BM 79

Statement on Housing and Transport

INTRODUCTION

The following statement stems from the 2019 Policy Paper on the Social Dimension of Higher Education. In the aforementioned paper, ESU divides the costs faced by students in two groups: the direct costs (i.e. tuition fees) and the indirect costs of higher education (i.e. housing and transport). Less visible at first glance, these indirect costs are an important part of the budget and of the life of students and can prove to be part of the barriers to an accessible higher education. They also have an undeniable influence on the living conditions of students: as student precarity is a growing issue across Europe, it is crucial for ESU to extend its stance in that field, and to take a strong position to have better living, and therefore, studying conditions for students.

HOUSING

Housing is an essential part of a student's life, as without this basic need being fulfilled, there is no capacity to study. Accommodation also takes up one of the biggest parts of students' budget, especially when there is a need to move closer to the study place. It can however become an important source of stress for many reasons, including the fact that a housing shortage is to declare across Europe – not only for students – and that the cost it represents can easily become very high for the restricted budget that many young people run on. Finding suitable housing is not an easy task, especially when accommodation is not offered by higher education institutions or any public system, or when the ones offered by the higher education institutions or the public system have very low standards, and it becomes increasingly complicated for students who are in precarious situations, or who have specific needs in terms of physical accessibility.

As mentioned before, one of the main problems with housing for students is that there simply is not enough of it. This affects housing prices negatively, making it much harder for students to afford the housing that is left on the housing market. There needs to be an adequate amount of housing to actually fill the need of students. In most places, simply building more housing, and focusing on student friendly housing, can help solving this problem, but this is not the case everywhere. We can as well note that over the past decade

there has been an increase in the offer of luxury student housing, creating economic discrimination on the housing market and only enabling students from better-off background to fulfill their need for accommodation.

Even in situations where there is enough housing for all students, its pricing has to be kept at a level that is affordable for everyone. Too expensive housing can be a barrier for students to even access the housing market and can also be a cause of mental strain for those with high rents. It can force students to have to choose between necessities in their everyday life, in order to afford rent, and can force them to have to prioritise working more, which can get in the way of their time to study. To this end, it could be advised to advocate for rent framing, especially in areas near higher education institutions, as it is for instance done in France in some cities. Another way in which accessibility could be improved is by introducing further protections on deposits for student renters. Limiting rental deposits to the value of one month's rent and the implementation of a deposit protection scheme are some ways in which student renters can be protected against the illegal retention of deposits by landlords. The deposit protection scheme would ensure that the deposit is protected by an independent third party. It is kept by them until the end of a tenancy where, at that time the money will either be paid out to the tenant or landlord as agreed between them, or the money could be paid out as decided by arbitration/mediation.

Moreover, it is crucial for students to have access to enough privacy and to be able to have a room of their own. It means that the housing market for students should allow all of them to have a room of their own, without being forced to share the same room as someone else, if this is not actively desired. The market of shared rooms can be a makeshift way to mitigate high prices, but it should be seen as treating the symptoms, instead of getting to the core of the problem. Accommodation should also cater to the basic needs of students, meaning that there should be enough space to study, personal storage for clothes, books and other possessions. Furthermore, there should be access to proper toilet, bathing kitchen facilities, these can be shared or not. The sustainability of housing as well as universal design should be central too. All housing for students must be safe and follow health and safety regulations, which is often currently not the case, as the precarious situation of students pushed landlords to rent unsafe places at high cost as the demand will not decrease.

The place of study is often the center of a student's life, with classes, library and social life all happening in nearby locations. Therefore, it is important that student friendly housing actually exists near to, or at a minimum a fair distance from, the place of study by various means of transport. Living too far away can inhibit a student's social possibilities and be in the way of fruitfully fulfilling their studies as well as increase the cost of transportation to the place of study and to extra-curricular activities. The cost of housing and its distance can also influence strongly the choice of the higher education institution where someone will study, creating discrimination based on financial means and keep some students from

attending the university of their choice simply because they cannot afford to move closeby to complete their curricula.

Yet another key element in the issue of housing is the protection of tenants, especially when it comes to more vulnerable populations, of which students are part. This legal protection should cover the issues caused by different types of discriminations (based on gender, age ethnic background, sexual orientation, ability and disability…), but also by power relations between landlords and tenants. Indeed, more than often power resides in the hands of the owner of housing, and this can lead to very problematic situations for tenants, especially when they are students and/or young. In different European countries, enacted legislations which favor the rights of the landlord pose various barriers to students, for example, preventing the creation of shared accommodation, the access to financial aids and others. Hence there needs to be specific protection mechanisms in place to avoid any exploitation of students and their rights in the context of housing. When it comes to discriminations, the housing market should be accessible for all students, no matter their background. No amount of discrimination is acceptable, and all students should have a fair chance of accessing housing in their area without regards to discriminatory factors. Furthermore, students with mental andphysical disabilities are also often subject to discrimination both directly and indirectly in students' housing facilities. Students with impairments may not have the possibility to attend a HEI if they don't have the possibility to get access to adequate accommodations. To tackle these issues, students' housingmust assure assistance and a quota of accommodations accessible for, and that fulfil the needs of, all students with physical and mental disabilities.

