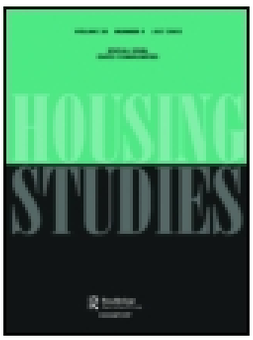

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# 'We prefer *our* Dutch': International students' housing experiences in the Netherlands

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**ABSTRACT**

This article investigates how international students find and maintain housing and what constraints they have to deal with in the process. It reveals how the interplay between personal characteristics and housing-market features shapes housing biographies and unequally disadvantages certain international students over others. Eighteen in-depth interviews with international students were conducted about the housing situation for them in Utrecht, a Dutch student city. Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) of the interview data found that international students' housing biographies differ substantially, both in progression and outcomes. Despite some students successfully finding adequate housing, many described living involuntarily in conditions of stress, instability and insecurity and a number experienced progressively worsening housing conditions. The students ascribed their difficulties to discrimination and structural disadvantages on the housing market. In light of these findings, this article calls for a re-evaluation of the Dutch student housing system.

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International students; discrimination; housing precarity; housing pathways; higher education

## Introduction

International students[1] are a growing, heterogeneous, group of young adults navigating housing markets that are largely unfamiliar to them (Baas, 2019; Bista, 2016; Myers *et al.*, 2019). Despite studying abroad being a—in many ways—privileged activity, the privileged situation many international students find themselves in does not automatically guarantee adequate housing conditions in their host countries. Over the past years, anecdotal accounts of international students in various countries (e.g. Australia, the US and the Netherlands) have shown that many of them experience difficulties finding and maintaining adequate housing (Kuzmane *et al.*, 2017; Obeng-Odoom, 2012), mirroring the perils of countless young adults on tense housing markets (Hoolachan & McKee, 2019).

Limited prior research on the housing situation of international students generally concludes that their unfamiliarity with the housing market of the host country,

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coupled with language barriers, create difficulties for them (e.g. Obeng-Odoom, 2012). We argue that this narrative insufficiently captures the full range of possible housing problems and their likely causes and neglects the differences within the group of international students. Additionally, such claims are rarely supported with convincing empirical evidence. Lastly, the voices of the students themselves are mostly absent in this discourse. Stated boldly, we generally do not know how international students find and maintain housing, what constraints they face in the process and how they deal with them.

The aim of this article is to give an in-depth account of how international students find and maintain housing. We do this by analyzing the housing biographies of international students in Utrecht, a popular Dutch 'student city' (Smith & Holt, 2007). The housing biographies are classified using David Clapham's (2002; Clapham *et al.*, 2014) framework of 'housing pathways' to give a rich description of the biographies and to highlight the differences between them. In sum, this article seeks to answer the following question: *Which housing pathways for international students in Utrecht are formed by interactions between personal characteristics and the structural constraints of the housing market?*

The article opens by outlining why international students should be seen as a distinct and disadvantaged group on the housing market and contextualizes their housing market situation in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Next, we illustrate the housing pathways approach. The subsequent methodological section elaborates on aspects of participant sampling, characteristics of the interviewees and the analytical techniques employed in this study. The findings are then discussed in detail and reviewed in light of the theoretical approach of housing pathways. The article closes with an outline of a future research agenda for studying housing experiences of international students.

## International students: a disadvantaged group on the housing market?

While some authors assert that international students constitute an economically privileged group (Malet Calvo, 2018), this is hardly the case for them all. Most do not work full-time but finance their stay abroad via means other than income—such as student loans and savings (Hall, 2010; Hordósy *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, they generally lack the relevant social and cultural capital that may be important for finding housing (O'Connor, 2017). In the context of finding housing, social capital refers to the personal social network which individuals can draw on. Cultural capital refers to knowledge of housing-market practices as well as being 'culturally compatible' with the local housing context, for instance, by speaking the local language. International students can, generally, be argued to have less social and cultural capital than domestic students: most do not have a social network in the host country and often do not speak the local language (Boterman, 2012; Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2015). This might lead to complications for international students trying to find housing, which, ideally they need to secure before arriving in the host country, given that most have no friends or relatives there with whom they could stay temporarily (O'Connor, 2017; Obeng-Odoom, 2012). Secondly, they are largely unaware of the housing market they seek to enter. While much information on housing markets and laws is available online, not everything is

written in a language they understand, easily accessible, helpful or accurate. Online information is also a poor substitute for tacit knowledge of housing-market practices (a form of cultural capital) (Maslova & Chiodelli, 2018). Besides their lower social, cultural and economic capital (compared to domestic students), international students might face structural disadvantages on the housing market.

### Structural disadvantages on the housing market

Many international students report ethnic discrimination on the housing market, in the Netherlands and elsewhere (Bengtsson *et al.,* 2012; Carlsson & Eriksson, 2015; Kuzmane *et al.*, 2017; Silver & Danielowski, 2019). Despite the Netherlands' reputation as a liberal and tolerant country, prior research found the housing conditions of certain ethnic groups there to be lower than those of the ethnic Dutch (Özüekren & Van Kempen, 2002). Additionally, non-Western immigrants face more hurdles on the housing market—i.e. in obtaining a mortgage or advancing in the private rental sector (Aalbers, 2007; Bolt *et al.*, 2008, 2010). Research from Belgium and Germany, neighboring countries of the Netherlands, points to landlords as one of the major sources of housing discrimination against certain ethnic groups (Heylen & Van den Broeck, 2016; Mazziotta *et al.,* 2015). Given the similarities between these three countries, it is likely that this also the case in the Netherlands. Generally, landlords in the private rental sector are allowed to decide with whom they enter into a rental agreement. This decision-making process has been argued to be biased against certain ethnic groups. For instance, field experiments found that individuals with 'foreign-sounding' names have fewer chances of being invited to see a dwelling—seen as indicative of landlords discriminating against certain ethnicities (Auspurg *et al.*, 2019).

