

Edinburgh's Student Housing Crisis: The Impact of Insecure Housing on Student Wellbeing and Engagement

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Abstract

There is very little research on the experiences of students who are homeless and the impact it can have on them. The aim of this research was to better understand the forms that homelessness and precarious housing take for students and the impact it can have on student wellbeing and engagement with their studies and the university community. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 24 students at the University of Edinburgh who experienced homelessness or precarious housing during the 2022/23 academic year. The results show that homelessness and precarious housing can take a variety of forms amongst students. It had a significant impact on the students' wellbeing and mental health, even after they found secure housing. There was also a profound impact on engagement with their course and sense of belonging. These findings can help universities to better support students who experience homelessness to improve wellbeing and engagement.

Introduction

NUS Scotland (2022) found that 12% of students in Scotland have experienced homelessness during their studies. Whilst this figure is useful in terms of focussing attention on the scale of the student housing crisis, little is known about the form homelessness takes for these students, or the impact that a lack of secure housing has on their wellbeing and engagement with their studies. This article highlights how homelessness and precarious housing affect students through the analysis of 24 interviews conducted with University of Edinburgh students in 2022/23.

In the 2022/23 academic year, there were 49,740 students at the University of Edinburgh, including 29,765 undergraduates and 19,975 postgraduates (University of Edinburgh, 2023). Of this total, 25% were over the age of 25, and 49.6% were international students. Due to placements, study abroad programmes, and online learning, up to 10,000 students were not on campus or in Edinburgh at any given time during the year (University of Edinburgh, 2023). Student rents in the UK increased by 30% between 2021 and 2022, and Edinburgh was the most expensive city for students to live in 2023 (NatWest Group, 2023). The University provides accommodation for more than 10,000 students, but that still leaves around three-quarters of students in Edinburgh to find housing in the private sector (University of Edinburgh, 2024a). Edinburgh is the most expensive city to rent in Scotland, with average rents increasing by 42% between 2019 and 2024, which makes finding affordable housing in the city challenging (Rightmove, n.d.). Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA) recommends students start looking for accommodation three months in advance, but this is difficult for students who have not yet moved to the city (EUSA, 2025a).

There is a wide variety of legal and academic definitions of homelessness, but what is pertinent here is that homelessness is not restricted to sleeping rough or staying in homeless

shelters (Parsell, 2023). Other forms of homelessness include, but are not limited to: living in accommodation unsuitable for the long term; informal or insecure accommodation; squatting; inappropriate physical conditions such as overcrowding; and involuntary sharing, for example, because of abusive relationships (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000). To account for this variety and the challenges of defining homelessness, this article will use both homelessness and precarious housing to describe the experiences of participants, by which is meant a lack of secure, appropriate housing for more than a week. The factors that cause homelessness are myriad, complex, and interconnected, and some groups are more vulnerable to it than others, such as people who have experienced (childhood) poverty or those who lack social support networks (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Over the last few decades, the way higher education in the UK is funded has shifted towards a private sector-style business model, which some scholars believe has meant that the student has become:

A monetarised and commodified, as much as an educational, persona, representing opportunities for profit (Chatterton, 2010, p.512).

At the same time, many students struggle financially, with 35% of students in Scotland considering dropping out of their courses for financial reasons (NUS Scotland, 2022). The UK government's efforts to 'widen participation' and encourage previously underrepresented groups to attend university have also led to an increase in students who are more vulnerable to homelessness, such as those from disadvantaged areas and backgrounds (Mulrenan et al., 2018). As such, it is imperative that we have a better understanding of the form that homelessness takes amongst students, and the impact that it has on them and their ability to engage with their studies and the university community. The purpose of this article is to help further our understanding by exploring the experiences of 24 University of Edinburgh students.

Literature Review

Most studies on homelessness and precarious housing amongst university students focus on students in the USA who were homeless before they started university. Hallett et al. (2015) and Pavlakis (2017) argue that stereotypes of homelessness have made it easy to overlook homelessness amongst students and young people. In a systematic literature review, Broton (2020) found that 45% of US college students experience some form of housing insecurity, including unaffordability, instability or homelessness. Kornbluh et al. (2024) found that housing insecurity correlated with lower grades and poor mental health outcomes, but these quantitative studies do not shed much light on the experiences of students who are homeless. Research with young people who were homeless whilst studying at community college found that the students saw education as a route out of insecurity, but they struggled to make the most of their studies because of their housing situation (Gupton, 2017; Hallett & Freas, 2018). These qualitative studies demonstrate the utility of seeking to understand the lived experiences of students who are homeless. Additionally, Crutchfield and Meyer-Adams (2019) explored how social workers can best support students who are homeless, advocating for collaborative support by a combination of services. Silva et al. (2017) and Olfert et al. (2021)

have studied the relationship between housing and food insecurity, and also call for governments, universities, and community groups to work together to support students.

