

# Impact of Accommodation Environments on Student Mental Health and Wellbeing

Report summarising roundtable discussion facilitated by Scott Brownrigg and Galliford Try involving wellbeing professionals, university estate managers, student representatives and student accommodation operators.

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## Participants

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# FOREWORD by Alan Percy

*“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven..”*  
- John Milton, 'Paradise Lost'

With the increasing concern over student mental health and wellbeing the emphasis is being placed on how we can create environments, communities and institutions which facilitate growth and the capacity to thrive for students, rather than just dealing with individual problems when they arise. The Universities UK 'Steps for Change' initiative for improving student mental wellbeing places the emphasis on a 'whole institution approach' to facilitate student development. One of the most important aspects of the student experience in terms of a 'whole institution approach' is the physical environment and living space. This can enable students to attach themselves both physically and emotionally to their new environment which hopefully will help them to feel safe, secure and give them a sense of belonging to a new home.

Student accommodation plays a vital role in the student experience. A sense of belonging and security is essential for young people to be able to feel enabled to take on the risks and challenges of higher education and to achieve the associated academic and life growth. Students need to feel part of a shared community but also need to be able to have a safe, private space. Physical environments such as bedrooms and places of accommodation play a vital role in the psychological development of young adults. Environments can encourage shared living and thriving communities where a friend is close to hand to talk over the stresses and challenges of student life which is so vital in preventing mental health problems arising.

Student mental health is hugely improved if they can feel able to engage with other students through cooking, socialising, playing and generally living together in a respectful community. It is also vital for students to be able to retreat to a private safe space for quiet reflective time. Getting the correct balance between individual space and a community experience is difficult but essential. Over the recent decades the emphasis has been placed on individual needs in student accommodation which has the potential dangers of creating environments where students can feel lost and isolated from their fellow students, which can lead to loneliness and mental health difficulties.

I therefore welcome this great initiative by Galliford Try and Scott Brownrigg of this roundtable discussion and report on considering the impact of accommodation environments on student mental health and wellbeing, which I am sure will lead to providing the spaces for students to thrive academically, socially and psychologically.

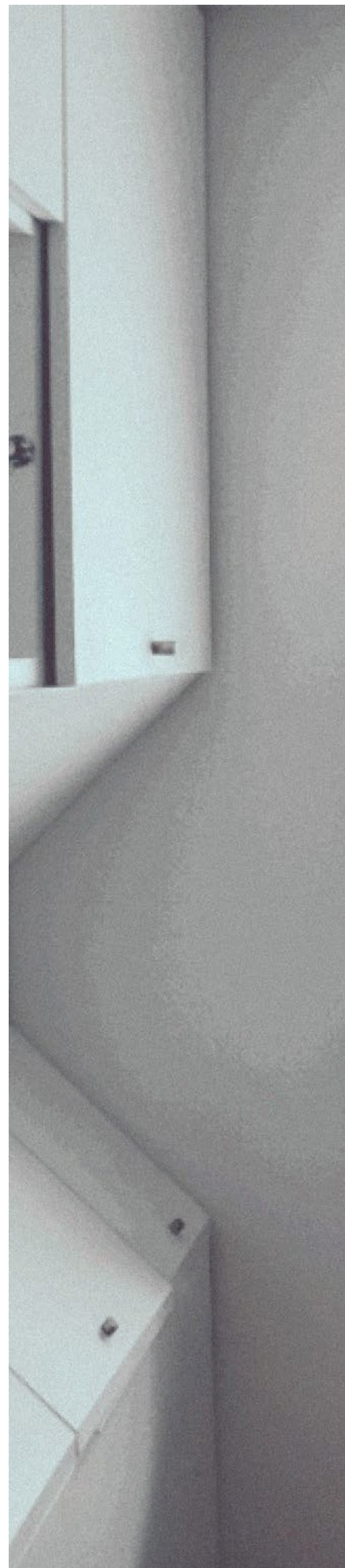
## **Alan Percy**

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# INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

**According to analysis carried out by the BBC at the end of 2018, the number of students seeking mental health support while studying at university has increased by more than 50% in the last five years.**

Student mental health and wellbeing while studying at university is a complex area which requires *'looking at the whole institutional approach and whole student experience.....it's not just about dealing with problems but it's about how students can flourish and how you can create communities where that can take place.'* (Alan Percy)

With this in mind the following report is set within the context that buildings in isolation are not the answer but that they do play a role in *'creating environments and contexts that enable students to thrive.'* (Mark Dooris)

Galliford Try and Scott Brownrigg have enjoyed a long and fruitful collaboration on our education sector projects and the success of those projects is in no small way due to our collective understanding of the educational drivers, issues and context within which these projects were delivered. In the light of the concern about mental health and the wellbeing of university students, at the end of 2018 we began to talk about organising a Higher Education based research project.

We chose student accommodation as a focus area as we felt this represents such an important component of student life and the student experience. We also felt that the majority of configurations of student accommodation had not changed much in decades.

*'Many universities are investing heavily in their academic estates, however the same attention has not been given to students' living spaces and with the increasing evidence of mental health issues on the increase, universities ignore this aspect of student experience at their peril.'* (Julian Robinson)

We set out to examine the design and management of student accommodation through the lens of wellbeing and how it may impact on young people while at university. This report captures some of the views gathered through a structured discussion with a cross section of views from the Higher Education sector including wellbeing professionals, university estate managers, student representatives, student accommodation operators, architect Scott Brownrigg and main contractor Galliford Try.

