

Monitor Internationale Studentenhuisvesting Utrecht

International Student Housing Assistance

2021

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About this release

Monitor International Student Housing 2021 is a publication of International Student Housing Assistance (ISHA) in Utrecht. The report is available online at: ISHAU.nl/reports/

The report *Monitor International Student Housing 20201* is written by Leonie Schiphorst.

1. Preface

This monitor contains the results of a study into the living quality of international students in Utrecht. We as the ISHA foundation (International Student Housing Assistance) want to use this research to better map the housing quality and needs of international students in Utrecht. There is currently a shortage of 7600 student residences in Utrecht. In addition, more than 3000 international students come to Utrecht every year; some of these students do not yet have a room when they arrive in Utrecht. In addition, they often pay far too much for a room and some international students are even scammed. Moreover, it is often unclear to international students who they can turn to with questions or comments about housing.

ISHA Foundation is committed to international students in Utrecht. ISHA was founded in 2007 and consists of representatives of four student organizations: VIDUIS, ESN, BuddyGoDutch and BoKS. These representatives focus on the housing problem of international students.

This is done in various ways: ISHA is committed to providing more and better information to international students about living in Utrecht and answers questions from international students about housing in Utrecht. In addition, ISHA provides free (legal) advice to international students through VIDUIS Legal Aid, lobbies for more and more affordable student housing and maintains good contact with educational institutions.

ISHA also brings to light the complaints and wishes of the often unheard of international students through a survey that is distributed twice a year. The results of the research for the academic year 2020-2021 can be read in this monitor. Where possible, data from previous surveys are used to provide a picture of developments over time.

We hope that this monitor will lead to greater awareness of the distressing situation in which many international students find themselves. We also hope that this report provides a basis for even closer collaboration between the various actors involved, so that the educational institutions, student housing providers in Utrecht and the Municipality of Utrecht can look for solutions together.

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VIDIUS
ESN
BuddyGoDutch
BoKS

Chair
Secretary
Secretary
Commissioner PR

2. Method and data

The survey, in the form of an online questionnaire, was distributed to as many international students in Utrecht as possible via the communication channels of ESN Utrecht, BuddyGoDutch, and VIDUIS. A link to the survey has also been shared via the social media channels of ISHA Utrecht. Since purposive sampling has been used, it cannot be guaranteed that the results in this report are representative of all international students in Utrecht. The survey contains both open and closed questions and was open from December 2020 to early June 2021.

A total of 49 respondents completed the survey. This is half of the number of respondents in the 2019-2020 academic year. All respondents indicated that they are international students. By way of comparison, the survey has been completed every year by +/- 250 international students in the previous three years. This small sample can be explained by the consequences of the COVID-19 virus. In particular, the closing of land borders and the cancellation of exchange programs probably resulted in fewer international students living in Utrecht. In addition, education took place almost entirely online, so some international students have chosen to study remotely from their home country. In June there were only 18 international students who completed the survey, while 31 international students responded during the measurement moment in December. The respondent who indicated that he did not live or did not live in the Utrecht region was not included in the following analyses. As a result, the sample size concerns 48 international students.

2.1. Sample description

Most respondents were born in the year 1999, where the oldest student was born in 1990 and the youngest student was born in 2001. The sample includes 31 women and 14 men. 3 students have indicated that they do not wish to answer this question. It is impossible to say whether this ratio is the same for the entire population of international students in Utrecht. Almost all students study in Utrecht at Utrecht University (33 students), at Hogeschool Utrecht (Higher Vocational Education) (6 students) or elsewhere in Utrecht (5 students). Two students study in Amsterdam.

Of all respondents, 28 students have a European nationality. Of these, 8 come from Italy, 7 from Germany, 3 from England and 3 from Portugal (Figure 1). In addition, there are 16 students of non-European nationality. One student has indicated that he has both European and non-European nationality. The nationality of three students is unknown.