As housing and education policy varies between countries, the transferability of these studies to the Scottish context is limited. There is one study conducted in the UK with students who were made homeless during their studies, which makes comparisons with this project more productive. Mulrenan et al. (2018) interviewed sixteen students from a London university and identified the following themes:

the quality of temporary accommodation; the ability of students to focus on academic work; the cost in time and finances for homeless students; and the ability of homeless students to engage with the wider aspects of studying at university. (p. 148)

Several of these themes overlap with the findings of this research, which will be discussed below. However, as education and housing are both issues that have been devolved to the Scottish government since 1999, Mulrenan et al.'s study is still not directly applicable to the Scottish context. This article will help to address that gap.

Methods

This project was funded by a Student Experience Grant from the University of Edinburgh and was granted ethical approval by the School of GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh (reference number 2202-683). The data was collected by the author and two colleagues, one of whom was a Postgraduate Researcher who is fluent in Mandarin. She translated the recruitment information into Mandarin, promoted the project amongst Chinese students, and gave participants the option to do their interview in Mandarin. This approach was taken to try and ensure a diverse range of students were included in the project, and to gain the perspective of international students, who it was theorised face barriers to finding secure housing that many British students do not.

Participants were recruited by emailing all students within the School of GeoSciences, as well as sharing the recruitment information on several relevant social networks. An email account was set up for students who wanted to take part to contact to arrange an interview. The terminology around homelessness and the lack of stable housing is complex and emotionally loaded, which made recruitment difficult, as not all participants defined themselves as homeless. An effort was made to counter this challenge by stating in recruitment materials that the project was looking for students who had experienced precarious housing or struggled to find somewhere to live, as well as those who had been homeless during their studies.

The interviews took place in the University of Edinburgh buildings or online and ranged in length from 25 minutes to an hour and 20 minutes. Semi-structured interviews were used to maintain consistency between the researchers whilst allowing flexibility to respond to individual participants' experiences. Participants were reminded they could pause or stop the interview at any time if a topic was upsetting, and the interviewers paid close attention to participants' emotional state. The interviews conducted in English were transcribed by

software called Otter.ai, the accuracy of which was checked by the author. The four interviews conducted in Mandarin were translated and transcribed by the Postgraduate Researcher. The author conducted thematic analysis of the transcripts, which enabled the identification of patterns in the data without being wedded to a particular theoretical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Inductive coding was used to ensure that the findings were driven by the participants' experiences, and because the absence of literature in this area meant existing potential themes were lacking (Thomas, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Interviews were conducted with 24 students from across the university. Nine of the participants were postgraduates, and fourteen were undergraduates; thirteen were international students. To ensure the students' anonymity, each participant was given a unique identifier beginning with UG for undergraduate students (UG01, UG02, UG03...) and PG for postgraduates (PG01, PG02, PG03...). The participants will be referred to by these identifiers throughout this article.

The Form of Student Homelessness

Most public perceptions and media representations of homelessness focus on what is often described as the 'chronic homeless'; people with addiction or mental health issues who spend long periods of time sleeping rough on the streets or in shelters (O'Sullivan, 2020). However, this group is thought to only account for around 10% of people experiencing homelessness in the Global North (O'Sullivan, 2020). None of the participants in this study slept rough or made use of emergency accommodation or shelters, and although some of them took three months to find suitable accommodation, others only lacked housing for a few weeks, and all were in stable—if not ideal—accommodation by the time of the interviews.