Landlords, thus, occupy a relatively powerful position on the housing market, especially when the supply is constrained (Keller, 1987). Besides discriminating against members of certain ethnic groups, landlords can make high demands—e.g. asking for extra security deposits, not maintaining the property correctly, temporary rental contracts—when there is a housing shortage and many potential tenants are competing for the same dwelling (Owusu-Ansah *et al.,* 2018). Given the few alternatives for renters on tense housing markets, they might be less inclined to fight for their rights, fearing that the landlord will terminate the rental agreement or retaliate in some way. The relationship between landlord and student may be even more unequal than between landlord and working adult. Landlords might perceive students, in general, to be in a financially unstable position and untrustworthy as tenants (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2013; Calder *et al.*, 2016; Verhetsel *et al.*, 2017). Given the temporality of international students' stay in host countries this temporality can, on the one hand, lead to an undesirably high turnover. On the other hand, landlords could exploit this turnover by frequently increasing rents (Owusu-Ansah *et al.*, 2018).

### Student housing in the Netherlands

Dutch universities do not provide accommodation but help international students to find housing by including information about housing options online (Kuzmane *et al.*,

2017; Verhetsel *et al.*, 2017). Most also cooperate with student housing associations although the latter generally have too few rooms to guarantee housing for every international student. Hence, most students have to find housing in the private rental sector, where there is a grave housing shortage and very high competition (Boelhouwer, 2019; Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2015; Savills, 2017). This tense market must house increasing numbers of international students—76,908 degree-seeking international students were enrolled in Dutch universities in 2017, an increase of 96% since 2008 and increasing by about 10% every year (UNESCO UIS.Stat, 2019).

Due to high house prices, a studio/flat is unaffordable for most students. Instead, most rent rooms in flats where they share facilities such as the kitchen and bathroom and have a bedroom to themselves. These shared flats are both clustered on or near university campuses and spread out over the whole city (Nijënstein *et al.*, 2015; van Huijsduijnen *et al.*, 2019).

The structural constraints of the Dutch student housing market, the unequal power relationship between landlords and students and possible ethnic discrimination combined with personal disadvantages in terms of social, economic and cultural capital, are the probable causes of problems for international students searching for housing. We expect structural and personal disadvantages to interact differently for the various subgroups of international students, hence leading to variegated housing biographies.

## The housing pathways approach

This research follows the housing pathways approach or HPA, a flexible framework to holistically describe the temporal progression of housing biographies and their similarities across cases. The HPA was chosen over alternative conceptualizations of tenure transitions, like the life-course approach, as it allows the investigation of housing biographies over much shorter timespans (Feijten & Mulder, 2005). By examining housing biographies through the lens of housing pathways, it is possible to 'understand housing choices and tenure transitions as a complex string of events' (Köppe, 2018, p. 226). Housing pathways are, thus, distinct sets of living and dwelling conditions that vary in price, quality, tenure and temporality (Clapham, 2002).

Earlier research found several different housing pathways for young adults (e.g. Castro Campos *et al.*, 2016; Clapham *et al.*, 2014; Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2015). Given the special situation of international students on the housing market, we expect them to follow housing pathways different from those followed by native young adults (see Castro Campos *et al.*, 2016; Eskelä, 2017; Revington, 2018; Stillerman, 2017). Additionally, as housing pathways may be strongly geographically localized and only to a certain extent transferable across geographical contexts, we draw on earlier research on young Dutch adults' housing pathways in Amsterdam (approximately 40 km north of Utrecht) as a backdrop for investigating those of international students in Utrecht (Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2015). Hochstenbach and Boterman (2015) found three housing pathways for native Dutch young adults: a linear pathway and two types of chaotic pathway. Young adults from the native population who followed the linear pathway largely obtained housing in the formal housing market. Only a minority of young adults was able to follow such a planned and stable

residential pathway due to the high competition for dwellings and high prices. Most individuals follow chaotic pathways, which entail moving through the informal housing market and having little or no stability due to temporary housing and ever-increasing rents. Hochstenbach and Boterman further differentiate between a *reproductive* and a *progressive* chaotic pathway. In the latter, young adults are argued to have 'greater control over their own housing pathway, while the reproductive chaotic pathway is characterized by frequently undesired forced moves' (Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2015, p. 264). We seek to expand upon this typology by focusing on the variation within one subgroup of young adults navigating tense housing markets—international students—and compare their housing pathways to those found by Hochstenbach and Boterman for young adults in Amsterdam.

