

ACADEMIC

“Starting off Well” – The quest of finding suitable accommodation in Wellington and the impacts on student wellbeing

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Abstract

PURPOSE

This study investigated the barriers, and challenges faced by medical students at the University of Otago, Wellington in their search for suitable accommodation in Wellington (Pōneke). The research also aimed to identify solutions to these challenges and barriers.

METHOD

This is a qualitative study of ten semi-structured interviews with medical students over December 2021. Interviews were then transcribed and thematically analysed by the researchers.

RESULTS

The five key themes identified; the high cost of living and rent, difficulty finding accommodation, the overall financial burden of living in Wellington, poor quality of housing, and the students perceptions of differences across the three medical schools.

CONCLUSION

Students are struggling to find accommodation and to meet the cost of living in Wellington. They face the additional costs associated with placement across various clinical sites, and feel unsupported by the University of Otago. Students would like more support from the University, including financial assistance for the higher cost of living in Wellington, travel subsidies, having a designated staff member to assist with finding accommodation and the provision of University accommodation in Wellington.

Introduction

Housing is a necessity and a basic health requirement, with the quality, availability, and affordability of housing having major implications on the health of an individual.^{1,2} Aotearoa New Zealand is facing a housing crisis and this is significantly impacting students in Wellington (Te Whanganui-a-Tara).

Otago Medical School requires fourth, fifth, and sixth-, year medical students to study at one of the three clinical schools in Dunedin (Ōtepoti), Christchurch (Ōtautahi), or Wellington.³ Third-year medical students apply for their preferred choice of city; however, limitations on class sizes can determine that some students are balloted and sent to a less-preferred site.⁴ Wellington has been the least preferred site over the last few years, evidenced by the numbers from Otago Medical School's class division process. There are marked differences in the affordability and accessibility of housing in each of these centres. The median weekly rent of a three-bedroom flat in Dunedin (Central) is \$475, Christchurch (Riccarton) is \$460, and Wellington (Newtown)

is \$790.⁵ This price difference is significant for Wellington students, who are also further burdened by the issue of housing availability.

Victoria and Massey University student representatives have reported that the housing crisis and high cost of living in Wellington are unappealing and unfeasible, resulting in students deciding to study elsewhere.⁶⁻⁸ Medical students from the University of Otago do not have the option of choosing another place to study, with more than 300 students being placed in Wellington each year.⁹

In 2021, the Wellington Health Professionals Student Association (WHPSA) sent out an optional financial survey to their students to explore the financial stresses faced. The survey found that over 90% of students regularly felt stressed about finances, with 80% wanting to engage in paid employment, but struggling or unable to because of the changeable nature of clinical placements and university timetables.¹⁰ The cost of living in Wellington was regarded as a deterrent to 82% of students studying here.

The 2022 People's Inquiry into Student Wellbeing, which had over 4,000 students respond from across Aotearoa, depicts a similar picture to the WHPSA survey results.¹¹ This inquiry found that after paying rent, two-thirds of students often struggled to have enough money to afford food, power, healthcare, and clothing.¹¹

Before this 2022 inquiry, the impact of student accommodation costs on tertiary students in New Zealand had not been previously researched. This study aims to build on the limited knowledge in this field, identifying the barriers to and the challenges of finding accommodation in Wellington. It also explores the impact these challenges have on student wellbeing and identifies possible solutions.

Method

This qualitative study involved interviewing medical students to assess the barriers, challenges, and solutions to student accommodation.

Recruitment: Participants were recruited through Facebook and email. A Google Form (Appendix 1) was posted on the class Facebook pages and emailed to all medical students who would be studying in Wellington in 2022.

19 students registered their interest: nine Trainee Intern (TI) sixth-year students, eight fifth-year students, and two fourth-year students. Over December 2021, author one conducted ten semi-structured interviews following a predetermined interview guide (Appendix 2).

Data collection: The ten interviews were recorded and transcribed using Temi, an online transcription service. Author one verified the transcription against the original voice recordings. The transcripts were de-identified to protect participants' anonymity.

