Welcome to the Latvian housing market!
International student housing pathways in Latvia

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Student research report

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Introduction

Studying is an increasingly mobile practice that creates housing challenges in many cities hosting higher education facilities. In Latvia, which since the 1990s has been a homeowner market with a relatively small rental segment (OECD, 2020), this is particularly acute. In Riga, where housing demand exceeds supply, student demand at the end of the summer when study semester starts is widely perceived as a particularly hectic period (LSM, 2019). Additionally, if in 2008 international students constituted only 1% of students in Latvia, then in 2019 the number had grown to 14% and decreased only to 12% during the pandemic in 2020 (IZM, 2021). Thus, the question of how more than 9 thousand international students find housing remains open.

While international students are often perceived as a privileged group, they also have been shown to face multiple forms of disadvantage, ranging from risks of being exposed to scams to undisguised racism (Fang & van Liempt, 2021). Importantly, the ease with which newcomers feel welcomed affects all residents' everyday encounters, sets the scene for broader socioeconomic development of the city as well as decreases opportunities for scammers to distort housing prices. Since the numbers of international students in Latvia is only expected to rise but finding housing is a challenge to most people in Riga, analysing student' pathways to housing allows also to understand broader national housing challenges as well as risks of studentification of housing (Smith & Hubbard, 2014).

To examine student housing experiences in detail, in this report, we draw on 32 qualitative interviews and survey responses of 176 (see Chapter 1) international students collected in the Spring of 2022 to explore **how the housing pathways of international students contribute to their sense of belonging in the city of their residence**. Under this framework, we examine three interconnected issues:

- How student needs, identities and financial capacities shape their preferences in finding housing? (Chapter 2)

- How various platforms, structures and relationships differently enable and/or constrain student pathways in the housing market? (Chapter 3)

- How does housing and its related public encounters contribute to a sense of home and belonging during studies? (Chapter 4)

Our analytical approach is based on three theoretical premises that inform each chapter. First, we treat the experiences of housing and home as socially and materially

interactive practices of identity formation of individuals and groups (Kusenbach & Paulsen, 2013: 2). Second, we employ the housing pathways approach to show how individual consumption of housing is constrained or liberated by relationships, interactions and wider structures of the housing system (Clapham, 2002; Fang & van Liempt, 2021). Third, we analyse students' sense of belonging through housing by examining their practices of home-making and social and material place-attachment (Kusenbach & Paulsen, 2013).

By our analysis of these questions we aim to examine general tendencies in access and affordability in the Latvian housing market as well as raise questions about the broader urban social cohesion in Latvia. The report was produced as a part of the study courses "Research practice" by second and third year students and "Quantitative research methods in anthropology" by second year bachelor's students of social and cultural anthropology at the University of Latvia. The report was a part of the study process and reflects its limitations.

The research emerged as a complementary study to the JPI Urban Europe project "The Housing-Integration-Nexus: shaping exchange and innovation for migrants' access to housing and social inclusion" and is the second anthropology student exploration on student life, with the previous being on study relationships and wellbeing. The report is written in English both because international students were a part of the research team and to make it available to international student audience. The report will be of interest to students, social scientists, university staff, housing providers and NGOs and policymakers working with issues of housing and integration.

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1 Methodology and ethics

To answer our research questions, we used semi-structured qualitative interviews and a self-administrative online survey. Qualitative interviews were conducted first to base survey questions on empirical evidence and use as a validation and further analysis of gathered data.

Research design, participants and ethics

The target group of this research included international students studying in Riga. To get in contact with international students in March 2022 we sent out an e-mail to student service departments, student councils, Erasmus+ and international students' coordinators of 19 higher education institutions in Latvia with the largest number of students. The e-mails contained a short description of the study, our aims and methods as well as a request to send this information to international students currently studying in their institution. A few universities responded to the e-mail and forwarded the information to their international students. The e-mail also contained a link to an application form where students who were interested in participating in the study could write in the higher education institution they are currently studying in, their phone number and e-mail address, and whether they are an EU citizen.

20 students applied to qualitative interviews through the aforementioned application form. Their contact information was given to the research team. Some of the researchers could reach the applicants, some could not. The researchers reached the rest of the research participants through their personal contacts. In total, during April (with few exceptions in late March and early May) we conducted 32 interviews that were from 20 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes long. The total interview length was 18 hours and 51 minutes, all of which was transcribed. Most of the students lived in Riga but few lived in Jelgava or Daugavpils. About half of the interviewed students were EU citizens, and more than half (17) were male (15 – female). Most students that are EU citizens are or were studying in Latvia in Erasmus+ programme. Those that have finished their studies were studying and living in Latvia for about 3 years or less.

In the second round of recruitment for the online survey, a link was sent out to the established university contacts. The data for the analyses was collected from May 30 until June 2 (in the year 2022) using stratified multistage selection sample. The survey was carried out using the online survey tool – QuestionPro, which we chose due to its functionality and accessibility at our university. The survey was filled in by international students of 13

institutions and of various nationalities (for example, German, Finnish, Indian, Russian, Turkish, Ukrainian, British, Sri Lankan, and more) that were grouped into 8 categories – students from: Africa, America, Asia, Caucasus, Central Asia, Europe, South Asia and Other. We received 300 questionnaires, but only 176 were valid, the rest being unfinished. Of the 176 respondents whose answers were valid (from 300 questionnaires), 146 were degree students, and 30 were short-time students. Of the degree students, 65% were male, but 34% female. In terms of level of education, 63% studied for a bachelor's degree, but 34% studied for a master's degree. Every student had an opportunity to participate in the study, meaning – no gender, age, or nationality was excluded.

In order to protect the parties involved during and after the study, the study was conducted in accordance with the basic principles of anthropological ethical codes. Researchers told about the aim of the study and asked permission to record the interview. They also said that the interview will be anonymous which means that any information that could reveal a research participant's identity will be taken out of the interview transcript (e.g. name, age, university, place of residence). They also stated that research participants have rights not to answer any questions, to leave any information off the record, and to leave the study at any moment without explanation (beforehand informing the researcher about this). All student names in the report are pseudonyms.

Data collection and analysis methods

Students were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. That means that during the interviews researchers used interview guidelines – a list of open questions about the topic categorised in specific themes, but were open to detours considered important by participants. We came up with the interview questions through several group workshops and editing sessions using the research questions and literature studies. Researchers used the interview guideline as a thematic conversation prompt to ensure comparability but other than that they followed where the research participant leads. Survey questions were designed after qualitative interview questions, specifying some of the same issues.

In order to comply with epidemiological safety due to Covid-19, the interviews were mostly done through video calls or phone calls. It was also necessary because some of the research participants were not in Latvia at the time of the interview. Similarly, online self-administrative questionnaire was used for the quantitative data collection. For the quantitative data analysis, we used SPSS software platform for cross-tabulation analysis. Researchers transcribed the interview recordings and then coded them. Interview coding involves deciding on themes that researchers wish to analyse and looking for the data in the
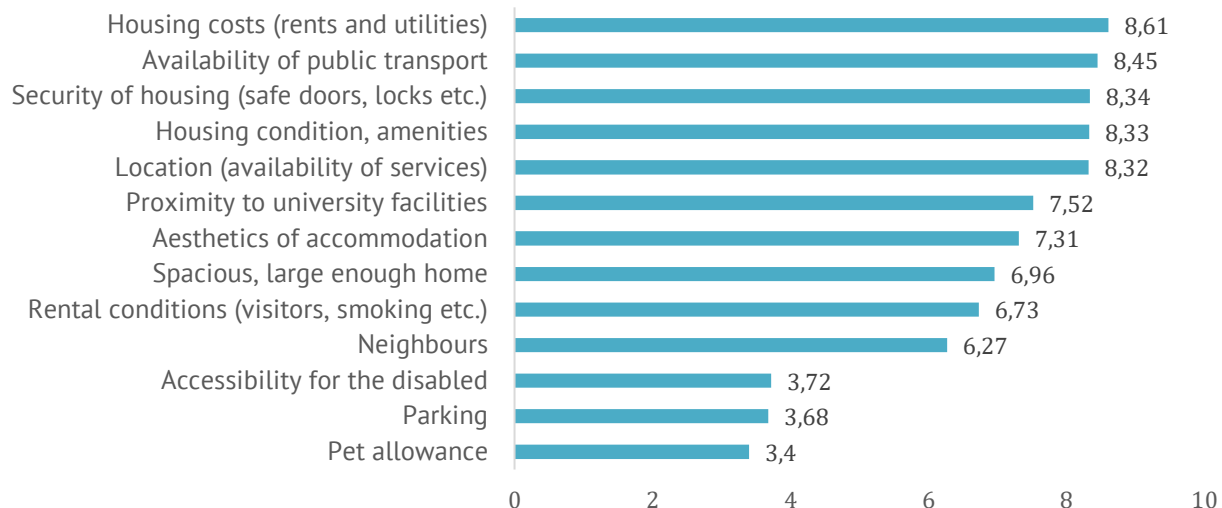
transcripts (1 code is 1 specific theme). Researchers read through the transcripts several times and note the sections that illustrate one or several themes. Through several design workshops we created a code system based on our interview guidelines and individual first cycle coding to make the data sorting and analysing more efficient, structured and collectively unified. To make coding easier we used MAXQDA software that allowed us to create, delete and sort interview quotations in faster and more secure ways. The major code families included: actors, tools and platforms, issues and challenges, home-making. The report structure reflects some of the major codes under these families.

The research has several limitations. First, the sample size does not reflect all experiences and some groups and universities are better represented as the response rate strongly differed. Second, some of the survey data are not included due to time constraints and lack of sync with the broader qualitative report. Third, the mixed methods research was conducted and written by 28 people with 3 lecturers guiding the research (Lakševics and Orste – qualitative, Rutkovska – quantitative) and 25 students doing the analysis, making the merge and quality of arguments challenging. The report was reviewed and edited for coherence, but keeping intervention rate low to respect all contributors input. Nevertheless, the analysis reveals clear trends and we hope the report will be of use and spur further research and improvement regarding the issues described.

2 Student housing preferences and expectations: price, location, and size

International students have various expectations about securing housing in Latvia. Due to their heterogeneous backgrounds, past experiences and financial capacities some think Latvia provides more opportunities for them, yet others are complaining about various conditions. When students are asked what determines their choice of housing, both quantitative and qualitative results show that price is the most significant factor. The mean evaluation of importance of housing costs for degree students in 10 point scale was 8,61. This is followed by concerns about location (public transport 8,45; services 8,32; proximity to university 7,52) and housing condition (security 8,34; amenities 8,33; aesthetics 7,31), which also show high importance. Less important but still of significant concern are size (6,96) and sharing space with others and neighbours (6,27).
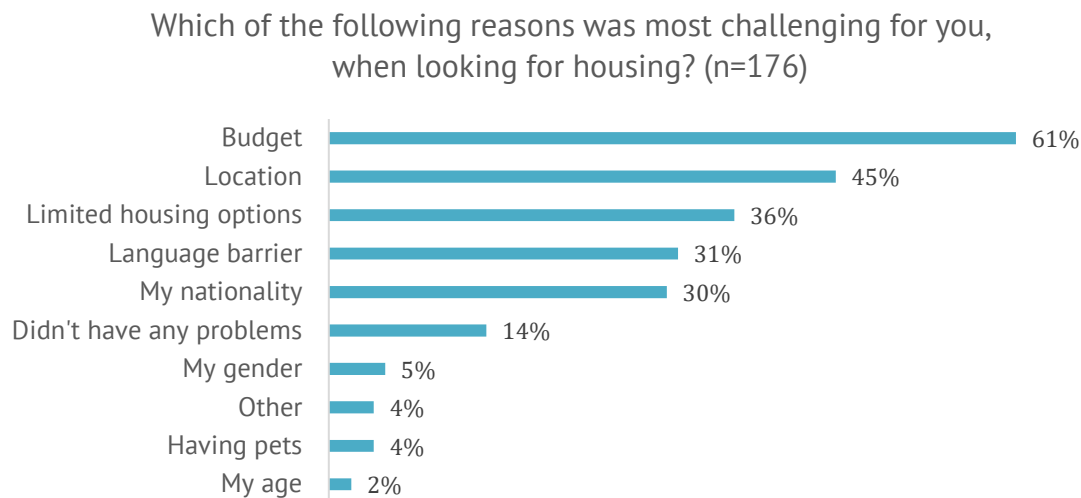
How important these factors are for you when looking for housing, while studying in Riga in a scale from 0 (not at all important) to 10 (very important)? (degree students; mean; n=146)

Factor	Value
Housing costs (rents and utilities)	8,61
Availability of public transport	8,45
Security of housing (safe doors, locks etc.)	8,34
Housing condition, amenities	8,33
Location (availability of services)	8,32
Proximity to university facilities	7,52
Aesthetics of accommodation	7,31
Spacious, large enough home	6,96
Rental conditions (visitors, smoking etc.)	6,73
Neighbours	6,27
Accessibility for the disabled	3,72
Parking	3,68
Pet allowance	3,4

As can be seen, major considerations for students looking for housing relate to price, location, quality and size. Hence, in this chapter, we explain how student housing preferences and expectations interact with what they encounter in the market in each of these domains.