## Data and methods

This article is based on 18 semi-structured qualitative interviews with international students conducted in 2018 and 2019. The interviewees were all between 20 and 29 years old and had lived in a country other than the Netherlands before moving to Utrecht. At the time of the interview, they had been resident in Utrecht for a minimum of one year. All were students following a degree course at one of the universities in Utrecht. The interviewees were selected in a way that enabled us to achieve variation in gender, ethnic and educational background, location of previous residence and length of residence in Utrecht (see Table 1). Interviewees were primarily approached via an advertisement posted in four Facebook groups for international students who were resident in and around Utrecht. These groups are open to anyone wanting to get in touch with other international students in the area. A small number of interviewees came from the researcher's personal network. In line with the overall demographics of the Utrecht international student population, females, Master's students and EU nationals are over-represented in this study.

The interviews retraced the students' respective housing biographies. During the interview, they were asked about their previous place of residence—usually the parental home. If it was not the parental home, additional questions were asked about the previous dwelling—and especially about the process of finding accommodation. All interviewees were asked how they envisioned housing in Utrecht before the start of their search. After this, the housing biography in Utrecht was systematically reconstructed by asking how each dwelling was acquired, what search strategies were used, which constraints they faced and why they moved to a different dwelling. Special attention was paid to the knowledge of housing they had accumulated before going

**Table 1.** Characteristics of interviewees ($N = 18$).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | Female ($N = 14$) | Male ($N = 4$) |
| Nationality | EU ($N = 12$) | Non-EU ($N = 6$) |
| Educational background | High school (equiv.) ($N = 6$) | Bachelor ($N = 12$) |
| Study programme pursued | Bachelor ($N = 6$) | Master ($N = 12$) |
| Location of previous residence | Home country ($N = 9$) | Other[a] ($N = 9$) |
| Length of residence in Utrecht | 1–2 years ($N = 12$) | More than 2 years ($N = 6$) |

UK citizens counted as EU citizens.

[a]This category includes interviewees who had completed secondary education or a bachelor's degree in a country other than their home country before coming to Utrecht.

to Utrecht, while searching for the first dwelling and through exposure to other international students' housing experiences. At the end of the interview, the interviewees were asked how they saw their housing situation in the coming 6 to 12 months. Each interview was audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The names used in this article are pseudonyms and any revealing personal information has been removed.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed by means of a typological content analysis. First, the interviews were coded using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). QCA was used to systematically and reproducibly summarize the content of the interviews according to unambiguously-defined categories of the coding frame (see Janssen *et al.*, 2017). The coding frame initially contained exclusively deductive categories. The different sub-categories were inspired by the characteristics of housing pathways explained by Hochstenbach & Boterman (2015)—e.g. characteristics of each dwelling, search strategies employed, reasons for moving between different dwellings, types of move and self-assessment of their progression on the housing market over time. During a trial coding of five interviews, inductive categories were added to the coding frame (e.g. emotions and self-evaluations attached to the personal housing biography). All interviews were subsequently coded twice, with a 30-day interval between the codings, using this revised coding frame. This procedure enhances the reliability and validity of the coding frame and the analysis as a whole (Renz *et al.*, 2018; Schreier, 2012, pp. 15–17).

Secondly, an empirically grounded typology of the housing biographies was created to derive the different pathways. In so doing, we followed the steps outlined by Kluge (2001) and Hochstenbach & Boterman (2015). The pathways were identified by first summarizing the individual components of each housing biography for all categories of the coding frame. We then tabulated these summaries for all interview transcripts and categories. Finally, we systematically compared all interviews according to these summaries. This process was repeated after the second round of coding to ensure the robustness of the analysis. Additionally, we conducted coding frequency analyses to check for different housing aspirations, search strategies or outcomes between BA and MA students, given the over-representation of females and MA students among the interviewees. We did not find substantial differences and concluded that the composition of the interviewees was unlikely to bias the results of the analysis.

On the basis of the characteristics mentioned above, we found four housing pathways for international students in Utrecht—the linear, the chaotic, the inverse and the exception. These pathways differ from each other in the types of moves, the temporality, contractual conditions and legality of the dwellings and are internally consistent (Kluge, 2001) (see Table 2).

In the next sections, we first describe some key features of the housing market for international students in Utrecht, as experienced by our interviewees. Given the lack of prior research on this topic in the Netherlands, we believe that this context is necessary to understand the housing market that international students move in and the general problems they encounter. We then elaborate on the four housing pathways, paying special attention to the constraints which our interviewees faced and the strategies they developed to counteract them.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of the four housing pathways for international students in Utrecht.

| | Frequency and types of move | Types of dwelling | Contractual conditions | Legality of dwelling | Students following these pathways |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Linear pathway | Infrequent moves; relatively planned and foreseeable | Satisfactory rooms in shared flats | First rooms temporary, later rooms mostly permanent contracts | Legal | Single students |
| Chaotic pathway | Frequent moves; forced and at short notice | Successive low-quality rooms in shared flats | Mostly temporary contracts | Legal or illegal | Single students |
| Inverse pathway | Frequent moves; forced and at short notice | Low-quality rooms in shared flats, frequently living in housing alternatives long-term, e.g. with friends or relatives | Temporary or no contract | Legal or illegal | Single students |
| Exceptional pathway | Infrequent moves; relatively planned and assisted by real estate agents | Only apartments or studios | Permanent contracts | Legal | Mostly couples, rarely singletons |

## International students on the Utrecht housing market

Nearly every interviewee explained that several overarching structural and contextual issues prevented them from accessing accommodation in Utrecht. Chiefly, they felt neglected by their universities, receiving little or no institutional support, feeling discriminated against by Dutch students who sometimes acted as landlords and faced structural disadvantages finding housing.

