

Why not live in Medway? Report

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Foreword by Simon Earp (Transport & Green Travel Manager) and Justyna Dobber-Morrell (Accommodation Services Manager)

Many more students are using our intercampus bus service from Greenwich to Medway. Whilst the bus service is highly valued by students the university recovers less than a third of the cost through fares and its carbon footprint is significant and growing. Having so many students living a long distance from Medway may also be detrimental to student life on campus and in Medway. This survey is the first proper attempt to understand why students choose not to live more locally and it is hoped will inform the university how it could grow the student community in Medway.

Foreword by Aminul Fahad Islam (GSU Officer)

As a GSU Officer and Medway lead, it is of the greatest importance that research is conducted to improve student experience. It is my opinion that Medway has an abundance of unique selling points to give to students and the wider community. Therefore, it is fundamental that we take the insights from this research and continue to develop future policy inline with the needs and wants of students at the heart of it.

Author

This report was written by Ellie Snee, Democracy and Insight Manager.

Executive Summary

Greenwich Students' Union (GSU) and the University of Greenwich (UoG) are committed to being an inclusive environment for students and staff. It is the understanding of both parties that to improve student experience, the transparency of data is crucial. Following feedback from UoG students, we have published our '*Why not live in Medway?*' report. The data is based on the responses of UoG students studying at Medway, collected between December 2023 and January 2024.

Greenwich Students' Union, in collaboration with the University of Greenwich's Transport and Accommodation team, surveyed 268 students who study at the universities' Medway campus but live elsewhere. The survey was designed to gain comprehension of why students are choosing to live away from Medway. The survey focused on the factors influencing students' decisions about residence and transport choices.

The aggregate dataset indicated that more than 65% of participants reside in London but travel to Medway on average 3 times per week for their studies. This commuting pattern correlates with various factors such as housing availability, proximity to part-time work opportunities, and personal preference. The highest rate of respondents was first-year, full-time students within the 18-24 age range.

Lack of awareness of the location of Medway campus was the main reason students lived elsewhere. This suggests that students may have initially chosen the University of Greenwich with the expectation of being based at one of its London campuses.

Availability of part-time work in Medway was a secondary key concern for students. This likely indicates that though students are concerned about their academic experiences, they are also faced with the challenge of financial stability whilst studying. 170 students indicated that if circumstances were more favorable, they would reside in Medway, indicating that Medway can become a more attractive living destination given the right conditions.

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Overview

In 2023, students at Medway reported finding challenges in their experience of living and studying at Medway. Compounded with frequent feedback to the Transport team and Accommodation about access to services, GSU set out to conduct a survey to gather a greater understanding of why students may chose to not live in Medway. Based on the findings from 268 surveyed students, this report gives a richer insight into the academic and social experience of our Medway student community and offers key recommendations for future action to make Medway campus a more desirable location for Greenwich students.

Methodology

The data used throughout this paper was gathered via an online survey, conducted by Greenwich Students' Union in collaboration with the University of Greenwich's Accommodation and Transport team. Data was collected between December 2023 and January 2024, and was advertised through a variety of channels. Including digital screens on the Medway bus service and QR codes on social media. Promoting the survey this way allowed the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the thoughts and feelings of a wider audience than maybe traditional marketing tactics would have permitted.

Findings

This report is broken down into several key themes and their sub-themes:

1. Accommodation:

- *Low quality*
- *High cost*

2. Location:

- *Expectation vs reality*

3. Cost:

- *Accommodation*

- *Commuting*

4. Transport:

- *Pros and cons*

5. Opportunities:

- *Lack of employment*
- *Negative social scene*

Some key takeaways from this paper include:

- A total of 268 students responded, of whom study at Medway but live elsewhere.
- 65% of respondents live within London Boroughs.
- On average commuting to campus 3 times per week.
- The cost of housing continues to be a barrier to living closer to campus.
- An apparent lack of awareness of the location of Medway ranked highest in students' decision making to live elsewhere.
- Financial stability in relation to part-time work impacts students greatly.
- 170 of respondents agreed they would live closer to Medway if the conditions were right/better.

Accommodation

The primary data collection of the surveyed students identifies that:

- *55% of respondents privately rent.*
- *10% of respondents reside in halls of residence.*
- *26% of respondents live with family.*
- *66% of respondents live in London.*

Students highlighted that a lack of affordable housing in Medway and limited availability of accommodation were major deterrents to living closer to campus. Students also expressed frustration with the perceived lack of support from the university. The below feedback underpins the complex interplay of logistical, financial and safety considerations

to which influence students' housing choices.

- *Campus accommodation being full.*
- *Lack of facilities and amenities to the Medway campus.*
- *Little to no working opportunities.*
- *Safety and security concerns in the local area.*

Access to safe, affordable and quality housing is essential for student well-being and their academic success, and the concerns raised by survey respondents identify this need.

i) Recommendations:

- *Transparency:*

Transparent rental pricing should better support students making informed choices for their term time residences. This could be through ensuring accessible information is always available for prospective students, including average rental rates, and an established mechanism for students to report pricing related discrepancies.