A number of central themes came to the fore for reflection when considering the briefing, design and operation of student accommodation. There is connectivity between these themes and comments noted under one theme have relevance to others. These themes are explored under the following headings in this report:

- **Transition** Looking at the period of potential vulnerability for new students
- **Community** Considering the importance of creating communities
- **Holistic Approach** Context within a Whole University Approach
- **Citizenship** Helping students to mature and thrive
- **Affordability** The challenge of providing better value for students and reducing financial worries
- **Typology** The form, function and performance of the built asset





Under each of these themes a number of topics that link to the student accommodation and the built environment were raised:

- **Community:** The idea that the accommodation creates a community but within it internal communities also exist. The relationship of the accommodation community to the wider university community and public community need to be considered.
- **Connectivity:** The principle of supporting connectivity at an individual level within the student accommodation but also with the wider university and public.
- **Culture:** The creation of a positive enriching and uplifting culture in which students feel safe, are 'at home' and are comfortable.

Julian Robinson summarised the feelings in the room by saying: *'It's clear to me that university clients, designers, developers and providers have a massive responsibility to design student accommodation in a way that maximises wellbeing. I think this is a very timely debate.'*

This report does not pretend to contain all the answers to a complex subject but will hopefully provide some food for thought when considering student accommodation and the wellbeing of the students that live there.

In conclusion to this report we have suggested a 'Student Accommodation Manifesto' to stimulate reflection and debate on how student accommodation can be designed to better support student mental health and wellbeing.

# SETTING THE SCENE

Both living and learning environments will define the higher education experience for a diverse range of students as they leave home and start to make their way in the world, independent from the family home. The diversity of the student population is such that there is no 'one size fits all' for young people at this critical stage of their lives. Combine this variable with the wide range of student accommodation typologies, age and condition on offer (each and every one in a unique location) and it is no surprise that the wellbeing of groups and individuals alike is hard to anticipate and manage.

It is however apparent that a place to call home is a vital part of the student experience. Whether in an Oxford Quadrangle, a Victorian terrace, a Brutalist ziggurat, or a North American Fraternity house, safety, comfort and a sense of community and shared experience can form the basis of a stable and fulfilling stay at university.

In considering revised typologies we need to learn from the past, and anticipate the future. We should address the ratio of public to private space, internal connectivity and physical networks, and the chosen architectural style and expression to define a set of design principles. In conjunction with choice and affordability a combination of these factors can be incorporated to promote best practice in considering mental health and wellbeing throughout the consultation and design process.







# TRANSITION

**There was general agreement amongst the participants that the first year at university is an extremely important transition period in the lives of young people and that the environments which they live in during those transitional times have a huge impact on their experiences.**

Alan Percy commented that *'When people leave the security of their home environment they leave behind everything that is familiar and this can impact on their sense of self. This isn't communicated to students well enough. This is what makes them vulnerable because they haven't got those attachments in their new environment and they have to go through a process to re-attach to a new home and have a new sense of belonging, this is what makes people feel secure and able to thrive.'*

During the initial stages of transition the students terms of reference to new surrounding and relationships are perhaps at their most fluid. Their normal support networks are either remote or have disappeared. As Alistair Brierley noted *'For young people who have left home, they are straight into a situation where they are free and away from home, the rules have gone, everything is up for grabs.'*

Alan Percy used the analogy of the hermit crab to describe what this transition period can be like for students. *'Their experience is a bit like that of a hermit crab in transition – upon finding a new shell, a hermit crab has to leave its existing shell and during that time it is incredibly vulnerable.'*

Participants talked about how our sense of ourselves is so closely linked to our environments and that as students typically leave their family homes, this new environment will impact on their sense of wellbeing. As Alan Percy described, *'What makes transition really difficult for young people is that their experience and sense of self is very closely linked to their environment and their relationships.'*

During this transition period it is important that students form new relationships and find support networks that impact positively on their sense of individuality, community, public and private self. It is also important that a sense of place and belonging are nurtured. Students potentially don't fully understand this transition period and the fact that it is normal for them to go through a process of adjustment and re-attachment to a new environment.

*'We are social animals and we have an instinctive desire to be sociable, to attach and be part of a group and to have meaning through that. But we can get lost and our sense of identity can get taken over and lost, so we then go down a continuum to individuate and have to have a sense of privacy and belonging but if you do that too much you get isolated and cut off.'* (Alan Percy)

The design and management of student accommodation needs to consider and balance the conflict between the desire to individuate and be private, with the desire, and necessity, to be sociable and public.

*'Student accommodation can be learning/working environments, social/hospitality environments and residential. There are huge issues around psychology and mental health and individuals moving through the system are at the most vulnerable point in their lives.'* (Steffan Williams)

In addition to the pressures associated with new environments and relationships, students also experience pressures in relation to competition, finance and the expectation of success.

*'When students express that they have mental health problems once you actually unpack that, a lot of the time, there is a sense of being overwhelmed by things, overwhelmed by life, by information and the pressures to compete in this individualistic, competitive world. The fees aren't a problem in themselves but it's the pressure to get the perfect essay, to get the perfect exam, the perfect degree to get the perfect job so that they can buy a shoe box. All these pressures start to put stresses on our sense of wellbeing and mental health.'* (Alan Percy)

The physical nature of the bedroom will be discussed later in this report but at this point it is important to touch on the role of the bedroom from a mental health and wellbeing stand point. Alan Percy spoke about the importance of the relationship that many teenagers have with their bedrooms and how they use their bedrooms as a way of expressing themselves during their development. For many, the bedroom is a place of comfort, safety, familiarity, individuality, exploration and personal identity. However as Dave Corcoran expressed; *'Every student is going to be different and each will want something different from their bedroom.'*

**The challenge is to  
provide environments  
in which young  
people can make this  
transition and thrive.**

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# CREATING COMMUNITIES

**The importance that the creation of the right culture and a sense of community can play in student wellbeing cannot be overstated. This was perhaps the most debated subject during our roundtable.**

*'There is a need to create environments where people feel that they can bring their private internal self to a community, so that they don't feel isolated. The more that people feel pressured, anxious or depressed, their natural tendency is to cut themselves off and withdraw physically, internally and psychologically. Externally they can seem fine but physically people can regress and retreat to their bedrooms and isolate themselves, not sharing in terms of communal living, and disappear into themselves. That is where things start getting dangerous. How connected that sense of environment and community is determines how we can experience ourselves and attach to a sense of community.'* (Alan Percy)

Dave Corcoran suggested that we really start to think about doing things differently *'if you put accommodation right at the centre and build around that for the good of the new incoming students and student services could be built around the accommodation for that transition period into university,'* then this would help to build a sense of community and belonging and bring the student residences literally into the heart of university life.

