Post-studentification? Promises and pitfalls of a near-campus urban intensification strategy

Nick Revington
Institut national de la recherche scientifique, Canada

Abstract
The concentration of students in neighbourhoods through processes of studentification has often precipitated conflicts with other residents centred on behavioural issues and perceived neighbourhood decline. Dominant policy responses have been exclusive in nature, attempting to restrict where students can live or to encourage them to live in purpose-built student accommodation in designated areas. Drawing primarily on interviews with key informants in Waterloo, Canada, I examine a process of ‘post-studentification’ where non-student residents are instead integrated into student-dominated neighbourhoods through urban intensification, promoted by an alternative policy approach. I outline this process and its links to other forms of urban change. Despite the promise of a more inclusive strategy to mitigate the challenges of studentification, I find that post-studentification is subject to several pitfalls related to local planning objectives, local contingencies and inequalities with respect to class, age and gender.

Keywords
gentrification, post-studentification, universities, urban development, youthification
Introduction

Studentification, the process by which students become concentrated in particular neighbourhoods, is increasingly recognised as a global phenomenon. Recent studies document cases in Canada (Revington et al., 2020), Chile (Prada, 2019), China (He, 2015), Spain (Garmendia et al., 2012), the United States (Foote, 2017) and elsewhere since the process was identified in the United Kingdom over a decade ago (Smith, 2005). Despite the benefits that students bring to communities, studentification is associated with several issues relating to student behaviour, poor property upkeep and the displacement of other residents, particularly in the Anglo-American context. Policies to mitigate these issues generally fall into two inherently exclusive camps: attempts to limit where students live within an urban area, and efforts to encourage students to live in purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) in particular areas.

Student housing is one aspect of the broader ‘town and gown’ relationship between universities and cities. Processes of studentification are therefore central to near-campus urban (re)development in a variety of international contexts (Nakazawa, 2017; Perry and Wiewel, 2005; Wiewel and Perry, 2008). This type of (re)development is implicated in other processes of urban change such as gentrification or ‘youthification’ (Moos, 2016), whereby young adults are concentrated in certain areas (Bose, 2015; Moos et al., 2019).

Drawing primarily on key informant interviews, I investigate the emergence of a novel policy approach to studentification and near-campus urban development, and a distinct trajectory of urban change associated with it, in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. This policy and process of ‘post-studentification’ represents a potential alternative, based on a purportedly more inclusive urban vision, to existing policies meant to mitigate the perceived negative impacts of studentification. Examining the unfolding of this process illustrates the dynamism of studentification (Kinton et al., 2018) and its links to other facets of urban change (Moos et al., 2019), along with pitfalls that inhibit this inclusive potential from being realised.

The City of Waterloo (population 133,000), about 100 km west of Toronto and one of three urban jurisdictions within the Region of Waterloo (population 560,000), is home to the University of Waterloo (UW) and Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU). As the universities witnessed rapid enrolment growth over the 2000s, studentification of some near-campus neighbourhoods meant that by the early 2010s, they had developed a reputation as a notorious ‘student ghetto’ (Waterloo Chronicle, 2010). Since then, the city has made a concerted effort to revitalise these areas.

I begin by reviewing trajectories of studentification, emphasising several of its most common variants, relationships to other dimensions of urban change, and political and policy responses. Next, I sketch a conceptual outline of post-studentification. I then describe the methods and introduce Waterloo’s history of studentification. Subsequently, I empirically describe emerging post-studentification in Waterloo. Then, I evaluate this case of post-studentification from three perspectives: its achievement of local policy objectives, its local contingencies and its consequences for urban inequality. Finally, I reflect on theoretical and practical
implications regarding (post-)studentification and related urban processes.

**Trajectories and politics of studentification**

Studentification is a dynamic process (Kinton et al., 2018) exemplifying several diverse trajectories. ‘Classic’ studentification involves students living in shared accommodation within the existing housing stock (Smith, 2005). With enrolment increases outpacing institutional provision of housing, small-scale investor-landlords purchase housing to rent to students, and occasionally convert interior common spaces to additional bedrooms. This piecemeal investment often inflates property values even as the physical quality of the housing deteriorates. This type of studentification occurs within established neighbourhoods, with the greatest potential for ‘town and gown’ conflicts as student lifestyles clash with those of existing residents (Smith, 2008). Disruptive behaviour, noise, poor property upkeep and parking issues are oft-cited concerns in such neighbourhoods, sometimes alongside other deep-seated changes including the closure of schools and reorientation of businesses (Hubbard, 2008; Munro and Livingston, 2012; Sage et al., 2012; Smith, 2005, 2008). Existing residents are often displaced from a neighbourhood they perceive to be declining.

