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DE-STUDENTIFICATION: EMPTYING HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS OF STUDENT POPULATIONS

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Abstract

International scholarship on student geographies and urban change continues to advance knowledge of the intense commodification of student lifestyles and student housing. The main aim of this paper is to consider some of the hitherto under-researched wider knock-on effects of more commodified student housing markets. Here we present findings from the first-ever empirical study of de-studentification. Using the case study of Loughborough, we demonstrate how de-studentification is a process of change that has been stimulated by the increased supply of purpose-built student accommodation. We show that de-studentification leads to the depopulation and decline of some classical studentified neighbourhoods. Moreover, these urban transformations have several significant implications for pre-existing conceptualisations of urban change and student geographies. Notably, the impacts of de-studentification pose important questions for the conceptual boundaries of studentification – a prerequisite of de-studentification – and although, to date, dominant conceptualisations of studentification are wedded to upgrading-led representations of urban gentrification, it is shown that de-studentification, conversely, leads to physical downgrading and emptying of neighbourhoods in distinct phases. We therefore argue for a process-led definition of de-studentification, to illustrate how studentified neighbourhoods are gradually ‘emptied’ of student populations and student housing. More broadly, it is asserted that new student geographies are being created by the deepening neoliberalisation and commodification of higher education, which, in turn, will have unintentional consequences for wider social, cultural and economic relations in university towns and cities, such as emergent community cohesion and changing senses of place.

Keywords: student geographies; studentification; de-studentification; depopulation; empty neighbourhoods

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“Understandings of the processes of de-studentification and population restructuring remain underdeveloped” (Sage et al., 2012: 600).

1. INTRODUCTION

Students are widely recognised as an influential social group in enacting urban change (e.g. He, 2014; Daneri et al., 2015). This is reflected in the emergence of a critical body of work examining the patterns, processes and impacts associated with concentrations of students in towns and cities: cultural and consumption spaces of students (Holdsworth and Brewis, 2014; Parameswaran and Bowers, 2014), student demand for private-rented housing (Munro et al., 2009) and other processes of urban transformation (e.g. gentrification) (Smith and Holt, 2007; Chatterton, 2010), diverse spatial impacts and practices of students (Duke-Williams, 2009; Holdsworth, 2009), international student migration (King and Raghuram, 2013), the proliferation of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) (Laidley, 2014), and population change within university towns and cities (Holton, 2015).

Nowhere has this marked intensification of interest in the diverse urban geographies of students been underlined more than in the importance attached to the term ‘studentification’ (Holton and Riley, 2014). Notably, studentification is becoming more fully embedded within popular and academic consciousness to make sense of wider processes of urban change across the developed world, for example: China (He and Lin, 2015), Hungary (Fabula et al., 2015), Poland (Murzyn-Kupisz and Szmytkowska, 2015), Slovakia (Sekelský, 2014) and Spain (Garmendia et al., 2012).

Across these international contexts, studentification describes a process whereby high numbers of university students move into established residential neighbourhoods. This sparks distinct social, economic, cultural and physical effects (Brooks et al., 2015). At root, studentification involves the replacement of 'settled' resident groups with 'temporary' student groups, a reconfiguration of local population structures from increases in the production of unrelated living together in shared housing, and, with young, co-habiting students changing local class and household structures, a distinctive student-cultural lifestyle. As processes of studentification become embedded in local neighbourhoods, the out-movement – or displacement – of established resident populations (most commonly families with children), combined with student depopulation during vacation periods, can lead to the creation of 'ghost towns'. Especially within media discourses, studentification is blamed for the closure of schools and community services, their replacement with student-oriented services, and the formation of 'student ghettos' (Rogaly and Taylor, 2015).

As processes of studentification have become more engrained in established residential areas, and university on-campus accommodation has struggled to cater for increased student numbers, the 'studentification frontier' has rolled out across new urban neighbourhoods. Key here is the agency and opposition from resident groups to student neighbours, which has placed pressures on local politicians and planning departments to enable PBSA to be developed in other parts of towns and cities, often with the aim of dispersing students out of these classically 'studentified' neighbourhoods.

This direction of transformation is epitomised by Hubbard's (2009) discussion of studentification in Loughborough, which demonstrates how local student housing markets have become more diverse. In part, the negative social impacts of studentification in university towns and cities has also fuelled on-campus developments, including extensive

refurbishment programmes to upgrade existing accommodation and build new PBSA. This change is being driven, in part, by student demands for, and commercial supply of, higher quality off-campus accommodation – what Chatterton (2010) refers to as the ‘commodification of studenthood’.

It is important here to stress that some commentators have recently challenged neoliberal readings of seemingly unbounded student choice (e.g. Holdsworth and Brewis, 2014; Brooks et al., 2015), and there is merit in more critical perspectives of ‘bounded’ student choice and consumption practices. Nevertheless, the shifting dynamics in the supply and demand of student accommodation has resulted in lower proportions of students living off-campus and lower population densities in some classically studentified neighbourhoods. This process of transformation is referred to as ‘de-studentification’, describing a potential ‘aftermath’ of studentification, “which leads to social (for example, population loss), cultural (for example, closure of retail and other services), economic (for example, devalorisation of property prices) and physical (for example, abandonment of housing) decline” (Smith, 2008: 2552). Indeed, de-studentification is a process that has not gone unnoticed in UK towns and cities:

“Anecdotally ... we understand there has also been ‘de-studentification’ of some areas such as Longsight and Levenshulme. Some of this is likely to have been driven by these market changes together with the increased development of purpose-built student accommodation, which has led to an increase in supply in other areas, which are more attractive to students and nearer the core areas” (Tribal Group, 2009: 58).