### *Lack of institutional support*

Several interviewees hinted at a lack of institutional support in Utrecht. Helena (22), a BA student from Austria, mentioned that the international office of her university did not help her when she had problems finding accommodation:

> I think the worst thing is when you call the university and they just tell you: 'Yeah, we know that it's bad'. Thank you for helping me. You just think, well, in the worst case, I can always contact the International Office, but they can't help you, either.

Overall, this proved a contentious point. While most interviewees felt very strongly that universities were not doing enough about the housing situation, others remarked that the universities '[are] pretty open about that and tell you it as it is' (Dimitri, 20, Russia). Likewise, Dimitri remarked that he feels that the universities in Utrecht are doing enough to improve the student housing situation by, for instance, cooperating with the student housing corporation—SSH—to provide short-term accommodation for international students.

Legal counselling in cases of problems with landlords was also regarded as existent but largely ineffective. Nina's landlord decided to sell the flat in which she and six other international students were renting a room. They were certain that their landlord could not end their contracts on a whim and took the municipality's offer

of free legal counselling. However, their landlord did not stop pressurizing and harassing them. Feeling stressed and having to complete their MA theses at the same time, the tenants decided to 'let it drop':

> We just ended up going to lawyers and legal help (…), trying to postpone as much as possible the fact that we were being kicked out of our apartment. (…) And even though I was very pissed off and outraged because of what the landlady was doing to us, I was like: 'Okay, I don't want to be part of this'. I was busy with my thesis at the time and I did not want to have extra things at the back of my mind and live with such tension. (Nina, 23, Romania)

Some interviewees suspected that certain landlords prey on international students, knowing that, if they exert enough pressure on them, they can get their way. This is in line with our theoretical expectations regarding the unequal power balance between landlords and students. Many interviewees called the Dutch student housing system flawed and complained that it leaves international students feeling stressed, abused, vulnerable and alone, having to fend for themselves finding accommodation.

## Hospiteeravonden*: a gateway for undisguised racism*

Several spoke of facing discrimination during the *hospiteeravonden* (hospitality evenings), during which the residents of a flat invite a number of students to introduce themselves. The student who makes the best impression, or who 'clicks' the most with the present tenants, will be offered the room. Our interviewees found these *hospiteeravonden* strange and compared them to job interviews, beauty pageants and talent shows:

> You go there, and you sit there with four or five people and you have to present yourself. The people living there, like, judging if you will be able to live with them. So, it's like 'You didn't pass the test, you can go'. (Ada, 23, Greece).

This puts pressure students to appear confident and likeable. Fleur (29) from Curaçao (a Dutch Caribbean island), described feeling compelled to 'amplify the truth' to succeed at hospiteeravonden:

> You have to try to say what they wanna hear and especially for the party houses, and I'm not a party person. You have to say: 'Yeah, I love *gezelligheid* [coziness]', have fun together, go out for a beer. But I'm, like, when I come home, I'm probably gonna be tired, I don't even wanna socialize all the time. So, you have to be like 'I'm ready to party, I'm ready to do anything'. Just to get the housing.

Fleur, like many of our interviewees, had to go multiple *hospiteeravonden* to find accommodation. In several cases, she faced blatant undisguised racism:

> They would tell me: 'No, you're international!'. And I would tell them: 'No, actually I'm a local because I speak the language fluently, I understand it. So, you don't even have the issue that you would have to speak English or switch languages when talking to me'. No, then they're like: 'We prefer *our* Dutch'.

Students from non-Western-European countries in particular faced such outright discrimination. As Fleur's example illustrates, not even possessing the 'correct' cultural capital—i.e. cultural proximity and speaking Dutch fluently—seemed to protect them from such remarks. These instances of racism might also be experienced by Dutch

students of color who grew up in the Netherlands. Our interviewees, however, stressed that they were not aware of Dutch students of color having their Dutch-ness questioned in the same way. This led our interviewees to conclude that they were discriminated against because they were both students of color and international students.

### *'No internationals': structural discrimination on the housing market*

The majority of our interviewees were unable to access rooms via SSH and had to look for accommodation in the private rental sector—mainly on dedicated websites like Kamernet and in Facebook groups related to housing. There, the discrimination continued. All interviewees remarked that a sizeable proportion of rooms was categorically unavailable, with many landlords refusing to rent to international students:

> Most posts start with this: NO INTERNATIONALS in capital letters. I feel angry. (…) And then there are some that, instead of saying 'We're looking for Dutch people', say 'Dutch-speaking' people, which leaves some room for internationals but only those that speak Dutch, and that's a very small percentage of people. (Ananda, 24, Greece)

> It kind of hurts a little when you don't know about it. You are attracted by the university to come here and you face that and you're like: 'Shall I leave'? That's the strangest thing. (Johanna, 25, Germany)

Despite this practice being illegal, our interviewees remarked that such statements were frequent (up to 40 per cent of adverts, according to one interviewee). These exclusionary and potentially hurtful statements make the overall process of house-hunting highly selective and difficult for those who do not fit the narrow(-minded) criteria indicated. Our interviewees found it shocking and ironic that such adverts were posted in Facebook groups for *international* students. They disagreed, however, about whether this constituted discrimination. While, legally speaking, it does, some understood that Dutch students preferred to live together with other Dutch students.

Despite these disadvantages encountered by almost all our interviewees, there are marked differences between the types of housing biography. We found four housing pathways, discussed below.