Student accommodation should not be viewed in isolation from the whole university approach to wellbeing as the student accommodation community is an important part of the university community.

The location of the student accommodation in relation to the wider university estate was much debated. It was recognised that the different dynamics affecting urban campus and green field campus present challenges and require solutions unique to each context. Therefore, a one size fits all approach is not suitable.

Accommodation that is remote from the university teaching campus presents one of the greatest challenges to a sense of connectivity to the university and to the university community. This may place greater emphasis on establishing both stronger links within the university community but also at a local level.

Talking about the *'challenges of student life and travel distances'* Mike Entwistle spoke about students travelling long distances between teaching facilities and accommodation which went against the concept of a *'sticky campus'* where students will want to study and stay around the campus facilities.

Great importance was placed on the role of social and communal spaces within buildings and their role in supporting communities and culture. These spaces can also help to combat isolation and help to integrate some students who spend a lot of time alone in their rooms.

*'You need to feel safe and loved to be able to start to mix and to be communal and to share inner feelings, that's the thing that really helps communities. Those individual problems don't fester and people won't feel isolated and can take risks and develop.'* (Alan Percy)

*'We know that you create society by having social spaces, we know that we can spot and manage welfare better in a community where you have people around you and you haven't got people locked up in their rooms.'* (Ilya Tabachinskiy)

Zulum Elumogo described his personal experiences within his student accommodation while studying at the London School of Economics, *'Why did I have such a good time at LSE? I realised it wasn't actually the university itself, or the course, it was the people. It was the fact that we were having amazing times together and had that sense of family in the halls.'* - *'Having that sense of home and familiarity and getting to know everyone, dining together each night, having a large common room space, being able to meet people through serendipity in the kitchen because it was all open, even in the bathroom, because there was nothing that was private apart from your own room.'*

Tom Martin agreed that the arrangement of the accommodation can have a positive impact on the student community, *'The different accommodation we have in the same city at seven different sites, the best community feel is from a community where they have shared bathrooms and not ensuite facilities.'*

**As well as stressing the importance of getting the architecture right, it was felt that the human element is even more important.**

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It was felt that the size, scale and configuration of the accommodation played an important role in creating a sense of community and, in general, that the larger the scale the greater the challenge to creating a strong community.

Alistair Brierley posed the question; *'Micro or macro? When is a building going to be too big? Is there an overwhelming scale that will damage any sense of real community? It is important there's a sense of belonging, there's a sense of scale, there's a sense of togetherness.'*

Zulum Elumogo agreed that scale had an impact on his student experience, *'In my first year I was in fantastic halls which were just off Tottenham Court Road and the smallest hall at LSE. We only had a population of 120 and the sense of community that we felt in the small space was incredible.'*

Fleur Priest-Stephens also agreed that the size of the social spaces impacts on student satisfaction, *'Cass and Claredale provide student accommodation but they run as a 'not for profit' model. They have tiny rooms, really small rooms, with shared facilities. But they have great social spaces and every year they perform really well across all London institutions in terms of their accommodation.'*

Tracey Smith noted the preference of students on the number of rooms being provided within flats, *'We have talked to students about the size of a cluster, should it be six or ten, ten seems to be the one that everyone loves now because there is always someone who is in that area to have debates and discussion'*.

The student hotel uses a different business model than more traditional student accommodation providers which mixes students with hotel guests with shared social and communal facilities. Ilya Tabachinskiy explained, *'One of our mottos is the completely connected community the basic philosophy behind it is that we mix all sorts of people including hotel guests, student guests, local residents and anybody is welcome, so it's open to you and everybody that you know.'*

Two areas that received concern when discussing 'community' were the growth of studio flats and intercollegiate accommodation. Aside from the cost of studio accommodation there was agreement that the feeling of community can sometimes be harder to create and support and that there is a danger of isolation for students.

Fleur Priest-Stephens summarised, *'first time renters, first time in a new city, might really like the idea of studio accommodation, but actually when you are living in a brand*

*new city and when you are under this academic and financial pressure, living on your own in a really small box, eating your food in your room, is not good for your mental health.'*

Tracey Smith agreed, *'Studios are just an awful thing for students. One of my friend's daughters ended up in a studio because they didn't book until late, and she's not happy. She was feeling ill one night and the only person she could get hold of was her mum because she didn't feel that she could shout out. There was no-one to shout out to and that epitomised to me what an effect a studio can have on a young vulnerable adult in their first year of undergraduate.'*

Zulum Elumogo noted that while a community feel might be possible within intercollegiate accommodation, that it doesn't benefit the individual universities and their student relationships, *'We also have an additional amount of intercollegiate halls whereby LSE students are living alongside students from other London universities and while that sounds very romantic, in reality it's not great for community because these people are probably going to end up being closer to those people that they are not at university with.'*



**Student accommodation is where many students spend most of their time and is a key space for community formation.**

- Zulum Elumogo, LSE SU



**Part of the student experience at university should be about learning from the community in which you are living.**

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# HOLISTIC APPROACH

**The importance of tackling the whole environment and not just the physical environments was discussed and it was stressed that only a whole institutional approach to improving mental health and wellbeing within universities would result in improvements.**

Mark Dooris noted that the UK Healthy Universities Network, of which he is a co-chair, promotes a 'whole university' approach to health and wellbeing, *'that's what the whole model is about you can't look at things in isolation.'*

The Whole University model *'aims to make the places within which people learn, live, work and play supportive to health and wellbeing.'* So the key question is *'how do we create environments and contexts which are going to support students to thrive and flourish?'*

Dave Corcoran also supported the whole university approach and reinforced that this has to be in partnership with new students and the Students Union. It is important that everyone is on board with this approach so that all parts of the university are *'going at the same pace, otherwise we will have gorgeous student rooms, but depressed people.'*

For new students the initial period of university life can be overwhelming and so it is important to provide the right foundations for a student at the start of their university life. However the induction process, intended to help engagement and connectivity can itself be overwhelming.