There is also growing recognition of the potentially far-reaching consequences of de-studentification in a second Northern, formerly industrial city, where the process of abandonment is clearly not new in these types of areas:

“A mass exodus of students from their traditional Leeds heartlands (areas like Hyde Park, Headingley and Kirkstall into purpose built flats in the city centre) could push down property prices – but there are fears that it could also send the numbers of empty properties in those areas spiralling upwards ... The continuing flight of students has led to a situation of transition for some neighbourhoods” (Yorkshire Evening Post, 2015, n.p.).

Yet, for all that de-studentification is recognised as a driver of population change in towns and cities, it remains a poorly-understood process of urban change (Sage et al., 2013). Research, to date, has been narrowly focused on the outcomes and hallmarks of de-studentification (What is de-studentification? Where is de-studentification occurring?) and/or the supply and demand dynamics which create the conditions for de-studentification to occur. What is missing is a process-based conceptualisation of de-studentification that connects the start of the process, that is, the conditions necessary for de-studentification to occur, and the impacts, namely, the outcome of a de-studentified neighbourhood. To this end, this paper presents original findings from the first-ever *in situ* empirical study of de-studentification. The paper is divided into three parts. Extending Hubbard’s (2008, 2009) accounts analysing the geographies of studentification in Loughborough, UK, the next section explores the changing supply and demand dynamics which disrupt processes of studentification and create the preconditions for de-studentification to occur. Drawing on

unpublished data of university term-time addresses for two Loughborough wards, as well as findings from 33 research interviews, Section 3 proceeds to identify three stages in the unfolding process of de-studentification. Following on from this, Section 4 cautions against viewing de-studentified neighbourhoods as the end-point of a process of urban change; rather, we suggest there may be an important fourth phase that comes after de-studentification, which may involve the repopulation of previously studentified neighbourhoods. In the final section we propose a new 'process-based' definition of de-studentification that deepens our understanding of how urban landscapes are more widely being transformed by the neoliberalisation of higher education and commodification of studenthood.

2. FROM STUDENTIFICATION TO DE-STUDENTIFICATION?

2.1 Locating the 'studentification frontier'

Loughborough is a market town (population of 62,242 in 2011) that is emblematic of 'university towns' in the UK. Students comprise a high proportion of the total population (15,965 or 25% of the term-time population (HESA, 2014)) and the local economy is influenced by the presence of a university, and student-related practices are a conspicuous part of the landscape. Loughborough University is characterised by its rapid development since gaining its Charter in 1966. Total full-time student numbers increased from 1,545 (1950) to 4,050 (1970), and the student population was stable throughout the 1980s (approximately 6,000 full-time students). In line the national government policies to expand higher education, total student numbers increased year-on-year to 12,000 in 2000/01, and peaked in 2006/07 at 17,015.

Growing student populations triggered widespread studentification as higher proportions of students sought accommodation off-campus. As Hubbard (2008: 329) remarks:

“since 2001, the numbers of students have grown significantly faster than the places available in managed student premises, and with only 4,978 managed bedspaces in the town this means there are around 6,700 students in the private (‘unmanaged’) sector.”

Hubbard points out the distinctive geographies of student occupation in Loughborough during this period. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s the studentification frontier was concentrated in Loughborough’s “Golden Triangle”, an area comprising the Storer and Burleigh wards, characterised by the conversion of terraced properties into houses in multiple occupation (HMO) for student lets. Hubbard (2009) also reveals how Storer was one of the hot-spots of studentification, with 17% of households inhabited by students at the time of the last UK census (2001), making it the 8th most studentified ward in England and Wales.

2.2 Disrupting the geographies of studentification

An increase of students living off-campus present challenges for town-gown relations. Local residents, concerned by negative impacts of studentification in Loughborough, formed the Storer and Ashby Residents Group (SARG) in 1999. Partly in response to these local concerns, the local authority issued supplementary planning guidance relating to student properties, imposing restrictions on the conversion of existing family dwellings to HMOs in

neighbourhoods where HMOs exceed 20% of the total housing stock (Charnwood Borough Council, 2005). This has disrupted the geographies of studentification by restricting the “Golden Triangle” from becoming more studentified. More broadly, new-build developments have had significant impacts on the patterns of studentification, enabled by the local planning department, and motivated, in part, to meet new-build housing targets, stimulate regeneration of brown-field sites, generate Section 106 funds, and counter the studentification-related concerns of local councillors seeking to represent the interests of their constituents.

This rise of off-campus, and refurbished on-campus, PBSA has diversified the accommodation available to students in Loughborough (see Figure 1). Figure 2 presents findings from a survey undertaken in 2013 of first year students, and reveals the breadth of student accommodation that is available in Loughborough, with the important differentials of residential location, weekly rental costs, ensuite, TV facilities, double beds and cleaning services.

