

STUDY ABROAD

How difficult is it to find accommodation as an international student?

ABIR HOSSAIN

The prospect of leaving the comfort of one's home and venturing out into the world — one that is unlikely to offer any of the privileges that a lot of us have grown accustomed to — is understandably daunting. Inevitably, it comes with its fair share of challenges. From managing finances to taking up part-time work and learning how to balance household chores with academics, the adaptation period is steep to say the least. The list of things one has to get used to appears to be never-ending.

The life-altering changes can feel seismic. Through it all, however, there is one integral aspect that students can hope to offer some semblance of stability and refuge from the relentlessness: the space one lives in. This is especially true in a foreign land where the risks of alienation are more pronounced. To be able to return to a space of one's own is certainly a gift. Yet, for a lot of international students, the very experience of looking for accommodation poses a number of issues.

Maleeha Muniyat, a third-year student at the University of Portsmouth in the United Kingdom (UK), lived in the university's dormitory for the first two years of her degree, after which she moved to an off-campus accommodation.

She explains how she began looking for a place, "There are popular websites like Rightmove and OnTheMarket that I used to look around for houses. The websites have a filter system that allows you to look for accommodation based on what you want. This can include criteria such as the number of rooms and the kind of area you want to live in. After you make your choice, you call the agent or the landlord and wait for them to respond. From there, you visit for a viewing, based on which you make a decision."

When asked what hurdles she faced during the search process, Maleeha spoke about the house viewing experience, saying that the houses looked different from the pictures on the website.

"When you visit for a viewing, naturally, there are tenants living there. But some of the houses that we went to were in horrifying condition. Neither the kitchen nor the toilet was clean, and the bills weren't paid either. A couple of the houses we viewed were dark and smelled really bad," recalls Maleeha.

"How can you imagine living in a house that is in such poor condition? Although the agent reassured us that the place would be cleaned if we decided to move in, we were deterred by the conditions. This forced us to reject a lot of the options that we went to look at," added Maleeha.

Leaving the country to study abroad is expensive as it is. Finances are arguably the most pivotal factor in determining which country and institution a student chooses to attend. If we were to break down the cost into smaller fractions, then perhaps the single biggest recurring expenditure for any student is the rent they have to pay.

Affordability, thus, becomes a driving factor. After all, a hefty amount is likely to exert greater financial strain. However, with affordability being at the forefront of students' concerns, does that entail that they have to compromise on other areas of their living conditions?

Sadman Kamal, a third-year student at the University of Manitoba in Canada, discusses the factors he considered when looking for accommodation: "I was obviously looking for a place that was within my budget and close to my university. At the time, however, I did not realise that I should move somewhere that was also accessible by public transport."

"The other concern was the number of people I would have to share the house with. It seemed like the situation would become more complex with more people involved. I also considered whether or not I would get along with my flatmates and if they were students or graduates who are already working," he adds.

Nahaly Nafisa Khan, an alumna of Virginia Tech, discusses the hurdles she faced: "Initially, it was just the rent-to-amenities ratio. A lot of the apartments I looked into did not have the amenities I was looking for — in-house washer dryer in particular — but came at a higher rent. I kept looking and eventually found one I could afford by sharing with two other roommates."

Although Nahaly admitted that she had to compromise on other aspects of her accommodation to save money on rent, she did mention that it wasn't all bad. "I had a lot of space to myself and could make things work once I sorted out my priorities when it came to housing," she explains.

"The rent I pay is definitely worth the space, but I wish the

ILLUSTRATION:
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facilities were better. When we initially moved in, it wasn't clean at all. During my first week in this house, I didn't take a shower because the bathroom that came with it was dirty. After work, I would go to my previous dorm, use my flatmate's key, and use the shower there," Maleeha expands.

Though there are many factors that the house possesses which align with her preferences, there remain a few drawbacks, such as the heating and wifi, which she said don't work very well.

"I might have been able to find a better place to live in, paying the same rent that I do now. People live in houses where they have to pay 110 pounds a week, including utilities. I pay more, excluding utilities," she laments.

In a survey conducted by Academica Forum, where 265 international students in Canada participated, it was found that international students mostly sought accommodation off-campus. But finding a space proved to be difficult for many of them. In the same report, the authors mentioned that some of the participants alleged that "landlords did not like renting to international students—who may not have a credit score or history in Canada—or that they had to opt for crowded living spaces to get by." A lot of them also felt that their housing accommodations had been far too expensive.

Sadman emphasised that most of the problems he faced when looking for accommodation had a solution, except one. He recalled that transferring the flat deposit to Canada proved to be challenging. "Although it was a relatively small amount, I didn't really know how to transfer it from Bangladesh. There weren't any reliable channels, apart from hundi," he said.

Though he did vouch for Bangladeshi student communities (which most universities have) as a bridge to address possible concerns that incoming students might have regarding housing, Sadman's encounter proved to be less than ideal.

"I knew of an acquaintance who was looking for tenants to move in with him. I was very close to confirming my place in the house, but, for some reason, he would not tell me the

rent for the entire house. Despite asking several times, he would not disclose it. Instead, he asked what I would do with that information. So, there is always the possibility that even people you are familiar with could try to deceive you," he explains.

Despite the emergence of online house renting platforms all across the globe, the risk of falling prey to scammers — especially as an international student — remains. Most students who are moving to their respective countries do not have a trusted individual who can go look at the place or verify the details on their behalf. Additionally, multiple online groups and forums on Facebook and Reddit, which are meant to help incoming pupils with securing housing, consist of posts by students outlining their frustrating experiences and warning others about the perils of being deceived.

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There are other issues that students have to put up with as well. This can include sporadic text exchanges between tenants and landlords, which can primarily be attributed to the difference in time zones. Additionally, gauging the exact size of the room you may be considering can be a bit difficult. It is also worth accounting for the fact that popular destinations such as the United States (US), the UK, Canada,

and Australia have a credit score system, which Bangladesh does not. Thus, translating such gaps to

landlords and agents abroad could also be a hurdle.

Nonetheless, what students must remember is that many thousands of Bangladeshi students leave the country each year in pursuit of a degree abroad. The number has continued to increase exponentially, with pupils going almost everywhere and at all levels of higher education. Given current developments in popular destinations, however, the number is likely to decrease. What cannot be denied, though, is that a precedent has been set.

"Talk to your potential roommates before signing the lease, discuss food habits and your lifestyle to check if you're compatible enough to live in the same house," Nahaly advises. "Read all the documents before signing and paying the security deposit, and double-check with the property manager if you have any confusion. Ask for a house tour on video call if possible, don't just settle for pictures."

Elsewhere, Maleeha recommends incoming students to start looking for a place as early as possible. Sadman urges them to be aware of the existing tenancy laws and remain up-to-date with any changes.

The students who have gone before their younger counterparts have paved the way for their predecessors. Although the world order appears to be shifting, it would not be entirely wishful thinking to speculate that it is going to take a while before these paths are entirely closed off.

Reference:

Academica Forum (September 19, 2023). *The Housing Crisis and International Students*.

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