Dave Corcoran talked about the induction period and how important the introduction to student life is, *'if that engagement doesn't happen in the first two weeks you have lost it and isolation may have started. The person who is still in their room or wouldn't come out because they think it's a socially engineered event. They are not lost to us but it's so hard to get back into going forward.'*

He also suggested that universities should rethink their approach to Freshers events, *'We keep doing the same things every year, the same induction arrangements in place. Everyone is trying to promote their priority to the new students and we do the same thing and the students feedback each year that it has 'done their head in.'*

It was felt that the human element is important, such as having student ambassadors in the halls of residence, trying to get new students involved in social clubs and activities or ensuring that operational staff are available to support students.

Tracey Smith reported that a large part of a positive student experience is due to the *'operational teams on the ground and how they can be that additional family, how they can be that someone to sound off with. Most of the time that will be our guys that are working in the evening. We don't have security guards we have people who are there, who can help if there is a problem with maintenance or just support from a social and wellbeing perspective.'*

Zachery Spire also felt that the cultural feeling of the university and of student accommodation is significantly influenced by the staff, university staff or outsourced operational staff, they help to set the *'tone and the tempo'* for the environment within the community.

*'The hard thing to do is to tackle the culture from an organisational point of view. We can come up with many strategic initiatives, and they all might be fantastic, but if it's not challenging a culture that is having a negative impact then culture will always win. I think this is why the environment is so important because actually it can start to change the culture and so that's why I think this discussion is so crucial.'* (Alan Percy)



**A Healthy University adopts a holistic understanding of health, takes a whole university approach and aspires to create living, learning and working environments and cultures that enhance the health, wellbeing, sustainability and connectedness of its community**

- Mark Dooris, University of Central Lancashire

**It's important to provide  
the right foundations for  
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# CREATING GLOBAL CITIZENS

**A lively discussion took place around the theme of nurturing citizenship. Many students will be experiencing independence for the first time and they will also be trying to understand and establish their place in their new university community.**

The debate covered topics such as: How students are allocated their student accommodation to create a social mix, to broadening understanding of 'global citizenship' and to teaching 'life skills'.

Mixing students from different backgrounds and courses within student accommodation was generally felt to be a positive approach but the degree to which accommodation providers and managers should take an active role in creating that mix is less clear.

Neil Smith spoke about the importance of creating 'a *mixed and balanced community*' meaning that students should be mixed within the accommodation to promote inclusion and diversity.

Rob Hartley felt that it was important to '*pepper pot*' students from different socio-economic backgrounds - to promote positive relationships between people of different social groups.

Tracy Smith acknowledged that the allocation of accommodation is difficult to get right, from a student perspective. For example, some international students may prefer to be accommodated together at the beginning of their courses. She felt that part of the university and accommodation providers role is to '*sensitively influence students*' as part of their transitional journey.

Tom Martin noted that future occupiers of some Sodexo student accommodation are able to self-select whom they would like to be accommodated with. However, he noted these students only have access to three pieces of information upon which to base their decisions - gender, age and field of study. Tom agreed that accommodation should support the mixing of people of different backgrounds, cultures and religions - from the different regions of the UK and internationally.

Participants agreed that the degree to which the balancing and mixing process can be successfully managed in advance is debatable.

Mike Entwistle, also relayed the experience of one university which had allocated international students around the various halls of residence, only to find that by the end of the first term the students had swapped rooms with one another to be close to students of the same nationality. He noted that '*You can try the social engineering and sometimes it works and sometimes people embrace the diversity and sometimes they don't.*'

Zachery Spire felt that student communities should not be '*socially engineered*' but that the aim should always be to support students so that they can mix, flourish and enjoy their time at university, while responding to their needs as and when required.

Participants felt that an important part of the student experience is about learning from the community in which one is living and studying with.

Rob Hartley noted that students at their institution are from a very eclectic background, many will be the first generation of their families to attend university. Part of the responsibility of the university is to help those students build their network and part of that will be down to the students that they share their accommodation with who are from different courses that they might otherwise not meet. Rob explained, '*We are creating global citizens of the future and I think what is more important is the fact that they learn from the community that they are in, how to behave socially, racially, mix with different religions, learn to live sustainably, look after the environment, look after each other, look after their mental health and physical health.*'

Students can often come to university without well-developed life skills which, in itself can lead to a feeling of not being able to cope. Some students may never have cooked for themselves, washed their own clothes, shopped, tidied their own room or organised many aspects of their own lives.

Tom Martin talked about his experiences of working directly with first year students. '*The irony is that for students the first thing that they say they want is life skills. In addition*

*to the faculty contact time for six hours a week, they want to do more. They want extra curriculum activities, societies, sports teams and volunteering opportunities. We are almost teaching them how to become adults, and showing them life skills such as how to recycle etc.'*

With less disposable income and perhaps a lack of life skills, the positive impact upon student mental health and wellbeing of physical activity, healthy interaction with other people, with nature, along with sleeping and eating well should not be underestimated. Ian Pratt suggested that *'this poses a question around levels of provision. For example, self-catering facilities versus provision of healthy meals through communal dining.'*

Ilya Tabachinskiy noted that *'a generally accepted principle of a good state of mental health and wellbeing is eating well. And this perhaps poses a question around*

*self catering accommodation or providing food, as some universities/colleges provide meals through a communal dining facility.'*