Off-campus PBSA accounted for 1,013 bedspaces in 2015, and was located primarily on brown-field sites in the town centre. Loughborough University partnered with University Partnerships Programme (UPP) to develop 1,300 new bedspaces (2008/09) on the campus. This, alongside the refurbishment of existing on-campus accommodation, has been fuelled, in part, by the opportunities for providers to maximise profits, and the university’s need to increase the supply of relatively high-quality accommodation on-campus (for recruitment, marketing, student experience and retention). New on-campus PBSA has relieved pressure off-campus by complementing the catered halls favoured by first year students, and enabling more second and third year students to remain on-campus.

At the same time, seemingly rising student demand for higher-quality accommodation has pushed the 'studentification frontier' wider than PBSA, with modern semi-detached, detached and townhouses now being converted to HMO. This trend encompasses the Kingfisher Estate, built in 2002, which is adjacent to the university campus and close to the town centre. Comprising two and three storey townhouse properties, the Kingfisher Estate was marketed as a 'cul-de-sac' providing executive homes for families. Between 2002-2005 properties were sold primarily to families, but from 2005 onwards landlords began buying up properties and converting into HMO. In 2015, there were approximately 60 student-let properties with around 160 students living on the Kingfisher Estate. With neighbouring Forest and Herrick, an area of modern semi-detached and larger detached properties, this location is now home for over 500 students. This is an important development because in Hubbard's previous studies of Loughborough he notes that limiting HMO conversions would likely see competition for existing student housing in the Golden Triangle "increase because students are unwilling to live beyond this area" (2009: 1911), and "areas to the east and south of the town centre remain largely free of student housing" (2008: 330). Developments since then in the Kingfisher, Forest and Herrick areas point instead to a largely unforeseen change in the geographies of studentification, with notable consequences for established residents:

"This [Kingfisher Estate] was a nice quiet area but now it is more like a student ghetto. They drink outside and in their house, making lots of noise until about 11pm, then head out and come back around 3am, with the same noise, absolutely legless. The next morning, the pavements and area are covered in glass, vomit, condoms and litter" (Resident's Letter, Leicester Mercury, 2011: n.p.).

“The Forest Road north side is an excellent area for family houses and we do not want to see what has happened elsewhere in the town happen here. We have nothing against students, we wish them well in their education at Loughborough University, however they do have a different lifestyle from permanent residents and we wish to preserve the peaceful and attractive nature of the area in which we live” (Resident’s Letter, Loughborough Echo, 2012: n.p.).

The final noteworthy development here is that since 2006/07, when student numbers peaked at 17,015 and Hubbard (2009) undertook his research, total student numbers attending Loughborough University have decreased by 1,050 (-6.2%) (HESA, 2014). Add this to the additional bedspaces produced by the rise of PBSA (2,304 in total: 1,300 on-campus, 1,004 off-campus) and the conversion of previously non-student housing into HMOs in the Kingfisher, Forest and Herrick areas, a point had been reached where Loughborough had a significant oversupply of student accommodation. Reports in 2011 suggested that there were around 2,000 empty student bedspaces in Loughborough (Loughborough Echo, 2011).

Our argument is that any one of four key developments – the rise of PBSA, student demand for improved accommodation, the ‘colonisation’ of non-traditional student areas, or reduction in student numbers – can trigger de-studentification. In Loughborough, all four key developments could be observed in the late-2000s meaning there was the potential for the perfect ‘de-studentification storm’. Recognising the importance of researching processes of gentrification/studentification as they unravel ‘in situ’, as opposed to entering the research site in the wake of the progressing gentrification/studentification frontier (Freeman, 2006), Loughborough provided an ideal case study to deepen our knowledge of

hitherto under-researched processes of de-studentification (Sage et al., 2012). Critically, it also provided the scope to connect up the conditions for, and outcomes of, de-studentification by developing the first process-based definition and conceptualisation of de-studentification.

To achieve this, the remainder of our paper presents qualitative findings from 33 interviews with landlords (10), letting/estate agents (4), representatives of Loughborough University (3), accommodation providers (5), and established local residents (11), undertaken between 2010-2013. All interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and thematically coded. Quotations are used to highlight key points and are not representative of all views. Supporting this, Use Class/HMO data for the Storer and Burleigh area from 2008-2012 was made available by Loughborough University and SARG. This data shows the Use Class (specifically if the house is C3 [family] or C4 [HMO]), any changes to this class, the year of any sales for each individual property, and the number of bedrooms in each property.

3. TOWARDS A PROCESS-BASED ACCOUNT OF DE-STUDENTIFICATION

The novel comparison of SARG and Loughborough University term-time address datasets reveal that in 2012 Storer and Burleigh wards had 758 and 311 empty bedspaces in HMO, respectively. Analyses also show that between 2008-2011 the process of student depopulation unfolded in the three years immediately preceding, with a total loss of 411 students, with uneven patterns of student depopulation across de-studentifying neighbourhoods. On the one hand, it is important to distinguish between student depopulation resulting in partial occupancy and empty properties. Figure 3a reveals partial occupancy to be relatively consistent across both wards (43% and 46%, respectively) but the

proportion of empty HMOs is higher in Storer (19%). Interviewees perceived more empty bedspaces and properties in Storer due to houses being “generally that little bit bigger”, and “streets which are a bit wider” (interview, Landlord 6). In this way, particular types of HMO are first in line for de-studentification. Figure 3b suggests that as the number of bedspaces in a HMO increases so too does the likelihood of partial occupancy in de-studentifying neighbourhoods.