A corporatised ‘new-build studentification’ (Sage et al., 2013) subsequently emerged as private developers realised that students constitute a significant source of rental housing demand, while universities themselves could not fully accommodate this demand and existing rental housing was often of poor quality. Resulting PBSA typically features higher-end amenities catering to a student lifestyle, all-inclusive rent and heightened security measures (Hubbard, 2009; Kenna, 2011). The luxury, quasi-gated nature of these developments raises concerns about the segregation of students from other residents, and of wealthier students from their poorer peers (Smith and Hubbard, 2014). An extreme result is what Smith (2018) has called ‘super-studentification’: the emergence of ultra-luxury housing aimed at the absolute wealthiest of students.

PBSA also became attractive in policy discourse, to address the perceived issues of ‘classic’ studentification by redirecting students away from established neighbourhoods (Hubbard, 2009; Smith, 2008). This strategy is not guaranteed to be successful (Revington et al., 2020; Sage et al., 2013) but, where it is, the outcome is often ‘de-studentification’. De-studentification refers to an emptying of neighbourhoods of students, either as local enrolment declines, or as students are shuffled into new PBSA or other near-campus housing developments (Kinton et al., 2016, 2018; Mulhearn and Franco, 2018). De-studentification therefore results in the vacancy of neighbourhood housing units, or their re-conversion to other uses such as single-family housing.

Studentification has also been linked to other urban processes. Several studies consider the spatial and temporal overlaps between studentification and other urban changes (Foote, 2017; Moos et al., 2019; Revington, 2018). Urban universities often seek to gentrify their surroundings to create an attractive environment for prospective students and faculty (Bose, 2015; Ehlenz, 2019; Etienne, 2012; Mapes et al., 2017). Likewise, a by-product of central-city revitalisation might be to attract more students to a gentrified area (Bromley et al., 2007). Studentification and gentrification may also coincide as students, and PBSA developments, actively displace working-class neighbourhoods (Pickren, 2012; Sage et al., 2012). Conversely, students may be ‘marginal gentrifiers’ (Rose, 1984) who, attracted to cheap rents, prime a neighbourhood for subsequent gentrification (Davison, 2009). There
is also evidence that studentification can lead to youthification, or a concentration of non-student young adults in dense urban areas (Moos, 2016), as it shapes post-graduation housing preferences (He, 2015; Sage et al., 2013; Smith, 2005). Studentification and youthification may occur simultaneously if urban amenities cater to young adults regardless of educational status (Ma et al., 2018; Moos et al., 2019).

While some municipalities have addressed studentification issues through increased law enforcement (Evans-Cowley, 2006), elsewhere researchers have documented a discourse of ‘thresholds’, whereby non-student residents view their neighbourhoods reaching a ‘tipping point’ once a certain number of households are student-occupied. Once this threshold is reached, according to this narrative, the neighbourhood is irreparably changed and becomes a distinct student area. This discourse is hugely problematic from a moral standpoint, as it adopts discriminatory attitudes considered unacceptable in the context of race or ethnicity, effectively penalising all students for the behaviours of a subset (Hubbard, 2008; Munro and Livingston, 2012). Yet, it remains a central feature in many attempts to regulate studentification through policy.

In practice, the threshold discourse has manifested in attempts to limit the number of students residing in an area. One approach places restrictions on rental housing (Ruiu, 2017), sometimes directly limiting the number of properties in an area that can be rented to students (Hubbard, 2008). Indirectly, regulations may target students by capping the number of unrelated persons that can live together (Pickren, 2012) or by requiring a minimum distance between rented houses (Revington et al., 2020). An alternative strategy encourages PBSA development in designated areas (Hubbard, 2009; Sage et al., 2013; Smith, 2008). While the framing of new-build studentification is more positive, as it focuses on providing housing for students rather than explicitly restricting it, ultimately the policy objective remains the same: reducing the number of students in established neighbourhoods to ensure a ‘balanced’ mix of population (Smith, 2008).

