



Campus rent negotiations

With growing concern about the levels of rent charged in student accommodation, engaging in annual rent-setting processes is becoming one of the most important roles students' unions can play in addressing the cost of living for their members. This briefing will cover the steps students' unions can take to lobby their institution on this issue, some of the key considerations and a case study.



What's going on?

The [NUS/Unipol Accommodation Costs Survey](#) conducted in 2012/13 demonstrated that the cost of purpose-built student accommodation had doubled in the past ten years. These increases have been far above both the rate of inflation, and any increases in student support and means there is increasingly a shortfall for many students between income and the expenditure that is required to live in halls.

Furthermore, there are signs that institutions have actually led the way in rent increases, and now almost match private providers, particularly when it comes to the most common room types. Equally worrying is the fact that many institutions seem to be phasing out their older, more affordable provision, in favour of newer, more expensive developments. As a result, it is imperative that students' unions engage in both annual rent-setting and ongoing strategies for development.

The steps to success

1. Do your homework

Many institutions will be less than transparent about when and how rent-setting decisions are made. The first step before you can influence things is to find out who the key players are and what the process is. Often rents are set almost a year in advance, so it's important to involve yourself at the earliest possible opportunity.

2. Get a seat at the table

Once you know where the decisions are made, it's important that you are able to be a part of them. If you are not already part of the committees or working groups where these decisions are made and/or approved, it's time to make your case. You wouldn't expect the students' union to be left out of decisions which were so integral to the academic experience, so there's no reason why they should be left out of these. If you can't sit on the committee itself, you should be able to secure some kind of consultation.

3. Build an evidence base

Your institution is likely to throw all kinds of statistics at you to demonstrate that students can take another rent increase, or that the main demand is for luxury en suites rather than affordable rooms with shared facilities. Local research on student hardship can help

4. Ask the right questions

It's vitally important that you can get to the bottom of where your institution is coming from in order to be able to challenge their assumptions and win the best deal for students. Do they expect accommodation to break even, or make a surplus? Are they developing accommodation with the conferencing trade in mind? Do they consider accommodation to be a pastoral service or a commercial one? How do they reconcile their accommodation and widening participation strategies?

5. Challenge the rhetoric

A lot of institutions will tell you that students expectations are changing, particularly with a new fee regime, more competition in the sector and changes to the student accommodation market. It's important to challenge this, as well as the role the institution itself plays in setting those expectations. Often you'll find students actually report being more satisfied in cheaper accommodation.

The idea that everyone needs an en suite is still a relatively new one and it could be argued the supply has created the demand. Some institutions have been really innovative in recent years, developing new townhouse models of more affordable accommodation with shared facilities, and some have even successfully developed twin rooms.

6. Be proactive

You may be able to get some success if you wait to respond to proposed rent increases or plans for new development, but you're likely to be more successful if you can set out a vision for what should happen and make the case for something specific. For example, are you asking for a rent freeze, or maybe a reduction in the costs of the cheapest provision to make it genuinely affordable? Or are you looking for the institution to commit to providing a new and affordable offering?

Beyond the headlines



Often when negotiating on rent levels, it's easy to get carried away with looking purely at weekly rent. However, there are a few other considerations you should be taking into account:

- **Contract length** – the length of contract offered by your institution can make a significant difference to how much the annual rent is, and also enables you to compare rent levels with rates of student support.
- **'Free' or inclusive deals** – anything provided within accommodation or as part of the package will be paid for by the tenant somewhere. As a result, it is vital that these services are ones that will be used by everybody paying for them. While there is a case to be made for contents insurance or Wi-Fi, gym membership or film subscriptions may be harder to justify.
- **Cashback offers** – with many institutions now attempting to increase the numbers of returning students living in campus accommodation, some are offering cashback deals as an incentive. Be wary of this as it is unlikely to be as appealing as cheaper rent, and is also less conducive to helping students to budget sustainably as it feels like free money when it's not.
- **Cross subsidies** – is rent used to subsidise other campus services such as security, and if so, is it right that this subsidy is set at the level that it is?





Case study: Chichester

By Lizi Mutter

This was a campaign that came as a bit of a surprise and suddenly other campaigns of mine had to be put on hold to focus on just this. In a meeting with the University, Finance and Estates announced that they were changing the payment system for our halls of residence. The payment plan had always been three equal payments, to reflect the way student loans are given. The University were now planning on requesting a 46% payment in the first semester. This would mean demanding more money than students are given in their loans.

The aim of my campaign was to find a compromise with the University which would suit our students better and to make the University see how essential it is to involve the Students' Union in decisions made about accommodation.

Luckily I went to Welfare & Community training just after finding out about the University's plans so had lots of people to ask about what would be best for me to do. What proved most useful was looking at who my allies, influencers and decision makers would be. I knew the final decision makers would be Finance and Estates and so I tailored my report to suit them. Rather than talking for ages about student welfare (which I was most concerned about), I focused on student retention and whether asking for a 46% payment would deter students away from us and towards our competitors.

I then set up meetings with my allies, who were student support and the chaplain, to get their views on the change and to brainstorm alternatives to the problem. I thought that anyone fairly high up in the university could be seen as an influencer so I handed my finished report to as many people as I could, so that as many people as possible were talking about the issues around the university's proposition.

A few days after handing my report out I had a meeting with Finance and Estates. They had already made an alternative payment scheme for me to look at after reading the suggestions made in my report. In the end we agreed on changing the payments to 40%, 40% and 20%. Although, I still believe some students will struggle with this system, there is going to be a review meeting in November which will now include the Students' Union and Student Support.

Although I would have ideally liked the decision to be reversed, I knew it was unlikely so am pleased with the compromise. The part I am especially pleased with however is that Estates are now willing to let the Students' Union to be a part of their decision making processes from the beginning to avoid this happening in future. As of September I have been collecting case studies from students that are experiencing the new payment system to try to see if any are struggling. I will also be collecting statistics from our sports and societies to see if student participation has dropped, as well as keeping an eye on how our student retention rates compare to previous years. All of this combined will give the Students' Union extra force in the review meeting to hopefully push the rent payments closer towards their previous instalment amounts.

For more information on this topic, you might want to try our [Accommodation Costs Campaigning Guide](#), and last year's [Accommodation Costs Survey](#)

This briefing forms part of a series, which is being released by NUS throughout the year to help students' unions develop their work on key housing issues and campaigns.