During the time that they were unable to find suitable housing, the students utilised multiple alternatives. Some stayed with friends, family, or partners, in spare rooms, on sofas (sometimes known as sofa-surfing), or sharing beds. Others stayed in short-term holiday rentals, hostels, BnB's, or hotels. Two chose to stay with their family at their 'home address', and either commuted long distances to attend classes, or missed in-person classes completely. One student stayed in the temporary accommodation that the University of Edinburgh provided by putting bunk beds into common rooms in halls of residence owned by the University. Some students experienced a combination of these options; for example, UG11 lived with a family member on the outskirts of Glasgow and stayed in a hotel in Edinburgh for up to two weeks each month. Five were supported financially by their families either whilst looking for housing or through contributions to expensive rents when no cheaper alternative could be found.

The cause of the students being homeless was mostly the same. Whilst one student was evicted, and another was let down by a landlord who withdrew their offer of housing less than two weeks before the start of term, most simply could not find appropriate or affordable accommodation in time for the start of the academic year in September 2022, despite beginning to look up to several months in advance. As UG02 explained:

The two friends that I was looking for a flat with, for months, we had no luck. The same situation as many people... we were speaking to some landlords, and they were saying they would put property on the market, and within 24 hours, they've had, like, 30/40 applications. So just the sheer volume of people looking at just, it was impossible to find anywhere and also everything was just going up in price.

For some of the students, their alternative accommodation had positive elements; those who stayed with friends or partners were able to save money they would have otherwise spent on rent and even expand their social networks by making friends with their host's flatmates. For others, the experience was less positive, as their temporary solutions were expensive, inconvenient, or resulted in a lack of privacy, space—including space to study—and security. For example, UG01 stayed in their partner's room in a shared flat for 6-7 weeks and described the impact of not having secure housing on them and their friends:

It was something sort of eating away at all of us we were just, quite stressed and, yeah, not having somewhere that like, you know, you can just, like, just have your own space in.

UG04 explained some of the more practical impacts of staying on a friend's sofa:

I'd spent so long sleeping on a sofa. I was so tired. Probably smelled like crap. I'd been living out of this rucksack for weeks.

The process of looking for housing was time-consuming and stressful. Most students used housing websites, and although some did call or visit letting agents in person, this rarely helped. Most participants were spending at least an hour a day on housing websites, and attending viewings was also time-consuming:

I probably do two hours minimum of looking online a day. Just in between my everyday life like every half an hour I'll check it. And then actually going to the viewings takes up a lot of time. Like I probably did about 20-odd viewings and none of them I got. (UG08)

The competitiveness of the housing market meant that when accommodation did become available, students had to act fast. As PG03 explained, "basically only the first few people who [responded to an advert] would get a viewing." This created a sense of urgency and tension: "The most important thing was just one word, 'qiang'. Everything, just 'qiang'" (PG02). '抢' (qiang) in Mandarin translates to snatch, grab, rush, or scramble. UG06 would fill out applications for housing on their phone while viewing the property. This urgency made it difficult to focus on studying for any sustained length of time:

I'd be working and then I'd be on my computer, and then all of a sudden a flat would pop up and then you're like 'right, well I have to stop work now, I have to do this application as quickly as possible'. (UG01)

Due to the high demand for housing, some students also felt they were being forced to compete with other prospective tenants, and that factors such as not planning to stay for more

than a year (PG02); not being able to offer a higher deposit (UG08); or not having a UK-based guarantor in the case of international students (PG02) put them at a disadvantage in this process. Some felt they were not being chosen because they were students (PG08, UG08) and one international student was even told by a letting agent that they were not chosen for a flat because “the landlord prefers locals” (PG03). Whether the barriers to being chosen as tenants were real or perceived, they reinforce the sense of how difficult it was to find somewhere to live, and how little control the students felt they had over the process.

Many of the students had to make compromises to obtain secure housing. Desperation was a reason given by six of the students for accepting housing that did not meet their requirements. PG02 mentioned being “really desperate” or “so desperate” three times during their interview, conveying just how severe they felt the situation was. The form that these compromises took varied. For example, UG05 explained why they stayed in a building with disruptive neighbours and frequent visits from the police:

I would usually not live in these conditions. But because of the housing crisis, that there was nothing available, I was kind of forced to stay there because compared to other options it was still good.

Other students were living in accommodation that was “worn down” and “draughty” (PG01); did not have sufficient heating (PG07); or had mould and “evidence of mice” (UG02). Some were dealing with landlords who were reluctant to make necessary repairs (PG03, UG09, UG15). For three students, the standard of housing was acceptable, but they lived further away from the university than they wanted to (UG11, UG12, UG15). Another three had to work more hours in part-time jobs to afford the rent (UG04, UG07, UG08). The extra time working had an impact on their ability to study, a consequence that will be explored in more detail later. It is important to note that finding secure accommodation did not necessarily mean a solution to the students’ housing-related problems.