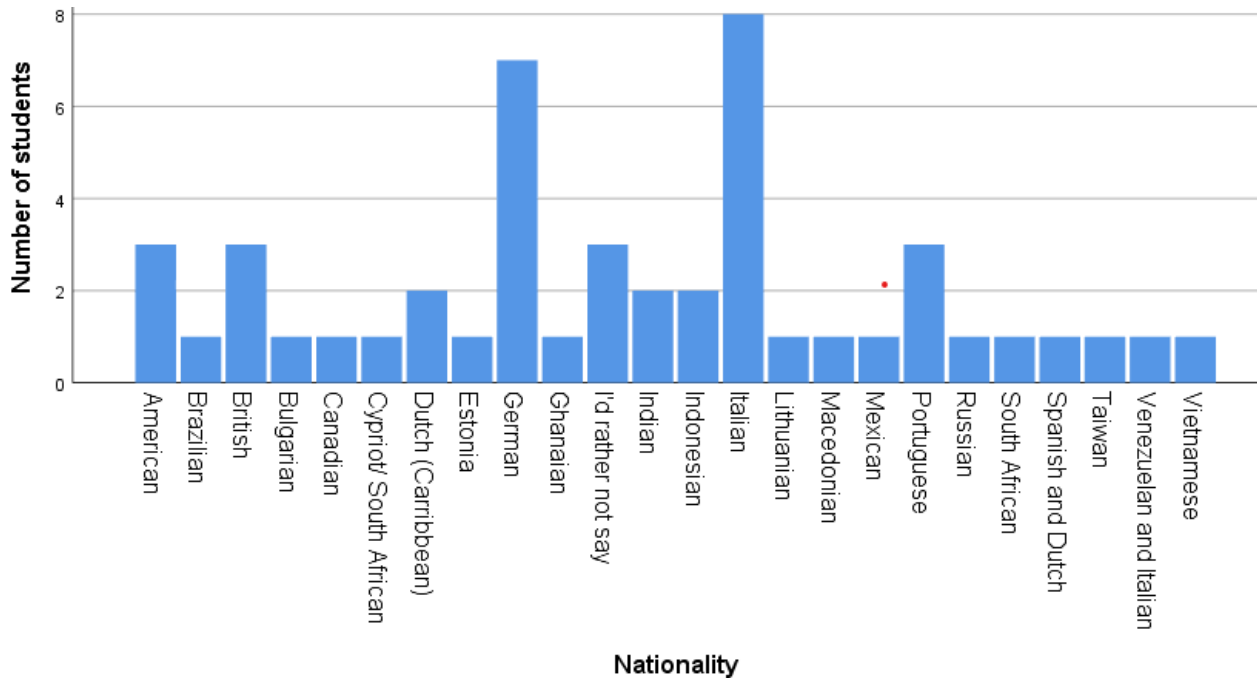


Figure 1. Nationality of the respondents.

Looking at the kind of study program the respondents are following, we see a striking difference from last year. Last year, 14 of 92 respondents (15%) were in Utrecht for one semester and 4 of 92 (4%) for one year. While this year all students were in Utrecht for a full degree. This included 24 bachelor students, 19 master students and 4 PhD students. Only one student indicated that he was not enrolled in a study program (Figure 2).

This difference can be explained by the corona pandemic because Utrecht University has cancelled several exchange programs. As a result, the sample only includes students who are in Utrecht for a longer period of time. This is reflected in the question from whom the respondents rent their accommodation. Students are not allowed to rent from SSH Short stay for longer than one year, which means that a relatively large number of respondents rent their accommodation from a private landlord (Figure 3). Unfortunately, no reliable data is available regarding the distribution of landlords in the entire population – i.e. all international students studying in Utrecht. As a result, it cannot be established to what extent the distribution of landlords in the sample is a correct representation of the actual distribution.

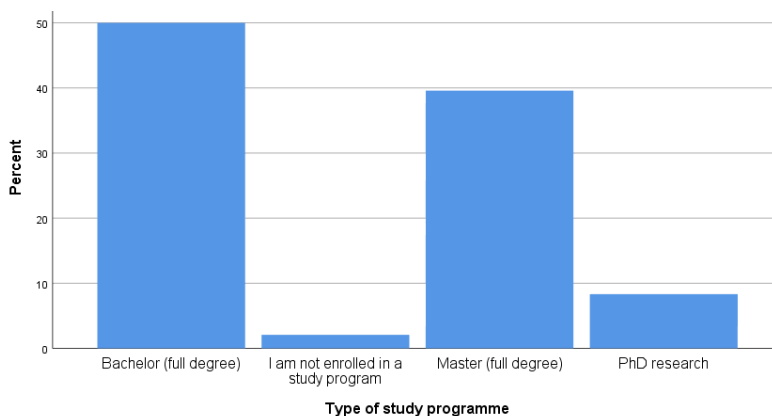


Figure 2. Study program van all respondents.

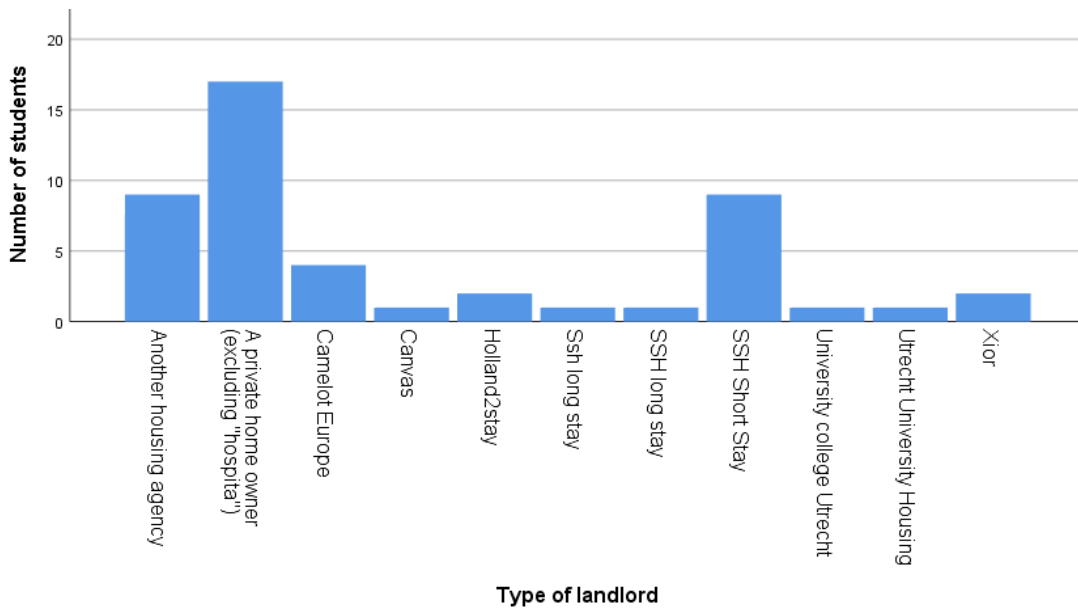


Figure 3. Type of landlord of the respondents.