**Post-studentification: A conceptual outline**

Another type of neighbourhood transition that might be referred to as ‘post-studentification’ is possible, whereby heavily studentified neighbourhoods adopt a more ‘balanced’ (Smith, 2008) mix of population that retains a high proportion of students while gaining other residents. From a conceptual standpoint, beyond an influx of non-students into a previously (and perhaps still) student-dominated area, post-studentification would involve shifts in urban development from the unique provision of PBSA towards housing that accommodates a broader range of residents, and public and private amenities that cater to a more diverse population. The specific characteristics of new residents are not central to the definition of post-studentification, and therefore the links to other processes of urban population change remain an empirical question. For example, post-studentification could represent a process of marginalisation where residents lacking other options are forced to live in a student precinct, or a process of gentrification as quality amenities attract high-income residents.

However, the potential for post-studentified neighbourhoods has important theoretical and policy implications given the centrality of student/non-student conflicts in local politics of the ‘town and gown’ relationship in a variety of international
contexts (Nakazawa, 2017). In particular, the concept of post-studentification contests the inevitability of the threshold discourse. It allows for alternative trajectories of studentification, which may result in vastly different outcomes, including an ostensibly more inclusive brand of urbanism than the threshold discourse promotes.

Commentators have observed a ‘blurring’ between accommodation for students and other populations, particularly young adults, with firms increasingly occupying both PBSA and co-living niches, or offering housing targeted to both groups simultaneously (CBRE, 2020; Uyttebrouck et al., 2020; Winchester, 2021). Some PBSA providers have begun offering ‘similarly managed properties upon graduation’, with ‘developments promising “hassle-free graduate housing”’ (Hubbard, 2009: 1908). This blurring extends to lifestyles, as ‘many recent graduates may continue to deploy their cultural capital, in lieu of economic capital, by carving out distinctive residential niches, and reproducing the cultural practices of studenthood to maintain social and cultural identities’ (Smith and Holt, 2007: 156). Meanwhile, condominium developments have allowed buy-to-let investors to access these asset classes, and enabled owner-occupation by non-students (Mulhearn and Franco, 2018; Revington and August, 2020). These trends represent a reaction to perceived or anticipated overbuilding in the PBSA sector, as owners reposition assets to appeal to a wider market, and as a response to broader housing market challenges facing young adults in particular.

Some examples of university-led revitalisation may also represent post-studentification instead of conventional gentrification if the incumbent population is low-income because it is temporarily poor students as opposed to long-term working-class residents (Ehlenz, 2019; Moos et al., 2019). This distinction is important insofar as these schemes differ in the social and physical issues they purport to address, and in their impacts, for instance via displacement. Here, post-studentification represents a response to the particular social, behavioural and physical issues that studentification presents, distinct from the concerns of revitalisation projects that attempt to address concentrated poverty through mixed-income redevelopment (Lees, 2008; Rose et al., 2013).

Despite similarities to de-studentification, post-studentification differs in several important regards. Smith (2008: 2552) defines de-studentification as:

the reduction of a student population in a neighbourhood which leads to social (for example, population loss), cultural (for example, closure of retail and other services), economic (for example, devalorisation of property prices) and physical (for example, abandonment of housing) decline.

Kinton et al. (2016: 1619) emphasise that de-studentification is dependent on a large oversupply of student housing, attributable to ‘lower proportions of students living off-campus and lower population densities in some classically studentified neighbourhoods’. In contrast, as the ensuing case demonstrates, post-studentification bears none of these hallmarks of decline, nor does it entail a decrease in the student population. Private developers and landlords may expand their target market from students to a broader range of population as a response to de-studentification (Kinton et al., 2016) but this trend does not depend on de-studentification per se. Rather, post-studentification represents a mutation of the studentification process that begins to dissolve the distinction between students and other residents. Nor is post-studentification to be equated with co-living. However, inasmuch as co-living is integrated into
studentified neighbourhoods, it may be one element thereof. The Waterloo case provides an example of post-studentification as an explicit policy approach for dealing with student housing issues.