2.1 Price, time, and necessities

If housing costs were the most important factor constraining housing search, budget was also the biggest challenge. 61% or 108 of our survey respondents found budget to be the most challenging when looking for housing while issues regarding location and limited housing options followed by only 45% (79) and 36% (64). Other challenges related to language, nationality and gender, which we reflect on in later chapters on barriers to housing.

Which of the following reasons was most challenging for you, when looking for housing? (n=176)

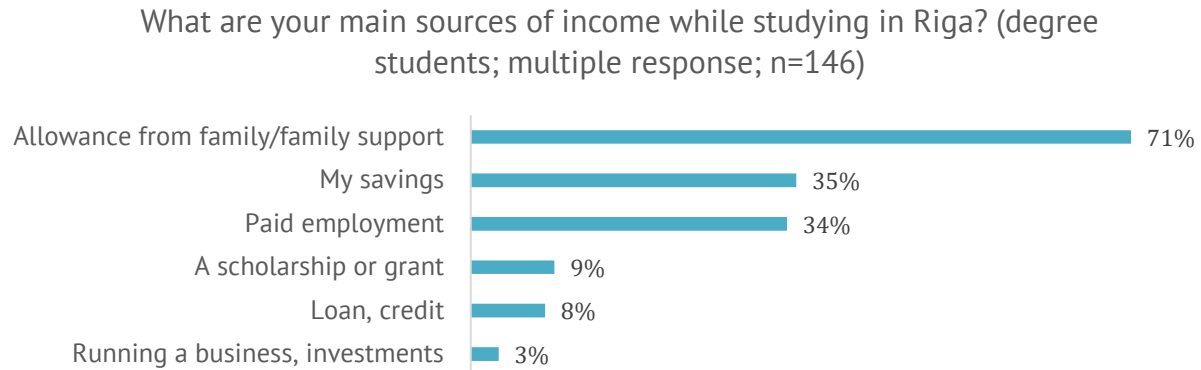| Reason	Percentage
Budget	61%
Location	45%
Limited housing options	36%
Language barrier	31%
My nationality	30%
Didn't have any problems	14%
My gender	5%
Other	4%
Having pets	4%
My age	2%

Importantly, however, students' sense of affordability was determined by prices at their city of previous residence and their financial backgrounds. Some students expected Latvia to be a "cheap" country in terms of housing costs. However, many were surprised to learn that it is quite difficult to find an apartment that would match their standards and simultaneously be in their preferred price range.

For EU students, Erasmus+ study mobility program provides financial support which is not always enough for the entirety of spendings foreign students need to pay for during their stay in Latvia. In such cases, European students are supported by their families, but are still privileged in comparison to the students that come from outside of the EU. Most of the interviewed students who came to Latvia through the Erasmus+ program said that they did not see finances as very impactful of their housing experience. In this sense, it is easier for Erasmus+ students that other students to afford housing in Latvia because they receive a grant. Once a month for the whole duration of their studies in another country international students receive a grant (around 500 EUR, depending on the year) to cover their living expenses in another country. As described by the interviewed students, it is enough to cover

the rent. However, some students advocated that an additional sum of money would be well received to cover food expenses.

For students who travel from outside of the EU, studies and housing in Latvia is based on private resources that shape their housing preferences and lifestyle. As reflected by the survey, most full-time degree international students' income is significantly dependent on family support (71%).

What are your main sources of income while studying in Riga? (degree students; multiple response; n=146)

- Allowance from family/family support — 71%
- My savings — 35%
- Paid employment — 34%
- A scholarship or grant — 9%
- Loan, credit — 8%
- Running a business, investments — 3%

At the same time, paid employment was noted by 34% of students, but 18% when asked about their employment status reported working full time. Thus, a notable difference conspicuous to non-EU students is that many need to find a job in Latvia to cover their expenses. However, the process of finding a job is rife with challenges. First, students legally are not allowed to work more than 20 hours a week[1]. This sometimes forces students to work illegally. Then having to know Latvian language is yet another holdback to find satisfactory job position and many students are not satisfied with Latvian language course availability. Such restrictions both limit the possibility to raise income and also make students more vulnerable to exploitation in the informal job market.

Both groups of students – from EU countries and non-EU countries – usually say they have no special expectations, but need only basic necessities, which are expected to be available in their temporary home place. Some students also have more privy wishes, for example, coffee machines, new bed sheets and pledges. Even when price is crucial, there is consideration of other aspects which can change a student's budget. Some mentioned that "the cheap apartments looked bad" or that they did not want to go through the hassle of translating the housing offers from Latvian to English as there was an English segment available.

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[1] https://lvportals.lv/e-konsultacijas/17700-vai-drikst-nodarbinat-arvalstu-studentus-2019

After students have compared some offers, they evaluate what is a reasonable price for them and where the offer potentially overextends. One of the students said that they found a flat whose price seemed so good that they became suspicious and rather decided to rent something more expensive.

> Yeah, I didn't want to say but, I felt that even that maybe there are some ghosts in this flat or something like that. [..] It's not possible that someone rents such a good place for such a good price. (Jan)

In regards to renting apartments and landlord's sense of security, students are bound to temporal restrictions. From one side, this limits students opportunities to rent as landlords might not be willing. From the other side, minimal investments into temporary housing are common for all groups of students, even when choosing an expensive option like an empty flat without furniture. In this case, spendings for housing are relatively high because students need to buy additional necessities. Still, even this strategy faces some problems which are not always recognized and planned in students' budgets.

Second-hand stores are popular among students. There they can obtain goods for reasonable prices and later can readily get rid of them. Some students even suggested making a service that could be used for students who seek cheap attributes for their temporary home.

> So most of my stuff I bought second-hand, I bought just the most necessary equipment that I need. I knew that I don't want to stay in that flat for more than one year, so I just didn't invest much. For me, the most important is, kind of like a desk where I can do my work. (Jan)

Another issue some of the international students mention is that they feel they are paying more than the local students. One international student expressed disappointment that they have to pay more than their Latvian flatmates. This happens not just in the private sector, but in dormitories provided by universities:

> In my dormitory the price of double shared room for Latvians is 81 EUR and for foreign students is 101 EUR. (Jai)

Erasmus+ programme provides a possibility for students to experience additional higher education facilities for a limited period of time which is a study semester or two. Some students stay in Latvia for a longer time, but then they are required to pay for all

additional expenses on their own. Because of the specific demand for a short period of rent, student oriented offers have sprung up that provide equipped apartments or rooms in shared apartments which saves time and is comfortable, but is also more expensive. Many students from the EU countries are finding their apartments in Facebook groups created by real estate agents. They provide necessary information in English and make deals remotely, before students arrive. This sometimes results in deceived expectations. Sometimes after students arrive in their apartments they find some hidden defects or lack of the promised equipment, but because students already paid for their rooms cancelling the contract also means losing money and time. Most EU students favour using agent services; it is the easiest way of finding housing, but also the most expensive.

Other students choose Latvia as a place to attain a full degree. For these students housing preferences are notably different. Mostly these students are looking for long time renting options, but use also other services and similar services, such as dorms and student hostels (see Chapter 3). Some also pay more time to make their housing snug and cosy – buying furniture as well as other goods and equipment. Still, they were a minority among research participants.

The imperative requisites most often mentioned by research participants are: the Internet (a mandatory attribute during times of Covid-19 when abundance of schoolwork was taking place online), water supply and heating. In this aspect, for many students the most shocking aspect of finances when living in Latvia is the price of utilities. They expressed surprise that the price of utilities could be somewhat similar to what the price of rent is. Many buildings are old and badly insulated, therefore a lot of warmth is lost daily. Utilities are often excluded from the bill and the price being abnormally high is something that is not often explained to international students before they engage in the housing market. Therefore, they are not acquainted from the start, expecting for the utilities being included in the price they were offered for renting the apartment and might financially struggle or eventually will have to lower their standards in order to afford housing.

> I was always paying attention to turn off the lights, not to cook for so long. In France, I can boil meat for 5 hours and I wouldn't care because electricity is so cheap. (Denis)

Many students who come to Latvia with a limited budget find it difficult to match housing offers within the market with the budgetary constraints they have and at the time of writing, with raising inflation, Covid-19, and war in Ukraine the situation is and promises

to be increasingly more financially constraining. In some cases, students found out that they were swindled and were robbed of their money because of their lack of Latvian language skills or unawareness of benchmark expenses for rent and utilities. The increase of prices is of no help in noticing scams either.
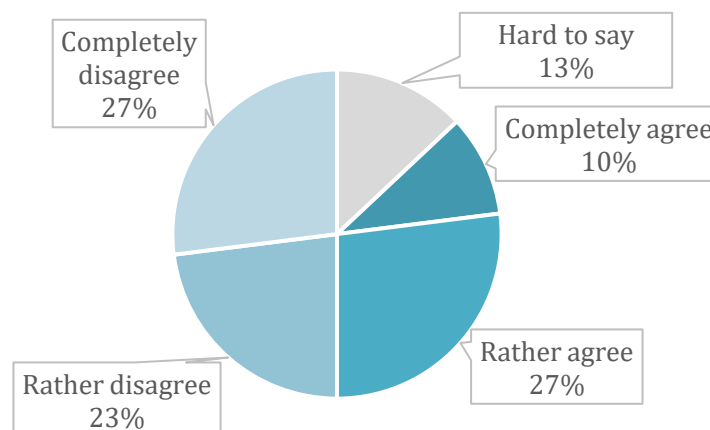
In terms of monthly income, students reported numbers that show that a significant part cannot afford apartments that are not shared or provided by universities. While income below €450 can be good for students living with their parents, the poverty line in Latvia is €472 and it is hard to survive alone with such income.

During the previous six months, what is your average income monthly from all sources? (degree students; n=146)

No answer
5%

Less than €450
29%

More than €651
31%

€451 – €650
35%
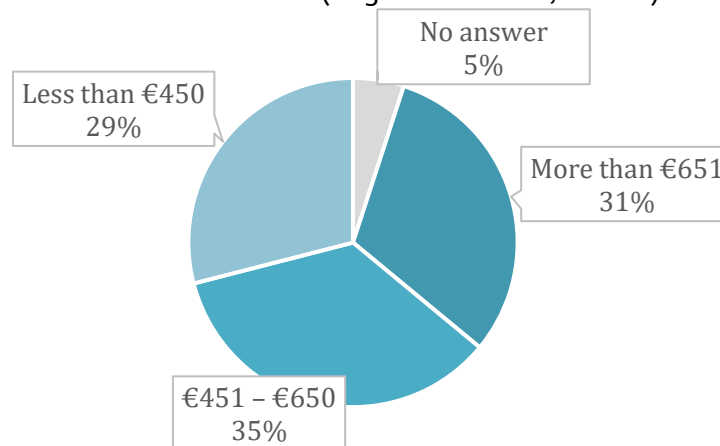
Importantly, a significant number of students noted that they are struggling (10%) or rather struggling (27%) to pay rent.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am struggling to pay rent (degree students; n=146)

Completely disagree
27%

Hard to say
13%

Completely agree
10%

Rather agree
27%

Rather disagree
23%

To deal with the high cost of living, students have different strategies of saving money. The most widespread is shared apartments (see section 2.3). Sharing does not only provide a chance to save some money on housing but also gives a chance to use material and non-material resources of the other companions. Other students may also know about shopping, leisure, places to visit, cultural activities, local communities, etc.