- *Benchmarking:*

Introducing a quality-controlled benchmarking system for student accommodation within the local area would establish clear standards for housing providers to meet/exceed. The system should cover health and safety, hygiene, local amenities and general living conditions. To which could be upheld by regular inspection to ensure compliance with the set standards.

Furthermore, leveraging the symbiotic relationship between the university and local authorities could be beneficial in addressing the wider student housing crisis.

A suggested pathway for this includes:

- *The identification of suitable sites for the development of new student accommodation.*
- *Collaboration and advocacy with local stakeholders to increase funding for affordable housing within the Medway area.*

- *Establishment of partnerships with local housing organisations to expand housing offerings.*
- *Signposting students to partnering organisations to support them in their navigation of the rental market.*

By taking a collaborative approach to housing it has the potential to create lasting positive outcomes for both students and the wider community of Medway.

Location

Lack of awareness of the location of the Medway campus topped the ranking of why students lived elsewhere. Of the 268 students surveyed, a substantial proportion of students responded that they were not aware Medway was in Kent. This suggests that students may have initially chosen the University of Greenwich with the expectation of being based at one of its London campuses. As such, it should be questioned:

- *Why are students not aware?*
- *Where is the information disseminated from to which should inform them?*
- *Who is responsible for this information?*

Broadly this underscores the importance of clear communication from stakeholders promoting the university internally and externally. Highlighting the cruciality of a collaborative approach between the university's (internal) home and (external) international comms to avoid any ambiguity surrounding the university's Kent-based location. This should support both home and international students to manage their expectation of related issues such as working opportunities within the local area.

The survey revealed the reality that several students chose to live away from Medway due to prior negative experiences. Students did not identify if their negative experiences related to the UoG campus/accommodation or Medway as a town; it would be advised to conduct further investigation to determine the core of the negative experience. Respondents used the word 'depressing' to convey their experiences, suggesting a

correlation between well-being and the living environment. These findings highlight the importance of a positive and supportive campus setting, that fosters student well-being, to create a far greater inclusive environment for Medway students.

Equally, addressing student concerns such as the disconnect they feel from the wider UoG brand due to being based in Medway, and the fact they are based within a partnership of other universities, would support their well-being and sense of identity from the isolation they may feel. Respondents fortunately identified several key issues that could support the university in harboring this relationship with students, despite their location-based and wider experience concerns:

i) Recommendations:

- *Improve on-campus facilities such as sports centres and green spaces.*
- *Create a broader event listing across university spaces.*
- *Foster a sense of community through night life opportunities.*
- *Partner with local businesses to improve working conditions.*

The feedback provided by students surrounding their decision to live away from Medway underscores several valuable barriers that the university can address in the future. It can be seen as evident that students have strong feelings both toward the UoG campus and the wider area of Medway. And as such, delivering strategically outlined objectives focusing future efforts toward: enhanced marketing and promotion of the university's location, improved sporting facilities, on campus safety and finally, an acknowledgment to interconnectedness of mental well – being and living conditions, ensure students are fairly heard and understood.

Cost

The cost of accommodation ranked third among respondents' reasons to live elsewhere. It was expressed that the current cost of accommodation in Medway was comparable, if not equivalent, to the cost of accommodation in London. Not only does this underscore the financial burden placed upon students, but the added stressors of seeking suitable

housing near the university campus. It is imperative for the university to address the cost related barrier to ensure sufficient affordability and accessibility in their housing offering. Though this paper does not directly address the broader issue of the cost of living, it is evident that there is an acute responsibility from the university to examine/review its own offerings as part of a broader effort to achieve best practice. The responsibility resonates from the institution's wider role in promoting student well-being, academic success and overall experience and included in this are the related challenges of housing and transport. The mitigation of the financial burden on students should considerably be a focal point for the university, as this likely has a direct correlation on student outcomes. And as such, students reported the cost of both the university bus service and accommodation offerings to be a significant stressor upon their wellbeing, identifying initial areas for the university to address.

i) Recommendations:

- *Financial Assistance Programmes*

Make students aware of university financial support sooner in their student life, This would aid students in understanding the available monetary resources that are available to them, to which can support with travel and accommodation related costs.

- *Budgeting Education*

Develop money management workshops for students to attend and gain confidential advice can ultimately empower students to manage their finances more effectively.

- *Student Feedback*

Conduct regular research pieces such as this report will ensure a streamline of communication between the student voice and university. This allows the university to stay ahead of any finance related emerging trends. Introducing a proactive rather than reactive approach can help the university better support its student body, before financial crisis hits.

Transportation

Interestingly, 33% of survey respondents reported that they enjoyed commuting though it can be challenging. This contrasts with challenges faced using the university bus service, including timing issues, frequency, lack of seats, and cost. 57% of respondents placed the cost of the bus service as the primary reason for their dissatisfaction, indicating that transport affordability remains a key concern for students. Improved transparency surrounding the cost of the bus service could alleviate student dissatisfaction.