Observing that a declining student population in Storer and Burleigh may be indicative of de-studentification in action, our research examines the process(es) that are leading to this neighbourhood change. Revealing how the de-studentification process unfolds the remainder of this section identifies three distinct stages and scales – which we term ‘empty beds’, ‘empty houses’ and ‘empty streets’ – which take an area from exhibiting the conditions necessary for de-studentification to occur to the outcome of a de-studentified neighbourhood. We deepen knowledge of the micro-geographies of student population decline in de-studentifying neighbourhoods, a necessary manoeuvre given the parallels between studentification and de-studentification; that both processes “occurs on a street-by-street basis rather than at the ward level” (Hubbard, 2008: 331).

Stage 1: Empty beds within studentified neighbourhoods

Although an oversupply of student accommodation is often the pre-requisite for de-studentification, there is a neighbourhood-specific threshold that needs to be reached before de-studentification will begin. A small oversupply of student accommodation is usually absorbed without triggering the effects of de-studentification, until a threshold triggers a depopulation of students in particular neighbourhoods. Only then does population decline act as a catalyst for the appearance of economic (devalorisation of property and

rental prices), cultural (closure of student-oriented services) and physical (deterioration of the built environment) facets associated with de-studentification (see Smith, 2008). Once this threshold has been reached the impact of de-studentification is influenced by a combination of the magnitude of oversupply and the time taken to return the balance between supply and demand below the threshold. Furthermore, as we will show, beyond the threshold, student demands become influential within the location in relation to the type of HMOs most/least exposed to the advancing de-studentification frontier.

The first sign that a neighbourhood has been exposed to de-studentification is the recognition of empty bedspaces within student housing. This often occurs in areas which least meet the needs, expectations and preferences of students. In Loughborough, Storer and Burleigh accounted for 1,069 of the approximately 2,000 empty bedspaces in 2012, as students gravitated to residential locations with higher-quality, PBSA and HMO accommodationⁱ. But just as de-studentification does not unfold evenly across a university town or city, neither does it unfold evenly across de-studentifying neighbourhoods or wards. In Loughborough's 'Golden Triangle', for example, Fearon Street (57%) in Storer, and Burleigh Road (58%), York Road (57%), Curzon Street (57%) and Frederick Street (54%) in Burleigh, all record partial occupancy rates of 10-15% higher than the area average (44%).

Evidently, there is concern among residents, letting agents and landlords regarding high-levels of partial occupancy at ward and street-level, but their concern is less with partial occupancy itself, and more that partial occupancy is the first stage in a longer process towards becoming a de-studentified neighbourhood, for example:

“I think it often starts with not being able to fill the house in its entirety – for example, you can’t get five people for a five bed, but you manage to get three, and then it carries on from there” (interview, Landlord 9).

All of this suggests those streets experiencing high-levels of partial occupancy in Storer and Burleigh are on the front line for the next stage in the de-studentification process – the further emptying of properties and population.

Stage 2: Empty houses within studentified neighbourhoods

15% of all HMOs in Loughborough’s ‘Golden Triangle’ sit empty of student tenants. Yet, masked by this overall figure are important micro-geographies of how de-studentification unfolds unevenly across neighbourhoods. In contrast to Burleigh, where no streets record >15% empty properties, seven streets in Storer record >20% – what we take from this is a potentially important observation: Burleigh has higher levels of partial occupancy but low rates of empty properties at street-level; conversely, Storer has higher levels of empty properties but fewer streets with high levels of partial occupancy. If a rise in empty properties is, as suspected, the next stage in the unfolding process of de-studentification this points towards, first, the process taking hold faster, and the impacts more visible, in Storer than Burleigh, but, second, the higher number of streets registering high rates of partial occupancy in Burleigh suggests this area could quickly see significant increases in empty properties, similar to those witnessed in Storer.

Transitioning from full/partial occupancy to empty properties is an important stage in processes of de-studentification, particularly for landlords and residents. For landlords, the transition from full occupancy to partial occupancy results in decreasing rental incomes

(e.g. three students in a four-bed HMO still returns a rental income of 75%), which can usually be absorbed for at least one or two years. However, the transition from full or partial occupancy to empty property equates to no rental income, which, given the cyclical nature of the student housing market, is a situation likely to be for a minimum of 12 months. For landlords and residents, the transition to empty properties sees de-studentification mature from its largely invisible – or, perhaps, more accurately, hidden – phase, where depopulation results in partial occupancy, to a phase where empty properties provide visible markers in the landscape of properties, streets and neighbourhoods experiencing de-studentification. Our interviewees have certainly taken notice of the rise in empty properties, for instance:

“There are empty houses popping up everywhere. There are so many to let signs and posters up advertising rooms even though all the students will have got somewhere sorted by now. There are plenty of offers going on as well, especially down Storer Road last summer” (interview, Landlord 4).

The over-supply of student accommodation indicates the declining power of landlords (especially those with less desirable properties and/or locations) vis-a-vis their tenants when it comes to negotiating rental prices, packages and tenancy agreements. In this more competitive student housing market, minimising the risk of having an empty property means landlords and letting agents endeavour to make their properties as attractive as they can to prospective student tenants:

“At one stage the average was probably around £85 per week, not all in, and now it seems to be about £70 all in. You would rather put your price down and rent your property than stick at a higher price and have your house empty ... so there have to be compromises” (interview, Landlord 5).