> I would always try to find people that were already living in the apartment and they were looking for someone else to move into a different room. Or I would just be trying to form my own apartment. Uh, because it's cheaper that way cheaper to live with other students. And also, when you move into a new city, it's an easier way to meet new people. [..] it's easier to have meaningful friendships, I guess. (Daniel)

Students choosing to live together in small communities within a shared apartment do find additional benefits. Every person that participates in this commune has personal experience, knowledge that has potential to be used and shared among community members. Strategy of shared housing is also a commodification of communality itself, to wit, communality is recognized by community members as a sum of resources of the community members. For example, information provided by other students is valuable, because newcomers receive experience about life in Latvia which helps to save time and money, and provides emotional support. Of course, not all students prefer to live in shared apartments; some have enough resources to live separately.

This brings us to another often expressed need in the form of a good kitchen that also has a dimension of saving.

> Well, I had a lot of noodles, like cup noodles. [..] And then went to restaurants, just take-away. I think I spent more money because of that. (Nima)

There are several additional values of cooking. For example, for some students this practice is attributing to the home-making practices. Homemade food is something that through cooking as practice makes people feel comfortable. Cooking as creative practice is also procuring wellbeing[2]. A cook is in control when preparing meals as well as shares his virtues among others involved in the practice of eating together with others. Such practice is known as commensality, that is – communal eating[3]. Therefore, this is another example

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[2] Farmer, N., & Cotter, E. W. (2021). Well-being and cooking behavior: using the positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment model as a theoretical framework. Frontiers in psychology, 12, 56057.
[3] West, Harry G. We Are Who We Eat With: Food, Distinction, and Commensality. The MIT press reader https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/we-are-who-we-eat-with/ (as seen 29.05.2022)

of commodified communality. Cooking is also a social activity as sharing food helps to make and sustain friendships and friends improving students' support networks.

2.2 Location and transport

After price, most students considered the location of housing. Location, however, is usually tightly interlocked with price. Most Erasmus+ exchange students without a tightly circumscribed budget chose location over price. As for the full-time students and students who have limited finance – they choose to put the price higher in their list of priorities, yet keeping the location and comfort in mind. One students reflects thus:

> Of course, the first thing was price. I studied and worked at the same time but still I had some budget to operate with every month. So definitely the price was the first and then also location, that it's somehow close both to university and my workplace because back then it wasn't remote. [..] So I would say definitely for me the most important was price, then it was location and then the third one was the quality or how the flat looks in reality. (Jan)

As we can see in this quote, Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions that came with it, prioritised work and studies from home, temporarily changing some priorities and possibilities, like proximity and possibilities to socialise. Nevertheless, the aspiration for proximity remained strong.

In Riga, universities, dormitories, residing areas and leisure spaces mostly are in scattered locations. Thus, in choosing location and finding their balance, two popular desires could be established. Some students were more interested in living close to their university, while others were more interested in seeking housing in the city centre. The major challenge is to balance the price with need to be in proximity to their university as well as to work, shops, hang out spots, and public transport. Despite not always being close to their universities, the city centre had a broad appeal:

> We wanted to be in the centre, because [..] we are both very outgoing. He was a hairdresser at that time, so he wanted something not far from his job, and I wanted something not too far from my university, and we wanted something that we can both afford. That was the trickiest part actually, because it is in the centre, but is very cheap and huge, yeah. (Olga)

Significantly, especially for Erasmus+ exchange students, many sought to socialize with others from the international student community, therefore wishing that their residence is close enough to student hang out spots. For these students, the more favoured location was the city centre, but also the inner city neighbourhoods that are close to both the centre and, for example, some university facilities located in the Moscow district.

> In the city centre, it's better than in the old town. [..] I want to hang out with my friends, with Erasmus students. [..] There's even an opportunity to meet more students there than in the old town because most of the students live in the city centre. [..] If you want to hang out, do a tour or something, hang out with your friends, you can basically go to bars or even like walking—it's not that far to the old town. (Amir)

Another often mentioned aspect in regards to location was a wish that supermarkets and other stores are nearby or within walking distance. Interestingly, however, the perception of what constitutes a "walking distance" varied. A few students, for example, mentioned that walking an hour was not a problem for them while for others it didn't seem so.

> Yes, the location of this hostel is very strategic. We have Rimi and Maxima very close to us, like walking distance. [..] Akropole is very close to us, Origo is very close to us. This location is very amazing, you can get everything, especially groceries and medicine within walking distance. (Saira)

Most students try to find a place that is closer to all the places they frequently have to go to save travelling time and expenses. Some students also changed the apartments due to these locational factors.

> I like this one a lot more because location-wise it is a lot better since I am also sporting in [a town], so I have the convenience of public transport and the apartment itself is a lot nicer. (Lazde)

A factor that is closely tied with location and was mentioned in interviews is availability and accessibility of transportation. This was particularly important to those who didn't choose or were not able to afford housing near their universities or other frequented locations. These students were mostly concerned about public transport, pointing out that it is the easiest way to get from one place to another when you don't have a car. The use of

bicycles among interviewed international students was low. For most, the preference was to have public transport close to their apartment.

> Also transportation is very important, from Kengarags the transportation to centre is very convenient, the transport goes often. (Elia)

> Uh, well, it has to be uh well connected to public transport. (Max)

Others mentioned that they have no difficulty using trains and buses if they must go somewhere further away, such as another city. This often related to whether they saw the city of their university as large or small in comparison to their previous urban experiences.

> I don't have to organize public transport, bicycles or anything like that because everything is close. For the main city it is pretty small. (Jessica)

At the same time, knowledge about public transport use and convenience came out to be a significant aspect of how students could decide to reduce costs of living.

> Find an apartment a bit farther away from the city centre, but there is a bus or a train station nearby, so the price will be a bit lower than the city centre. But for transportation, I think that we have a traffic card discount for students. These are small tips for saving money. (Sue)

As Sue pointed out, prices of the public transport were cheaper than they expected. Some students did knew about student discounts though not all of them. That said, suggestions from students that it would be convenient to include information in universities' websites to help them better understand public transportation, student ticket pricing and the possibilities to travel by cycling is a sound and viable improvement to make.

2.3 Size, space sharing, and privacy

The next major aspect students are concerned about is housing size, especially in terms of how much privacy they will have and how sharing space allows to save on expenses.

> The most important thing, having a private room. If, for example, the apartment will be shared, not like I am the only person that is living in the same apartment, I will definitely go for a private room. This is the first priority. (Amir)

One of the most often mentioned desires regarding housing size is having private space. A lot of our interviewees had roommates or flatmates, but for some having a private room was a must. The reasoning why some students placed it as their priority were some hobbies which they carry out in solitude, which is important for one's mental and/or physical health. Also, some felt that living with other people can be hard or sometimes overwhelming, depending on how many people are living together and how they organize their common life. Some had negative experiences with sharing a room and sharing a flat.

At the same time, for many students, size wasn't a much desired aspect. Some noted that less space means less cleaning and has other benefits apart from costing less.
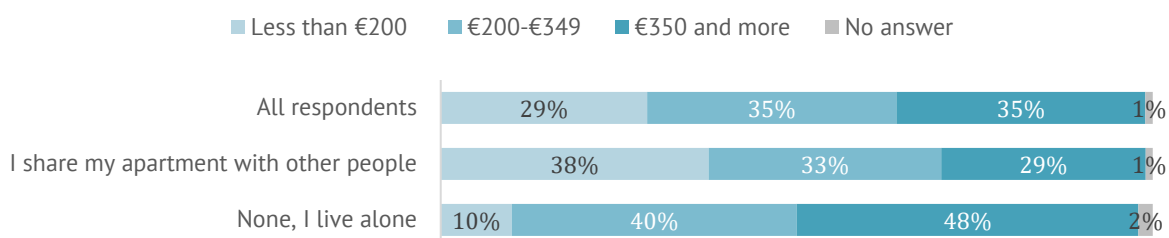
> I mean my room is kind of small now. Like the first one I had was pretty big – 30 square metres, but it was also more expensive. But the one I have right now is like 12 square metres. Which is kind of cosier actually. (Judith)

Importantly, many of the students also had a strict budget and their finances did not permit exploring options which provided increased housing size. Students living in larger apartments were mostly sharing them with other students:

> Well, it was a very specific apartment, so I don't know if I should judge like you know, living in Latvia according to my experience because it was like two apartments in one: eight room apartment with like two bathrooms and two kitchens. Very huge. (Lenka)

Sharing apartment with others allows for significant savings. If 48% of students living alone pay more than €350 for housing per month, then only 29% of those sharing an apartment pay more than €350.

In the last six months, how much did you pay on average per month for your housing? (degree students; n=146)

Legend: ■ Less than €200 ■ €200-€349 ■ €350 and more ■ No answer

	Less than €200	€200-€349	€350 and more	No answer
All respondents	29%	35%	35%	1%
I share my apartment with other people	38%	33%	29%	1%
None, I live alone	10%	40%	48%	2%

There were also some instances where people had a housing size bigger than they expected. An explanation as indicated by couple of students is that those who search a living place via Internet platforms rely solely on pictorial displays, which for numerous reasons do

not match expectations. Or it was bigger than their expectations, as they were not expecting that size, because of what they would get in their country for the cost that they paid.
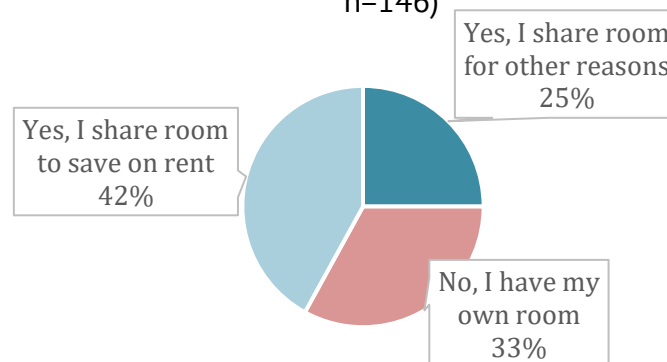
Nevertheless, because international students' primary devote themselves to studies and socialisation, the size of the apartment doesn't seem to be a priority, if compared to price and location. Further, small rooms don't necessarily mean discomfort or them being low quality. As was noted, the situation often is reversed, students finding small-sized housing as comfortable, in a low price range and in favourable locations. For those students living with cohabitants what is aspired for more than size is instead a solitary space for themselves.

Although proximity to faculty, shops, work and accessibility to international communities are considerable factors, prioritising privacy was paramount to many:

> I don't care if there are already roommates in it. I just like to be in a private room. (Max)

Students were not against sharing an apartment with others. Many of them actually preferred it, pointing out that it was cheaper if you shared rent with others and that it was an opportunity to improve their English language proficiency. Also, being in a new city alone can be difficult, so they saw this as a great way to make new friends and have someone to hang out with or eat breakfast with. It is worth pointing out that for people who shared an apartment with someone, having a private room was still desired and became the reason why some students decided to relocate from dormitories with shared rooms to flats with a private room. At the same time, rate of students who share a room remain high with only 33% noting that they don't share their room.

Do you share your room, while studying in Riga? (degree students; n=146)

Yes, I share room for other reasons 25%

Yes, I share room to save on rent 42%

No, I have my own room 33%

Apart from price and privacy, there were other sociocultural aspects challenging students expectations. Some had expectations matching previous apartments in a different country, and they realised that some things are different. Most pointed out rules and expectations in common rooms that come with sharing an apartment, such as the kitchen not being accessible during the night or contextual aspects that they had to adjust to.