## The linear pathway

The linear pathway for international students in Utrecht strongly resembles that described in prior research (e.g. Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2015). On the linear pathway, international students quickly manage to improve their housing situation, each dwelling being of better quality and closer to their envisioned ideal than the previous one.

Interviewees following this pathway generally started searching for a room in April or May, before the start of the academic year in September. As few could travel to Utrecht to search for accommodation, most had to find their first room online. All started their housing search with SSH. Theresa (23), an MA student from Germany, was surprised that the booking process turned out to be difficult and stressful:

> There was this date, I think it was 9 May at 9 a.m. That's when all of the short-stay rooms went online. And then the website crashed. So, I just sat behind my computer for 20 hours straight and kept refreshing the website until I got one of the last rooms that

> were still available. I think at some point I went to bed but could not sleep well as I woke up all the time to refresh my laptop. It finally worked at 6 a.m.

During the booking process, Theresa needed to reduce her expectations and take any room she could get—doing so via SSH proved to be an exceptional case. Some students could not access the SSH website; others received their acceptance letter too late, meaning that all reserved accommodation[2] had already been booked. As a result, other international students had to find housing in the private rental sector.

There, our interviewees quickly realized the housing shortage. For every advert on Facebook or Kamernet, there were dozens of replies by international students. The dominant strategy of our interviewees in dealing with this was to sign up for as many Facebook housing groups and websites as possible and to reply as quickly as possible to every single advert that fitted their criteria. Some interviewees spent three hours per day for three months looking for and replying to housing adverts. However, due to the number of replies that landlords received, they received few replies. Anna (23), a German MA student, explained:

> There's so much competition, there's so many emails coming in, a lot of people don't want to reply to everyone, and they just pick five people and then they won't reply to the 100 mails that they also received. (…) Every time somebody posted something, I was replying and that was distracting me, of course, from doing anything else. I was always, like, low-key stressed about it.

As the beginning of the academic year approached, most interviewees started being open to more expensive rooms. To afford this, they took out (additional) student loans, looked for part-time jobs, used up their savings or relied on parental support. Celia (24), a Greek student, grudgingly took her parents' money to be able to afford a more expensive room. However, this came with strings attached:

> I was expected to have good grades, I guess. (…) But that also made me feel like I wasn't really doing this for me, I'm doing this for them. So, like I'm not studying for me, I'm just studying for the grades and to be able to call them for the validation: 'Oh hey, I passed and it's okay, you can send me money now'!

Most interviewees mentioned being worried about financial problems because of the high housing prices. The quote by Celia illustrates that parental financial support is not necessarily unconditional and might put additional stress upon international students. Many, like Theresa (23) from Germany, were not, however, in any way financially supported by their parents:

> I had some savings, which I mainly had to use for the deposit. Not everything, but a large part. My parents do not support me financially, I have to make money to cover my own expenses.

The majority of our interviewees following this pathway found their first room while abroad by searching intensively and Skyping with landlords. The room which they managed to find was usually small, expensive and came with a 6- to 12-month contract. Accordingly, they had to start searching for another room relatively soon after moving in. Some had to move as they were living in squalor:

> While I was living there, they started renovating the place. (…) They took out the toilet and the shower. No, the shower was still there, but they turned off the drainage. So I

> was taking a shower and suddenly the neighbor rang the door and was, like, 'Please stop showering, the water is running into my house'. So I basically was living in a flat which was not habitable. (Mareike, 22, Germany)

Their next move, accordingly, was relatively planned. As they were already living in Utrecht, they could spontaneously attend viewings. Additionally, most said that they were able to search for a room during less-busy times, especially winter and early spring. They thus relatively quickly found a cheaper room of better quality in a better location. Anna (23) from Germany was surprised by how quick her second room search was:

> Only because I had really stupid luck, I went to my first [room viewing], which was in this flat where we are now. And just because of a lucky turn of two rooms being free and me coming a bit earlier than the others, they kinda chose me for the room I'm in now.

This held true for all interviewees who followed this pathway: after a rough start and initially extremely unsatisfactory housing conditions, they were able to improve their accommodation in Utrecht by moving within the city. At the time of the interview, our interviewees following this pathway still lived in their second room in Utrecht.

## The chaotic pathway

The chaotic pathway, marked by stagnating housing conditions, is in line with the one found by Hochstenbach & Boterman (2015), who described it as a series of unplanned moves and less stability. We found that international students following this pathway moved frequently (at least twice in two years) and in an unplanned manner for reasons mostly outside their control. The spontaneity of moves entailed having little time to find new housing. Hence, they transitioned in and out of rooms with periods of effective homelessness and had, overall, limited control over their housing pathways.

The chaotic pathway was mostly followed by international students who did not have significant trouble finding their first accommodation in Utrecht. Most of our interviewees who followed it had managed to book a room via SSH or another student housing company. However, as their rental contract was limited to 12 months, they faced time pressure at the end of the academic year—they considered this one of the worst moments to search for housing as they had to compete with new international students searching for rooms. Due to the severe time constraints of their university courses, many were unable to find a new room before their contract expired. Hence, they had to move in with fellow international students or stay in hostels and, again, devote a significant amount of time to finding a new room.