Data analysis: Thematic Analysis Methodology, developed by Braun and Clarke,¹² was used to analyse the data, with author one reading through all transcripts and identifying emerging codes and themes.

Following six participant interviews, the researchers conducted a preliminary analysis. After the tenth interview, it was concluded that there were no new themes emerging and that saturation had been reached.

An inductive approach was used to form the codes. The codes were then discussed and used to generate the five themes deemed most important, which are seen in the results section. Self-reflection: Author one recognised that as a student herself it was important to be aware of her own attitudes and how these could influence the analysis. This was noted in the thematic identification process and worked through with author two.

Ethics: This study was approved under the University of Otago Category B Ethics pathway; all participants provided informed and written consent.

Results

The five overarching themes identified were: the cost of living/rent, finding accommodation, the overall financial burden of living in Wellington, poor quality of housing, and the perceived differences across the three medical campuses.

COST OF LIVING/RENT

The cost of rent ranged between \$160 to \$300 per week (pw), with the median rent being \$222pw. The lowest rent was \$160 (\$320, split by a couple). The StudyLink student loan in February 2022 was \$242.53pw.¹³ These results were consistent with the WHPSA survey where 53.5% of students said StudyLink student loan did not cover their rent costs.¹⁰

[Before receiving the TI grant in 6th year] "...trying to live on \$230 and pay for rent in a place that's \$250 and not being able to work properly during fifth year, it was hard."

"We had to have a couple in one of the bedrooms otherwise we couldn't cover the rent."

FINDING ACCOMMODATION

Another major theme identified was the difficulty finding accommodation in Wellington. Participants described the process of finding accommodation as "uncertain", "arduous", and "time consuming", which resulted in feeling "overwhelmed" and generated significant levels of stress and anxiety.

Common barriers to finding accommodation were the lack of availability, not being in Wellington to search for a flat, and timing. Students who considered themselves "lucky" and found a flat relatively easily, tended to have connections with landlords.

"Luckily enough, a family member owned the flat... without a family member owning the flat, we wouldn't have got a flat of that quality for that price."

Those who did not have personal connections to landlords struggled, with some searching for months and having to leave work or study to look.

"Some of the girls were leaving their jobs to come look and we were leaving class to go look... So sometimes one of us would stay in class and take all the notes. And then the other two would go look at the flat. And we'd rotate."

Not being in Wellington to look for a flat made the process extremely difficult, with one student having to fly up from Dunedin to attend viewings.

"We started looking for a flat at the end of third year and there was nothing available and trying to do viewings was such a faff none of us...were in Wellington, so I ended up having to fly up from Dunedin."

"It was already daunting moving to a new place and you know, in Dunedin it's quite easy to find flats. But in Wellington was really difficult... none of us were in Wellington to go look at the flats ourselves. We had to rely on other people."

FINANCIAL BURDEN

Participants commented on the significant financial burden of living in Wellington with accommodation accounting for the greatest cost. Many had to rely on additional support from family to continue to survive and afford food and rent.

"I've had extra support from my parents to bridge the gap between what my StudyLink will cover and what my expenses are every week."

"I had to ask my parents for money a few times, which was a bit hard. Not eating vegetables for ages cause that's so expensive."

Students acknowledged they felt privileged if they were able to receive financial support from their parents. However, they also acknowledged that it would be near impossible to live in Wellington without that extra support.

"I feel like a burden when it comes to finances on my parents... My parents and I came to an agreement that I would borrow money from them and I would pay them back... they ended up having to re-mortgage the house."

"If your parents can't support you, you can't do this. It's actually impossible for you to do this... if you came from a low socio-economic background, this would be impossible. Like medicine already is so difficult financially. Being sent to Wellington would actually cripple you."

Many students commented on struggling to fit in extracurricular paid work due to the demands of the medical curriculum and assessments.

"I was also working at a cafe in Wellington... if I only got StudyLink, I'd only have \$30 a week for groceries, utilities, having a life outside of university and paying for fuel."