> Uh, so, like, for example in the washroom, we have a common washroom for all the students, right, so girls and boys. Back in India it was very different. There the girls washroom would be different, men's washroom would be different so that nothing mischievous could happen. (Anwar)

Most concerns about sharing space, however, were about cleaning practices. Cleanliness in general was one expectation that evoked most contestations and was among key justifications why some students decided to change their housing. As we note later, sometimes this also translated to stereotyping certain ethnic groups as more interested in cleaning despite this being raised as a concern by people coming from most contexts.

2.4 Key findings on expectations regarding price, location and size

As we have seen, price is the primary factor affecting international student choices and expectations in the housing market. Students with Erasmus+ support find it easier financially to find apartments of their choice and there is an above-average price market catered to them, while for others the opportunities are more scarce and limited by landlords temporal concerns. Other major issues revolve around paying for and expecting utility payments that can get as high as rents and purchasing affordable necessities.

Students searching outside of dormitories try to balance finding a location that is at the city centre that provides opportunities for socialisation versus apartments that are close to their university. Those who get to know about student public transport price discounts and are willing live at further locations and take longer walks also search in other neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, dominant locations remain near the city centre and the universities, thus contributing to the diversity of those areas.

Students often choose to share apartments with others to share costs and socialize, but most wish to have a room of their own instead of sharing a room. Many, however, cannot afford it. Altogether these expectations regarding price, location and size create the context for what housing pathways are desired, available and limited to students in the housing market which we examine in the next chapter.

3 When expectations meet reality: student housing pathways in Latvia

It is the task of this chapter to contrast previously mentioned expectations with the practical reality of the accommodation process in Latvia where the majority of issues and challenges come to the fore. In this chapter, we apply 'housing pathways' approach (Clapham, 2002; Fang & van Liempt, 2021) to analyse how institutional mechanisms and market platforms shape as well as constrain student choices in the housing market. We follow how housing and information on dormitories are used by students, how students approach the private housing market through digital platforms and what are the barriers and enablers in the process. We note how language issues, social support, ethnic stereotypes and student-status encounters and fosters barriers, discrimination as well as informal social support in the housing market. There are several ways how students find housing, from dormitories to hostels or shared apartments. Each platform provides a different sort of housing for meeting one's needs as well as unexpected surprises and potentials for discrimination.

3.1 University: provider and assistant

The first housing pathway to be considered is university dormitories. One the one hand, it is the cheapest and most reliable way to find accommodation. On the other hand, it is not always the most helpful information-wise and often doesn't meet the pre-set standards many students have. There are three major ways how students find the university useful when considering accommodation: to secure a place in a dormitory, to use the information that university provides about private sector options and to use dormitory as a stepping stone to engage in the private sector later.

When discussing university as a pathway to find accommodation, it most often means dormitories, which universities provide. One of the positive aspects mentioned by a handful of students was about the constructive and timely manner with which universities operated, sending application forms for dormitories together with the rest of contracts students need to sign, therefore giving an option to obtain at once place into a university and also a living place. When considering some unwelcome hindrances that students come up with regarding the university's staff, students often felt a lack of dialogical relations with staff regarding matching their preferences to possible options available. As an example, students who prefer silence and privacy would look for rooms which are empty and have a view to the

backyard. But, having no specifically designed instruments or channels through which to express their likes and dislikes, students feel like they are forced to be the ones who have to initiate a direct conversation with the staff about other possible options from which students can choose the most appropriate. When it comes to dormitories themselves, what is mentioned is, though being cheap, some are of low quality and in inconvenient locations (far from the city centre and away from other course mates and friends), therefore creating a situation where students are disappointed and start to look for other accommodation options. But such a critique must be reasoned by taking into account individual needs and preferences which vary from person to person.

University also serves as a major informative platform for many students who are looking to rent a flat instead of staying in a dormitory. Paradoxically, one issue that emerged from multiple students was how little information was provided for finding a living place outside of the dormitory. As one of the students mentioned:

> Actually, through the website of the University you can reserve the dormitory but maybe there's something missing from the University for the student. I mean maybe because of the like there's no other options, there's no choice to live. Not most of the students prefer to live in dormitory, you know. (Amir)

One student also compared the informative support with the experience she had in Norway. She states:

> Well, the one thing I recognize was whenever I tried to search for housing in Latvia, I didn't get any support from the University. But in Norway, even before I arrive they sent me a lot of emails about the housing: where you can find the houses and private accommodation. (Nima)

While universities might primarily be interested in students to stay in university dormitories, here the expectation was that they could also provide some more information on how to secure other types of housing. For those students who were searching to rent an apartment and used university only as an information platform, one additional issue that was noted concerned the content language. One such example is shown in the answer by one student:

You were not looking for housing opportunities at the local websites, like ss.lv or others?

I was. Some sites that the academy gave me, but it was hard and it was not English. (Giuseppe)

Another hindrance for those students searching to rent an apartment instead of applying for dormitories was that when looking for information in university's information platforms there was not only a general shortage of information about possibilities to rent an apartment, but also no additional information regarding the transportation system or city's geography, which as noted in the previous chapter, is not just a minor consideration but a decisive factor when international students choose a living place. This is how one student formulated this point:

Knowing what the place is that I have to go, that I like to go are, I would change like the position of my apartment because it's like 20 minutes from the city centre by walk or 15 minutes with a bus and so I think that maybe it's difficult when you don't know the city, knowing exactly like where it is better to have an apartment. (Sofia)

Such concerns indicate that students look towards university as not only a formal administrative body, but as a counsel and a sort of guide who could assist in getting to know the city and country in general.

Another way how many students used the university was through taking the dormitory as a stepping stone. Since applying for a dormitory is easier and requires much less effort than immediately engaging in the private housing market, a student first settles into a dormitory, but only with the idea to quickly find possible roommates with whom one can rent a private flat and share expenditures. This is how one student explains such a strategy:

Actually, I made a friend there [in the dormitory-add.], he's from [Southern Europe], he's an Erasmus student too. [..] And he came late in the second month of that semester and when he came here, he just reserved in the dormitory of the University. And when I asked him after that when we knew each other if he preferred to live in the dormitories of the University or just if he didn't find any other choice, he told me: "I didn't find any other choice and I want to move out the second month to have an apartment or something." And next month he lived with me and we rented an apartment together. (Amir)

What such experiences indicate is that universities have far wider expectations and possible reach than these institutions presumably at the present moment embrace. Yet, as mentioned in the introduction, university is just one of the pathways used. Other students choose to directly engage with the private sector options.

3.2 Pathways to private housing

There are three major ways how students find options in the private sector: through social media, internet platforms and acquaintances or agents.

Social media

International students most often start their private housing search in social media. Most often this happens through joining groups on Facebook. Social media is used not only to gather information about offers, but for finding a free place in a flat or for looking for flatmates, arranging a deal with landlords to rent a flat or making connections with predecessors – students who have lived there before them.

> I thought that it was like this community thing, that there are places where the international students live and they are just sharing the echo about the places: free or not free with the community. (Lenka)

The opinions about looking for housing on Facebook can be contrasting. For some, it is the perfect place for apartment hunting and the most prolific resource to use, while others see it as a way for landlords to offer more expensive apartments to foreigners. International students recommend it to each other and so it has become a space where a lot of international students turn to when looking for housing. Facebook seems to be easier to browse for international students, as it is based on location and advertises accordingly. Additionally, students can compare housing without Latvian language skills. Students describe Facebook as a space where they search for housing with English-speaking landlords and find reassurance that the apartment is a good place to live for international students, as often they are suggested by other students who have lived there before.

> It's either Facebook Marketplace or Facebook groups. There is a "Riga student apartment" and lots of such groups, but there are mostly rooms. If I want to find an entire apartment I look in Marketplace or ss.com. Because in these Facebook groups usually agencies post the offers. (Elia)

Additionally, there is also Facebook Marketplace which can be a handy tool for finding housing. Nevertheless, one of the students mentioned that the groups are most suited for finding a room in a shared apartment, while Marketplace is better suited for finding an entire apartment. Students are describing Facebook as a marketplace where everyone can find a bit of something for their taste on Facebook. However, if finances are an issue, they seem to turn to other services.

Webpages, platforms and agents

Amongst international students, the second most popular option for finding housing after social media is the advertisement portal ss.lv. It provides listings of housing, sorted by city, neighbourhoods as well as price, size and other details of housing. The purpose of using this webpage is to rent directly from the owner in a broader marketplace than Facebook, which often means that offers are listed in Latvian and/or Russian and the owners might not know English. Because ss.lv does not have special groups for the international students, they face the problem of having found a desired deal but not being able to finalise it for numerous reasons. Students are also not always aware how to differentiate rent from utilities and many rentiers represent the sums in offers differently.

Apart from ss.lv, there are also websites that are sometimes also recommended by universities that provide information about housing options for a cost. These webpages have certain advantages, because they specifically target international students and provide the necessary mediation in the housing market in matching students' needs with the available offers.

Well, there was the website globalhome.lv and it's very well organised I would say because there's this map where they divide also the areas of Riga and I wrote an email telling my budget and then the area where I would want to stay and also if I preferred shared flat or not, and they gave me many options among which I could choose. (Sofia)

In terms of more unusual pathways, one student negotiated a deal with an Airbnb host through arguing that renting for a longer term will be more profitable for them. In this case, he was also weary that the more informal housing market could be more hostile that Airbnb owners who are familiar and welcoming to foreign nationals. Another popular option for those who have had or expect negative experiences in the private market are student hostels, such as Duck Republik. While potentially more expensive, these strongly cater to student needs providing shared facilities fostering socialization, good quality rooms and

favourable locations without the hassle of establishing relationships with landlords who might not have experience with international students.

As can be seen, there are many challenges for students to navigate ss.lv and other options on their own. Therefore, some kind of support is needed. As one student noted:

> Yeah, I know there is a place called ss.lv. I have seen some apartments there on that, but still what I have come to know from my friends is that even if you go to ss.lv, the kind of apartments that you get are still expensive. So, it is better if you talk to some of your friends which are actually in contact with somebody else so you can get a better deal with those people. (Anwar)

Platforms like ss.lv are not always easy to navigate and often that means using personal contacts through whom web sources and specific landlords are selected and sorted out. But often personal contacts are relied upon entirely.

Contacts

International students mentioned that they often have contact with other international students that can provide them with websites where accommodations are offered to students. These often are aforementioned Facebook groups or websites like ss.lv.

> So yeah, he said that he would check it out and probably he found it in some website that, you guys, have, like ss dot something, the green one. (Esra)

Quite a few international students mentioned that they have existing contacts in Latvia. Such contact with people who live or have lived in Latvia makes their experience of finding accommodations immeasurably easier, be it finding a place to stay or getting it for a cheaper price.

> My friend was living there before and when he moved out I moved in his place. I was very lucky with this one, because for me it has been very hard. (Onkar)

> It's the same size in terms of numbers but it feels bigger and I am paying half the amount. All of the bills and rent is the same I paid before. Because of the family connection it is this cheap. (Lazde)

Contacts – friends, family or acquaintances – give international students a great advantage and have proven to be an important factor when accommodation is considered. It is because through such channels novice international students get first insights about resources such as Facebook groups, ss.lv and other websites, which, as shown, are mediators that help to secure a living place in Latvia. If finding a room or apartment in Facebook can be the most expensive, using ss.lv – the most risky, then using contacts allows for potentially better deals. Importantly, this also allows to overcome potential barriers and discrimination through contacting landlords who already have a good experience with a particular group and can counter negative image.

3.3 Challenges to finding housing

Though the housing pathways used by international students varied, students experienced challenges in most of them. Overall, survey results revealed that almost half of the respondents (49%) found it difficult to find housing, but only 24% found it easy, the rest being rather neutral (27%).