**Methods**

I examine incipient post-studentification in Waterloo, Ontario, drawing on semi-structured key informant interviews \((n = 33)\) in the local real estate and planning sectors (developers, brokers, landlords, property managers and planners), student organisations and universities, to outline the driving factors behind post-studentification as both policy and process. Interviews, conducted in June–November 2018 and averaging approximately 45 minutes in length, were recorded, transcribed verbatim and manually coded. Codes were assigned according to predefined themes and to new themes that emerged in the process of analysis (Palys and Atchison, 2014). Each theme was subsequently re-coded, resulting in finer distinctions between sub-themes and new general themes. This procedure resulted in a refined picture of urban planning and development in Waterloo’s near-campus neighbourhoods. The study is also informed by a systematic review of planning documents and news media in the context of a larger research project on studentification (Revington, 2021; Revington and August, 2020; Revington et al., 2020).

**Context: Studentification in Waterloo**

Waterloo is often held as a paragon of the knowledge economy within Canada. The region forms the western terminus of the ‘Toronto-Waterloo Innovation Corridor’, which claims the second-largest concentration of tech start-up firms globally (Corridor, n.d.), and local development strategies have emphasised high-tech industry following deindustrialisation and the loss of traditional manufacturing employment. However, Waterloo is the longstanding home of several major insurance firms’ headquarters and accompanying high-order service employment. UW, WLU and polytechnic Conestoga College play a crucial role in the local economy, with UW particularly known for its connections to local industry, its role in regional innovation and its strengths in engineering and computer science (Bramwell and Wolfe, 2008). With strong employment growth in the local tech sector, the region experiences substantial endogenous demand for housing. However, Waterloo also sees considerable spillover from nearby Toronto’s expensive housing market. Regional and provincial growth controls limit low-density urban sprawl, generating substantial demand for apartments and condominiums as a cheaper alternative to detached home ownership.

Studentification in Waterloo is detailed extensively elsewhere (Charbonneau et al., 2006; Revington, 2021; Revington and August, 2020; Revington et al., 2020). In brief, as enrolment increased rapidly at UW and WLU over the early 2000s, the existing municipal lodging house licensing system became untenable. This system had sought to limit concentrations of students by instituting a minimum-distance separation between lodging houses. Increasing housing demand from students therefore led to early studentification farther afield from the campuses and strong incentives for landlords to flout the rules in near-campus neighbourhoods. A court challenge in 2003 rendered the lodging house bylaw unenforceable.

Meanwhile, the city was running out of developable land, with no prospect of annexing additional space within the regional government framework. Intensification along
nodes and corridors was seen as the solution to both the land supply issue and residents’ concerns about studentification in near-campus neighbourhoods. This planning model was adopted in 2005 in the hopes that new apartments developed in the nodes and corridors near the universities would draw students out of other residential areas. Despite early PBSA construction in the nodes and corridors – largely low-rise apartments containing four five-bedroom units each – students continued to concentrate in the Northdale neighbourhood, an area of suburban detached houses between UW and WLU.

Northdale has long been a student area. While the census does not directly identify post-secondary students, and tends to undercount students in situ as they are often enumerated at their ‘permanent’ residence (i.e. at their parents’ house) rather than at their ‘temporary’ term-time address, the census tract containing Northdale nonetheless registered strong evidence of studentification in 2001, with nearly a quarter of residents aged 20–24 (over three times the metropolitan average) and a homeownership rate less than half the metropolitan average (Table 1). By 2006, over half the population was aged 20–24, and the homeownership rate had fallen by a third. A 2011 survey of Northdale found that in the three survey subareas, respectively, 77%, 81% and 97% of dwelling units were student-occupied (MMM Group, 2012b).

Existing residents expressed frustration with the ongoing impacts of studentification, namely rowdy behaviour, noise and physical deterioration of the neighbourhood, which made it difficult to sell their houses to potential long-term residents. Investors, meanwhile, preferred to buy properties in the designated nodes and corridors where they could redevelop at higher density. These investors increasingly included large financial players building bigger PBSA projects (Revington and August, 2020). Land clearing related to accelerating development explains the substantial drop in total dwellings in the neighbourhood between 2006 and 2011 (Table 1).