Most new rooms they found at such short notice were illegal—these were mostly offered by private individuals who rented rooms to students without having the necessary permits. The rooms generally did not allow for municipal registration (*inschrijving*), which posed a problem for non-EU students as they needed to be 'registered' to obtain a residence permit. Registration was, in fact, for practical reasons, a necessity for all international students:

> If you don't get registered, then you don't get a BSN number.[3] If you don't have a BSN number, you don't have a bank account, health insurance, you cannot do anything. (Ananda, 24, Greece)

To obtain a BSN number, several of our participants resorted to fake-registering at friends' houses, thereby risking high fines. Some also reported living in rooms that they did not know were illegal, as they were allowed to register at that address. Ananda was evicted after the municipality found out that her flat was illegally sub-let:

> Our landlady contacted us, and he was, like: 'I need to talk to you, so let's meet tomorrow'. So, she came, and she was, like: 'There is this law that started in 2016 or something, that doesn't allow renting to more than two students or something like that. So, you need to move out'. (Ananda, 24, Greece)

Once in an illegal room, the situation mostly perpetuated itself. Ananda, for instance, again had to quickly move out of her next room, as it was also illegal. Having to perpetually look for new rooms and always fearing having to move out took a great emotional toll on our interviewees. On average, it took them four 'intermediate illegal' rooms in order to find a legal one with a permanent contract.

Some of our interviewees also had to find new rooms for completely external reasons. Simon (26), a student from the UK, lived in Utrecht for four years, in seven different rooms. He had to leave them all, either because his contract expired or because his living situation became unbearable. Simon's first room was in a town near Utrecht. As the contract was limited to one year, he had to move out and found a room in the city center of Utrecht. The landlord, however, did not properly maintain the house:

> It got to the point where the lights stopped working and you know, ( … ) it was just such a run-down place. It looked war-torn, in parts. ( … ) There were holes in the walls because there were mice ( … ). Mice dying on the floor or the bed. It was bad, really bad.

After moving out, Simon lived (in rapid succession) in four other rooms. He had to leave the next room after one of his roommates threatened to kill him; the one after that because his landlord had lied to him about being able to host him permanently, meaning he had to move out at very short notice. After this, he lived on friends' sofas for about two months before he finally found his first permanent room in Utrecht, a highly emotional moment for him:

> I closed the door, said 'Goodbye, see you soon' to my friend, who was there. Walked down the stairs, just walked some distance and started crying. Just this release of anxiety, this stress, this where-the-hell-am-I-gonna-be? It was horrible.

Simon's case shows how some of our interviewees followed the chaotic pathway out of the need to rapidly move from one room to another, without the opportunity to carefully look for a new room. His story was illustrative of those of many international students in Utrecht who had to rent rooms from shady, uncaring and abusive landlords.

While the chaotic pathway was thus mostly formed by unfortunate external circumstances, some students described following this pathway deliberately. Helena, an Austrian student, described her first room in Utrecht as a temporary sublet from a Dutch student. Whilst staying there, she learnt about a hall of residence run by a student housing cooperation. As her contract was about to expire, she exclusively tried

to find a room via this specific cooperation. She succeeded in the end, although she was only able to secure another temporary room. However, she resolved this issue by planning her mandatory study abroad according to the rental period. The chaotic pathway can thus also be one of flexibility, which allows students to make housing transitions easily at the expense of stability. However, only a minority of our interviewees described following this pathway deliberately. For the majority, it was a consequence of temporary contracts, high competition and, as it seemed to them, bad luck. 'Bad luck', here, seemed to be a diffuse term that reflected the tremendous power that landlords have in determining students' success on the housing market and their overall housing conditions.

## The inverse pathway

To our knowledge, the inverse pathway has not been described in prior research on young adults' housing pathways. While most housing pathways seem to end with a 'success story', meaning that the individuals interviewed managed to find housing, our findings reflect a different narrative. We found a distinct pathway in which the housing situation deteriorated over time, especially in terms of stability and legality. Despite the moves being foreseeable, our interviewees following this pathway failed to find any kind of legal or permanent accommodation. As a result, they were forced out of the formal, regulated, housing sector. They became reliant on alternative housing arrangements like living with friends or in illegal housing situations without rights or stability.

Most of our participants following this pathway lived in SSH short-stay accommodation during their first year in Utrecht. Knowing that their lease was limited to one year, they generally started to look for a new room about four to six months before their contract expired. This was the case for Sevgi (23) from Turkey. She explained that she thinks not all international students are equally disadvantaged on the housing market. After all, she and her Mexican roommate were the only inhabitants of her flat who had significant trouble finding housing for the second year. Sevgi wondered if her troubles finding a room stemmed from her coming from Turkey, in contrast to her roommates, who were mostly Western Europeans:

> You know that Turkish people are also one of the minorities in the Netherlands and there are also negative stereotypes about them. I also don't know how I should interpret this. Is it the fact that I am discriminated more harshly because I'm Turkish, or if I'm … treated like any other international person? I cannot differentiate between them, because it's not something you can prove.

Receiving mostly no replies or only rejections to messages she sent to landlords on Facebook and Kamernet, Sevgi tried to rent a flat in the formal housing sector together with her Mexican roommate. To improve their chances, they asked a Dutch friend to call a landlord:

> We translated the requirements with a Dutch friend of ours. (…) But we saw that we can still apply for it. (…) We asked (her) if *she* can call them and start speaking in Dutch. (…) Everything was fine until she said that we were internationals. And the employee on the phone directly said: 'No, we don't rent to internationals'. But come on, we meet the requirements! Why don't you accept internationals? It was harsh.