Moreover, international students are often more vulnerable when looking for accommodation in their host country. Not knowing anyone, or not knowing what is fair and normal in the new housing market can be a barrier for international students. This also leaves them vulnerable for being scammed by unsympathetic individuals looking to gain personally on unsuspecting international students' situation. International students should get help and guidance on the housing market they are entering and get the necessary support, if they have fallen victim to a scam. Furthermore, in order to accomplish this, higher education institutions and local authorities should be encouraged to create and manage platforms in order to support students when it comes to housing issues.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences on students showcased existing difficulties and problems in the field of student housing. Many students, especially international ones, found themselves in difficult situations when the student housing they were using until then was either closed, or their lease came to an end. With the pandemic context and with no possibility to go back home (whether nationally or internationally), the situation was extremely hard. It showed the urgent necessity for housing policies that guarantee continuity, especially when it comes to public and/or university housing, and that housing is a right for all. Students renting on the private market also found themselves

without any financial resources and struggled to make ends meet and to pay rent. This showcases the fact that more than ever sufficient grants must be priority to enable everyone with the will to tackle higher education to do so with dignity.

In this context, ESU formulates the following demands:
● Set rent regulations and rent framing policies to avoid prices skyrocketing, and to keep housing accessible for all;
● Establish and encourage proper grant support systems, allowing students to sustain and accommodate themselves in a safe way;
● Universal design and physical accessibility need to be core elements when designing accommodation;
● Housing continuity should be ensured, meaning that no students should find themselves with no housing solution, especially between one academic year to another, or during force majeure cases like the COVID-19 pandemic;
● Proper legal framework has to exist to balance power relations between students and owners, and to ensure the safety of the tenants;
● Encourage the creation of quality public student housing with low rent.
● Housing should be accessible for students with physical and mental disabilities.
● Joint agreements between tenants' and landlords' organizations can help mitigate damages. This is especially true in the areas where housing market is resulting in a spike of prices and negotiation should therefore be encouraged by local administrations
● Encourage the establishment of dedicated rental support helpdesks within HEIs or local authorities, so that students can have professional opinions regarding their doubts about the regularity of the rental agreements and the clauses for withdrawal

TRANSPORT

Before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, a student would commute daily to and from their place of study, extracurricular activities, group work, sports and other social activities. National lockdown measures and the shift to online learning environments have significantly impacted student mobility. As a result, reduced access to face-to-face learning opportunities, services, social networks and other goods that are essential for social inclusion is affecting the well-being and quality of life for students and citizens in general. This highlights the centrality of mobility through accessible and adequate transport systems, not only in a student's life but above that, for the successful delivery of social policy and inclusion.

Within the context of the social dimension of education, transport plays an important role in preventing social exclusion. Difficulties with transport can prevent people from accessing and participating in learning or restrict their choice of the quality, subject matter or type of

learning they attend[1]. This can affect access to education at all levels, however in this statement we refer to the consequences and opportunities of transport systems in the ability to *access* and *achieve* higher education.

The universal design of transportation for students differs highly throughout cities, regions and countries. However, what is definite is that transport carries a financial expense that is, more often than not, incurred by the students. Although student-prices for transport schemes are present in a number of cities, when related to students' low budget, they still tend to pay high amounts of money on transport passes and tickets, both in their home country and more so when studying abroad. Alone, transport costs may not seem problematic, however when taking into account other student costs including tuition fees, housing, materials necessary for study and extracurricular activities, we get a full picture of the financial burden that lower economy and precarious students must incur in order to attain a full academic experience in higher education. Therefore, the subsidization of transportation costs, specifically for not locally residing students, would positively impact the financial burden of students in higher education.

The cumulative costs of higher education not only aggravate socio-economic division amongst students but also can contribute to their social exclusion as students who are not able to afford these costs, particularly as inflation is on the rise in a number of big cities, must remain in their hometown or live farther away from their institution of choice. Transport disadvantage takes a toll on the ability of students to fully and successfully participate in academic and extracurricular activities and this consequently impacts the mental health and well-being of students.

Apart from the issue of affordability, transport systems can disrupt and disadvantage mobility when they are inadequate to meet the different needs of accessibility and availability for certain groups including non-car users, those with mobility impairments, including people with disabilities, with young children and with heavy belongings, people working/travelling outside of conventional office hours, those who feel vulnerable to abuse and people from minority ethnic groups, and people with language or learning difficulties.