In response to public pressure, the city commissioned the Northdale Land Use and Community Improvement Plan Study in 2012 (hereafter ‘Northdale Plan’), with the following vision statement: ‘By 2029, Northdale is revitalized and reurbanized into a diverse, vibrant and sustainable neighbourhood, integrated with educational, residential, commercial, cultural, heritage and recreational functions, and improved open space, pedestrian, cycling and transit networks’ (MMM Group, 2012a: 25). Attracting non-students is a centrepiece of this vision, as the plan aims to ‘provide a new opportunity for permanent residents to

### Table 1. Population and dwelling characteristics, Northdale neighbourhood.

|                     | 2001   | 2006   | 2011   | 2016   |
|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Homeownership rate  | 29% (67%) | 19% (70%) | n/a (70%) | 6% (68%) |
| Population aged 20–24 | 24% (7%) | 54% (8%) | 53% (7%) | 63% (7%) |
| Dwellings in apartments, five storeys or more | 18% (11%) | 11% (10%) | 13% (10%) | 68% (11%) |
| Total dwellings     | 955    | 940    | 620    | 1460   |

Source: Calculated by the author based on census data (Statistics Canada, 2018).

Note: Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo Census Metropolitan Area in parentheses. Census tract 106.01, which contains Northdale.
live in a mixed use, urban neighbourhood’ (MMM Group, 2012a: 23) and accommodate ‘a diverse demographic including students, families and professionals’ (MMM Group, 2012a: 26). While not specified in the plan, respondents expressed that the long-term goal is for one in three residents to be non-students (planner P04; Councillor Jeff Henry).

To achieve these ends, the Northdale Plan allows for intensification throughout the neighbourhood, with maximum heights ranging from six to 25 storeys. The plan designates much of the neighbourhood for mixed use, requiring ground-floor retail spaces in residential buildings and a higher standard of urban design. It incentivises smaller one- and two-bedroom units – in contrast to the preponderance of five-bedroom units that previously dominated development in the neighbourhood – through changes to the development fee structure and by tying parking requirements to the number of bedrooms rather than the number of units. The plan relies heavily on market development to catalyse neighbourhood change, but has also been accompanied by municipal investments in the public realm.

The plan has resulted in sustained redevelopment in the near-campus area (Figure 1), making Waterloo by far the largest concentration of PBSA in Canada, with over 17,000 bedrooms (Revington and August, 2020). By 2016, nearly two-thirds of the population were 20–24, over two-thirds of dwellings were in apartments of five storeys or more (Table 1) and the homeownership rate was a paltry 6%. With several large residential projects completed, the total number of

Figure 1. Planning and PBSA development in Waterloo. 
Source: Created by the author with data from the Region of Waterloo.
dwellings had rebounded to exceed 2006 levels by 55%, signifying intensified studentification but also enabling an incipient process of post-studentification.

Contrary to other prominent examples (Bose, 2015; Ehlenz, 2019; Etienne, 2012; Mapes et al., 2017), Waterloo’s universities have had a minimal role in near-campus urban redevelopment. While they did construct some new residences on existing university lands – and WLU acquired some private PBSA, largely with a view to long-term land banking rather than providing housing, per se – by and large, development has been left up to the private sector to build and the municipality to regulate, with little involvement of either university.

Post-studentification in Waterloo?

Residential development

A primary factor in this incipient process of post-studentification has been a reorientation of the actual residential development activity from a focus exclusively on students to a broader market. As developers realised the PBSA market was becoming saturated, some deliberately shifted the style of building they constructed and correspondingly the demographics to which they marketed their products. One planner (P02) observed that ‘they are being marketed now towards students-slash-young professionals, and there’s an additional emphasis on this, young professionals’. For a developer (L10):

What we build now is we focus more on what I’d refer to as market condos or market units, a typical unit layout and type of building that would be generic for any urban centre, and build them near universities.

Another (R06) agreed that in addition to students, ‘we were trying to appeal to people who actually work in Waterloo’ because ‘they can afford something that is a little bit better than what a student could’. While

Figure 2. PBSA building permits, City of Waterloo.
Source: Calculated by the author with data from the Region of Waterloo.
developers emphasised market shifts, planners highlighted the Northdale Plan’s incentives for smaller units: ‘the hope is’ that the plan will ‘bring about that balance’ between students and non-students by having ‘that right product, and having a product that is more attractive to non-students’ (P04). Not-In-My-Backyard-ism prevalent elsewhere in the city is less likely to be experienced in student-dominated Northdale (P06; Revington, 2021), making it an attractive location for non-PBSA development.