Tracey Smith explained the services that Sodexo provide with their student accommodation. *'We run a lot of workshops so "Residence Life" is not just about eventing. It is about helping shape lives as well, such as workshops on how to cook on a budget.'*

Alan Percy talked about his personal experience, *'When I was at University we lived together and we had a shared communal space. We worked out a rota for who would cook and one night a week you would have to do the shopping, the cooking and cleaning up. It's a lot cheaper, it's usually healthier, it brings people together to talk and that's a very simple thing to do but it's about how can we help facilitate that within our accommodation.'*



# FINANCIAL PRESSURES AND AFFORDABILITY

**The financial cost of student accommodation was discussed as Fleur Priest-Stephens introduced the topic by saying that ‘research from the Institute for Public Policy Research that came out last year reported a fivefold increase in student’s disclosing a mental health issue to their university while studying.’**

While some of this increase is accounted for by wider participation and a wider pool of students, some of the increase is also due to *‘students facing unprecedented levels of pressure both financial pressure and academic pressure.’*

Research by the National Union of Students shows that 63% of students regularly feel like they struggle to pay everyday expenses and the largest proportion of all students’ expenses is their accommodation, the cost of which has increased year on year.

*‘The costs associated with attending university leads to a massive pressure to achieve, particularly when many entry level jobs require a 2:1 grade degree or above from students. So there is the pressure of financial stress and academic stress, the cost of living and the feeling of living in relative poverty.’* (Fleur Priest-Stephens)

Additional pressure can be caused by students then having to take on paid work to supplement their income. Fleur Priest-Stephens explained that *‘many students take on part time work. They will often be working above the recommended 16 hours a week and doing night shifts, so that they can go to university during the day. That is eating into their time to sleep, to socialise and eat which are really important in terms of maintaining good mental health.’*

The National Union of Students carries out an annual accommodation costs survey and this is currently showing how much the relative cost of accommodation has increased in the last ten years and, although the financial package available to students has also increased, students are now spending up to 76% of the maximum amount of the student loan on their accommodation. Fleur noted that very few students are eligible to receive the maximum student loan.

While Tom Martin explained that *‘We’ve seen over the last five to ten years a massive increase in the standard of student accommodation,’* Fleur felt that decisions around the designs of the accommodation and the facilities available to students should be driven by affordability and ensuring that the majority of the students’ needs are met rather than just an elite who can afford luxury facilities.

One of the areas of the forthcoming review of post-18 education and funding which is being led by Philip Augar is *‘Value for money for graduates and taxpayers.’*

*‘The Augar review into higher education is looking at quality but also looking at value for money and I think a key thing from the Augar review is undoubtedly going to be around affordability and how do we make sure that what it costs to send a student to each university maps against value for money. Augar has heard significant evidence about student accommodation as part of that review.’*  
(Fleur Priest-Stephens)

Tracey Smith agreed, *‘Affordability is still key and will remain key, so how do we provide and future proof accommodation so that it can be affordable for students.’*

David Long acknowledged that whilst there may be a *‘wish list’* of additional social and communal spaces beyond the student bedroom that affordability and value for money remain paramount so the selection and use of space needs to be balanced, even if that results in compromise or prioritisation.

Julian Robinson reported that design decisions in relation to student accommodation are often cost driven and described his recent visit to a private university, which includes a dining area next to every kitchen, external balconies and lots of social spaces provided within the development.

There was discussion as to whether the financial model for student accommodation needs to be revisited to help reduce cost but also to improve choice and support the affordability of better social and communal facilities.





**Today's students face unprecedented pressure regarding financial and academic performance. While space cannot address these issues directly, the places we inhabit have an undeniable influence on how we feel and experience life.**

- Steffan Williams, Scott Brownrigg



# TYOLOGY

**The panel discussed whether student accommodation has changed much in recent decades or whether the typology of accommodation provided is essentially the same while other areas of life such as the way we work or shop have undergone a significant change.**

*'We work across a variety of sectors and have seen that changes in the built environment have been driven by changes in culture such as the way we work, the way we shop, the way we relax, the way we live.'*  
(David Long)

The roundtable considered whether it is time to stand back and re-examine the model for student accommodation and to challenge it in terms of its function, its cost and how much it supports the needs and wellbeing of its occupants as well as those of the building owner and operators.

*'What does the building look like, what does it signify, and how does it lay out its functions in terms of circulation places and spaces and the spatial functionality is one thing, what a building signifies and what it looks like is another.'*  
(Alistair Brierley)

Mark Dooris talked about the principles which were agreed to be important to designing to create wellbeing in physical spaces, *'for example Simon Fraser University in Canada has produced some briefings around designing physical spaces for wellbeing, so it includes biophilic design connected to nature, the effect of colour and natural light, also control over furniture and being able to move things around, whether that is in a social space or in a bedroom.'*

This report has noted the increase in student accommodation cost and quality while also noting the desire for improved social and communal spaces to help support the creating of a community feeling and the transition into a new home.

*'The feel of a place is incredibly important and an inspiring environment can lift the spirits and leave the students feeling like they have had a positive experience at their university.'*  
(Julian Robinson)





Julian also noted that he had visited many student residences, *'Some have great designs and facilities, but that comes at a price and I have seen some awful student accommodation and your heart sinks when you see it and they literally are units for living or just accommodation for mass numbers of students. I don't know how we square this but we have just got to recognise that cost is probably the main driver.'*

Neil Smith questioned whether student accommodation is viewed correctly from a regulation perspective, *'from a regulation point of view, student accommodation is seen as a hotel, therefore from a policy perspective we don't perceive it as somewhere where someone lives.'*

The group also discussed the gap between students' perceptions, the marketing of student accommodation and reality. While first year students are often polled to discover their opinions, they may have high expectations on first entering university.