3. Results

In this chapter, the results of the research are presented. Since this report aims to highlight points for improvement and difficulties regarding living in Utrecht for international students, only the most important points that emerged from the questionnaire will be mentioned.

3.1. First accommodation in Utrecht

Many international students indicate that they have made a lot of effort to find their first accommodation. On average, on a scale of 1 to 10, a 7.33 (standard deviation = 2.65) is given for the degree of exertion. The degree of effort per student does differ per accommodation that is found. For example, the degree of effort made by students through friends or acquaintances or 'other' is relatively low. Students who find accommodation via Kamernet, social media or a housing agency show a higher degree of effort, while the effort for students who find accommodation via SSH or their educational institute is lower than the average (Table 1). The difference between these groups was expected, since SSH and its educational institute are committed to renting out accommodations to international students. Nevertheless, the average level of effort for these groups is also high.

What is directly related to the level of effort is the search time in weeks for finding an accommodation (Table 1). This turns out to be a concern when we see that the average search time in weeks has increased drastically compared to previous years (2018: 4.1 weeks; 2019: 6.6 weeks). Unfortunately, this number is difficult to compare with previous years, because this year's sample due to the COVID-19 virus is not a representation of the

population of international students who normally live in Utrecht. However, based on the average search time in weeks per medium used, we can see that the average search time for housing agencies and the SSH has increased compared to 2019 (housing agencies 2019: 10 weeks; SSH 2019: 4.5 weeks). Most respondents described their experience when asked about this via an open-ended question. 10 students described it as 'difficult', 6 students called their experience 'stressful' and 3 students 'horrible'. Some students even say that they are unable to find a room in time.

- 'Getting a reserved accommodation in SSH was lucky for my first year. For my second year it was so challenging and I ended up homeless and moving in with a Dutch friend's family for a month.'
- 'Absolutely awful. I have watched internationals be homeless for up to 4 months some even being forced to return home due to no accommodation being available.'

Table 1. Average effort and average search time in weeks per medium used to find the first place to stay in Utrecht.

	Number	Average effort	Average search time in weeks
Educational institution	10	6,80	5,90
SSH	14	6,21	6,00
Kamernet	7	9,29	10,14
Social media (e.g. Facebook)	6	9,17	11,00
Friends or relatives	4	6,25	6,25
A housing agency	2	9,00	21,50
Other	5	6,80	4,20
Total	48	7,33	7,69

3.2 Rent current accommodation

The international students have indicated that their average rent is €617.53 (Table 2). For comparison, last year the average rent that emerged from the questionnaire was € 594.92 and in the 2018-2019 academic year it was € 485.86. This small increase of € 22.61 is in line with expectations, given that national and Utrecht rents have risen at breakneck speed in recent years. At the same time, the average surface area of the room (17.74 m²) has decreased compared to 2019 (20.05 m²) and 2018 (19.36 m²). This makes the situation even more worrying. However, it should be noted that this year fewer respondents are renting accommodation from the SSH (23%) compared to previous years (2018: 88%, 2019: 72%) and the SSH charges a relatively cheap rent.

Nevertheless, comparisons can be made between previous years and between organisations. For example, it appears that in addition to renting via SSH, renting via 'other' and via a private landlord is the cheapest. 'Other' also includes SSH Long Stay. The category

'landlord' is not included in the table, as no respondent indicated that they had this type of landlord. Within housing agencies, there is a reasonable difference in rent, and it appears that Xior is the most expensive per square meter, while SSH Short Stay appears to be the cheapest. This is striking since Xior turned out to be the cheapest last year.

Table 2. Average rent based on the average surface area per landlord.

	Rental price (€)	N	Surface (m ²)	N	Rental price per m ²
SSH Short Stay	464,00	9	16,33	9	28,41
Xior	722,50	2	15,50	2	46.61
Holland2stay	690,50	2	20,50	2	33,68
Camelot Europe	749,00	4	17,75	4	42.20
Another housing agency	706,78	9	21,56	9	32,78
A private home owner	620,63	16	16,47	15	37,68
Other	547,00	5	17,00	5	32,18
Total	617,53	47	17,74	46	34,81

3.3 Satisfaction with current accommodation in Utrecht

Several items are included in the questionnaire that measure different aspects of the satisfaction of international students when it comes to their accommodation. To measure the satisfaction with the accommodation, the satisfaction with the following twelve aspects was asked: Room size, kitchen size, rent, quality of furniture, internet access, quality of shared facilities, total price-quality ratio, travel time to study, travel time to the city centre, feeling of security nearby, clean on arrival, and outside noise. Answers range from "very dissatisfied (1) to "very satisfied" (5). The twelve items were combined into one scale labelled 'satisfaction'. The internal consistency of the scale is insufficient (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.39). This can be explained by the fact that the question about the feeling of safety generally scores much higher than the other questions about satisfaction.