Wellbeing

Student wellbeing and mental health have been a core focus of UK Higher Education in recent years. In 2018, the then Universities Minister called on universities to make mental health a priority, and The University Mental Health Charter was published the following year (Department for Education, 2018; Hughes & Spanner, 2019). Such calls have led to a concerted effort by universities to define, measure, and improve student wellbeing (Dodd et al., 2021). Zikmund (2003) defines wellbeing as:

The satisfaction of material, biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs and demands of an individual, which are necessary for his satisfaction with life. (p.402)

Secure and appropriate housing is arguably essential to the satisfaction of these needs, and research has demonstrated that the impacts of homelessness, such as uncertainty and insecurity, negatively affect wellbeing (Thomas et al., 2012). The participants experienced a range of negative effects during their periods of homelessness and precarious housing that indicate a significant impact on their wellbeing.

Many of the students felt a lack of security or certainty in response to being homeless. PG04 explained the impact that the feeling of uncertainty had on them:

Uncertainty is just a really paralysing thing that prevents you from being able to both commit to anything but also to properly engage in stuff if you have this lingering feeling in the back of your head that it's going to fall, like it's gonna collapse, and you're gonna have to do stuff again. And you think like what, why am I bothering?

PG07 also suggested the impact that a lack of security had when they said, “the worst part was I didn’t have a place to call home.” Instability, uncertainty, or a lack of security are common experiences for people who are homeless (Barker, 2016; Thomas et al., 2012). In their study of the relationship between uncertainty and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic in China and the US, Howell et al. (2023) demonstrated that uncertainty causes worry, which can have negative impacts on wellbeing, particularly in the context of a lack of control. Several of the students felt that “we didn’t really, like, have any sort of real power in the situation” (UG09) or “so hopeless and out of control” (UG15). As such, it can be argued that the feelings of uncertainty and insecurity had a negative impact on the students’ wellbeing.

Sixteen of the students talked about the impact of homelessness on their mental health, mentioning stress, anxiety, depression, and even PTSD. PG09 described:

The stress of not knowing when, when you're going to find somewhere. Is it going to be a week or is gonna be a month?

The experience “had a massive mental health impact” on UG15, and made PG03 “more melancholic and pessimistic.” UG14 explained the impact in more detail:

It was unlike any sort of mental health situation I've ever been in before. It was just, I was just constantly crying...Just because it was so overwhelming. It was like the most overwhelming thing I've ever had to go through.

The percentage of undergraduate students in the UK experiencing poor mental health rose from 6% in 2016/17 to 16% in 2022/3 (Sanders, 2023). Demand for counselling services at the University of Edinburgh increased 270% between 2015 and 2023 (Edinburgh Friends, 2023), highlighting the pressure that this increase in poor mental health has placed on university support services and staff. It would undoubtedly be better for both students and staff to prevent mental ill health rather than treat it, and this requires an understanding of the factors that cause and influence it (Campbell et al., 2022). Homelessness or precarious housing is just one of many factors that can cause mental ill health in students, but it is important that universities understand and acknowledge the impacts it can have on mental health to attempt to counter those impacts.

Even once the students found stable housing, the emotional impacts did not necessarily go away, as UG08 explained:

Although I've got a place to live, and I should on paper, in theory, you know, be much better. It's still affecting things. Like it's just a general feeling of being unsettled that doesn't quite go away... of not knowing where the next month, will I be still here or somewhere else or where will I be?

The prospect of having to go through the whole process again for the next academic year was a source of stress for some of the students (UG10, UG15). Obtaining secure housing does not instantly 'fix' the issues and wellbeing of those who have experienced homelessness (Chamberlain & Johnson, 2018; Stonehouse et al., 2021). Just because a student isn't homeless anymore, it does not mean that they are not still feeling the impact on their wellbeing.

Perhaps ironically, more than half of the students reported feeling lucky that their situation had not been more severe, or in relation to other people whose experiences were 'worse'. For example, UG09 explained that despite the length of time it took to find accommodation, "I feel like we were quite lucky to have found somewhere." UG01 felt lucky that they had the option to stay with their partner:

I was in a very good situation compared to a lot of people so I didn't, I didn't take it for granted, I didn't want to sort of be like 'Oh this is the worst thing in the world' like, I did have a bed to sleep in every night.