Just as partial occupancy results in declining rental income, these types of deals and offers see the overall return on investment in student housing decrease. That said, if these deals and offers are successful in stabilising the student population they enable landlords to absorb the impacts of de-studentification and prolong their presence in the student housing market. So what we are seeing in those areas most exposed to de-studentification is, firstly, a coping strategy where landlords attempt to insulate themselves from the worst effects of population decline and the onset of de-studentification by ensuring they do not have empty property, and secondly, an offensive strategy whereby landlords provide a more competitive offer that may help the area to once again prove attractive to students, stall – or better still, halt – the process of urban decline, and, while an oversupply of accommodation remains, see the de-studentification frontier move to properties, streets and wards elsewhere in the town or city. Returning to Smith’s outcomes-based definition of de-studentification, this second phase sees aspects of economic decline (for landlords in the form of reduced rental yields) accelerate to offset and slow down the declining student population, thereby preventing transmission into the cultural and physical decline of an area.

When considered alongside other scholarship on urban decline and changing demand for housing, the process of de-studentification bears some similarities. For example, Lee and Nevin’s (2003: 74) work on the abandonment of social housing

neighbourhoods in Liverpool shows that increasing numbers of empty properties in low demand areas, which “leads to the supply of new residents decreasing and therefore the trajectory for voids will be upwards over time”. Likewise, Keenan et al. (1999: 795) describe how ‘abandoned properties’ can act as a “contagion effect which, unless reversed, can lead to whole neighbourhoods becoming devoid of social and economic activity, a twilight zone in which crime and social malaise abound”.

It is important here to emphasise that de-studentification does not equate with broader geographies of abandonment per se. Rather, de-studentification would appear to represent a process of emptying neighbourhoods of populations, possibly in the short-term. Irrespective of being inhabited or void, student landlords maintain their housing and do not board-up windows and doors (signifiers of abandonment). As this paper has shown, landlords will seek to maximise profits from their investments. This is clearly in contrast to physically abandoned (semi-built) properties in Ireland (ghost estates) and some neighbourhoods in the North-West of England (low demand areas), for example. At the same time, it is important to stress in essence, students do not ‘abandon’ neighbourhoods. Student occupancy is predominantly a temporary stay in a neighbourhood, which is tied to the annual cycle of the academic calendar. Student populations are thus replenished on an annual basis and in/out-migration is part of the wider population dynamics of studentified neighbourhoods.

Stage 3: Empty streets within studentified neighbourhoods

If landlord incentivisations fail to offset student rejection of an area, a new stage in the de-studentification process becomes increasingly visible – the full onslaught of de-studentification. At this point the impacts of de-studentification spread from social and

economic decline into cultural and physical decline, thereby creating a vicious circle that could see the decline of an area gather pace. Yet, unlike other examples of urban depopulation and abandonment, where the movement of people in and out of properties can occur throughout the year, the student housing market is characterised by one large in-migration, at the beginning of the academic year, followed by one large out-migration, at the end of the academic year. Student HMOs which sit empty at the beginning of the academic year are likely to remain empty for a whole year, making the period 12 months after a property has been emptied a critical juncture for landlords, likewise for residents when properties have been emptied at a street level, and service providers when it occurs at ward level.

Student HMO which are empty for more than one year in the student housing cycle are symbolic of a street or area on the cusp of transition to becoming de-studentified. This was clearly evident in Loughborough's Golden Triangle, with residents expressing concern about the length of time properties were remaining un-let:

"There are some [properties] that have been sitting empty for over a year that we have been watching to see what happens to them" (interview, Burleigh resident 1).

In previously studentified neighbourhoods such as Storer and Burleigh, the concerns that local residents express in relation to high concentrations of student populations (litter, noise, on-street parking) are soon overtaken by more far-reaching concerns about the detrimental effects caused by the rapid depopulation of an area by students. First among many concerns is the rapid deterioration of un-let student HMO:

“All houses that get left empty deteriorate very quickly ... I guess when you have got someone in there it looks more like a home, it looks like it is lived in. Empty properties are not attractive. They just look uncared for and one problem with it leads to another and no one seems to care enough to sort it out. For some, a lick of paint would do a world of good, but for others, they are in such a bad state that they need so much work to them” (interview, Burleigh resident 1).

There are echoes here of Wilson and Kelling’s (1982) ‘broken windows’ theory whereby failure to rectify the small signs in the initial stages of decline (e.g. paint peeling, unkempt garden) escalates into further deterioration and a downward spiral of decline. Observing the initial stages of decline, residents in Storer and Burleigh are concerned about the potential negative impacts that property deterioration may have on the attractiveness of the area. Indeed, this situation has become acute as an increasing number of un-let student HMOs are empty as fewer students seek accommodation within Storer and Burleigh, and this is tied to some landlords seeking to sell-up:

“Before it was always landlords buying up properties ... now, I think that lots of landlords are selling. I would say 2010, that was when we really started to see houses for sale ... There were suddenly several boards up all around here” (interview, Storer resident 1).