Table 3 shows that the respondents score slightly higher than neutral on their general satisfaction. Indicators with which the respondents are most satisfied are the feeling of safety in the vicinity of their accommodation, their travel time to their studies and the centre of Utrecht, and the beauty of the room upon arrival. Respondents are least satisfied with the rent and the price-quality ratio. If we compare indicators with last year, we see that the respondents are less satisfied on all indicators except furniture, travel time to the centre and the cleanliness on arrival.

Table 3. *Level of satisfaction op various indicators.*

Indicator	Mean	Standard deviation	Observations
Room size	3,42	1,35	48
Kitchen size	3,34	1,22	47
Rent	2,73	1,21	48
Quality of the furniture	3,37	1,20	38
Internet access	3,48	1,28	48
Quality of shared facilities	3,17	1,20	47
Travel time / proximity to location of educational institution	3,75	1,16	48
Travel time / proximity to city centre	4,04	1,09	48
Feeling of safety in the neighbourhood	4,17	1,15	47
Cleanliness of the accommodation upon arrival	3,56	1,27	48
Noise levels	3,19	1,54	48
Overall value for money	2,92	1,18	48
General satisfaction	3,52	0,93	48

3.3.1 Satisfaction rent

Since the average satisfaction with the rent leans towards dissatisfaction, this will be further zoomed in on. For example, the questionnaire shows that 50% of the respondents are dissatisfied (33.3%) to very dissatisfied (16.7%) with the rent (Figure 4). If we look at the satisfaction with the rent per landlord, we see that the tenants of 'another housing agency' and Camelot Europe are the least satisfied with the rent. SSH Short Stay comes off the best as most respondents have indicated that they are satisfied. However, the sample only includes 9 students who rent from SSH Short Stay, so the results should be interpreted with caution (Field, 2013).

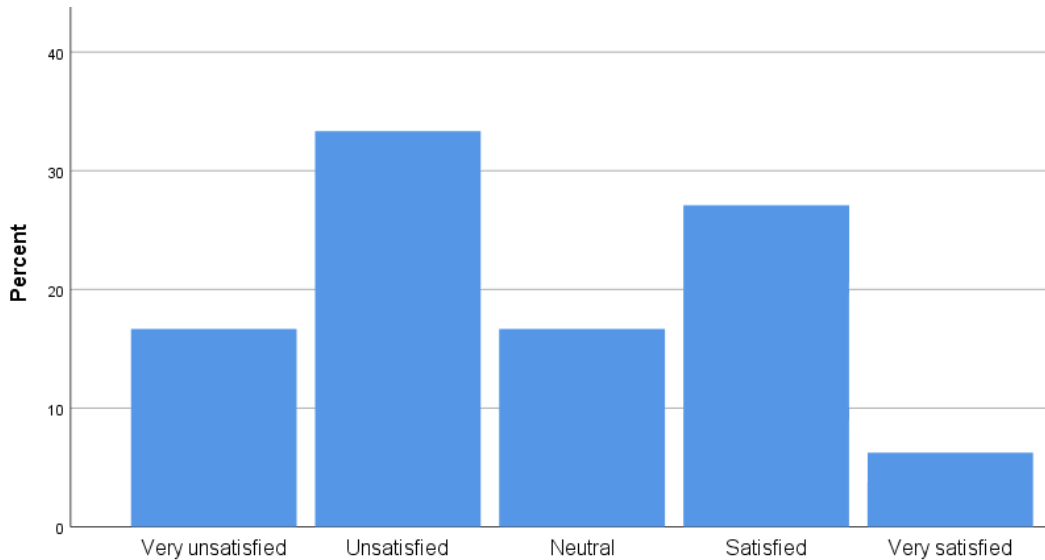


Figure 4. Satisfaction rent.

3.3.2. Satisfaction per landlord

Since the average satisfaction with the rent leans towards dissatisfaction, this will be further zoomed in on. For example, the questionnaire shows that 50% of the respondents are dissatisfied (33.3%) to very dissatisfied (16.7%) with the rent (Figure 4). If we look at the satisfaction with the rent per landlord, we see that the tenants of 'another housing agency' and Camelot Europe are the least satisfied with the rent. SSH Short Stay comes off the best as most respondents have indicated that they are satisfied. However, the sample only includes 9 students who rent from SSH Short Stay, so the results should be interpreted with caution (Field, 2013).