As students constitute a wide and diverse demographic in society likely to use public transport daily[2], and may present any of the afore-mentioned needs, students indeed provide the adequate target/ model group for the design of smart and accessible transport systems. At decision-making, design and implementation level, the obligation for transport companies and ministries (and municipalities) to develop student-friendly models for public transportation systems ties very closely with their social and ecological responsibility.

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[1] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0966692310001523
[2] https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_406_en.pdf

Another crucial point is night transport, almost completely absent in several university cities. If well implemented, night transport can considerably reduce the number of road accidents, due to fatigue or driving under influence. In addition, it would also allow commuting students to fully experience the social side of student life, as well as making it safer to return home, by avoiding long walks in the dark.

The extension and enhancement of the public transport network in a city not only increases the quality of life of the citizens but also significantly lowers the environmental impact of each citizen who, in the absence of an effective transport network, would choose the private car when available instead of public transportation, or would be kept out of higher education due to the lack of means of attending classes.

Furthermore, in some cities such as Milan, the proliferation of bicycle rental services by public transport companies to implement the city service has been observed. This service benefits primarily the student population who often have to move from one faculty to another in a short time. Rental bicycles offer an optimal solution for this cause as well as further reducing the environmental impact. Since a high percental of students choose the bike as a mean of transport because of economic and environmental reasons, it is crucial to assure safe cycling lanes on roadways. In fact, safe cycle paths decrease considerably the rate of cycling accidents and reduce fatalities for all road users[3].

We can also see virtuous examples of cities or states that make transport free for the whole city population such as Luxembourg where all transport is free at national level; Luxembourg is the first nation in the world to take this initiative. Other cities guarantee free public transport for students such as Florence and Tallinn.

Removing public transport costs not only reduces a heavy and extra weight from citizens, including students, who have a low-income but also allows people to experience everyday life with more serenity and safety.

Another aspect of transportation systems which can affect students is traffic safety. Higher education institutions are often situated in major cities or other places with heavy traffic. It is therefore important that policy makers ensure proper traffic regulation and safety measures to protect students on and around their campuses.

With this in mind, ESU encourages transport companies and governments (national, regional and local) to:

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[3] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3708009/ ;
https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/05/190529113036.html

- Invest in and promote the local, national and transnational railway and bicycle networks so that they become a cheaper and equally efficient method of transport as the airplane and cars, respectively.
- Along with the education institutions, promote sustainable and free public transport for students (both local and international).
- Involve student representatives, particularly those specialising in design, in the creation and/or renovation of public and sustainable transportation routes in and around university faculties, housing facilities and public spaces including libraries, sports grounds, parks and other cultural and social places of student interest.
- Assure accessibility and the independence of users with mobility impairments, language and learning impairments[4].
- Ensure that public transport systems meet standards for health and safety and appropriate working conditions for employees within the transport system.
- Guarantee an extensive network of night public transport that covers the main areas of the cities and functions in between two working days, with the same condition of access for students as the daily public transport.
- Make sure public transport stations are in close proximity to universities and other facilities frequented by students (such as dormitories, libraries, research facilities, etc.)

CONCLUSION

In the current context of rising student precarity across Europe, housing and transport play a central role in the quality of the living conditions of students. High costs related to accommodation create one of the main barriers to accessing higher education. Indeed, housing is one of the main indirect costs of higher education - meaning that it is not directly related to the academic path of a student, but that it is strongly linked to their capacity as students. When rents are skyrocketing, students from less well-off backgrounds will have more difficulty accessing accommodation, and will, for instance, have to reconsider their place of study. Discriminations on the housing market and the very design and availability of said accommodation are also crucial factors that need to be considered. Transport is strongly linked to the housing situation too. Indeed, efficient transport systems are a requirement for students to be able to attend classes and activities related to their curricula. Poorly established transport systems - for instance with unfitting timetables and routes and physically inaccessibility - can decrease the quality of the studying conditions. High transport fares, to merely access classes, can become a burden and keep students out of the classroom.

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[4] http://www.edf-feph.org/design-all

However, even if they are central to students' lives, housing and transport are not the only factors that have an influence on living conditions. Student support systems, in general, and their accessibility are of high importance: as mentioned before, efficient and accessible grant systems are, for example, one of the key paths to more open higher education systems. They can palliate the lack of financial means for accommodation and/or other daily essential expenses, and allow students to have the choice of taking up a student job or not, making sure that if they do so it is willingly, and not because of precarious conditions. More generally, the issue of living conditions of students needs to be considered more often and to be seen as a decisive factor in the access and completion of studies.