How challenging it was to you, as an international student, to find suitable housing? (n=168)
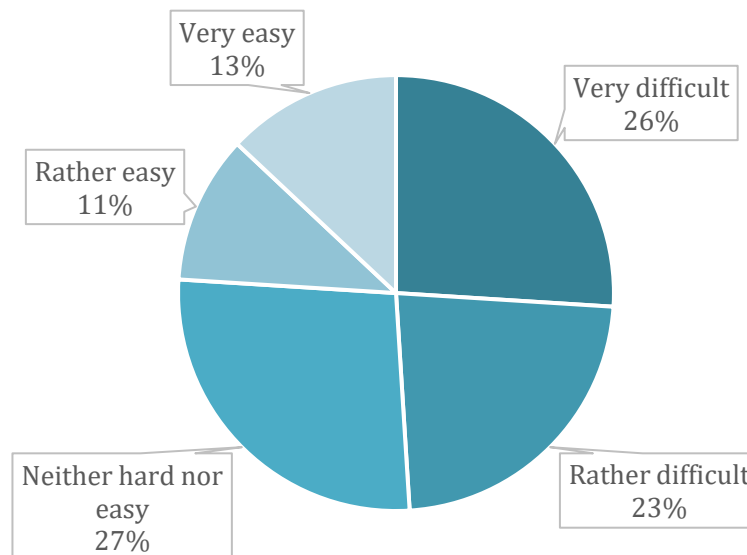
If we delve into the reasons that students reflected upon in the interviews, apart from issues on price and location we discussed previously and discrimination upon which we reflect on later, there were several recurring challenges research participants faced, particularly language issues and lack of support from various parties involved.

Language

When discussing language as a factor that influences both the way how international students experience being in Latvia as well as the possible outcomes of the attempts to secure and install the necessary practicalities and space around them, participants are enmeshed into a multilingual environment consisting of three languages – Latvian, Russian and English. Because more international students rely on English as a go-to language with which to achieve or secure social and private necessities, it is worth dwelling on the English language first. Majority of international students felt that English language proficiency for landlords is not at such a satisfactory level to make international students comfortable and feeling assured of being understood properly and therefore making the integration process less stressful. While no one specific institution or social group was unanimously deemed as either incapable to converse or deliberately refusing to communicate in English, interviewed students often considered the older generation of people in Latvia (65 years and older) as harder to communicate with.

> Yeah, my neighbour, he is like 65 years old, and when I first moved in, he added me on WhatsApp, but he could not speak English, he speaks only Russian. (Sue)

Although there is a notable difference about landlords in terms of using English language to conduct clear and precise transactions, this variety of opinions, for one, seems to be affected by pathways that were chosen to approach landlords. It was easier to communicate with and understand offers of hostels and Airbnb than it was on Facebook or the most challenging, but locally popular site – ss.lv.

> But finding a real thing out of Facebook is really difficult. There should be some sites that are more easily approachable for international students. Even if I knew which Latvian sites to use I would be able to translate them by google that would be a good option, but I did know where to look. And searching for that in English is quite difficult and translating into Latvian is also hard. I actually know Russian and it didn't help me much. (Emily)

If English is the most often used language which international students rely upon, there are some who also used Russian to make their way through the accommodation process. It is without a doubt that having mastery over the Russian language in Latvia eases the situation. For one thing, as was mentioned, information provided through some universities was available only in Latvian and Russian languages. Then, when considering private housing sector, some noted that it is best to know both some Latvian and Russian.

> And when I was looking for the second flat, I was looking with a Latvian friend who also spoke some Russian. So, for example, the place I'm in right now, the agent doesn't speak English, but it's no problem, because she spoke Russian and Latvian so my flatmate could deal with that. So, without my flatmate, I wouldn't have found this place, or I wouldn't have been able to actually get it because of the language barrier. (Olga)

Many of the advertisements on ss.lv are written in Russian, while English advertisements are rare. Further, it is easier to pass as a local if you speak Russian than if you speak English with or without an accent. Nevertheless, Russian is not thought of as equivalent to Latvian language. As will be elaborated in the third chapter, this point presents itself when students are asked to reflect on the hindrances experienced in daily life, especially regarding conversations with various service providers and strangers. However, such considerations do not diminish the fact that knowing Russian gives privileges when finding and negotiating over a living place.

Of course, language has a peculiar role to be able to have a sound and meaningful dialogue, yet it must not overshadow other issues, such as lack of support, which involves more than just pre-set skills, revealing systematic and managerial gaps and insufficiencies.

Lack of support

Support is crucial when it comes to accommodating international students in a foreign country. And a lack of it is making searching for housing much more difficult. In various cases the support was there, but couldn't live up to the demands of the students who wanted to get the desired information about housing. A significant perceived lack of support comes

from the university staff. It was frequently mentioned by students when talking about the support system for international students in Latvian universities.

> The university staff and the dormitory staff are separate. So university staff is something we are not talking about now. That was the one I was a bit negative about at the beginning, because (of the attitude that) we are not really interested, especially in medicine. There is something that I have now understood that there is really, but when I was already one semester here they started to become a bit more flexible. But it was very, like a bit negative. (Anu)

When asked about the things that are hindering the process of finding housing, the students highlighted the lack of personnel that could help with the process of finding housing, as well as expressed the need for a centralised search system for finding a proper housing for the time of residence. One student noted (as shown in the quote below) that Erasmus+ students that are coming for a short period of time seem to have more help from the education establishments than the students who come from another country to study full-time and obtain a degree in Latvia.

> Yes, I know that there are in universities these, like foreign departments. They were quite helpful, but mostly in some stuff related – like I had a scholarship and stuff like that. I think they are also not so big a department, I believe they are super busy to help everyone in depth, to help assist them in something. I also know that there are some, like buddies that they help these international students, but I think it's more for Erasmus students, these buddies. I'm not sure if it's for international students coming to get the degree here. (Jan)

Another form of lack of support students mentioned related to landlords. For students who require a residence permit to study in Latvia, they need to declare a place of residence and this can limit their choice of housing as they need to find it rapidly. However, some landlords are not interested and can actually be against students declaring their apartments as their place of residence:

> You know, for international students it is very important to have this declaration. Some private rentals, especially in the neighbourhood, don't offer the opportunity for declaration. They just don't want someone that is renting an apartment to be declared there. This is sort of a limitation. (Elia)

As was expected, lack of support has as its roots more systematic and organisational neglect rather than personal biases. Yet, beyond language proficiency and organizational insufficiencies there unfortunately does emerge a discriminatory attitude as well that accompanies these challenges.
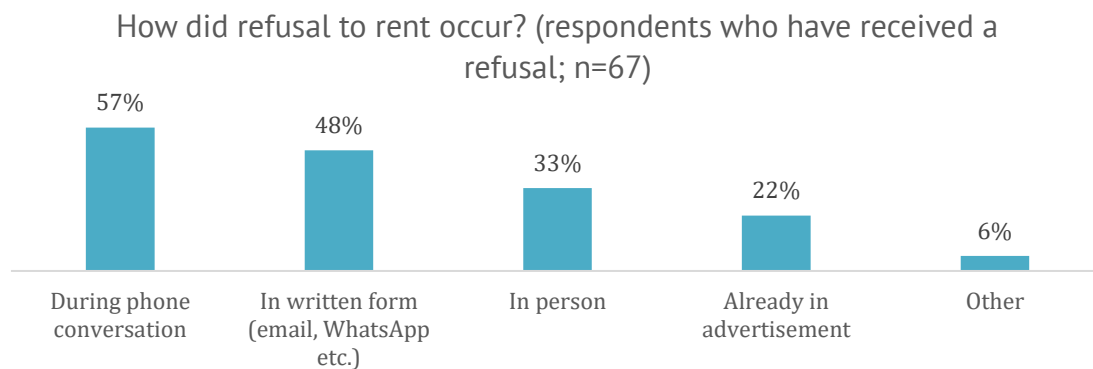
3.4 Discrimination

Discrimination manifests itself in two ways for international students living in Latvia. There is an ethnic aspect to discrimination—faced by a smaller group of students, particularly of South Asian origin—and there is discrimination based on being an international student associated more with the economic and social presumptions of landlords. Discrimination can be hard to detect, but one of the ways is to note refusals to rent. While most of our survey respondents (62%) hadn't experienced refusals to rent, 18% had experienced it four times or more.

How often have you been refused to rent by landlords while looking for housing, while studying in Riga? (n=176)
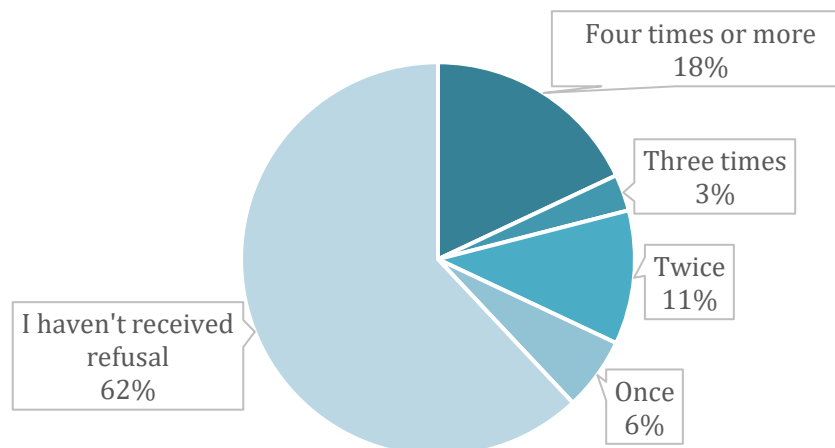
This is a troubling number and while respondents' interpretations on what they consider refusal can differ, data on means of refusal to those who experienced it show that there are multiple prevalent forms how refusals happen. This supports evidence that some groups are indeed discriminated more. In 57% of the cases (38 respondents) the refusal had occurred during the phone conversation; in 48% of the cases the refusal had been given in a written form (32 respondents); 33% of the cases had occurred in person (22 respondents) and 22% of cases indicated refusal already in the advertisement (15 respondents). Although the answer noting that refusal had happened already in advertisement was mentioned least

often by respondents, still more than 10% of respondents had witnessed discriminatory advertisements by landlords.

How did refusal to rent occur? (respondents who have received a refusal; n=67)

During phone conversation	In written form (email, WhatsApp etc.)	In person	Already in advertisement	Other
57%	48%	33%	22%	6%

Nationality / ethnicity

Nationality, ethnicity and citizenship are one of the lines through which discrimination is performed and, as noted previously (on page 7), 30% of students found nationality as increasing challenges in finding housing. Importantly, this was a highly prevalent answer among South Asian students (52%) and Central Asian students (36%). Thus, exploring whether ethnic and national backgrounds constitute a challenge for international students in their housing search highlights two different realities. On the one hand, there are students (primarily coming from Central and Northern European contexts) whose experiences when finding housing were rather positive, leaving no reason to believe that housing discrimination is an issue in Latvia. For them, the barriers were rather related to language and student status.

> I do not know anyone who had problems with it. Nobody from Erasmus. (Jessica)

Conversely, discussions with non-European students show a different view. South Asian students are particularly vulnerable to housing discrimination in Riga. Several interviews with Indian students showed that they had been refused housing based on their nationality, and in some cases even verbally abused by landlords. For example, when one student from India was asked if he had experienced housing discrimination, he explained:

> Not yet. But I have heard these stories that Indians don't get an apartment because we have such a great reputation here (laughs). (Anwar)

Though masked in humour by saying "not yet", his answer reveals a troubling truth: housing discrimination in Latvia is not only a possibility, but an expectation for many South Asian students. With the "reputation" of Indians alluded to above, it seems a significant share of landlords in Riga have a perception of South Asians as being bad tenants. As a result, in this competitive environment some students separated Northern and Southern Indian students as different in regards to upkeeping the apartments, but that nevertheless reinforces prejudices.