Timing is important here: 2010 represents three years past peak student numbers in Loughborough (2006/7) and at the end of the 2009/10 student housing cycle where, according to the SARG data, 332 out of the 411 (81%) empty bedspaces that appeared in

Storer and Burleigh between 2008 and 2011. For many landlords the significant depopulation of Loughborough's Golden Triangle in 2009/10 meant that they could no longer absorb the detrimental economic impacts of partial occupancy or having an empty property, and as a result they sought to sell-up and leave the market:

“When it no longer became profitable to have a mortgage which renting students paid for you, then a lot of little buyers, the smaller landlords, who had just one or two houses, they got out” (interview, Letting agent 2).

If a ‘tipping-point’ had been reached for landlords with a small portfolio of properties for student-let this was generally not the case for the professional landlords with larger portfolios:

“There are definitely some [landlords] that are leaving the market – one went bust, a couple are on the brink – but some of the bigger landlords have been buying up properties. Landlord to landlord sales have been increasing [and] that is quite a new phenomenon” (interview, Letting agent 3).

In the midst of de-studentification this points towards increasingly powerful stakeholders in the student housing market. Landlords with larger property portfolios are often able to absorb the impacts of an oversupply of student accommodation in one street or neighbourhood because their portfolio extends into streets and neighbourhoods experiencing studentification or which are already studentified. Rental income generated by property located where the student housing market remains buoyant can provide surplus

cash with which these landlords are looking to invest to expand their portfolio. As the quotations intimate, when landlords with a small portfolio attempt to leave de-studentified neighbourhoods some professional landlords – potentially deterred by increased property prices or lack of available housing in those areas meeting student demands for better quality accommodation – see the depressed property prices in previously studentified areas providing a potential investment opportunity. Nonetheless, there is no let-up in concern over what the period after de-studentification may bring:

“How easily are they going to be able to sell these properties in the meantime? If other landlords won’t buy them, then who will?” (interview, Storer resident 2)

4. AFTER DE-STUDENTIFICATION: “THAT’S WHEN GOOD NEIGHBOURS BECOME GOOD FRIENDS”?

As the process of de-studentification unfolds, attention shifts to questions about which social groups will repopulate the area. In this section we highlight five possible social groups that landlords, letting agents and residents hope (in the case of students, young professionals, and families) or fear (in the case A8 migrants and problem individuals or families) will repopulate de-studentified areas. It should be stressed here that, to date, there has not been a re-population of de-studentified areas within Loughborough, and the following representations are based on perceptions of possible repopulation in the future.

Stage 4: Re-populating previously studentified neighbourhoods

In local student housing markets where supply and demand are in balance, as one group of students dismiss specific HMO, streets or neighbourhoods (due to a mis-match to their

preferences for accommodation), the need for somewhere to live would almost certainly see another group of students move into the area that has been rejected by the former group of students. But where there is an oversupply of student accommodation student depopulation is rarely replenished by an influx of other social groups of students.

One scenario which could result in a new in-migration of students is if the students dismissing an area in search of higher quality accommodation are replaced by students who are priced out of increasingly expensive higher-quality accommodation, or are prepared to compromise on their demands if the financial incentives offered by landlords make lower-quality accommodation a more competitive proposition. Here the outcome could be the partial or complete re-studentification of a previously studentified neighbourhood by students requiring or choosing cheaper accommodationⁱⁱ. Yet, as this Loughborough University interviewee remarks: “the student market certainly is not the only market within Loughborough” (interview, Loughborough University representative 1); meaning we need to consider other social groups as potential in-migrants to de-studentifying or de-studentified neighbourhoods.

A strategy favoured by many letting agents in the early stages of de-studentification is the dual marketing of HMO to student and non-student groups. This has been a feature of the Loughborough housing market since the oversupply of student accommodation was first observed in the mid-to-late-2000s:

“I’ve looked in letting agent windows ... even the good companies have had some empty places in the last two years. This year they are advertising to rent to non-students as well. So that tells you something about the change in the market” (interview, Burleigh resident 1).

These 'non-student' groups are generally young professionals and graduates because while there is a desire – even optimism – among some residents that families will return, the physical, social, cultural and economic decline experienced in de-studentified areas make an in-migration of families unlikely:

“It is not going to be the simple case of ‘oh, the students are leaving so families will come back’. I don’t think people would consider buying here because of this ‘student Triangle’ stigma ... they wouldn’t have the confidence to buy because it has been seen as a student area for so long” (interview, Storer resident 2).

By contrast, many recent graduates will have lived in traditional studentified neighbourhoods when attending university, often meaning the stigma associated with studentified areas may be less of an obstacle to them. Letting agents are also inclined to market properties at young professionals and graduates because their similarities with the student population – e.g. limited budget, lifestyle – makes dual marketing easier.

Yet, while young professionals and graduates may be a desirable social group to attract into de-studentified neighbourhoods, they are not always desirable to landlords:

“We are talking to landlords ... if they have got properties suitable for other renters then we will say ‘have you considered offering and advertising it to other people?’ But at this stage there is still a reluctance to do that mainly because of the income. They have got to realise, got to come to terms with the fact that they are going to

have to accept a much lower income for that property” (interview, Loughborough University representative 1).

