times.
- Inner urban areas with student houses have been demonised in the press because of the perceived anti-social behaviour of large groups of young people living close to one another.
- ‘Studentification’ is a neologism to describe the social and environmental changes caused by high student populations concentrated in one area of a town.
- Student expectations regarding their accommodation have changed with increasing affluence of society as a whole.
- Purpose-built student accommodation and student villages have increasingly isolated students from the towns in which they study, causing economic decline in previously studentified areas.

### Pause for thought

- Do large concentrations of students in a relatively small area of a town have an overall positive or negative effect on the economy and environment of that area?
- The attitudes of local non-student residents may depend upon whether they directly benefit socially and, more importantly, financially from students’ presence.
- Are student villages and self-contained tower blocks of any benefit to the local residents (and students) or simply to the construction companies and building developers who have invested in them?

### Context

- ‘Urban renaissance’ has tended to draw on two perspectives: the new economic geographies of service-based sectors of the economy that use innovative technology, such as industries where people rely on computers and the internet; the importance of cities as meeting places, consumption centres and aesthetic sites.

## RESPONSE

### Assimilation

- 1 Study Figure 1. Describe the variation in the provision of student accommodation in Great Britain.
- 2 Summarise the impacts of an influx of large numbers of students living in a particular area of a town or city.
- 3 How will changes in the licensing of houses of multiple occupancy (HMOs) make them a less attractive business proposition for potential landlords?
- 4 Outline the impacts, both positive and negative, that you think a large purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) scheme will have on its immediate surroundings.
- 5 Outline the costs and benefits of the creation of ‘student villages’ to (a) students who live there and (b) the local community.

### Evaluation

- 1 For a studentified area that you have studied, assess the extent to which the process has impacted on that particular part of the town or city.

#### ANSWER PLAN

- A clear identification of your chosen area.
- Constant referral to your chosen place with specific detail.
- A description of the social, cultural, physical and economic impacts (one paragraph for each).
- A summative statement that assesses the ‘extent to which...’ each aspect of the area has been impacted.

- 2 Examine the photograph of Horizon Heights in Liverpool (p. 16). Describe the building and surrounding area.
- 3 What do you understand by the term ‘commodification of students’? Explain how this might impact on student accommodation in the future.
- 4 Evaluate the extent to which destudentification is taking place in some university towns and cities.
- 5 ‘Small towns are affected far more by the presence of a university than large towns and cities.’ Assess, using examples, the extent to which the above statement reflects reality.

### Extension

- 1 Visit [https://democracy.bristol.gov.uk/Data/Cabot,%20Clifton%20&%20Clifton%20East%20Neighbourhood%20Partnership/201510131900/Agenda/1013\\_9.pdf](https://democracy.bristol.gov.uk/Data/Cabot,%20Clifton%20&%20Clifton%20East%20Neighbourhood%20Partnership/201510131900/Agenda/1013_9.pdf). This gives a detailed residents’ account of how they believe they have been ‘studentified’ in one area of Bristol, whereas [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/bitstream/2134/20800/3/Kinton\\_EPA-2015-0435%20r3%20080316.pdf](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/bitstream/2134/20800/3/Kinton_EPA-2015-0435%20r3%20080316.pdf) gives details of destudentification in Loughborough.
- 2 Choose a university town or city that you might be considering as a place for your higher education. Research the available accommodation, particularly HMO areas, to see how the town has been affected in those places.