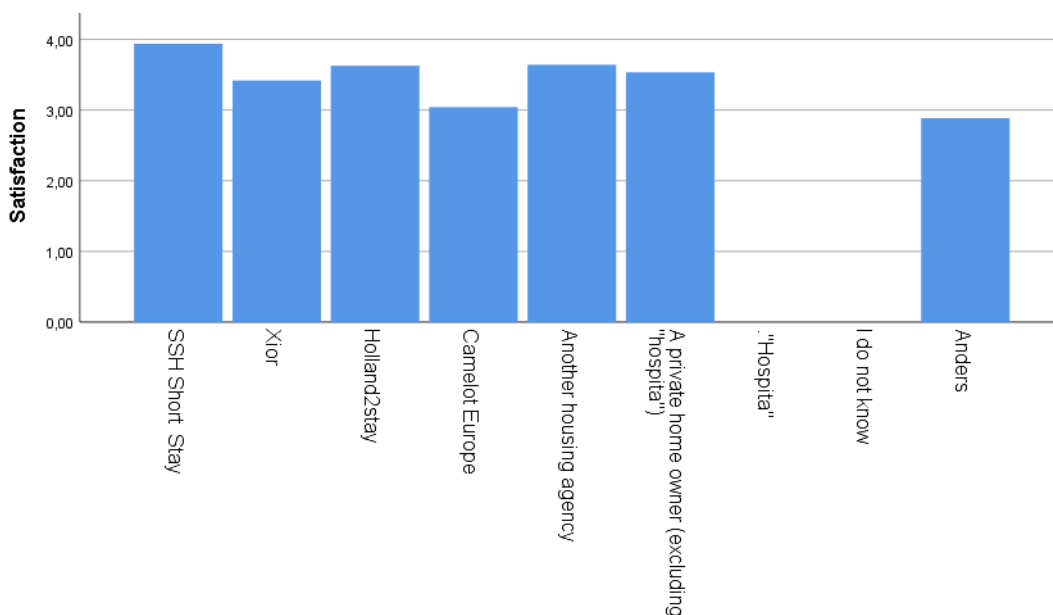


Figure 5. Satisfaction per landlord.

If we zoom in on the rent and look at the differences in satisfaction between tenants, several things stand out. Tenants of SSH Short-Stay are 1.24 points more satisfied with the

price of their accommodation than respondents of private landlords (Figure X). In addition, SSH Short Stay residents are no less than 1.78 points more satisfied with the price of their accommodation than respondents who rent from a housing agency. Measured on a scale of 1 to 5, such differences are significant.

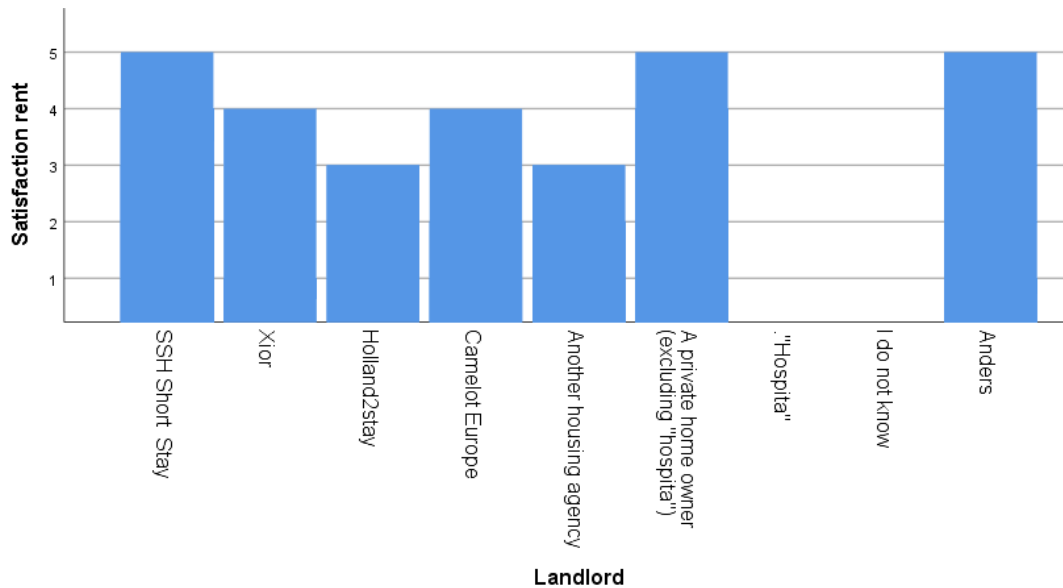


Figure 5.2. Satisfaction rent per landlord.

3.3.2. Roommates

The questionnaire showed that many international students live alone or have one or two roommates, although 23% of the students live with 5 roommates or more (Figure 6). Students' preferences for the number of housemates (Figure 7) correspond only to a limited extent with the actual number of housemates. A possible explanation for this is that international students have difficulty finding a room in Utrecht, so they are satisfied with a room with a number of roommates that do not quite meet their wishes.

Of the 38 students with roommates, 63.2% only live with fellow students, 28.9% live with students and non-students, and the remaining 7.9% do not live with students. It is striking that most respondents live without Dutch housemates (44.7%) while 94.1% of them prefer to live in a mixed house with Dutch and non-Dutch people. A possible explanation for this is that many student houses with Dutch people do not accept international students in their house.