The apparent mistrust of Indian students seems to be a fear of the unfamiliar paired with ethnic stereotypes on behalf of Latvian landlords. The perceived differences in homemaking practices from different contexts creates a kind of friction, making it harder for non-European students to find housing in Riga. Because landlords have less prejudiced expectations regarding European students, European students do not suffer the same ethnic housing discrimination as faced by non-European students. However, because South Asians are seen as "Others" amid their European counterparts they are refused housing. As one Indian student succinctly explains:

**Do you think refusals are because of the language barrier?**

No, I think it is because of the lifestyle people have from the region of India. People here [in Latvia] are not that flexible about them and I kind of understand them, because ways of living and keeping an apartment for them are very different. (Elia)

While there might be differences in how people approach apartments, these perceptions, nevertheless, are projected towards most South Asian students, resulting in discrimination and more time spent in searching for an apartment due to calls that are hung up. There is an implicit understanding in some of the prejudices shown by landlords that South Asian students come to Latvia and bring with them a host of strange and unwanted customs and ways of living, therefore, also setting higher expectations towards cleanliness than for others. Based on the conducted interviews, however, homemaking practices seldom differed on ethnic bases. Non-European students just as European students were concerned with cleanliness, furnished their apartments with Ikea or second-hand furniture, shopped at Maxima or Rimi, and hosted gatherings with friends in their living spaces.

What is clear that students coming from particular contexts and sharing particular traits in the eyes of landlords experience higher rates of hardship in their search for housing. To explicate this, we cross-tabulated survey questions "Please indicate how challenging it was to you, as an international student, to find suitable housing?" and "What is Your
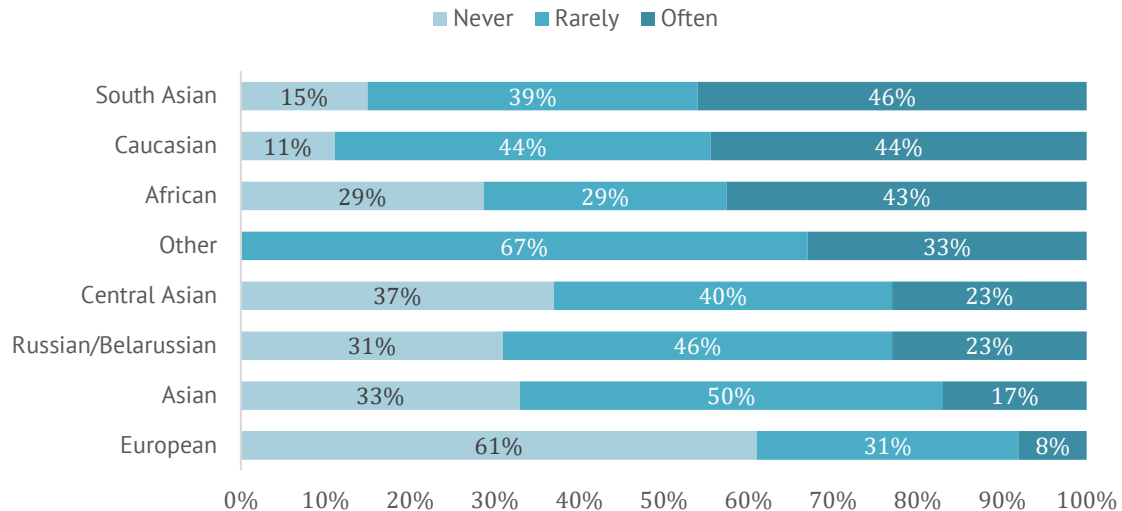
nationality?". To simplify comparing the differences, we recoded nationality in 8 regional groups: African; European; Caucasian; South Asian; Central Asian; Other Asian; Russian/Belarussian; Other. Similarly as in qualitative interviews, most difficulties were noted by South Asian students as 64% found it difficult, but Central Asian students (43%) also found housing search more difficult rather than easy. This differs from European students of which 44% found it easy. African respondents showed similar results, but it has to be noted that they are also both less represented among students as well as in our sample. Of students who noted being discriminated, for example, there were more African students than European students. The least represented in our sample were Caucasians, Russians/Belarussians and nationalities of other regions whose results reflect only several students' experiences.

How challenging it was to you, as an international student, to find suitable housing? (ethnic/regional groups; n=168)
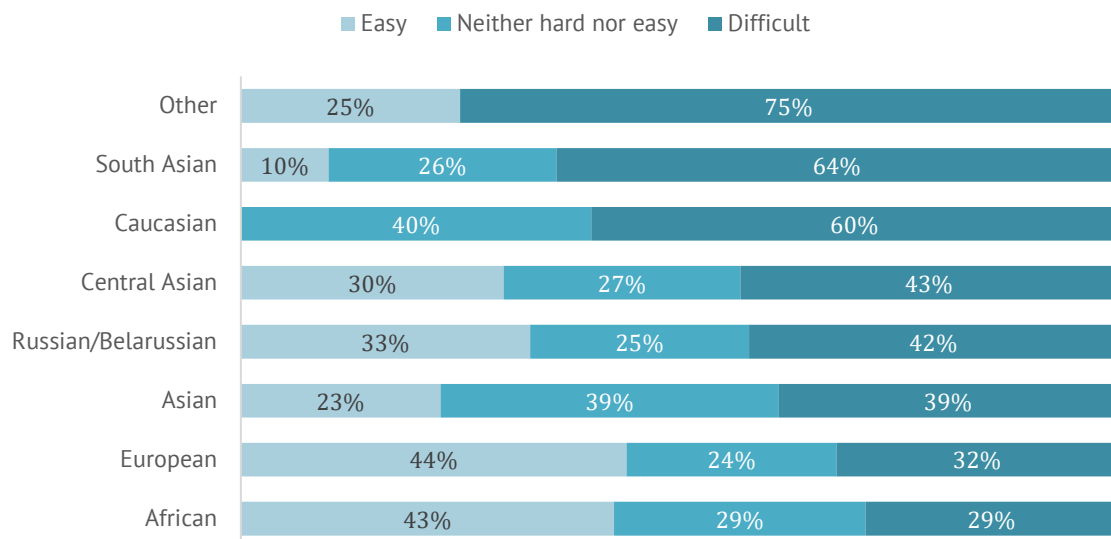
When students were asked specifically about discrimination in broader terms than housing, South Asian students answered that they experience often (46%). For this question, the prevalence was also high for African students (43%). Nonetheless, this reinforces the differences faced by South and Central Asian students in comparison to European students who in most cases have never experienced (61%) discrimination in Latvia.

In your day-to-day experiences in Latvia, how often do you feel
that you have faced discrimination because of your racial/ethnic
background? (ethnic/regional groups; n=164)

■ Never ■ Rarely ■ Often

Group	Never	Rarely	Often
South Asian	15%	39%	46%
Caucasian	11%	44%	44%
African	29%	29%	43%
Other		67%	33%
Central Asian	37%	40%	23%
Russian/Belarussian	31%	46%	23%
Asian	33%	50%	17%
European	61%	31%	8%

Status as International Students

Despite the different experiences faced by European and non-European students in the housing market, there is one challenge which the two share. Because both European and non-European students are foreigners in Latvia, both groups made clear that status as an international student was an issue when speaking to landlords. Unfavourable perceptions of students as tenants makes the housing search difficult. Landlords may be unsure of how responsible students are, and fear that they may host parties or have trouble paying rent or utilities.

> Biggest challenge – again, make the house owner accept us because we are students, and find a clean flat, yeah. And they were really good apartments but the reason that they didn't accept us was because we are students, and that was the only reason – everything else was fine. They just said things like: "No, we don't accept students". (Esra)

Conversely, some landlords may be happy to rent to international students because they are seen as easy to take advantage of. Throughout the interviews there were several instances where students described how they were scammed into paying fake utility bills or denied contracts. This bad relationship between foreign tenant and nefarious landlord is aptly surmised by one student:

> You are the weaker partner on the contract. Whatever you sign, you will never win. (Anu)

However, it is important to mention that students who are part of programs like Erasmus+ find it much easier to find accommodation. Because Erasmus+ students are in Latvia for short term exchanges, they often find housing through friends or websites in places which are specifically marketed towards international students.

> Just look them up on Facebook. Nothing else. Foreign students in Riga or Erasmus students in Riga, and then people would advertise their apartments in that way. [..] All of these apartments were intended to be rented out by students. (Daniel)

Evidently, status as a student can cause serious mistrust for landlords. The opposite is also true, and students are wary of ill-intentioned landlords hoping to take advantage of them. However, by paying higher prices students can expedite their housing search by finding apartments specifically marketed towards international students.

3.5 Key findings on housing pathways, barriers and discrimination

There are four major guides for students in the housing market. First, the university figures as a housing provider, information provider or transitional housing provider. Students expect that the university will provide as much information as possible about housing options and main features of the housing market. Second, students use social media, especially Facebook, to find apartments catered to student needs. Here landlords go specifically to the platform to attract international students while students use a platform they already know and expect knowledge of English on part of the landlords. Third, students use housing platforms, such as ss.lv to find apartments in the housing market. This has the best potential for finding a flat in their desired price range, but also the highest risk for discrimination and unpleasant encounters. Fourth, students use agents and services as well as their friends, social media groups and acquaintances to help them find an apartment. This allows to overcome difficulties in finding apartments and to find landlords with experience of housing international students. Fifth, students use hostels and short stay platforms to negotiate good short-term deals and avoid potential pitfalls in the private market less open to non-local citizens.

Based on which approach is taken and available as well as on student background, students' experiences in the housing market are visibly different. South Asian students, for

example, seem to be targets of housing discrimination more frequently than European students using the Erasmus+ programme. At the same time, Erasmus+ students are also more likely to use relatively more expensive apartments in the city centre advertised on Facebook and offered by landlords working with this segment. Importantly, social contacts, creative use of hostels and platforms and other support mechanisms are widely important to permanent non-European students who experience barriers to housing more often. Altogether a sound communication between international students and various involved parties in the housing market faces two major issues: insufficient English language proficiency (especially for landlords) and lack of support in managerial and organisational practices.

4 Attachments of belonging: things, relationships, and places

Finding housing is not only a pragmatic matching of one's lifelong accumulated standards to the offers in the market. It is also one of the fundamental entry points towards creating a sense of belonging and inclusion in broader society. Nevertheless, attachment can indicate higher wellbeing and social support, but also be somewhat of lesser importance to students due to transient nature of the study period. As shown by survey results on attachment to one's housing, the results are mixed.

Evaluate your emotional attachment to your current housing
(recoded; degree students; n=146)

Very attached
27%

Not attached
25%

Somewhat
attached
48%
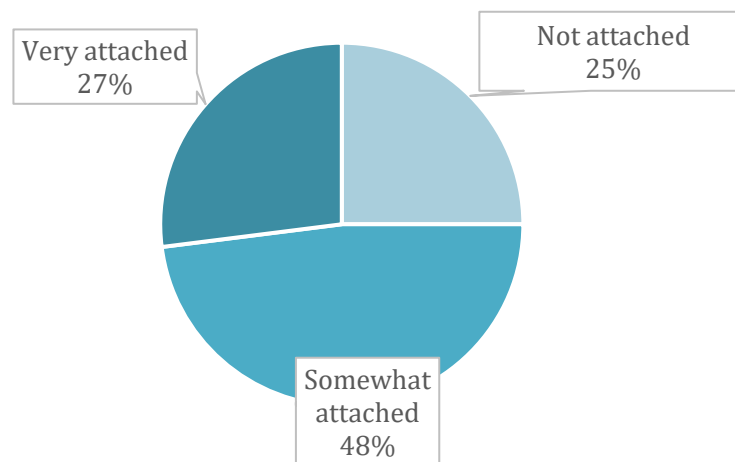
Therefore, this chapter will focus on the ways how students create emotional attachment to their home and the wider community during their study period in Latvia. On a general note, students describe attachment to their place of residence mostly through personal things and relationships. Like home, belonging includes personal and emotional relationships and places, and it usually extends beyond the local scale of an apartment and, as Kusenbach and Paulsen (2013) mention, while the two notions are not identical, belonging starts up where home is generally left off in several aspects which this chapter will try to illuminate.

4.1 Things

Firstly, we can notice that students' relations to things are affected by the transient nature of their study period. Many believe that decorations are important for creating a feeling of individuality, home and are also an aspect of belonging. It is important to note that consumption is important for this creation of individuality, home and belonging. For example, Paulsen (2013) discusses this consumption through model rooms, such as in IKEA, and the consistent newness of the furniture and décor of them that emphasises the importance of the buying opportunity aspect when moving. Over-the-top decorating schemes (such as those found in children's bedrooms in IKEA) amplify this point while also confirming that home décor is a valid manner of expressing one's identity (gender, sexuality, sports loyalties, etc.) and one's expectations from the world (e.g. how a 'girls space' should look like).

