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## Commentary

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### **The student city: an ongoing story of neoliberalism, gentrification, and commodification**

#### **Introduction: the student city grows up**

Two new residential student high-rise towers have just been added to the skyline of Leeds, one of the biggest student cities in the UK. One of them—the £80 million Sky Plaza built by the Bristol-based Unite Group plc—claims that it is the tallest student accommodation in the world. With 37 storeys, 557 bedrooms, and towering 103 m over the streets of Leeds city centre, it is the city's very own Burj Dubai for students. En-suite accommodation is £118 per week, with features including wifi, on-site DVD rentals, flatscreen TVs, and luxury furnishings and minibars in the upper floor penthouses. The other—Broadcasting Tower—is a £50 million, 23-storey, 240-bedroom tower built by the Liverpool-based Downing Group which boasts free Sky TV, wifi, contemporary interiors, and stylish décor. Both these student towers have been prelet before completion.

These are stunning developments in the ongoing story of the student city in the UK. They represent new heights in the reformulation, upgrading, and commodification of the student experience. No longer do students choose from grotty 'digs' let by slum landlords. I am reminded by a friend that student accommodation is referred to as digs as it reflected the fact that students used to literally dig down and spend a few years at university tolerating substandard accommodation in a subterranean world, looking forward to a brighter future. With the introduction of contemporary luxury student living this is no longer the case. Higher education students (at least those who can afford to) can choose from a range of high-quality vertical living accommodation in large dedicated purpose-built tower blocks. They are the newest arrivals in the unfolding story of the gentrification of central urban areas.

I first looked at student life in detail in the mid to late 1990s during my PhD thesis in which I explored how high concentrations of in-migrant middle-class students were creating what I called 'exclusive geographies' (see Chatterton, 1999). Since the time of my initial work into student life new trends have emerged, while older ones have been reinforced. The most obvious change is that numerical growth has continued and there are now record numbers of students in higher education. In 1998, 329 000 students started a degree in the UK, and by 2008 the figure had grown to 457 000 (Curtis, 2009a). Overall, there are 300 000 more university students in the system than in 1997 when New Labour arrived to govern the UK and I was finishing my PhD. Demand still continues to increase year on year, especially in the current recessionary environment, but a particular crisis moment has arisen within UK higher education. Unprecedented demand for places in 2009 could not be met, with a 10% surge in applications meaning that there were 50 000 fewer places than applicants (Curtis, 2009b). In light of recession-related spending cuts, the government target of 50% of 18-30 year-olds in higher education by 2010 is not likely to be met. In 2007/08 the figure reached its highest point of 43%.

Student debt has also mushroomed. Average debt in 2004/05 was £7900 compared with £3530 in 1999/2000 (Finch et al, 2005). With the likely eradication of the £3000 cap on tuition fees after the next parliamentary elections in the UK, elite universities have suggested fees would rise to £10000 per year (Shepherd, 2009, page 5). Many more students are staying at home due to the rising costs of student living, but student

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mobility and 'leaving home' remain strongly embedded elite practices in English higher education. Jessica Shepherd also points out that in spite of the many changes in the sector, including moves towards localised provision and the potential for fee waivers for those studying locally, going to university is still synonymous, culturally if not materially, with leaving home. This is an important trend that was evident ten years ago. The idea of university life as 'a great teenage transhumance' still dominates the typical image of student life, and obscures the many students from lower income families who do not fit into this mould. It reinforces the idea for young people from poorer backgrounds that university is not for people 'like me'. A key factor underpinning these migratory flows is that "the university system in the UK serves as a feeder system for the South East escalator region" (see Duke Williams, 2009, page 1846). Studentification, then, is not just a set of cultural practices; it relocates a particular class of young people from certain (mainly southern) parts of the country to large (mainly northern) urban centres and then feeds them back to different places, mainly London and the South East.

With these kinds of important changes continuing to unfold, it is timely to comment on the ongoing story of students and their relationship to urban space. We need a refreshed perspective on the impacts students have on labour and housing markets, on the built environment and on community relations. Studentification, as Darren Smith (2005) has called it, points to a now identifiable, strong process that has emerged out of a conjunction of regulatory and fiscal environments, consumer and lifestyle preferences, and business sector activities. But more than a separate logic, studentification has come to play a much more active role in the continued reinvention of city centres as places for the professional classes to live, work, and play. In what follows, I want to make some observations that reflect on the ongoing story of the student city, partly prompted by some recent writings that were presented in a recent theme issue of this journal (see volume 41, issue 8). Below I explore four key themes that I believe to be crucial in understanding students and their relationship to urban space.

### *The neoliberalisation of student life*

Neoliberalisation has become one of those watchwords to describe a series of events that have shaped our society over the last twenty years or so (see England and Ward, 2007). The university sector is not outside these changes and there have been clear moves to recast universities according to a much clearer neoliberal, or private-sector-led business model. Under pressure from funding constraints, university managers are being encouraged to become more entrepreneurial, to seek private sector involvement and investment to build new student accommodation, and to outsource provision of some services and functions. For example, Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contracts have been used to build new student accommodation where universities lease back accommodation from the private sector over long periods, while private companies such as INTO, Study Group International, and KAPLAN have been entering into joint ventures with UK universities for course provision, especially in English language and foundation courses for overseas students. One potential implication of these new private players is a two-tiered workforce within universities. These intrusions of the private sector create institutional forms and missions which are much more hybrid, but overall are much more business oriented.