These dynamics are captured in local building permit data (Figure 2). While the average number of bedrooms per unit of PBSA hovered just below five into the mid-2010s, this figure plummeted to below two for projects completed in 2016–2018. Since there is no legal distinction between PBSA and other apartments in Ontario, its classification here is determined by regional planners based on how the development is marketed, which has been ‘becoming more and more difficult over time’ (P02), a poignant illustration of how post-studentification represents a blurring between conventional PBSA and housing targeting other demographics.

For one broker and property manager (L09), the distinction between student housing and the rest of the market is becoming irrelevant:

I don’t think there is [a definition of student housing] anymore … it’s so diverse that I think it’s somewhat become meaningless and some of the student housing, or housing rented by students, could easily be rented by non-students, whether they be twenty years old, thirty years old, or seventy years old, and certainly some of them could well also be owned and lived in long term [by] families.

Population changes

One long-term goal of the Northdale Plan is for one in three Northdale residents to be a non-student, a clear policy of post-studentification. Progress towards this goal is unclear. According to the councillor for the ward containing Northdale, Jeff Henry, ‘it’s not information you can collect, and nobody really does collect it’. Nonetheless, interviewees indicated that a process of post-studentification was underway.

Several key informants reported non-students increasingly moving into buildings in and around Northdale. One broker’s (R02) client had a development near UW that was ‘seeing more non-students rent there than students now, overall’. Planners monitoring development around Northdale observed developers selling condos to non-students for owner-occupation. As one planner (P03) explained, ‘There’s a lot of techies that would look at these buildings as a stopgap to something else,’ for instance while saving to buy a larger house. The area is close to major nodes of professional employment, including the universities, UW’s Research and Technology Park, adjacent offices and Uptown Waterloo, making it ideal for young professionals. According to Ulrike Gross, responsible for WLU’s real estate portfolio, ‘it’s really a terrific opportunity to be very close to where they work and what that means is that you get away from the homogeneous student ghetto and to a more diverse demographic living in this housing area’. Reportedly, this trend is partially driven by tech companies ‘looking for large-scale rentals, so they’re taking blocks, you know, 10, 12 units at a time’ to house employees, but also to some extent by seniors looking to downsize (R02).

High-density housing mitigates some of the negative aspects of studentification, inducing some non-students to live in or near Northdale. According to one planner (P06), ‘there’s not that opportunity in an apartment building, to have great big, huge outdoor parties […] which, when it gets out of hand, can be negative’. A broker (R04) agreed that despite its shortcomings, ‘it’s still
way better than those run-down houses with kids urinating on the bushes on Friday night and sun-tanning up on the roof".

Another element driving post-studentification in Waterloo has been high regional housing prices. For one developer (L10), ‘there’s other towns with universities [in Ontario] where you can still buy a house for like CA$250,000, whereas in Waterloo, you’d be hard pressed to buy one for less than CA$500,000. So that’s an important factor for us.’ Young professionals in the tech sector see these condos as affordable relative to other major centres of the tech industry like Toronto or San Francisco. Moreover, the tight housing market has mitigated against the urban decline associated with de-studentification (Kinton et al., 2016) of other neighbourhoods precipitated by the high volume of new development in Northdale.

**New amenities**

Undoubtedly, part of the neighbourhood’s success in attracting non-student residents has depended on improvements to public and private amenities. One planner (P04) explained: ‘That’s needed to support and have a complete neighbourhood, so people have a place they’re hoping to live, work, learn and play.’ An economic development planner reported, ‘now all of a sudden, going from zero amenities, there’s over 25 shops and stores now in Northdale’ (P05). For one broker (R01), this was a ‘big driver’ in making the neighbourhood appealing, ‘especially as things go forward, where buildings are built with amenities in them. So amenities being, you know, Asian restaurants, or Wacky Tabacky [marijuana paraphernalia] shops, or whatever it is, I think that’s becoming more and more important.’ While some of these amenities certainly remain oriented to the student demographic, others have become a ‘kind of hidden gem type place’ (student leader, S01) that, at least anecdotally, attracts customers from across the region.

In a sense, Northdale is becoming ‘almost a second downtown if you will’ (broker R02), and with additional developments ongoing, ‘we won’t recognize it, and I think everyone’s going to be pretty happy with the end result, considering where we came from’ – a heavily studentified neighbourhood of run-down housing, few amenities and a negative public perception. As a result, ‘Other people are going to want to go there on a Friday night besides students, right? And other people will be there on a July afternoon, because all the students are gone.’ Indeed, that is the as-yet unrealised ideal of post-studentification. ‘From a city standpoint, that would be desirable, wouldn’t it?’ (R04).