> I bought candles. And lights. The flat itself does not feel like home, but I could make my room feel like one if I have a similar atmosphere to mine in Germany. (Jessica)

Most decors of homeliness are of such a small scale. However, these rented flats often are temporary places – owners are aware that they are leasing a flat for a limited time and the changes they can make to the flat (e.g., painting the walls) are also limited. A student might choose not to add decorations to their living space or anything deemed not essential for daily life. Moreover, many, especially the exchange students, avoid a sense of ownership through individualisation.

> We didn't do anything, to be honest. Because we are here for three months and we don't care about decoration. So the walls are absolutely naked, there is nothing and we're ok with this. For me it is more like a hostel room than a living room. (Paul)

> I don't want to invest much in a flat that is not mine, that is rented. So most of my stuff I bought second-hand, I bought just the most necessary equipment that I need. I knew that I didn't want to stay in that flat for more than one year, so I just didn't invest much. Till now, I don't change the flat that much, because it's not my own flat. (Jan)

Sometimes students employ strategies to achieve the intended results to reach place attachment through decoration without spending more money or by bringing important personal things from home. Some also worry about accumulating things and not having a place where to leave them after their study period is concluded.

> I rearranged it [laughs]. It's my kink, kind of [both laugh]. When I'm somewhere I just want to make it mine, so I just rearrange the, like just move all the things in the room to make it like more adjusted to me kind of. (Lenka)

Moreover, in many interviews reminders of family, past, and identity were represented through the remaining "things" of all the people who were still in their respective (often limited) quarters.

> When I came from France to Latvia, I brought my blender. Yeah, that's so crazy. (…) probably ask me 'why are you bringing a blender here?' So, I would always carry a blender with me everywhere. And here [Latvia], I also brought my blender to this flat because I would feel familiar, that's a part of me. A blender. (Denis)

> I really love paintings and I always bring a lot of them to my home. Also some plants. Now when I know that I'll leave soon I don't know what I am going to do with all that stuff. (Elia)

For some students various specific things are bare necessities, for others a bridge through which they create preferable 'atmospheres' (blender, candles etc.), and yet for others the content of one's house is a reflection of oneself (Marcus, 1995). Attachment to things and bringing them along when moving around also amplifies their sense of home. Alongside things that foster sense of belonging some of the students did receive assistance from family, friends, co-workers, or other connections. However, in many cases the social networks that could have provided counsel, material assistance, or emotional solace were unavailable or even partook in the very circumstances that cause difficulties for students. But at the same time, because many students reside together (especially those deciding not to decorate), their sense of home might depend more on relationships than things.

4.2 Relationships

No less important than things in creating a sense of home were relationships. Students interact with their flatmates, neighbours and wider community through sharing space, partaking in leisure activities, and interacting in their wider surroundings. These are various aspects related to relationships that affect the students' attachment to their housing.

For example, students note that sharing space with other flatmates can create both a sense of community as well as arduous challenges that affect students' well-being and ways

of inhabiting their living space. It seems self-evident that shared apartments and dorms are an easier way to meet new people. Nevertheless, when communication and living situations are subpar, students choose to avoid these situations and focus their socialising efforts elsewhere. As mentioned in the first two chapters, students think that shared apartments are a good way to get to know new people, and it is their common expectation and reasoning when looking for a shared apartment.
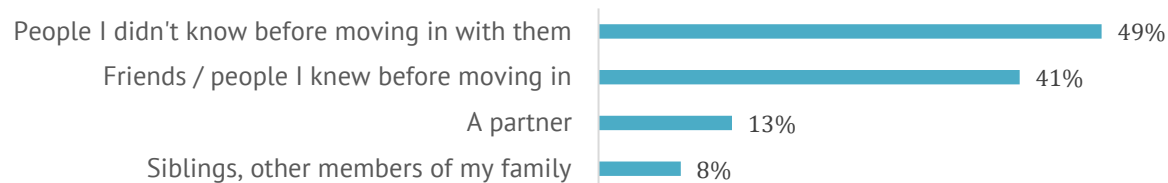
Another important aspect is socialisation, which students consider a benefit both if they choose to live in a dormitory or in a shared flat.

When you move into a new city, it's an easier way to meet new people. My previous apartment before moving out alone had a lot of roommates, which sometimes was nice because you could meet a lot of people at once and you could form different friendships without having to work a lot on finding friends. Whereas if you were only living with one more person, it was, um, more difficult to make friends. (Daniel)

Also I found it easier to hang out and to meet, and get to know other people living in the apartment. (…) But in my apartment, hanging out with your roommates you can invite other people, you can host some parties and you can't do any of that in a dorm. (Marco)

The importance of this socialisation is further shown by survey data as more students reported they are living with people they didn't know before (49%), but a significant number of students also reported living with people they knew before (41%). This reveals the need to build relationships and together with the budgetary restrictions forcing people to share space become an important aspect affecting one's daily life and place attachment.

Who are you sharing your housing with? (degree students; multiple response; n=146)

People I didn't know before moving in with them — 49%
Friends / people I knew before moving in — 41%
A partner — 13%
Siblings, other members of my family — 8%

Similarly, parties in dorms and apartments is a way to build friendships, which is also one of the ways of how people belong. In some interviews a sense of community extends further than the apartment that a student is living in. Some students note satisfaction with their interactions with flatmates and wider residential communities or describe connections to some other students' flatsharing community substituting the lack of community in their own apartments. It is important to note that a difference between community and belonging is that belonging can be a primarily aesthetic and ideological experience, whereas community typically requires positive social interaction and relationships with nearby and like-minded others (Savage, 2010).

> We moved in as three people: my friend, me, and the third. And then Carla moved out, and then Beta moved in, but Carla moved in with people who are friends with us, so the community extended to their place plus our place, and then Carla moved out again into a different place, and then Beta, who had moved into Carla's room, moved into Carla's next room, so the community extended again. So, yes I feel like there is a community, because we are hanging out with the same people all the time, and yeah, we are all friends in a sense. (...) We don't cook together or anything. So, it's not like a really strong community, but we are still friends. (Olga)

However, the interviews show that often these expectations of building friendships are not always fulfilled and sharing a space with other flatmates can become difficult. Students note that in Latvia you often don't know the future flatmates in advance, whereas in some other places there is a more thorough interview process to find out whether the people are compatible before moving in together. Difficulties in communication and differing standards of cleanliness decreases satisfaction of the student's living situation. As a result, they either choose to avoid the common areas in their flat or generally spend less time at home.

> I don't think that I'm attached to the people that I live with. [..] I was super enthusiastic at the beginning – yeah, maybe I'm gonna have flatmates, maybe we're gonna hang out, but apart from the [South European country] girl, the other girls are just very reserved [..] It's almost that I've been used to living on my own, even if they're there. Maybe it's not that nice, but even if they're there, sometimes I feel I'm alone completely, so I don't feel that sense of community. (Sofia)

Students also note limited interactions with their neighbours which for some feels odd in comparison to the experience back at their home country.

> Okay, so as I said, I'm Turkish, we have some different cultural situations. As far as I can see, they don't have the culture that Turkish people have, for example, if we move to some place, we try to get to know the neighbours and try to make some friends, give some gifts and food whatever, you know, make friends, that's the only thing. It's not happening here as far as I can see – maybe it happens here but we're students and foreign people, and they can't speak English, maybe that's the reason, but they seem friendly, like we say "hi" to each other when we run into one another, say it in the morning and that kind of stuff. They smile, at least that's good stuff (laughs). (Esra)

Some indicate issues prevalent in buildings they share with Latvian neighbours. For some, there are difficulties created by the language barrier. Others note that the lifestyle of some students imperils prosperous cohabitation. However, some noted that relations between other neighbours were already compromised when they moved in.
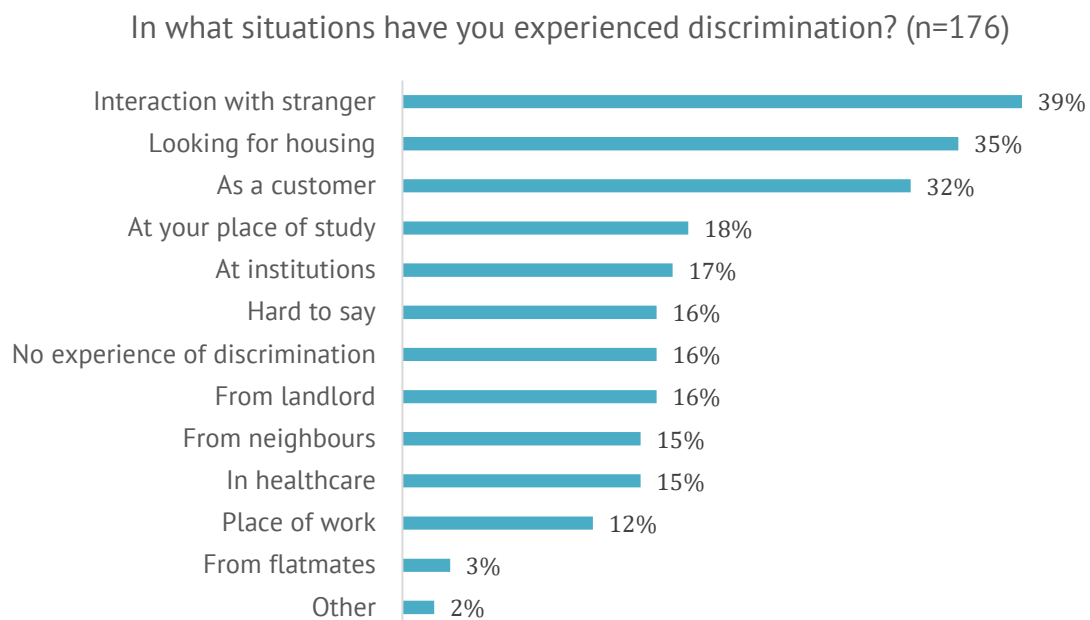
> In my last apartment when I was living alone everyone [Latvians] hated each other. Everybody complained about everything. [..] So, they would complain about the laundry. They would complain about noise. They would complain about smoking where you were not supposed to smoke. There was no community at all. I remember them trying to make a barbecue during the summer and nobody replied. In that way there was no community. (Daniel)

Sometimes these difficulties make students feel sad and further on makes them feel unwelcome to the place they have to stay for a longer period of time. Henceforth, while many students develop friendships that contribute to their sense of belonging, the engagement with local neighbours and even flatmates is a challenge for many, endorsing a sense of Latvians being hard to approach.

> As far as I can see, Latvian people don't like foreign people, especially students. Maybe it's because the foreign people, if they are students, they make parties and disturb others, housemates, or flatmates or whatever it is. So maybe that's the reason, I have no idea, or other stuff that happened in the past, but they don't like students and they don't want to give any apartments to students. As far as I can see, it's also based on religion and that kind of stuff. Yeah, that made me a little bit sad, but that also happens in Germany. But here, I can say, it's stronger, so that made me a bit surprised and sad. (Esra)

Importantly, a significant number of students expressed difficulty communicating and establishing relationships with locals. It was common to describe Latvians as "reserved" or "cold" even if it was challenged as a stereotype. The major issue, however, was that with international students mostly being surrounded by other international students — due to strong Erasmus+ networks and weaker networks with locals — there was little opportunity for mixing between foreigners and Latvians. Even in some dorms, international students and Latvian students live on separate floors and there is little interaction.

In this context, social situations where students experience discrimination reinforce relational pitfalls and increased challenges in belonging. For example, as shown by survey results, the most prevalent situation where students encountered discrimination was in interaction with strangers (39%) with pursuit of housing coming only second (35%) and discrimination being experienced in many contexts.