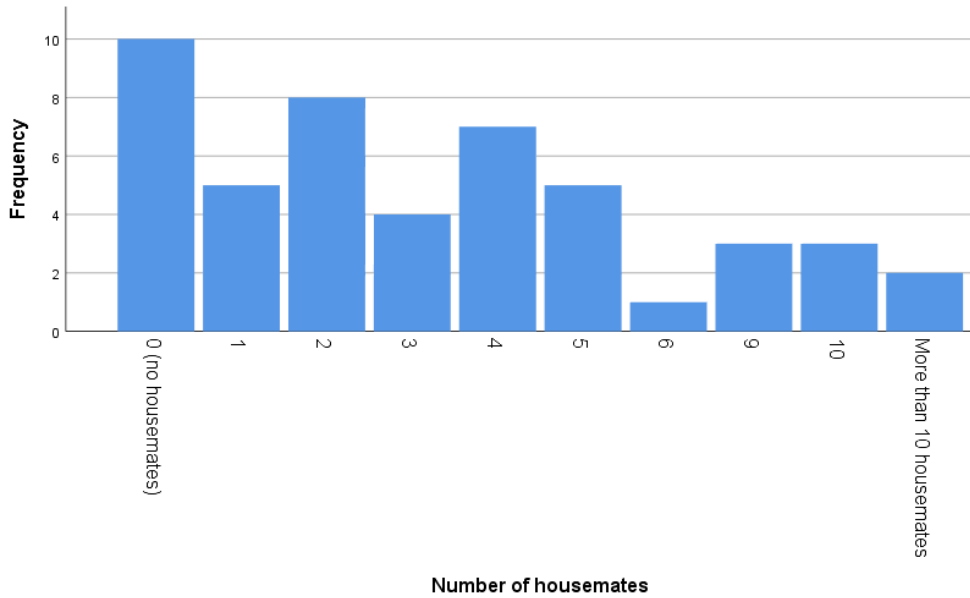


Figure 6. Number of roommates.

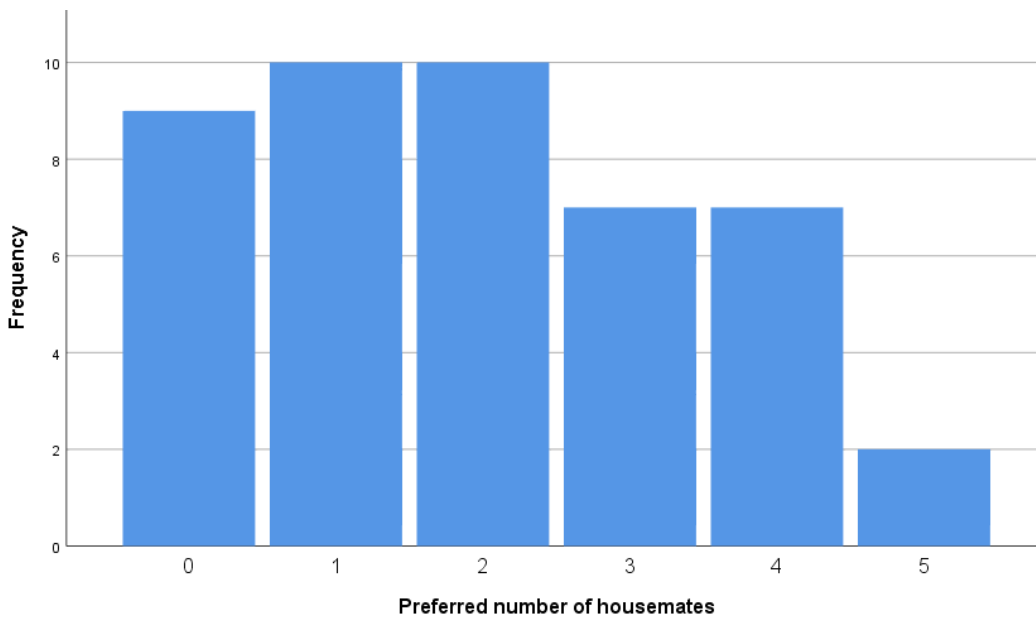


Figure 7. Preferred number of roommates.

3.3.3. Final assessment satisfaction

If one is allowed to give a score between 1 and 10 regarding their accommodation, then an average of 6.79 is given (standard deviation = 1.82). 58.3% of the respondents rate their accommodation with a 7 or an 8. 20.8% of the respondents give an insufficient (5 or lower) for their accommodation. 66.7% of the respondents indicated that they would recommend their accommodation to friends from their home country. When asked whether one could comment on their answer, the respondents gave several arguments:

- *It's a house in a great neighbourhood and I really like it, but still very overpriced.*

- *The bedroom size is extremely small. There is barely any space to walk. Although the housing location is very good and the whole house is accessible.*
- *It is cheap considering I rented a room of 12 m² for 500 euros a month and another room outside Utrecht (Nieuwegein) for 675, all of which had shared facilities but no living room. My current accommodation is recommendable because its affordable!*
- *The furniture and shared facilities are sometimes out of function, and the landlord ignores this.*

3.4. Communication and information

3.4.1 Channels used for information about accommodation rental

When asked how the respondents got information about renting an accommodation, we see that many of them obtained information through multiple channels. For example, 56.3% of them obtain information (online) through a training institute such as Utrecht University. 18.9% of the respondents obtained information through a housing agency, 43.9% through SSH, 48.1% through friends/acquaintances from the Netherlands, and 16.8% obtained information through friends/acquaintances from outside the Netherlands. About 6.25% did not obtain any information before looking for accommodation.

To see how satisfied the international students are with the information provided by the educational institution about renting accommodation, a statement was presented to them: “My educational institution has provided me with good information about finding accommodation in Utrecht. For the 54.2% of international students who obtained information through their educational institution, it appears that most of them were in agreement or neutral on this statement (Figure 8). However, a group of 19.2% also strongly disagrees with this statement.