POOR QUALITY HOUSING

Participants considered themselves fortunate when they found a flat to live in and were often desperate enough to accept any offer, regardless of quality. Mould, rodents, and dampness were repeated themes throughout the interviews.

"We felt like it was the last resort, time was getting short... my bedroom I suspect used to be a laundry room, I don't think it's insulated like the rest of the house... our stove stopped working, the dryer wasn't working... there was black mould on the curtains."

"My room got quite damp. The room I was in was quite small... started to get rats in the walls and had quite a few clear outs... where I just had to throw things out or continually wash things... mould on the everything."

Many students acknowledged that housing prices in Wellington do not reflect the quality.

"In Wellington you're paying copious amounts for low quality housing."

"We are paying more for worse properties in Wellington [compared to Dunedin]."

PERCEIVED DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE THREE MEDICAL CAMPUSES

The most commonly perceived differences between the three Otago Medical School campuses (Christchurch, Dunedin, and Wellington) were the higher financial burden of living in Wellington, increased stress trying to find accommodation, having to engage in part time employment on top of studies, and the extra costs of placement across three hospitals for Wellington students (Wellington, Kenepuru, and Hutt). Students also noted differences in curriculum and the disadvantages associated with the recent closure of the University of Otago Wellington's (UOW) academic block.¹⁴

All participants said these perceived differences were deterrents to being placed in Wellington for their clinical years. One recurring theme was the extra financial cost of clinical placement in Wellington.

"I spent half of my year at Hutt hospital... paying \$265/week to live in Wellington ... a 10 minute walk from the hospital and then driving out all the time."

"[After talking to some of their peers in Christchurch and Dunedin they realised], we're paying more for worse properties in Wellington, everything's more spread out... you spend a lot of money on public transport, compared to both Christchurch and Dunedin... the cost of living in Wellington, was quite a slap in the face."

Participants were somewhat aware of the differences in the costs before moving to Wellington; however, the reality was worse than what they envisaged.

"I wasn't aware of how bad the flatting situation was when I chose Wellington. I knew Christchurch was a bit cheaper, but didn't realise the extent of it... I think in Dunedin, you get lulled into a false sense of security."

*"[Speaking about flats] in Dunedin you're close and cheap... Christchurch you are a bit further way, but you get way better bang for your buck. Here you are probably pretty far away, hard as hell [to find], expensive as hell and it's a sh***y house."*

Another theme that emerged was the stress of needing part-time paid employment to meet the additional costs of living.

"I know that other students in our year group were working all the way through exam season, which I think students at other schools wouldn't have to do."

"Just that extra pressure with having to work or, having to find money from other sources that you really don't have to do in Christchurch or Dunedin."

Discussion

These interviews highlighted the challenges students face when living in Wellington. The main themes from the interviews were the high cost of living, barriers to finding accommodation, the financial burden of living in Wellington, poor quality housing, and the perceived differences across the three medical campuses. Participants considered all of these as deterrents to choosing Wellington for their clinical years. While this research specifically focused on the experiences of medical students, the themes found are likely to be echoed by the vast majority of students living in Wellington.⁶⁻⁸

The hardship that comes with constantly worrying about affordable food and other necessities is likely to have a negative impact on students' wellbeing, as supported by the 2022 inquiry into student wellbeing.¹¹ A Polish study described the negative impact that chronic stress has on mental health and suicidal ideology among medical students.¹⁵ Other studies describe the negative effect of chronic stress on body systems, which can result in poor sleep quality, depression, drug-use and other consequences.¹⁶ An Australian study found that

affordable accommodation was students' highest priority when assessing living situations and that students with satisfactory accommodation tend to have better academic results.¹⁷

One of the most difficult aspects of living in Wellington is the housing shortage and consequent inability of students to find accommodation. Students from the outside area were further disadvantaged by being unable to attend flat viewings, thus having to rely on others and sometimes signing flats without seeing them first.