While Sevgi said 'It's not something you can prove', her experiences of discrimination on the housing market mirror the findings of prior research on ethnic discrimination on the Dutch housing market (e.g. Bolt *et al.*, 2008, 2010). No matter how much she was willing to pay, she faced discrimination that made it difficult for her to find any kind of housing.

As the end of their tenancy in their first apartment approached, students following the inverse pathway had to make a decision: take any offer they could get (often in shady or unpleasant alternatives), become homeless or return home. The students we interviewed eventually ended up in alternative housing situations but knew fellow students who had to drop out and return home because they 'could not take it anymore', as Sevgi said:

> I was told the narrative of a friend of my friend. And she told me the friend needed to leave the Netherlands and go back to Spain because she stayed in a hostel for a few weeks, then she couldn't afford it. (…) That's super sad! You're coming here to study and because of being homeless, you quit your studies.

Determined not abandon their studies, our interviewees eventually opted for alternative housing options—mostly staying with friends, distant relatives or in illegal houses. Sevgi got relatively lucky in the end. She found out that she had distant relatives in the Netherlands living in Den Bosch, a city about 50 km south of Utrecht. While she appreciated finally having a place to stay, she recognized that the situation was not optimal, for everyone involved. Besides having a very long commute to her university (about 2 hours each way), she felt she was intruding:

> They have their own lifestyle, their own order and I don't want to be concerned about whether I'm ruining their wealth, life or if I do something that's rude or not. (…) It would be better if I could find a place for myself as soon as possible.

Huaiwei (24), a Master's student from China, was only able to find a room via the Chinese community in Utrecht—a room that he had to rent without a contract:

> I don't have a contract. (…) Of course, I asked, but I realized that if I insisted about this, I could lose this room. So, there are many people for such a room, and they don't want a contract, they can replace me.

He was not looking for other rooms but just hoped for the best. Living as many other international students did—without a contract—he felt that holding on to his precarious housing was the best thing he could do, as it would keep him from being homeless.

## The exceptional pathway

The exceptional pathway differed from other housing pathways in terms of standards, search strategies and the constraints faced. International students following this pathway aspired to live and succeeded in living in their own flat or studio, mostly with their partner. Due to high housing prices in Utrecht and the fact that landlords expected tenants to have sufficient income before renting a flat,[4] this pathway could effectively only be followed by couples who rent an apartment together. This pathway, thus, overlaps to a certain degree with Hochstenbach and Boterman's (2015) income-

selective 'linear' pathway. However, in contrast to their findings, we found this pathway to be *exclusively* attainable for couples who have the financial resources necessary to rent flats or studios together.

Eva (26) and her partner Juan met in Argentina and decided to come to Utrecht to start their careers together. Eva felt that a minority of international students were in a comparable situation. When first looking for housing in Utrecht, the university advised her to check SSH. The latter, however, made it clear that they did not rent short-stay accommodation to couples. Eventually, Eva and Juan started to look on various housing websites. The flats they found were very expensive. Seeing adverts vanishing quickly and only a small number of new flats becoming available, Eva said that all she felt she could do was to increase their budget and reply to adverts for even-more-expensive flats:

> There is such pressure to get apartments here, that of course, the prices go up. (…) So, we thought: well, we're going to have to start offering more. Or apply for apartments that are more expensive. (…) We were looking at apartments, our limit was 1500€, but we didn't want to pay that.

Being able to pool financial resources is a key advantage which couples had compared to singletons. However, looking for more expensive flats did not mean that couples faced less competition on the housing market. Eva and Juan found themselves competing with working adults. Due to the low availability of flats in Utrecht, Eva recalled spending a lot of time looking for flats and asking for Skype viewings on Kamernet, as the couple was still in Argentina at the time:

> So, looking back it was really hard work! I should have gotten paid for it, honestly. Because it was 1.5 hours per day for two months! So yeah, it was a lot of hard work.

After about two months, Eva managed to convince a landlady on Kamernet to give her and Juan a viewing via Skype. Being still unsure about the procedure, they asked a friend in Utrecht to pick up the keys for them:

> She showed us the apartment on her phone and she did ask for the deposit in advance. But I was, of course, still uncertain. We arranged for the keys to be delivered to a friend. So, she saw the person, the person was real, she had the key. (…) In the end, we got the key and we put it in the lock and it opened and it was an apartment.

Eva's comment that her landlady was the only one who agreed to a Skype viewing is testament to how approximately 90 hours of search efforts had resulted in so little. Luckily, the flat far surpassed their expectations. However, despite having a permanent contract, they had to move out less than a year after moving in:

> The owner told us that she wanted to sell the place. So, she once came and gave us a hint, kind of a direct hint. She said: 'Well, I want to sell the place, so maybe you can start looking for something else'. And we immediately saw an alert there! And we said: 'We don't want to have any problems'! So, we said: 'We start looking NOW.'

On learning that they would have to move out again, they panicked. They were afraid that they would again have to go through the same ordeal of finding a flat. However, as Eva said, they quickly realized that they were in a much better position than before:

> It gave me a lot of anxiety, I think. I wasn't looking forward to it, at all. But I started noticing that the process was going to be different because we were here. We had a recommendation from the owner.

A friend suggested that they look for a new flat via a specific housing agency. Most of these estate agencies charged fees that students generally could not afford and, in many cases in fact, categorically excluded students as clients. However, being a couple, despite being students, seemingly allowed the agencies to circumvent these limitations. Celine (23), a student from France, and her partner decided to use an estate agent not just for practical reasons, but also to make sure that their flat was legal and not overpriced:

> We were sure that we would get a proper contract and that we could register at the place and that everything would be fine.