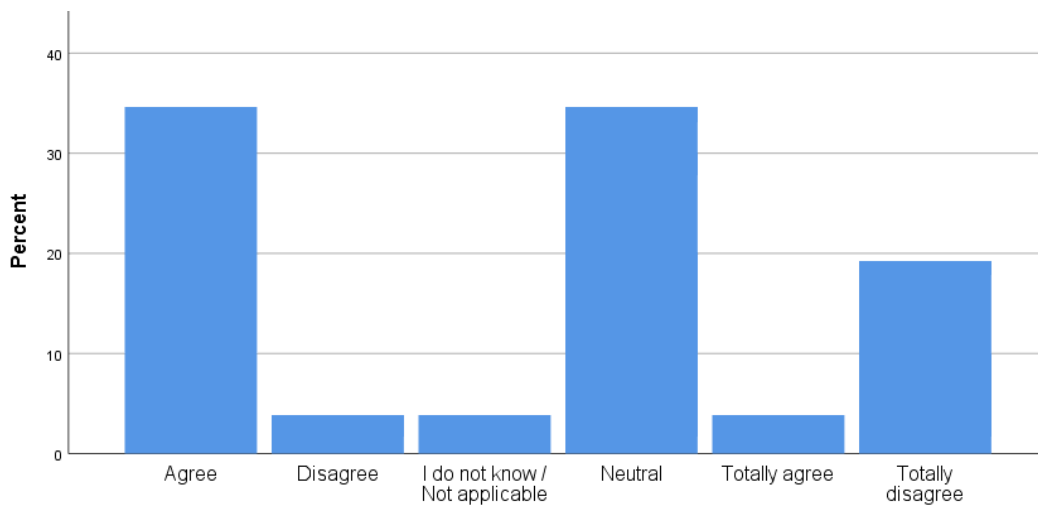


Figure 8. Answers to the statement: “My educational institute has provided me with good information about finding accommodation in Utrecht”.

3.4.2 Communication with the landlord

The majority (84.7%) of the respondents had contact with the landlord at least once. For example, 50% of the respondents had contact with the landlord about the rent, 62.5% about the contract, 33.3% about conditions upon departure, 56.3% because of maintenance, 42.8% about facilities, 16.7 % about housemates and 33.3% about service and other costs. In addition, they were asked how often people requested maintenance for their accommodation (Table 4). This showed that 75% of the respondents had requested maintenance once. It is striking that this differs from the percentage of respondents who had contact with the landlord regarding maintenance. It is unclear where this difference comes from.

What is also striking is that students of some landlords request maintenance more often than others. For example, it appears that respondents who rent an accommodation from a housing agency request maintenance more often than respondents who rent from a private home owner (Table 5).

Number of times contact with the landlord about maintenance	Number	Percentage
1	11	22.9%
2	10	20.8%
3	6	12.5%
4 or more	9	18.8%
Total	36	100%

Table 4. *Contact with the landlord about maintenance.*

Landlord	Number	Percentage
SSH Short Stay	2/9	65%
Holland2Stay	1/2	50%
Xior	1/2	50%
Camelot Europe	1/4	20%
Another housing agency	0/9	0%
A private home owner	2/17	11.8%
Other	2/5	40%

Table 5. *Percentage requesting maintenance per landlord.*

Finally, the respondents were asked to give their opinion about the following three statements regarding the communication with the landlord: 1) The conditions of my tenancy agreement are clear, 2) the communication with my landlord is good and 3) the conditions of my tenancy agreement are reasonable. Answers range from “strongly

disagree (1) to “strongly agree” (5). The three statements have been combined into one scale with the label 'communication with the landlord'. The internal consistency of the scale is good (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.88) and will decrease as an item is removed from the scale.

Table 6 shows that the respondents are on average neutral to agree with the three statements, and that the average respondent experiences neutral to reasonably good communication with the landlord. An ANOVA test was performed to see whether there are differences between the landlords concerning the general communication with the landlord. From this test, it can be concluded that the general communication with the landlord is significantly unaffected by the type of landlord ($p = 0.07$). However, due to the small number of respondents per landlord, these results should be interpreted with caution. If we look at the scores per landlord, we see that the SSH scores as the highest average a 4.07 on communication with the landlord, while Camelot Europe only scores a 1.67 (Figure 9). The other landlords score between 3.26 and 3.75 on communication.

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation	Observations
The terms and conditions of my rental agreement are clear to me.	3,53	1,21	47
The communication with my landlord is good.	3,29	1,16	45
The terms and conditions of my rental agreement are reasonable.	3,58	1,11	48
Communication with the landlord in general	3,45	1,04	48

Table 6. Average scores on statements regarding communication with the landlord.