This feeling of luck could reflect the lack of control students felt over the process of looking for housing, to the extent that managing to find accommodation felt like random chance. It could also be an attempt to downplay the severity of their experiences; in response to the interviewer expressing sympathy at what they went through, UG13 said: "I think I'm actually really lucky it's just I might of told the story in a bit exaggerated way." It is not uncommon for people to feel lucky after a negative or even traumatic or life-threatening situation (Teigen & Jensen, 2011). As such, there is a need for awareness among staff who seek to support students that a student might respond in this way. Such a reaction does not mean that the student has not experienced difficulty, or that their wellbeing has not suffered. It is a normal reaction to a negative experience and does not reflect their need for support.

Engagement with Studies

According to Thomas et al. (2012):

Homeless lives were lived in the present, concerns for the future or plans for making changes were subjugated to the immediate concerns and risks to survival. (p.788)

A lack of secure housing can make what others may consider basic tasks difficult, if not impossible. For students experiencing homelessness or precarious housing, engaging with their studies is one of those tasks that can suffer. Many of the participants felt that their experiences negatively influenced their studies. For example, PG03 "felt like my study was basically suspended" whilst they were searching for accommodation. UG04 "just knew that I

wasn't able to get anything done to even a half-decent standard." This section will explore how the emotional and practical impacts of being homeless or precariously housed affected the students' ability to engage with their studies, including a lack of time, a lack of study space, and difficulty focusing on work.

Students who were homeless or precariously housed had less time to focus on their studies, both during the period of homelessness and after. As noted above, the process of looking for housing was time-consuming, as PG03 explained:

Other people might be writing at 11 pm or reading some papers, but me, I was just refreshing those renting websites again and again, again and again.

UG04, UG07, and UG08 all had to work more hours in part-time jobs once they found accommodation to pay rent that was higher than they had expected. UG08's rent increased by almost £200 per month between the third and fourth year of their degree:

I went from like, 463 [pounds per month] to 650, which is a huge jump. And that's why I started working again, because I kind of said to myself: "you can stop your job. You can live on your loan, final year, just concentrate" but I had to start working again because of the 200 pound increase.

Research has demonstrated that students with less free time or who work part-time in paid employment achieve better grades than their time-rich colleagues (Ackerman & Gross, 2003; Dundes & Marx, 2006). However, Ackerman and Gross (2003) have demonstrated that having less free time can lead to feelings of stress, anxiety, frustration, and fear. Dundes and Marx (2006) also found that students who work more than 20 hours per week are twice as likely to have low grades as those who work 10-19 hours per week, suggesting that there is a point at which part-time work becomes too much to balance with studies. As such, it seems reasonable to suggest that a lack of available time for independent study both during and after periods of homelessness impacts students' ability to engage with their studies.

A lack of appropriate space to study was another reason that students gave for struggling to engage with their studies while homeless. UG13 lived with their partner in student accommodation designed for one person for three months and explained that "both our belongings were there, so there was no study space at all." UG07 was living in a box room: "I don't really have a desk, I have a set of drawers that I do my work on. It's not ideal." The type of environment preferred for independent study is subjective and can vary according to the activity being undertaken (Harrop & Turpin, 2013). Nevertheless, many students do prefer to study at home because of the autonomy it brings – they can control factors such as music and temperature to suit their comfort, and they have flexibility over when they undertake other activities such as eating, drinking, and doing the laundry (Beckers et al., 2016). If students do not have the option of studying at home or cannot exercise autonomy there because they are a guest or the space is insufficient, then their ability to fully engage with independent learning activities could be restricted.

For some students, the emotional and mental impacts of their housing situation made it difficult for them to focus on studying. As UG12 explained, “it was stressing me out so much that I couldn’t really focus properly.” UG13 summarised the impact succinctly: “when you have nowhere to live you can’t think about anything else.” UG15 also found working difficult:

I couldn't get into the working mindset. Yeah. And also, I was so focused on getting a flat. I couldn't think of anything else. Like in terms of like actually thinking about work. I couldn't even do it. Because when I was working, I was like, “I should be looking for a flat. Why am I working?”