*'New students are unlikely to have a clear idea of what makes a 'good' accommodation so it's best to view the role of accommodation through the lens of the "student journey". Some accommodations are guilty of selling dreams to students by leading them to believe that hotel-style amenities such as gyms and swimming pools alone constitute to a great student accommodation experience. This can be misleading. Are students at university to live in a hotel or to form relationships and grow as people? Accommodations should be viewed, first and foremost, as vessels to facilitate the community formation and a place to build and nurture lifelong friendships. Those who develop and market residences should be cognisant of the important position accommodation plays in a student's journey and should seek to relay that sentiment through their marketing.'*  
(Zulum Elumogo)

Zachery Spires noted the multiple positions that universities hold with regards to their range of accommodation. *'The regime that was in place up to the 1970's when the University Grants Committee funded universities to develop, means that subsequent accommodation at post 1992 universities is markedly different and built under different conditions. So not all accommodation is going to look the same and function the same, but how do we then bridge the gap in students' perception and in attitudes to where they are actually living.'*

Claire Jackson agreed and commented that *'We should*



*remember that not all student accommodation is newly built and that much of the estate is older, but that does not necessarily mean the student experience is worse, but we do need understand the range of experience across the estate.'*

Alan Percy noted that student expectations can have a detrimental effect on student mental health and recounted the experience of one student at Oxford, *'I see that all the time with Oxford students that they are in this amazing place but have turned it into a living hell. There was one case of a student who was from a non-traditional mixed-race background and he came for an interview at one of the old traditional colleges. It was a very competitive course and he didn't get into that college but they referred him to another Oxford college who accepted him. It was a new college and he talked to me later because he felt that his mood started to go down from that point because he felt like he had been rejected. It was completely to do with the physical environment and he spent a year feeling rejected. It has a good end to the story but it had that impact on him.'*

The discussion turned to whether students consider the accommodation as a factor in their choice of university. Claire Jackson commented that *'Students may be choosing universities based on the estate and the buildings, and maybe more importantly the teaching and learning spaces, but we also think that accommodation is a major consideration for the decisions that they are making regarding which universities they want to attend.'*

Julian Robinson agreed and added that accommodation location is a very important factor. *'I think that is very, very important because if you are a first year student and you are coming into a new city where you don't know anywhere and you are placed into private accommodation, or another hall by a private provider and then you are not with any students from your college that can be very isolating. We have got to think about what works for a group of students and where they are located.'*

The student bedroom was considered as it is probably the most important space to a student but also can have a huge impact on their wellbeing. As Alan Percy commented, *'Bedrooms are so crucial for teenagers' - 'they develop and use their bedrooms as a way of expressing their own development.'*

Dave Corcoran suggested having the ability to easily re-configure furniture so that students can really personalise their rooms.

Alistair Brierley contrasted the different qualities that could be available such as *'a tiny room with a great view. Perhaps that beats a large room with a terrible view. There are so many qualitative things at stake.'*

Fleur Priest-Stephens noted that *'There is a massive swathe of students, who are middle income students, who just want a room with a bed and a desk and a kitchen that they share with their friends.'*

Tom Martin felt that there is a heightened expectation of new students who think that an ensuite bathroom is now the norm while at university but also thought that the best community feel is within the accommodation that has shared bathrooms and not ensuite facilities. *'A student who has probably never had an ensuite in their life suddenly wants to come to university and get an ensuite. I ask them if they have an ensuite at home. 'No'. So why do you want an ensuite now?'*

Rob Hartley wondered whether this was due partly to a fear of the unknown which, once overcome, leads to a better student life experience. *'Is it true that the student has left home, doesn't know anybody at university and due to the accommodation choice, they want an ensuite because they don't want to initially share. Actually the students that chose the cheaper accommodation where you share the bathrooms, they end up, three months or a year down the road, being more bonded together because of that experience. But the actual first response is that they don't want to share.'*

The approach being developed by the Student Hotel, described by Ilya Tabachinskiy, does provide a different model for student accommodation. It perhaps challenges the traditional view of student accommodation in the UK as a distinct building use by creating *'completely connected communities'* which see the mixing together of hotel guests, student guests and local residents.

*'Anybody can book, we have a cluster system so some clusters are reserved for students but if the cluster is not filled then it can be booked. We have short stay and corporate stay options and we have students. We have three layers of security but the communal areas, bars, restaurants, lounge, reception are open to anybody including local residents.'* (Ilya Tabachinskiy)





**It's clear to me that university clients, designers, developers and providers have a massive responsibility to design student accommodation in a way that maximises wellbeing.**

**- Julian Robinson, LSE**



# SUMMARY AND MANIFESTO

*“We shape our buildings, and afterwards, our buildings shape us.”*

This quote from Winston Churchill in 1943 was used to describe how the rectangular design of the debating chamber in the House of Commons was responsible for creating the two-party system which is the essence of British Parliamentary democracy. This same quote can be applied to this discussion about how the design of buildings for student living can contribute either positively or negatively to their mental health and wellbeing. Buildings that provide a series of single occupancy rooms with minimal communal spaces, limited natural light and poor ventilation are likely to promote different moods and behaviours from buildings with generous community areas and shared facilities.

In recent times the student population has become more diverse, making the identification of ‘success’ difficult to capture in terms of a specific building typology. It is however possible to identify preferences in terms of potential solutions. In this instance both the qualitative and the quantitative are bound together. We must therefore address both style and substance in terms of the ‘homes’ we are planning for this complex and nuanced market and deliver habitats to nurture young people who have (more often than not) just left their homes and families.

We must bear in mind that young undergraduates may be vulnerable and overwhelmed when arriving at University and are looking for safety and comfort in order for them to flourish. In this context Alan Percy’s reference to the student as Hermit Crab is apposite. The Hermit Crab looks to inhabit a new home before the seagulls approach, in much the same way as a student will seek the security of a comfortable base in order to flourish during the whole higher education experience.