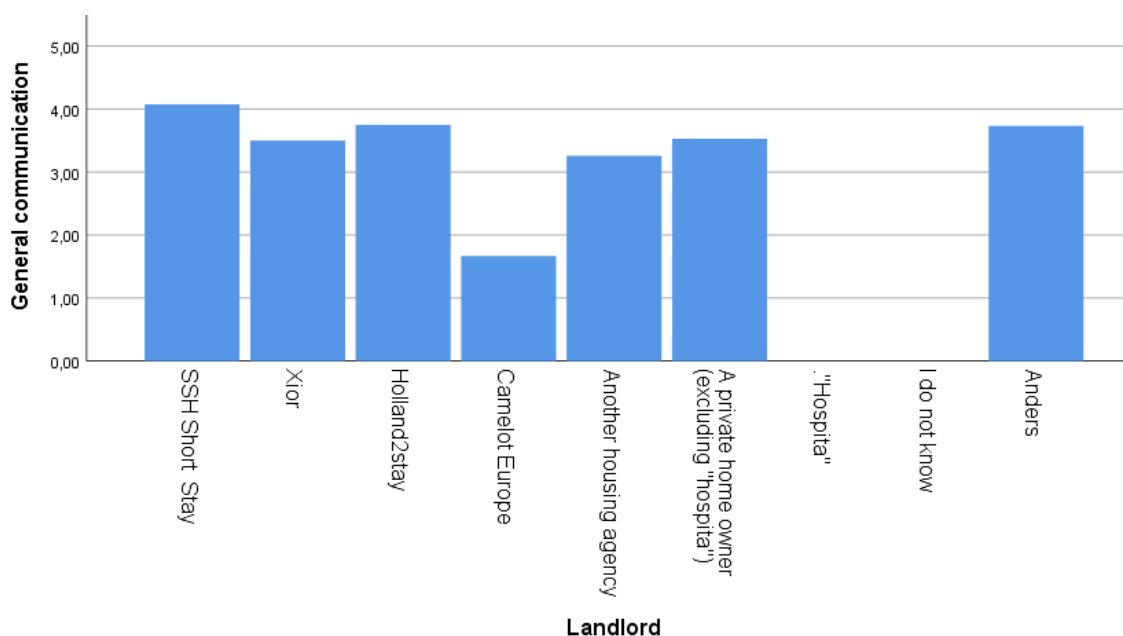


Figure 9. General communication with landlord.

3.5. Covid-19 and loneliness

Each year, space is made within the questionnaire for a topic to respond to relevant developments. This year, because of the corona pandemic, the board of ISHA (International Student Housing Assistance) decided to add the topic of loneliness to the questionnaire, which many respondents appear to be bothered by. 66.7% of the respondents indicate that they have experienced loneliness since the outbreak of the coronavirus. 22.9% indicate that they have not suffered from loneliness, and 10.4% have indicated that they would rather not answer this. From the open question whether they could explain their answers, there are clear explanations for the feeling of loneliness:

- *Because I live in a studio, I do not interact a lot with people especially since I cannot go to classes offline.*
- *I live (and lived) with all international students, and I am friends with mostly international students besides the 1 or 2 Dutch friends. Therefore when the internationals went back to their respective countries I began to feel a bit lonely.*
- *Making friends was particularly difficult due to the pandemic, so I only have a couple of people now to rely on for socializing. Also, most of my lessons are online and so a lot of the time I find myself going to class and studying in my room or in the library, spending a large percentage of my time indoors and on my own. I have a few roommates, however, which eases the loneliness at times.*

4. Conclusion

Every year ISHA publishes the International Student Housing monitor to keep abreast of recent developments regarding finding accommodation for international students and their satisfaction with the accommodation. This year, however, the results are difficult to interpret because many international students have had to cancel their exchange to Utrecht as a result of the coronavirus or have followed distance education from their home country. As a result, the sample size does not represent the entire population of international students who study and live in Utrecht every year. Nevertheless, 48 international students completed the questionnaire, which allowed us to paint a reasonable picture of the current developments in finding accommodation and satisfaction.

First, it appears that the amount of effort required to find an accommodation is slightly lower on average, but that the average search time in weeks has increased drastically compared to last year. The students are divided about whether the educational institute has provided good information about finding accommodation in Utrecht. This is worrying, as the stress associated with long-term room searches and constant lodging arrangements can affect students' mental health and academic performance (Fang & Liempt, 2020). As a result of this great difficulty experienced, international students are more or less forced to accept low-quality housing in poor conditions and/or high rent.

Secondly, it appears that international students are on average neutral to satisfied with their accommodation. The points they are least satisfied with are the rent and the price-quality ratio, on which the score was lower than neutral. This is a worrying fact, as there is a trend in which international students are less and less satisfied with their rent. Satisfaction with the rent has been falling since 2016 (and perhaps longer) and this trend has continued this year. What students are most satisfied with is the feeling of safety, the travel time to study and the centre. On average, people think about this with satisfaction. On average, the students give their accommodation a 6.78, although there is a lot of variation in the figures given. Just like last year, there are no significant differences in overall satisfaction per landlord. What does appear to differ between landlords is the satisfaction with the contact with the landlord. For example, the respondents are most satisfied with the contact with the SSH, while they are much less satisfied with Camelot Europe. Finally, it appears that a large majority of international students have experienced loneliness since the outbreak of the coronavirus.

This report is important as the Utrecht educational institutions are attracting more and more international students. However, the research by Fang and Liempt (2020) shows that the group of international students receives little or no help when it comes to the housing market in Utrecht. This is problematic as good housing is essential for a pleasant study time and a productive learning environment.

The educational institutes such as Utrecht University indicate that they want to help them with the process. In recent years, for example, they have reserved more housing with the SSH, and they are trying to inform students at an early stage about the difficult housing market utilizing a webinar. The extra accommodation via SSH appears to be a good step, as many students who rent from SSH appear to be satisfied with their accommodation. However, this turns out not to be enough. The negative trend of recent years regarding the effort that must be made to find acceptable accommodation in Utrecht has also continued this year.

Moreover, the housing problem of international students is not only a problem for educational institutions but also providers of housing for international students, the Municipality of Utrecht and surrounding municipalities. Together, they must quickly come up with a better approach to prevent the exploitation of international students.

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