This issue was also highlighted by Mulrenan et al. (2018) in their study of students experiencing homelessness in London. It is not surprising that students would struggle to focus on studying when one of their most basic needs is not being met. Combined with the practical limitations that being homeless can place on studying, this psychological impact can limit students’ ability to engage with their studies.

Engagement with University Community

A student’s interaction with their degree programme is only one element of student engagement; the community element of interacting with staff and fellow students is also integral (Groccia, 2018; Groccia & Hunter, 2012). Being homeless or precariously housed can make it difficult for students to feel connected to the university community, as UG11 articulated:

I felt completely disconnected from the sort of student buzz, the student experience, of being at the university.

This section will discuss how being homeless or precariously housed impacts a student’s ability to engage with the university community.

Social support networks are an important source of support during any challenging time, and many of the students were helped by friends or partners in Edinburgh whilst they were homeless or precariously housed. Staying with friends or partners was a common solution to a lack of housing – twelve of the participants did this for varying lengths of time, from a few nights to a whole semester. The emotional support provided by friends was also mentioned by several of the students as a valuable resource: “I couldn’t imagine what it would be like without support from other people” (PG02). The significance of social support networks is also highlighted by the stories of students who lacked those relationships, particularly those who were new to Edinburgh. PG05 was an international student, living in overcrowded accommodation without a contract, and their housemates were the only people they knew in Edinburgh:

I don't know any other person outside. I don't know, who can provide me the [place to] stay or something.

As a result, they were stuck in unsuitable housing that severely impacted their mental health. Social support networks are an important source of wellbeing, esteem, and assistance for people who are homeless (Thomas et al., 2012). It is well established that social support networks are integral to student engagement, belonging, and retention (Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Mishra, 2020; Thomas, 2000), and it was clear that they are also an invaluable resource for students experiencing homelessness.

For some of the students, their housing situation made it difficult to make or maintain friendships, for both practical and emotional reasons. On a practical level, some of the students felt unable to invite people back to their accommodation:

I was in a hotel room in like an undergrad complex as a masters student which meant it was difficult to do anything social with other people in my course that involved going to houses at all because I couldn't take them back to mine. (PG04)

For others, a lack of time and money made socialising difficult. UG03 commuted from Glasgow to Edinburgh and missed nights out with friends as a result. On an emotional level, the lack of security and certainty made it difficult to invest time and energy into building relationships. UG06, an international student who was worried they wouldn't be able to stay in Edinburgh because of the lack of housing, explains:

It made it more difficult to meet people, I suppose...So if I had to go home, I didn't want to join and get into some choir or something and then go home and not be able to do that anyway, so I was kind of hesitant to do that sort of thing.

For students who stayed with friends whilst they were homeless, there was a concern about the pressure that was put on their relationship:

Because as much as you know, it's one of my best friends, you are kind of feeling like you're overstaying your welcome all the time. And I was quite keen to get out just for because I didn't want to sort of affect our relationship. (UG02)

It is worth noting that this was not a universal experience. For some of the students, their precarious living situation created the opportunity to develop new friendships. For example, UG15 stayed with several different friends whilst they were homeless, which allowed them to get to know their friends' flatmates. For others, a reluctance to spend time in their accommodation made them more social, spending more time elsewhere with friends than they normally would (UG09). Thomas (2000) argued that the more extensive a student's social network is, the bigger the impact it has on engagement and retention, which emphasises the importance of being able to make and maintain friendships. Having accommodation in which a student feels comfortable hosting friends, as well as the time and resources to socialise, is integral to students making and maintaining friendships, which facilitates student engagement.

Many of the students' experiences of homelessness and precarious housing left them feeling like they did not 'belong' at the university. There are several avenues of support offered to

University of Edinburgh students in relation to housing. For example, EUSA's Advice Place offers free and impartial professional advice, the Rent Guarantor Scheme supports students without a UK-based guarantor, and emergency accommodation is available for current students for up to 72 hours (EUSA, 2025b; University of Edinburgh, 2024b; University of Edinburgh, 2024c). Whilst two of the students felt that the university was offering adequate support for dealing with the housing crisis (UG07, UG09), more were critical of the support that was provided, which left them feeling like the university did not care about them:

You do it [study] at a place that feels like it doesn't care about you because it isn't interested in your housing situation beyond whether you can show up when you're supposed to show up on your timetable or not...if the place only cares about you to that extent, why would you be putting in that extra effort to care back? (UG11)

They [the university] just say a lot of pretty empty words...the University was saying that they fully support you but in reality they haven't done anything and they won't even care if you have to sleep on the street. (UG13)

At the end of the day, I felt so alone, and so disconnected from the uni. Like I didn't feel like a uni student at that point, because I wasn't getting any support from the uni and I didn't have a flat. (UG15)

Belonging is a popular concept within higher education that can be defined as:

Students' subjective feelings of connection and integration with their institution and campus community. (Pedler et al., 2022, p. 398)

This article adopts the approach of Graham and Moir (2022), who engage with this concept critically, advocating for a form of belonging that includes diverse experiences and values rather than encouraging students to conform to dominant narratives and identities. The above quotes suggest that the University of Edinburgh's response, or perceived lack of one, to students' situations has severely damaged their sense of belonging, which has a strong correlation with student engagement (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021).

The current housing crisis in the UK is a structural issue that is beyond the power of universities to address. However, the way that individual staff members responded had a significant impact on how supported students felt, suggesting that there are steps universities can take to help students who are homeless feel more engaged in the university community. For example, UG04 had contrasting interactions with two different staff members:

I had words with a professor at the time. And I was basically saying, I'm currently you know, very struggling. I've not got a place to live...I'm working, I clearly look very tired. I'm maybe not going to be as... good as I could be. And there is a chance I may miss the deadline for this report that's coming up. Is it possible to have an extension? And I was met with no. At that point, I was furious. And I believe it's because... they didn't believe me. But...why would I lie about that? And it was, that was probably one of the one of the moments where I walked out thinking, oh, I want to leave this uni. I was furious when that happened.

Because I'd been having a really tough time and then I was met with, just, you know, a pleasant "No."

Their Personal Tutor, on the other hand, was more sympathetic:

They were a lot more understanding like... he could see I'd kind of turned into a panda from the bags under my eyes. And he could see... I wasn't as good as I could be. And I've made it clear to him that this is my living situation at the moment: help me. Not even so much help me but just understand. And he was very understanding, he was like, "I'll have words with some people," you know, "I'll have words with course organisers that you're on." And to this day, I don't know if he has, but it was just... the acknowledgement that I got from him was better than I got from a lot of people.

The Personal Tutor did not provide any practical support, but the way they responded to the situation made UG04 feel supported and cared about. In Mestan's (2016) study of reasons for student attrition, the responses of individual staff members were a factor in why students decided not to continue their studies (see also O'Keefe, 2013). As such, it can be argued that universities need to ensure that staff are informed about the housing crisis and are prepared to engage with students who are experiencing homelessness or precarious housing in a sympathetic and supportive manner.

Conclusion

This article has sought to draw attention to the experiences of students who go through homelessness or precarious housing during their studies and the impact that this can have on their wellbeing and engagement. Homelessness amongst university students does not fit common stereotypes and, as such, can slip under the radar of attempts to support students. The lack of security and certainty and mental ill health that students experience due to homelessness can have a significant impact on their wellbeing that can last well beyond the point at which they find secure accommodation. Being homeless presents practical challenges to students' engagement with their studies, including a lack of appropriate study spaces and less time to devote to studies. The emotional and mental impacts of being homeless also make it difficult to focus on studying. Social support networks can be a valuable source of assistance during challenging times, but being homeless can make it difficult for students to make and maintain these relationships with fellow students, distancing them from the university community. Being homeless can also lead students to feel that they do not matter to the university. This, in turn, impacts their sense of belonging, which can be both exacerbated and mitigated by the responses of individual members of staff.

Homelessness is a structural issue that is beyond the ability of Higher Education Institutions to solve alone. However, there are arguably steps universities can take to mitigate the impacts of homelessness and precarious housing on student wellbeing and engagement. For example, universities could ensure that all staff are aware of the possibility that students could be homeless and provide training on how to engage with students who are homeless in a sympathetic and supportive manner. Homelessness and precarious housing should be accepted as a reason for extensions and extenuating circumstances. Any support that is

available for students experiencing homelessness should be widely and extensively publicised, so students are aware of it. These are just a few of the relatively low-resource actions that universities could take to minimise the impact of homelessness and precarious housing on student wellbeing and engagement.

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