Student life has been shaped by the introduction of these neoliberal regulatory environments in a number of ways. First, a brief glance at today's university careers fairs highlights the extent to which graduate career opportunities are conceptualised in terms of routes into corporate careers. The 'big four' international accountancy

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and professional services firms (PWC, KPMG, Deloitte, Ernst and Young) have a particularly dominant presence on campus. The continued deflation of university degrees means that students are continually seeking new positional advantages to maximise their employment opportunities and their status as employable transnational professionals in the increasingly aggressive and saturated corporate job market (Waters, 2009).

Second, the introduction of student tuition fees and loans and the elimination of automatic state-based maintenance grants are a hallmark of change. They have led to a greater use of indebtedness for disciplining students to the realities of life under neoliberalism and preparing them for a broader life of debt management. The availability of large sums of easy credit for students has underpinned the growth of the consumption-oriented student city. Student debt continues to rise, and much of this borrowing is used to maintain the high costs associated with student life (such as housing, travel, and fees), but also to fulfil the increasing amount of consumer options available specifically for students within the student-oriented consumption city. Credit-fuelled spending is now an acceptable norm for all students to service their high-consumption lifestyles. A final observation relates to the greater regulation of student life through the introduction of attendance monitoring as a requirement from the UK Border Agency to monitor all foreign nationals within the higher education sector. Academics have raised concerns at this extra monitoring role, arguing that members of the academy should not be asked to collude with the UK's Home Office by playing a key role in an ever-tightening system of immigration control (Singleton, 2009).

#### *The growth of the student urban service sector*

What I found in my study of students ten years ago were clear trends towards the growth of segregated service provision for students, which led to what I called the emergence of geographies of exclusion in city centres (Chatterton, 1999). Basically, whole swathes of city centres become dedicated to servicing students, especially in terms of retail, entertainment, and leisure. Pubs, bars, nightclubs, and fast food and other retail outlets all pitch themselves at this lucrative, sizable, and dependable consumer population. This kind of clustered and segmented provision is in addition to the concentration of student housing areas. Smith's (2005) pioneering work on studentification highlighted how this kind of clustering is now a really distinctive part of many UK cities.

This concentration of activities creates a 'student urban service sector', most visibly seen along major urban arterial corridors near large civic universities. The best examples are those in major metropolitan centres which now have student populations the size of small towns (Leeds and Manchester, for example, have over 80 000 postcompulsory students). These places are normally well serviced by public transport, and contain a mix of large corporate and small niche independent operators all trying to establish a foothold in the lucrative student market. One of the interesting trends to monitor in the coming years is the shifting balance in ownership between the more independent/indigenous and corporate outlets, something I highlighted in previous work with Robert Hollands (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). Due to the large number of highly mobile young people these areas are also subject to many disputes and conflicts, both informally in terms of street crime and neighbourhood disruption, but also formally in terms of regulating litter, noise, and planning applications (see Munro et al, 2009)

There are some marked geographical differences here. Large core cities continue to benefit from high numbers of students, often containing both an old red brick and new

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post-1992 institution. There are also a number of smaller towns such as Penrith, Carlisle, Lincoln, Ormskirk, and Falmouth which are newcomers to university students in any numbers, and are experiencing a novel growth of a student urban service sector. The student urban service infrastructure also has wider impacts in that it also services prestudent and poststudent populations. It reaches out to those aspiring to be students and extends to those poststudents such as young professionals and recent graduates who maintain a youth-oriented lifestyle (see Hubbard, 2009). At the same time, it is key to stress that there is a continuing and worrying detachment between this profitable and buoyant student urban service sector, and the large cohort of local nonuniversity young people.

#### *Studentification as commodification*

Over the last ten years, student life, like other areas of urban life, has become an area ripe for further commodification. This works on a number of levels. The campus infrastructure has been upgraded and saturated with opportunities for consumerism as both universities and student unions compete with off-campus operators for student spending. Student unions have expanded their estates and created small retail malls to capture student spending. Most universities have now also created dedicated merchandising shops to sell university-branded merchandise, including everything from traditional tankards and teddy bears to locally tailored monopoly games and branded beer. Studentification, then, has gone hand in hand with commodification. The student has come to represent a monetarised and commodified, as much as an educational, persona, representing opportunities for profit for both local businesses and universities.