Despite being able to use estate agencies, finding a flat was in many cases not a quick and easy procedure. Celine explained that it still took her and her partner more than a month of intensive searching to find a flat in Utrecht.

Eva and Juan eventually found a studio flat that met their needs and was significantly cheaper than their first flat. Despite the new flat being generally of lower quality than the first, they managed to improve their housing situation over time as they valued the fact that they were now paying less. Despite having a permanent contract, Eva and Juan still worried that their new landlord might decide to sell the house. All in all, Eva still called their overall housing journey in Utrecht 'traumatizing'.

## Conclusions

This article has argued that international students are a neglected group in housing research. Breaking the stereotype of international students as an unequivocally (economically) privileged group, we have focused on their struggles and strategies on the housing market. Disadvantage on the housing market was conceptualized as arising from an interaction between multiple sources of stratification. Therefore, we went beyond common suggestions that all international students are equally disadvantaged by virtue of their being foreigners and a more heterogeneous picture of housing disadvantages and pathways emerged. This was supported by the lack of a relationship between the interviewees' housing history in their home countries and their housing biography in Utrecht.

Four housing pathways for international students in the Dutch city of Utrecht were found. These four housing pathways reflect the diversity of housing biographies. Students following the *linear pathway* managed to improve their housing situation in Utrecht after it was initially unfavorable. In the *chaotic pathway*, students neither improved nor worsened their housing situation. Rather, they were forced (due to external constraints) to move rapidly between dwellings mostly of the same low standard. Adding to the literature on young adults' housing pathways, two pathways not identified before were then described. These may be unique for international students. In the *inverse pathway*, students lost their homes altogether and were forced to permanently live in housing alternatives, such as friends' places, hostels or illegal dwellings. In the *exceptional pathway*, student couples rented a flat that was over most students' budgets—hence ending in some of the best but also priciest conditions for students in Utrecht.

Certain pathways are less likely to subject international students to precarious housing—especially the *exceptional* and the *linear pathways*—both mediated by financial resources and good timing. In the *chaotic* and *inverse pathways*, international students faced an uphill battle and could rarely develop appropriate strategies to combat the constraints they faced—illegal housing, the perpetual need to look for and move to a new room due to bad living conditions and pressure exerted on them by landlords.

Between these pathways, the housing search strategies which our interviewees used largely overlapped. One the one hand, this can be seen as a drawback of using the Housing Pathways Approach to study pathway-specific housing strategies. On the other hand, it is a clear sign that, despite using the same strategies, international students are confronted with structural issues like ethnic discrimination that prevent them from following a more desirable pathway, despite mimicking others' search strategies. Indeed, many of our interviewees named factors such as discrimination by landlords and Dutch students as reducing their likelihood of finding accommodation. These findings are in line with prior research reporting ethnic discrimination on the Dutch housing market and the unequal power relationship between landlords and tenants. Possessing cultural and social capital relevant to the Dutch context was helpful for finding housing. Interviewees who had acquaintances in the Netherlands, were aware of the structure of the Dutch housing market and spoke (some) Dutch had, generally speaking, relatively fewer difficulties. However, this did not hold true for everyone. Some interviewees possessed considerable cultural and social capital but still faced immense difficulties with accommodation. For these students, ethnic discrimination and the powerful role of landlords seemingly 'cancelled out' the positive effects of social and cultural capital.

The interviews revealed the great and continuous (emotional) impact that the search for housing had on our interviewees' daily lives. Especially when having to find a new room, they were preoccupied with housing issues and hardly had time for other activities, including their education. The whole process of finding and worrying about accommodation involved tremendous emotional labor that many of our interviewees felt was only understood by their fellow international students. The feeling of not being taken seriously by universities highlights the shocking perceived lack of institutional support for international students. These factors may contribute to the generally poor mental health among them (Auerbach *et al.*, 2016).

In light of these findings, Dutch universities and policy-makers should perhaps rethink their (international) student housing policy. With hosting increasing numbers of (international) students and accepting payment of their tuition fees should come a (moral) responsibility to ensure that every (international) student has a decent place to stay. This would benefit students' living conditions, as well as the Netherlands' reputation as a good place to study.

Given the under-researched nature of this topic, there is a need for further research. First, given the exploratory nature and limited empirical base of this article, further research would benefit from broadening its scope to other 'student cities'. A wider and more diverse sample of students should be interviewed to corroborate the existence of the inverse and exceptional pathways, neither of which have been described in prior research. Secondly, this article only considered the perceptions of the international students themselves. Given that most of our interviewees suspected tensions between 'them' and Dutch students, further

research should investigate the 'Dutch' side of the story, especially in the context of the production of prejudice against international students. This also applies to the role of landlords in supplying housing to international students. Finally, further research could more explicitly focus on the role of institutional and interpersonal support networks as creators of housing biographies. This analytical meso-level is currently underdeveloped in studies employing the Housing Pathways Approach.

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## Notes

1. Students who move abroad to obtain a degree.
2. These can only be booked if the student has already been (conditionally) accepted by the university.
3. Dutch social security number.
4. Landlords usually expect tenants to earn between three and four times the monthly rent to ensure they can afford it (Boelhouwer, 2019; Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2015).

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