Nonetheless, the reality in the Loughborough context is that the young professional and graduate market for private rented housing is extremely limited. The vast majority of graduates out-migrate from Loughborough at the end of their studies, and there are limited opportunities for young professionals in the local labour market of Loughboroughⁱⁱⁱ. This means that the appeal of students (as tenants) for landlords is, in part, exacerbated by the narrow local labour market, and the lack of demand from young professionals in Loughborough. This is intensified by the likelihood of landlords obtaining higher totals of rental income from relatively higher densities of students in HMO (i.e. 4-6 students per HMO), as opposed lower densities of young professionals (i.e. who often seek more space and privacy in HMO), or single families seeking rental accommodation.

Indeed, a recent survey found that landlords in Loughborough can get 36% more rental income from a student tenant, compared to non-student tenant (Osborne, 2015). As the quotations attest, for most accommodation providers, letting to non-student tenants is a necessary, but undesirable, temporary fix while they attempt to re-enter the student-let market. Nevertheless, our research did uncover some accommodation providers in Loughborough who have chosen to exit the student market altogether:

“One landlord, he has about ten houses, and he has just moved away from [renting to the student market] completely. His view is ‘I can see the problem coming and I am going to get out of it and be early on in renting to the normal market’” (interview, Landlord 10).

The re-population of de-studentified neighbourhoods by students, families, young professionals or recent graduates are all seen as socially – if not economically – desirable, but there are two groups of potential in-migrants which are readily identified as being both socially and economically undesirable – namely A8 migrants^{iv} and so-called ‘problem’ individuals and families.

While there is no perceived evidence that migrant workers are moving into former student houses in Loughborough, some established residents expressed concerns about the potential for A8 migrants to locate in Storer and Burleigh:

“I think there is a general fear that migrant workers might be put in to these properties by landlords. People are always anxious how it might affect their house and their prices” (interview, Burleigh resident 2).

This fear has been fuelled, in part, by evidence that so-called ‘problem’ individuals and families – part of what Standing (2011) argues is the growing ‘precariat class’ in modern society – are already moving into former student HMO in Storer and Burleigh:

“There are two [houses with Council tenants] and one of them has been a nightmare ... rumours of stealing, some really bad anti-social behaviour going on. You would much rather live next door to a group of students than that particular bunch” (interview, Burleigh resident 1).

Typically these tenants have low-incomes, are in and out of work, and are often dependent on benefits to maintain the most basic standard of living. In this way, many residents and landlords are coming to realise that the negative impacts of studentification are far less consequential to the negative impacts of de-studentification:

“I’m sure the long-standing residents would say it would be far more desirable for them if there were no students living in their area. But perhaps if they thought a little bit further about who might move into those properties then maybe they would consider the students to be no less or more desirable than the tenants that might replace them” (interview, Landlord 1).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Across the globe, studentification is now identified as an influential process of contemporary urban change tied to the neoliberal, marketisation of higher education. This international scholarship shows how urban landscapes have been reconfigured through the commodification of student housing and lifestyles, with the imposition of purpose-built student-only spaces and housing. The aim of this paper was to consider some of the wider knock-on effects of these new scripted student geographies, and to thus deepen our knowledge of the studentification process by providing the first empirical study of de-studentification.

Our discussion serves to demonstrate that de-studentification occurs when an oversupply of student accommodation results in the depopulation of student residents within distinct studentified neighbourhoods. In this way, de-studentification can be viewed as one expression of the maturation of the studentification process – a potential aftermath

of studentification. Indeed, the wider implications of this aftermath are considerable, having possible major consequences for: broader local property values and housing markets, sense(s) of place, social relations and community cohesion, local tax revenues and demands on local government budgets, sustainability of retail and public services, and changing levels of crime in both the de-studentified areas and other parts of towns and cities. These possible wider 'downgrading' effects of de-studentification are clearly contrary to many of the 'upgrading' signifiers of urban gentrification, and, in this way, de-studentification bears no conceptual overlaps with gentrification; although, interestingly, de-studentification may be(come) a precursor to subsequent processes of gentrification; creating a possible 'rent gap'.

Yet, for all that de-studentification is becoming recognised as a driver of urban neighbourhood change across some towns and cities, it nonetheless remains a poorly-understood process of urban change in places where the supply of private rented housing outstrips demand. In this context, our contribution has been to present findings from the first-ever *in situ* empirical study examining the process of de-studentification and its uneven geographies. To crystallise our findings more fully, Figure 4 presents a process-based definition of de-studentification.

Our contribution has been to reveal three intervening stages – which move through the magnified scales of: empty beds, empty houses and empty streets – in the process of de-studentification, before identifying a fourth stage – 'recovery' – which may come after de-studentification. Within this shifting dynamic context, our findings have revealed the tactics and strategies (for example, offering all inclusive packages, letting to non-student groups) employed by accommodation providers to stall de-studentification and remain in the student housing market until the balance between supply and demand returns below

the threshold. We have also stressed that de-studentification is not the same as wider geographies of abandonment and empty housing (see Henderson, 2015), for example where housing supply in Ireland (projects and developments started during the country's 'Celtic Tiger' boom years) became out of sync with housing demand following the recession, creating 'ghost estates' (Kitchin et al., 2012). Rather, de-studentification is part of a process of emptying beds, houses, streets, and neighbourhoods of populations. The visual signifier of de-studentification is likely to emerge at the stage of the process when there is a clustering of empty 'student houses', or one or more streets are emptied of students. Processes of de-studentification tend to be hidden at the stage when there is an emptying of beds (i.e. partial occupancy), masked by the respective lower density living within student houses. It is possible that some neighbourhoods will be (re-)utilised and repopulated in the future by other social groups. This re-appropriation of depopulated (de-studentified) neighbourhoods bears some similarities to the recycling of guest-houses in UK coastal resorts and former tenanted cottages in rural areas of the UK, for example.