Many participants spoke about having to juggle extracurricular paid work with the demands of the course and examinations, producing further financial and emotional stress. Students were required to spend their study leave and vacations working to save up for the next study year, instead of taking a break and recharging. Studies show high levels of burnout in medical students and higher levels of depression and anxiety amongst the medical student population than in other groups at a similar age.^{17,18} The chronic stress associated with the accommodation burden, as noted in this study, could increase the risk of burnout in medical students studying at UOW.

Family, support networks, and city culture attract students to Wellington. However, as found in our interviews, the cost of living and lack of suitable accommodation deter students from choosing Wellington for the clinical years of the MBChB course. Some students are fortunate enough to have financial support from their family. Those without this support are disadvantaged.

The perception of differences across the three medical campuses is not misplaced. Students at the Dunedin and Christchurch campuses receive petrol and accommodation subsidies as reported in a University of Otago Divisional of Health Sciences stocktaking report. This difference is particularly stark for Wellington Trainee Interns who receive no financial support from the University for clinical placements, even though they are required to spend at least two separate placements outside of Wellington in Palmerston North, Whanganui, Hawkes Bay, Gisborne, or Masterton.⁴

Some departments at UOW responded to this strain by decreasing away placements. For example, in 2022 the fifth-year paediatric community placement was discontinued, lessening cost but removing valued learning opportunities.

Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study includes semi-structured interviews, allowing students to speak about a range of issues and what they deemed to be most important.

A strength and limitation of this study was that author one is currently a medical student, which is addressed in the reflexivity statement in the methodology. This is a strength as participants may have felt more comfortable speaking about their hardships and financial struggles with another student in a similar situation. It is a limitation when analysing the data as author one might have underlying interviewer bias and sympathy towards their similar situations. We limited this effect by both researchers analysing the data separately and deemed the impact of this interviewer bias to be low, as when researchers compared codes, congruent themes emerged.

Another limitation of this study is that it did not address the perspectives of the radiation therapy students or final-year physiotherapy students studying at UOW. It also did not gain the perspective of University of Otago students studying in Christchurch and Dunedin. It would be important to include these groups and other young adult populations in further research.

Conclusion

Medical students transitioning from academic to clinical placement years are constantly facing new challenges to navigate in their professional and personal lives. These range from being lost in the hospital, to accidentally touching an unsterile area while scrubbed in surgery, to struggling to find the right words to say to a palliative patient. On top of this, medical students in Wellington have the added burden of moving to a city where the cost of living is high and the availability of accommodation is low.

Students felt that the cost of living in Wellington and the distinct differences in student needs between the three Otago Medical School campuses is an issue that has been overlooked by the University of Otago. This subject may also be a concern for students at other universities with spread-out campus sites and is an area which would benefit from future research.

There were many suggestions from the participants about the nature of support the University of Otago could offer students, including having a designated staff member to build and maintain relationships with landlords and property owners in Wellington so some flats are preferentially signed to UOW students, and increased financial support and subsidies for power, grocery vouchers, and travel expenses. Alternatively, accommodation similar to “Uni Flats” in Dunedin or a hall of residence would help students. One study from Australia suggests universities form public-private partnerships or lobby for a National Rental Affordability Scheme to help support students with cost of living and finding affordable accommodation.¹⁸

The housing crisis in Aotearoa, and Wellington in particular, cannot be solved by the University of Otago and needs to be addressed at a governmental level. However, the University of Otago has the power to be a significant advocate for students and should be lobbying for student rights and aid from the government related to housing and financial support.

In the future there needs to be more qualitative and quantitative studies examining the impacts of cost of living for all students in Aotearoa.

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Acknowledgements:

We would like to acknowledge the University of Otago, Wellington for their funding of my summer studentship. I would also like to acknowledge Assoc/Prof Mark Huthwaite for his supervision, support, and mahi throughout this research.

Financial Disclosures

This was a summer studentship funded by the University of Otago, Wellington Student Affairs Department.

Ethics Approval

University of Otago, Ethics B Category, Departmental Approval.

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