The city has invested in public infrastructure, including streetscaping and parkland. Infrastructure provided by the regional government, like the new light rail line that passes between Northdale and UW, may also encourage development. According to one planner (P06), ‘it’s transit-supportive development, or maybe the transit is supporting the high-density development’, but ultimately the outcome is ‘a more complete and attractive street’. Meanwhile, WLU is working closely with the local school district and the City of Waterloo to create a community space on joint properties in the area.

**Pitfalls of post-studentification**

This section advances a critique of post-studentification as experienced in Waterloo. First, the Northdale Plan is limited in its ability to attract a substantial diversity of residents. Second, where it has succeeded, it has benefited from local contingencies that may not exist in all contexts. Finally, and
most importantly, post-studentification has reinforced urban inequalities along the axes of class, gender and age.

**Achieving intended outcomes**

Despite attracting new types of housing, residents and amenities – and the enthusiasm of some planners and real estate professionals regarding these changes – in other respects, the Northdale Plan is less certain to meet its goals. Northdale continues to hold a negative perception as a studentified area or little more than a ‘nice student ghetto’ (broker R04), a challenge that also faces de-studentified neighbourhoods (Kinton et al., 2016). Another (R03) concurred that ‘those buildings are typically in locations most renters wouldn’t want to live, because they’re in student-ghettoised areas’. Therefore, the appeal to non-students remains limited:

> Once you kind of graduate, you’re looking for more: I don’t want to deal with roommates anymore, [...] I kind of want my own space. And I can probably find cheaper living not in a student area. Because as soon as you don’t have to live right by the university, your options are a lot more open. (Property manager L04)

Some questioned whether the type of housing provided – increasingly, small one- and two-bedroom condos – would be suitable for families (P02).

As a result, non-student residents in Northdale are often marginal non-students: ‘acquaintances, friends or spouses of students’ (property manager L09) or recent graduates. A researcher at a brokerage (R05) suggested that:

> people would probably live there because it’s comfortable for them because they moved there when they were in school, and then when they start to make more money, they’ll move out of there [...] I don’t think someone’s going to physically move in to this if they haven’t lived in [PBSA] before.

In other words, while ‘that’s no longer [...] technically considered a student’, it represents ‘a very similar demographic and profile very often, and a very similar lifestyle’ (L09). It is therefore unclear to what extent non-student residents are meaningfully different from students with respect to the planning goal of achieving a mixed population. Moreover, while the goal of one in three Northdale residents being non-students is perhaps realistic, it is not particularly ambitious, and there is no mechanism for monitoring it.

Another challenge pertains to the neighbourhood’s mixed-use component, particularly retail space. Balancing the quantities and timing of individual uses is a common issue in mixed-use development (Beauregard, 2005). Despite some successful businesses, interviewees noted that others have struggled and several spaces remained vacant (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). New retail spaces compete with successful pre-existing commercial plazas at either end of the neighbourhood, yet Northdale lacks key services such as a grocery store.

**Local contingencies**

Whatever the benefits and flaws of post-studentification, the question remains to what extent the process is likely to unfold in other contexts, and therefore whether post-studentification is a feasible alternative to segregationist strategies to deal with studentification, such as limitations on the number of student-occupied houses within an area or encouraging PBSA away from established neighbourhoods (Hubbard, 2008, 2009; Pickren, 2012; Revington et al., 2020; Ruiu, 2017; Sage et al., 2013; Smith and Hubbard, 2014). Several contextual elements in
Waterloo that have contributed to post-studentification may not be present everywhere.

For one interviewee, the blurring between housing for students and non-students was specific to the local economic development focus on high-tech industry, which has bolstered housing demand. ‘London [Ontario] has a great university, no one stays in London. They go there to get their degree. Waterloo, they come there and they stay there and they open up business’ (RO4). As a result, ‘Waterloo has an advantage that Toronto would have, that maybe McGill [University, in Montreal] would have, that Kingston [home to Queen’s University] wouldn’t have. […] There’s just that natural employment base there.’ UW is known for spurring spin-off businesses and generating talented workers for the regional economy (Bramwell and Wolfe, 2008). While the volume of tech employment is important, so is its location proximate to the universities. Office space along Phillip Street, immediately north of Northdale, has recently seen ‘close to 4000 new jobs, wherein all these companies are hiring young talent’, according to an economic development planner (P05). ‘So if you’re in fourth year university, fifth year university, come out of school, where you going to live? Well, probably nearby.’