What our process-based definition and conceptualisation of de-studentification cannot account for is the uneven geographies produced when there is a significant oversupply of student housing. Here we use our study of Loughborough to demonstrate that it is those classically studentified areas, characterised by Victorian terraced properties, which are perhaps most exposed to being de-studentified. Yet, there is no essential link between de-studentification and traditional studentified areas. Rather the essential link is between de-studentification and student needs, expectations and preferences.

Symptomatic of the neoliberalisation of higher education and commodification of studenthood, the student housing market in Loughborough is currently driven by rising student demands for high(er) quality accommodation, and a more consumer-oriented,

materialistic student lifestyle. In line with Holdsworth and Brewis (2014) and Brooks et al. (2015) we have noted that consumer choice is bounded. Nonetheless, in many towns and cities, perceptions of more discernible student demands are being matched by an increased supply of on-campus and off-campus PBSA (Smith and Hubbard, 2014), but as we reveal in this paper, the studentification frontier is also sweeping through those more traditionally middle-class, suburban communities with larger semi-detached, detached and townhouse properties offering off-street parking and gardens, intended for occupancy by families and professionals. Nonetheless, if student demands changed and there was a trend towards cheaper accommodation in a place where there was an oversupply of accommodation there is no reason to suspect that these newly studentified streets and neighbourhoods could not experience a similar process of population decline, followed by de-studentification. In this way, student geographies are dynamic and represent a 'moving target' for scholars of urban change.

Of course, it is important to note the effects of local geographic contingencies and de-studentification at this point. The local housing market of Loughborough is clearly different from the local housing markets of places such as Brighton and Exeter, where there is a relatively high demand for private rented housing from young professionals working in the financial and services and public sector, for instance. In these high employment centres for professional and managerial workers, rental costs have been intensified by excessive high demands from both students and young professionals, sparking current emotive debates about the lack of affordability, displacement and homelessness. Contrary to de-studentification, local discourses of empty bedspaces and houses are absent from these places. This is typified by the rise of the 'Generation Rent' movement (which campaigns for professionally-managed, secure, decent and affordable private-rented homes in sustainable

communities), in towns and cities such as Brighton, Bristol, Edinburgh, Exeter, Oxford and London Boroughs such as Hackney and Islington (Collinson, 2015). This is not the case in Loughborough, where demand for private rented housing comes principally from students. In larger metropolitan centres, such as Leeds and Manchester, de-studentification is manifest within low demand, sub-markets of the local housing markets, in neighbourhoods which are concurrently shunned by both students and young professionals for a variety of reasons. In this way, we would argue that de-studentification is a phenomenon that is entangled within many local housing markets across UK university towns and cities.

Beyond this, de-studentification is an important issue for policy makers in the current context of the so-called housing crisis, and overall lack of affordable housing for both renting and owner-occupation in the UK. The voids and empty housing associated with de-studentification clearly highlight the need for housing markets to operate in more efficient ways to maximise fully the capacity of housing stock to meet increasing social demands for housing.

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FIGURE 1: The diversity of student accommodation available to Loughborough students

(*top-left*: Victorian ‘Golden Triangle’ terraces in Storer and Burleigh; *top-right*: mid-2000s town-centre PBSA development; *bottom-left*: 2009 newly-developed on-campus halls of residence; *bottom-right*: early-2000s new-build townhouses in Kingfisher Estate) (author’s photographs)

FIGURE 2: The breadth of Loughborough student accommodation: cost and facilities

Geographical location	Average weekly rent (£)	Ensuite	TV facilities	Double bed	Cleaner / cleaning service
PBSA on-campus	£136 (£158 catered; £117 self-catered)	65%	38%	32%	98%
PBSA off-campus	£89	84%	80%	54%	72%
Storer	£71	48%	88%	72%	8%
Burleigh	£75	46%	82%	72%	18%
Kingfisher	£85	61%	100%	76%	32%
Forest / Herrick	£82	55%	82%	74%	20%

FIGURE 3: Occupancy of student HMOs in Storer and Burleigh (source: SARG 2012)

FIGURE 4: Towards a process-based definition of de-studentification

ⁱ 1,069 empty bedspaces is 28% of student HMO bedspaces in Storer and Burleigh.

ⁱⁱ Following the publication of The Browne Report (12th October 2012) on the future of higher education funding, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition won a House of Commons vote enabling universities to charge up to £9,000 a year for annual tuition fees from 2012 for most undergraduate courses.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charnwood Borough Council's (2015) 'Loughborough Generator' project highlights the need to "improve graduate retention by providing the type of workspace needed for new and growing businesses that currently isn't available in Loughborough".

^{iv} An A8 migrant is from one of the eight of ten countries that joined the European Union in May 2004: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. What makes the A8 countries different from Malta and Cyprus (both of whom joined the EU in the same round of expansion) is that due to the low income levels in these countries – per capita they are around 40% of the European average – it was feared that their accession would lead to migration on a massive scale, as their citizens sought to benefit from the better wages available elsewhere within the European Economic Area.