In what situations have you experienced discrimination? (n=176)

Situation	Percentage
Interaction with stranger	39%
Looking for housing	35%
As a customer	32%
At your place of study	18%
At institutions	17%
Hard to say	16%
No experience of discrimination	16%
From landlord	16%
From neighbours	15%
In healthcare	15%
Place of work	12%
From flatmates	3%
Other	2%

To conclude, it is common to find a perception amongst the interviewed students that 'Latvians' are reserved and hard to approach due to minimal effort of social engagement from their part, negative encounters with strangers and a lack of mixed socialization initiatives. Ultimately, for some this hinders the sense of community in their space of living and outside it — even after developing friendships with roommates or neighbours. This fosters an increased feeling of 'foreignness'. Thus, while relationships in one's flat, building and dormitory are paramount, relationships outside of these circles contribute to a similar positive or negative effect on belonging.

4.3 Places

While materiality and flatmates are most substantial dimensions that form a sense of belonging, many interviews indicated that students build their sense of belonging outside of their own apartments. As mentioned earlier, that was also done to substitute lack of flourishing interpersonal relations in their own residence. Unfortunately interviewees mentioned some negative experiences in the form of language barrier that also impacted students' place-attachments.

> Because in the shops you recognize that if people do not speak in English they have straight away negativity. Even if they should understand that their salary comes from the people who put the money in their shops. (Anu)

Some students experience belonging through people around them: in the apartment, community outside it, and less to the apartment itself. Moreover, there is a noticeable correlation with belonging and attachment with time spent in the apartment. In short, students who spend less time in their apartment, do not sense attachment to it.

> I will live here maybe three or four months max, and it's just for me a place to sleep. But after that I find it very difficult to find a place which I can say it's home. I lived maybe for two years in a place that I never said was my home. Because I can't be in a place where I can't change my furniture or something. I don't feel at home. But, yeah, in the way I am a bit attached to this place because that's where most of our parties are, most of the people are living. (Paul)

An interesting aspect that some students illuminate is that with increased distance from the place that they reside in makes their appreciation for it more prominent.

> Actually, when I came from France, the cab driver asked where I was going and I said I was going home. I was feeling like I was going home. It was so natural! I think I couldn't stay in Latvia all my life, cause the weather is sh*t. The weather is not that good. I feel attached to France as well, but I think it is my place right now. [..] When I came back home, I was feeling stuck between two worlds. Like friends and Latvia. [..] In Erasmus you really feel stuck between two worlds. Even the cab driver was kidding me, but I was really feeling like it was really my place. (Emma)

While for some it is the weather that feels familiar or strange, for others (especially those from the post-socialist countries) it is the infrastructure. Some students also fall back on their own home-country logistics or their attachment to it.

> Since Zagreb is not that differently organised as a city from Riga I did kind of feel like at home [..] Because our cities are pretty much similar I felt at home right away [..] as soon as I got there. I was there for six months so I didn't have that much time. But I felt at home after maybe two or three weeks. (Max)

As mentioned earlier, leisure activities help students integrate and feel more attached to a temporary place of residence. Some of the most frequently mentioned types of leisure were visiting bars, clubs, cafes and parks in Riga, as well as simply exploring the city. Secondly, students also mentioned leisure activities such as travelling (for example, to neighbouring countries), playing sports, cooking, and having various kinds of entertainment with friends, such as walking around the city together or having a party in the apartment.

> I've been travelling in Lithuania last week and I was actually like: "Yeah, I'm excited to go back to my apartment in Riga". Because it kind of feels like home already. (Judith)

In various instances, travelling around Latvia and the Baltics makes place attachment stronger. This then indicates that there are many ways to build links with the place of residence, not necessarily bounded to the specific place where the person resides, but to broader places in a region.

Notably, students did not primarily look for location of the flat where these types of leisure activities would be possible. However, it can be seen that no matter where everyone found the place to live, in each location the student managed to find a way to spend their spare time enjoyably. For example, one of the interviewees described her experience positively and illustrated her activities in her spare time by getting to know the new environment.

> Ha, yes, that is nice about this. I can do lot of activities. Exploring the city, cafes, bars. (Lazde)

Exploration here is also a form of developing place attachment. Although it is not possible to directly link leisure to the choice of the location of the apartment, ties can be observed between leisure and the characteristics of the apartment itself. For example, some of the students spoke about having friends over and having parties in their apartments. It

can be inferred that in order to do it, the size of the apartment matters. As it was also told in the interview by Judith, who said:

> I was planning on having friends over during my Erasmus semester. So, I was like- Okay it would be nice to, if they could sleep at my place. (Judith)

Relating to place-attachment in a broader sense, many students note that Covid-19 affected their choices, primarily relating to socialisation and community building. Some students emphasised the need of living with more people in order to create a social circle. This point was attested by those who lived individually and referred to the lack of community, which consequentially affected place-attachment.

> I was definitely looking for something with three people, like a flatshare. Because in [home city], before I lived alone and then the covid situation came and it was super depressing to me to be home alone the whole time. I was afraid that when there is another lockdown in this city that I don't know and don't have any family or friends it would be a little bit lonely. That is why I looked for an apartment with more people. (Olivia)

> In Florence, I have my closest friends, there is a different social life [..] At the very beginning I also enjoyed Riga as well. But here I have a different social experience. Also those COVID restrictions, bars were closed, so it wasn't similar to my life in Florence. (Sergio)

> I feel like due to Corona it is very hard to do that. I feel like normally it would be very easy and kind of achievable. With corona, it seems like no one is present. And with other Erasmus students, it was, even more, harder because I arrived at a later time and people had already made friends. So not really. (Emily)

As discussed above, most students did not choose their living spaces based on available leisure activities near them, but it was not difficult to find something that interested them. This along with the differences (and similarities) in the new environment (despite Covid-19 being an important aspect in the recent times) indicate that a there are multiple factors that impact one's place attachment and a sense of belonging.

4.4 Key findings on belonging through things, relationships and places

To conclude this chapter, students mentioned multiple ways how they felt or tried to build sense of belonging to the place they had chosen to reside in during their time in Latvia. First, decorating with objects from their home, ambiance and cosiness-inducing décor (such as candles) and other identity-validating objects were among the stated answers. However, the short temporal horizon of their living quarters discouraged most to put effort in individualising the living place. Second, a vital part in students' sense of belonging were relationships they make through shared spaces influencing also the type of accommodations they chose. Meeting people and making new friends was a goal for many when deciding to share a flat with others or live in. Yet not everyone's experience with community building in this way was positive. Instead acrimonious feelings of being unwelcomed in one's area of residence space was common due to difficulties with communicating or building relationships with Latvians rather than the more accessible international student community.

Third, leisure activities such as exploring the city's bars, parks, and other communal spaces alone or with others, and travelling outside the city and in some cases the country, conjured the sense of belonging as they increasing familiarity of the region. If broader sense of belonging can often be evaluated when home is left off (Kusenbach and Paulsen, 2013), as delineated throughout this chapter, these paths of belonging and a "feeling of home" are often blurred. Students can sense belonging and not feel at home, and they can lack belonging and feel at home. In the end, while student housing pathways impact such feelings as belonging and feeling of home, students cope with both of these feelings when making new connections outside of the apartment through friends, family, leisure, and multifold of places around them.

Conclusion

While there are significant differences in international students' expectations, experiences and sense of belonging, several common findings can be noted. Importantly, there are three major ways how student housing pathways affect students' sense of belonging in Latvia.

International students are both constrained and liberated by their short-term needs. From one side, it can be harder for them to acquire housing as landlords might not want short-term contracts. This can make students choose living in dormitories or private sector hostels not because of their choice. For some students, a hindrance is also some landlords unwillingness to allow them to declare in their flats needed to secure a residence permit. From the other side, this makes students feel more free not to invest in decoration and material goods, but in learning, socialisation and experiences. In this way, students are more open to different types of housing as well as to sharing apartments with others only with small adjustments of cosiness. Some students change several apartments in the process, while many use dormitories as a transitional housing before finding something that suits their needs more and provides more privacy, for example, through sharing an apartment instead of a room.

Non-European students are discriminated more in the housing market. Non-European students are more often studying for longer term, which means they are searching in the more informal market through ss.lv, rather than through Facebook where more expensive apartments and rooms are catered to Erasmus+ students whose scholarship makes these apartments more easily affordable. Additionally, many note that various ethnic stereotypes about cleanliness have spread among landlords resulting in specific ethnic discrimination. However, students have found creative and alternative ways to secure housing, such as through contacts that allow to move into apartments of another previous student, regional background-related support groups as well as paid agents.

International students socialize more with international students than with locals or neighbours. This is not facilitated only by strong networking groups and weak interaction with locals, but through dormitory design that separates international and local students. Students who choose the private market often face language barrier with their landlords and even become mixed in conflicts between neighbours that result in some feeling unwelcome. Sometimes socialisation with locals is seen as subpar even in shared flats. This

results in international students sense of belonging being mostly attached to relationships with international friends, spaces of evening-time socialisation and trips around the region.

Despite these challenges, however, for many students finding suitable accommodation is not hard and there are many opportunities for manoeuvre and finding support. Nevertheless, our research also shows several issues that can be improved.

Recommendations

One of the questions we asked all our participants related to what they think could be improved in the student housing support system. Therefore, in this final section we have merged and elaborated on students' recommendations per field of responsibility.

State, city and non-governmental level

- **Address and lower discrimination and racism**. Discrimination of particular ethnic groups remains high and there are little institutional support mechanisms apart from Ombudsman's Office of the Republic of Latvia in place to counter it. Consumer Rights Protection Law that has a section against discrimination applies only to businesses and not to private owners with no legislation that can be compared to Fair Housing Act in the U.S. Discrimination can also be addressed through mechanisms like anti-discrimination office (as in Saxony) and public campaigns and education against discrimination and racism that document and mainstream the issue (Meier et al, 2017).
- **Offer free counselling in cases of discrimination and scams**. Research shows that students sometimes become victims of scams and situations where they cannot declare their place of residence due to landlord's concerns or don't have proper contracts. In these cases, students need a clear advice where to seek help, such as the previously mentioned Ombudsman's office or NGO's like Make Room Latvia.
- **Monitor studentification of housing**. Participants experiences show that many landlords, especially near the city centre are specialising in housing international students. Many students see this positively as this also happens due to many landlords being unwilling to house students. However, this can also have repercussions in the housing market and should be monitored for its potential drawbacks and inflation of prices in the city centre.

University level

- **Develop comprehensive university housing policy**. Research shows it is not enough to provide dormitory spaces to attract students and be sure of their safe entry in the city's housing market. Students also need guidance in how to navigate the housing market early when they are considering applying to the university due to residence permit and other restrictions. Students expect universities to have clear policies and support mechanisms that extend beyond provision of housing to provision of information and resources of other options. This increases students' trust in the university and willingness to apply.

- **Provide students with mediation and the necessary information**. While many students noted that universities offered significant help in securing and finding housing, others felt abandoned on their own and wished there was a housing consultant employed by the university. Senior students can also systemically assist in this regard. At the same time, even if there isn't personnel that can provide direct assistance in navigating the housing market, comprehensive materials and links can be provided on options beyond dormitories. Students can also be directed to NGOs like Make Room Latvia and Shelter Safe House that offer a variety of advice and counselling to newcomers. Another option is also provide a list of reputable real estate agents and platforms that can assist in evaluating and negotiating apartments and overcoming the language barrier. Similarly, a few students wished for Frequently asked question (FAQ) type of materials that explain important issues that can arise in their search for housing. Importantly, it should also include information on public transport system and student discounts and other forms of mobility (especially, bicycles) that allow one to evaluate feasibility of different locations of housing as well as affordable platforms for getting, buying or renting necessities.

- **Use a participatory and dialogical approach in developing improvements to dormitories**. Many students expressed wishes in how dormitories could be improved and added additional features, such as bicycle rent and necessity exchange to them. Others noted that they felt their needs were not inquired about, leaving a sense that client service is formal and not enough based on individualised support that makes one feel at home. Students expressed that practices such as a survey used for evaluating if the place matches one's expectations and individual preferences would be helpful.

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