Besides offering shelter, student accommodation must facilitate the chance for cohesive communities to form that will allow for the expression of both internal and external ‘self’. This can be done via the ratio of private spaces to those that are shared and communal. The continuum that lies between social, shared and interactive, and private, isolated and introspective can be assessed in terms of building configuration and arrangement and pitched at an appropriate level to accommodate a range of people.

However, what the client and the design team cannot always account for is the rapidly developing virtual world. This exists in terms of intangible social spaces, where contacts and communication are one step removed from the real life encounter that human beings are programmed to rely on and enjoy. As virtual connectivity has flourished, individuals have become less reliant on real experience and a sense isolation and missing out has become more commonplace. Buildings must be designed to allow for the serendipitous encounter, the chance meeting and the anchor points of key destinations within a hall of residence that act as gathering spaces. This must be countered with the possibility of privacy and peace and quiet, where a student can rest, reflect, sleep and recharge for the adventure that the wider campus offers.







Returning to the quote from Winston Churchill, we believe that we must shape our Student Accommodation buildings so that they then shape our young people to become happy and fulfilled global citizens. To this end we propose a ten-point design manifesto to shape our thinking and deliver buildings that promote health and wellbeing.

1. **Address the human scale and avoid making vast and impersonal proposals.**
2. **Create hierarchies of space linked by active and well-lit internal circulation.**
3. **Embed the accommodation into its immediate context and ensure strong linkages to adjacent spaces and places, whether on a green campus or in a city.**
4. **Connect the accommodation to the main student campus and not in distant satellite locations.**
5. **Offer a generous social concourse for students to mix and share space and activities.**
6. **Arrange rooms in clusters, as opposed to linear tranches.**
7. **Ensure that help is always on hand by locating concierges adjacent to the building entrance.**
8. **Communal dining and cooking encourages social interaction.**
9. **Avoid the 'self-sufficient' studio to encourage outward facing activities.**
10. **Be generous with social space and economic with private cellular space.**



**Every aspect of student accommodation and the student experience must be designed to empower and encourage students to look after their own health and wellbeing, support others and create the change necessary to ensure all those in higher education can thrive.**

- Ian Pratt, Scott Brownrigg





# ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS



**Alistair Brierley**  
Project Director,  
Scott Brownrigg



**David Long**  
Strategic Business Director,  
Galliford Try



**Claire Jackson**  
Education Director,  
Galliford Try

**Alistair Brierley:** “How we live as a group of individuals, our habits and rituals, our need for group involvement, (as well as privacy) and the sense of inhabiting a secure and comfortable place is essential to the understanding of the architect when addressing future trends in student accommodation.”

**David Long:** “The fundamental model of student accommodation has not changed significantly in many years – I am interested to explore whether a new model exists that can both support and enhance student health and wellbeing, as well as being commercially viable to both students and universities.”

**Claire Jackson:** “On a professional level and a personal one, with a daughter at university, I’m interested in discussing if we consider wellbeing as central enough within the design, build and management of new student accommodation.”

**Alan Percy:** “Student mental health and wellbeing is a key priority facing the HE sector at present. We already know that the transition period to university for young adults and mature students is a crucial time that can have a huge influence on their whole student experience and wellbeing.”

**Julian Robinson:** “Mental health and well-being needs to be approached holistically. The environment and physical space experienced by the student can make a huge difference to how they feel. This can range from the shape and layout of their rooms, the provision of shared work and social space, the location of their residences and their journey into campus.”

**Fleur Priest-Stephens:** “I am keen to explore how wellbeing can be designed into accommodation itself. Bearing in mind the dual priorities of community and affordability, there must be model for accommodation which promotes sociability, interaction and integration whilst meeting the needs of comfort and security.”

**Tracey Smith:** “Insight tells us that there’s an increasing blurred line between the academic and living aspect of being at university. Providing a community feel in a homely environment where students are comfortable in their own skin, therefore contributes to their overall university experience, potentially supporting degree attainment and certainly equipping students with the necessary life skills as they leave university.”

**Ian Pratt:** “I’m keen to discuss the range of challenges facing current and future generations of students and how we can develop more user-focused, evidence-based designs for learner communities that prioritise health and wellbeing.”

**Mike Entwistle:** “Having worked in the design of university buildings for twenty years, I have seen the change in the demands which students make of their environments and the increasing level of active and passive support which is required. With a daughter at university, I have seen at close quarters how students’ surroundings impact on their daily experience, and in turn their mental and physical health and wellbeing.”



**Alan Percy**  
Head of Counselling,  
University of Oxford



**Julian Robinson**  
Director of Estates, LSE  
and Chair of HEDQF



**Fleur Priest-Stephens**  
Policy Lead & Programme  
Manager for Welfare, NUS



**Tracey Smith**  
Accommodation Officer,  
Sodexo



**Ian Pratt**  
Director, Scott Brownrigg



**Mike Entwistle**  
Project Principal,  
BuroHappold Engineering



**Zulum Elumogo**  
General Secretary,  
LSE Students' Union



**Steffan Williams**  
Director, Scott Brownrigg



**Tom Martin**  
Residency Living Manager,  
Sodexo

**Zulum Elumogo:** "Student accommodation is a core pillar of the student experience. It is where many students spend most of their time and is a key space for community formation. Every element of the accommodation environment works to create a culture."

**Steffan Williams:** "Today's students face unprecedented pressure regarding finances and academic performance. While space cannot address these issues directly, the places we inhabit have an undeniable influence on how we feel and experience life."

**Tom Martin:** "Over the past four years I have taken the opportunity to learn and gain invaluable skills including Mental Health First Aid, Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training and SIA Security courses. I am very passionate about the student journey in ensuring we are delivering a fantastic service that supports our residents from applicant to alumni."