However, despite these challenges, 54% of students expressed satisfaction with the service. The findings suggest that commuting offers benefits to some students that outweigh the difficulties they reported. Some students enjoy commuting since they can productively utilise their time studying or relaxing. Understanding the factors that contribute to students' positive commuting experiences can inform future efforts to further improve university transportation. These findings emphasise the importance of considering individual preferences and circumstances when addressing transportation related challenges in university settings, ensuring equitable access to university resources.

i) Recommendations:

- *Affordability*

The university should explore discounted transportation options for those who are unable to relocate. Not all students have the luxury of relocation for their studies. Providing more affordable transport offered to these students specifically could improve their experience. Though maybe not financially savvy, due to the fact of the university bus service already being heavily discounted in comparison with other public transports, creating a unique student-centric offering, could seemingly achieve loyalty and affinity from students.

- *Accessibility to data*

Financial transparency of the university bus services revenue could influence students perceived value of this service. Indicating the university's loss of funds in relation to fuel,

maintenance, insurance etc. of the vehicle. To which has the potential to underpin external variables to which impact the bus service of which students often fail to consider.

Opportunities

Availability of part-time work in Medway was a secondary concern for students. This likely indicates that though students are concerned about their academic experience, they are also aware of the challenge of finding suitable working opportunities.

i) Recommendations:

- *Establishing/fostering partnerships with local businesses, that can potentially increase job opportunities for students, whilst also boosting travel and tourism to the local economy.*
- *Accompanied by flexible scheduling options for classes and extra-curricular activities, students may be able to better balance their academic and work commitments.*

With a wider network of resources, the university can improve the landscape and attractiveness of working in Medway for students.

Respondents raised the concern that there was a disconnect between the UoG Medway campus and that of the rest of university in relation to opportunity and social experience. The dissociation with the wider university may result in a lesser experience, impacting on students' sense of belonging and overall well-being. Students expressed their anticipated experience was different from their Greenwich and Avery Hill based counterparts. Warranting a need for considerable attention toward bridging the gap and fostering integrated alignment across all three campuses. In addition to this, students' perceived lack of awareness of the location of Medway in relation to the other university campuses hinders their ability to frequently join in social/night life activities elsewhere due to transport constraints.

The reported lack of amenities and opportunities local to Medway and the university campus poses a significant concern that both directly and indirectly impacts students' overall satisfaction of their university experience. Causing 'stress and boredom' resulting in dissatisfaction. The reported lack of amenities and opportunity likely contributes to students' feelings of disconnect with their university experience.

ii) Recommendations:

- *Collaboration with the local authorities and both internal and external stakeholders of the university is significant and necessary to improve the availability of amenities, employment and recreational activity on offer for students in Medway.*
- *As well as, establishing regular community engagement initiatives, following a bottom-up approach, rather than a top-down approach, between the university and local authorities, businesses, and local charities can also support the facilitation of the redevelopment of the local area.*

By fostering collaboration and partnership, it is possible to address the reported pitfalls within the Medway area in a bid to create a more supportive, engaging and enriching environment for students. Another interesting outcome of the university's efforts with respect to this collaborative approach may be that it not only benefits university students, but also contributes to the overall wellbeing, satisfaction and prosperity of the local community. By leveraging the respective resources, expertise and networks on offer from the university and local authorities and businesses, innovative solutions and broader initiatives can be developed for the greater good of the local society of Medway.

Conclusion

The most prominent finding is that a significant proportion of students face barriers to both travelling to and living in Medway. These barriers impact the student experience and academic success and require strategic oversight and immediate action. These actions could involve improved transportation options (the frequency and coverage of the university bus service was a key issue, as were commuting costs). Addressing blockades to living in Medway such as the cost and availability of accommodation and

the perceived social scene, could also make the area more accessible and desirable to students.

The underpinning aim of this research piece was to gain a holistic understanding of why students were choosing to commute and chose not to live closer to Medway. With this in mind, the response of this survey indeed highlights attributing factors to these questions such as the high cost of accommodation within the local area and the lack of part-time work opportunities. Shedding light on the challenges and barriers students face in finding suitable living arrangements and employment opportunities locally. However, the survey responses also raise significant questions that warrant further investigation to gain a deeper understanding of the student experience:

A lack of awareness was an overarching factor to student residence, to which requires further insight as to:

- *Why students were not aware?*
- *Where the information was disseminated from to which should inform them?*
- *And who is responsible for this?*

By addressing the above questions through additional research, it is likely that the university and associated stakeholders can gain a greater insight of student's needs, particularly with reference to promotion of the university to prospective students ensuring collateral is precise and unambiguous. This new knowledge can inform the development of future targeted interventions, policy and procedure, when it comes to welcoming new students to the campus. Whether through long term housing partnerships, or collaboration with local businesses, it is apparent that additional research will only have positive impacts on the student experience.