Within such a large and diverse higher education system as that in the UK, this overall picture has strong local variations. There is a continuing homogenisation of student populations within particular older and elite universities, and this is a trend that will only be exacerbated as differential fees will create differential abilities to enter certain universities. Elite and red-brick universities, then, will continue to service a mobile and wealthy middle-class student population, while newer universities will service a more locally oriented market with more nontraditional students. This trend towards commodifying student life will simply be constituted differentially amongst different groups of students, reinforcing consumption differences along lines of social class. Additionally, the figure of the leisure-oriented student is a seductive one which continues to shape student aspirations whatever the social, economic, and educational background. One of the key trends to monitor is the role of large corporate providers in retail and entertainment in shaping (post)student consumer trends, aspirations, and preferences.

#### *Universities, urban regeneration, and gentrification*

Universities and their students continue to be central players in shaping urban landscapes. Student life is now a well-established part of a marketable urban lifestyle brand. For the UK's core cities, the presence of a large student population is a key marketing device to boost its external, international, and cosmopolitan image. Visit Leeds' marketing website site 'Live it love it', for example, and four options are presented according which group you fit into: business, resident, student, or visitor.

Universities are key players in urban regeneration due to their consistent role in urban regeneration, even in recessionary periods (Chatterton, 2000; Hardy, 1996). They continue to expand their estates, on and off campus, adding landmark buildings to the urban fabric. In the face of fiscal constraints, newer trends point to public-private partnership arrangements for the delivery of new building projects. The most remarkable trend, as my initial story highlighted, is the emergence of gated, privately managed, and centrally located high-rise blocks of student accommodation. This is a novel turn

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for student life, as it brings studentland closer to the sociospatial practices of existing city-centre lovers and patterns of gentrification based around gated enclaves (see Lees et al, 2006).

A number of large development operators have emerged to consolidate this private, gated urban student accommodation market, most notably Downing, Unite, and Opal in the UK. One interesting aspect to these operators is that they all grew out of medium-sized cities (Liverpool, Manchester, Bristol) and have grown rapidly from humble beginnings as small developers in their own home-grown markets. They built up detailed and first-hand experience of provincial housing markets and saw the opportunity to exploit the growing city-centre student housing market. All these three operators have become large providers of high-rise student accommodation blocks in, or adjacent to, city centres. These city-centre developments have benefited from legislation which has sought to deconcentrate the amount of student accommodation in traditional housing neighbourhoods through the use of tighter licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO). Many councils have set limits on the number of HMOs in particular areas in response to the deterioration of the urban fabric and lifestyle conflicts between students and established families and residents. This may stop the rapid in-migration and out-migration flows of young people in traditional housing areas. But this is an issue that needs further investigation.

What is now being created in these gated student high rises is a very different experience from the shared student house in traditional residential neighbourhoods. The significance of these new centrally located student skyscrapers should not be overestimated for the evolving urban form and the social habits of cities. The discussion by Hubbard (2009) is crucial. A new wave of corporate operators, along with investor, local authority, and university partners, has created a profound new dynamic. Studenthood is being gentrified, and in turn students are acting as gentrifiers. As Hubbard outlines, they are chasing the same social withdrawal and cultural exclusivities that define the established urban middle classes. Universities and their students are also now central players in urban gentrification.

A future trend to watch is how these new locations for high-rise student living in purpose-built blocks reinforce or shift existing concentrations of student housing and entertainment provision. Hubbard alerts us to the changing patterns of studentification and destudentification in different parts of town and we need to monitor these twin processes closely over the coming years. The current trends suggest that these centrally located student towers will reinforce central urban areas as student destinations. It is likely that they will also reinforce existing student urban service sectors along corridors leading to city centres. It remains to be seen if other activities in central urban areas are displaced as a result of these growing concentrations of students in city-centre locations.

#### **Conclusion: where next for the student city?**

What preoccupied me ten years ago in relation to the exclusive geographies that students created in their leisure time is now being reformulated and enlarged in new ways in the contemporary city. The growth of the student city has probably reached an historical peak and plateau due to fiscal constraints from government spending cuts, and the current recession may represent a pause in some of the noted trends. Studentification may also go into reverse in some places as higher education is increasingly localised. But these are changing times and student life will continue to change in new directions; and any changes are not likely to be uniform, but felt unevenly across a very uneven university system.

I have tried to signpost some of these changes in this short commentary on the ongoing story of the student city. Student life is now numerically bigger, and it is also more culturally significant. Prestudents and poststudents now form a distinctive life-style segment and part of the contemporary urban branding machine. At the same time, they have become distant and cut off from those young people facing a deepening and persistent culture of worklessness and poverty described by such anodyne New Labour labels as NEETs (not in employment, education, and training). Credit-fuelled studenthood has opened up new areas for commodification and profit making and a dedicated student urban service sector is now visible in most large cities. Most dramatically, courtesy of a new wave of aggressive high-rise urban property developers, students are now urban gentrifiers. These processes are not just happenstance but part of the deepening of neoliberalism that continues to shape and discipline urban life in new and complex ways. What is sure is that patterns of inequality and disadvantage will continue to unfold in a higher education system as long as it is characterised by credit-fuelled spending, high entry fees, creeping privatisation, and a greater reliance on a corporate business model. Given these impacts, the ongoing story of the student city is too important to ignore. This is why urgent further research is needed.

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