**Dave Corcoran**  
Director of Student Support  
& Transition,  
University of Chichester



**Mark Dooris**  
Professor in Health &  
Sustainability, University of  
Central Lancashire / Co-Chair,  
UK Healthy University Network



**Neil Smith**  
Head of Inclusive Design,  
BuroHappold Engineering

**Dave Corcoran:** "I have a keen interest in the impact of physical spaces and how people interact within and around those spaces and their wider environment. This is true of my own domestic engagement with space but equally when working with students and staff colleagues to understand the impact of space on individuals' mental wellbeing and their social engagement."

**Mark Dooris:** "A Healthy University adopts a holistic understanding of health; takes a whole university approach; and aspires to create living, learning and working environments and cultures that enhance the health, wellbeing, sustainability and connectedness of its community and enable people to achieve their full potential."

**Neil Smith:** "Good mental health matters. Our investigations have shown that to support good mental health we need to use the built environment to promote social interaction, mindful activity, and improve the experience of mobility. I am keen to explore what further work is needed to better understand the interventions we should be making."



**Zachery Spire**  
Head of Research & Training,  
The Class of 2020



**Robert Hartley**  
Head of Estates Strategy  
& Programme,  
University of Greenwich



**Ilya Tabachinskiy**  
Commercial Development  
Director, The Student Hotel

**Zachery Spire:** "Student accommodation and wellbeing has emerged as an acute concern influencing students' experience and engagement in higher education. Understanding of the interface of student accommodation and student wellbeing remains opaque."

**Robert Hartley:** "I'm responsible for the development of a space, providing an effective teaching environment, as well as enhancing living, social and leisure space, to promote the quality, health and wellbeing of the university experience."

**Ilya Tabachinskiy:** "I have a first-hand experience in both living in and delivering student accommodation. I know that student housing can be rather faceless and bland. At The Student Hotel our aim is to change that and transform it into a vibrant, once in a lifetime experience."



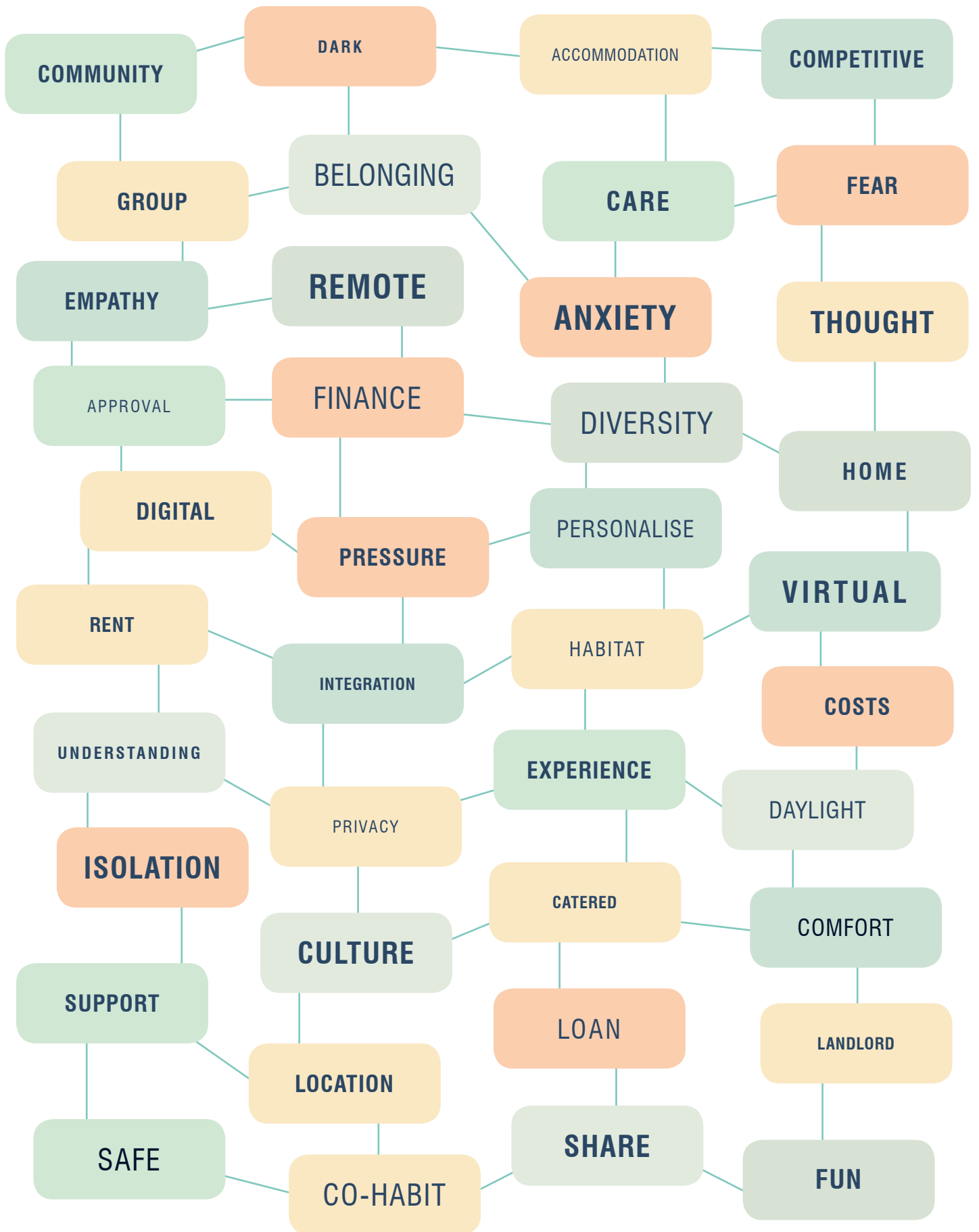
# ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION



We would like to thank all of the participants of our roundtable for taking part in such a stimulating discussion. It was very important to us when organising the event that we were able to bring together different professional views operating within the area of student wellbeing in higher education. Each of our participants was able to represent their particular field and area of expertise within the roundtable for the benefit of the overall discussion.







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