Other place-specific features such as Waterloo’s recently revitalised central Uptown area are attractive to young workers and students alike, as one broker (RO4) described: ‘It’s like Nashville, it’s just a cool place.’ While comparisons to the country music capital of the world may be hyperbolic, both the City and Region have emphasised graduate attraction and retention in their economic development strategies by, among other things, seeking to ensure a variety of cultural amenities and housing types (e.g. City of Waterloo, 2017; Malone Given Parsons, 2014). Waterloo’s ‘planning for “cool”’ (Vinodrai, 2018) extends beyond Northdale. For post-studentification to occur, a planner (P05) summarised, ‘you need high growth universities, […] and you need a strong tech sector and economy’. In contrast, cities with weaker employment and housing markets may not be able to realise intensive development supportive of post-studentification. Even with this type of development, the resulting surplus of housing could lead to more affordable rents, but also de-studentification, disinvestment and decline in some parts of the city (Kinton et al., 2016; Mulhearn and Franco, 2018).

Implications for urban inequality

Post-studentification in Waterloo is effectively a form of gentrification, representing a continuation from studentification-as-gentrification, as PBSA has displaced more affordable housing and non-student populations (Revington and August, 2020). As one student leader (S01) said, ‘if you’re looking for more affordable rent, you can’t … you have to move further out, essentially’. This relationship is intrinsic, according to a planner (P05):

> if you want to attract a more diverse neighbourhood, it can’t all be run-down student housing. So the idea of walk-in clinics, new streets being developed, high-end finishes, that means the cost of the projects goes up […]. There’s no more cheap housing.

This class-based exclusion is unsurprising as housing in high-amenity mixed-use areas is often less affordable than elsewhere (Moos et al., 2018).

In theory, the intermixing of students and non-students could be desirable for reducing age segregation and fostering intergenerational understanding rather than exacerbating town and gown conflict (Revington, 2021). However, in practice this is limited,
since post-studentification has tended to involve ‘marginal non-students’. These recent graduates, dropouts, young professionals and friends or partners of students often have similar lifestyles to that of students (Smith and Holt, 2007), and while they may be slightly older than most students, they do not contribute substantially to altering the neighbourhood’s age profile. Post-studentification can therefore be considered a form of youthification (Moos, 2016), providing a concrete link between youthification and universities (Moos et al., 2019) and reinforcing age segregation.

These class- and age-based inequalities also intersect with issues of gender. As feminist scholars note, urban planning and development are often masculinist as they overlook social reproduction and care work, and emphasise interurban competition and profit (Curran, 2018). This is true of Northdale, where post-studentification has been driven by economic development strategies that favour competition based on the highly gendered tech sector. The Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo metropolitan area is one of only two in Canada with a higher male share of the unmarried, university-educated 25–34-year-old population (Flanagan, 2018).²

Meanwhile, public amenities specifically geared to the young professional and student population that dominates the neighbourhood, rather than children or older adults, are not necessarily conducive to social reproduction and care work. The lack of amenities for these groups reinforces age segregation by reducing the area’s appeal to them. Likewise, the increasing prevalence of one- and two-bedroom apartments suggests a lack of housing appropriate for larger households with children, as one planner (P02) was hesitant to outright admit:

But definitely marketing towards these smaller units, it may be an issue because one thing that we have been hearing – so this isn’t something we’re saying, but something we’re hearing – is kind of the lack of family-oriented sized units, or units in buildings that might be of interest to a family.

This type of housing also limits possibilities for multi-generational living, which could otherwise offset age segregation (Curran, 2018).

Post-studentification in Northdale is perceived to entail young professionals temporarily occupying a lower step on a housing ladder, reflecting and reproducing certain gendered assumptions about housing. First, there is an expectation that family and detached home ownership are the eventual goal, and second, that high-density urban environments are not appropriate for raising children (Curran, 2018; Fincher, 2004; Kern, 2010; Raynor, 2018). Negative perceptions (and ongoing realities) of studentification in Northdale likely reinforce these assumptions, even where five-bedroom units in older PBSA may technically be large enough to suitably house larger households with children.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Post-studentification represents a dynamic evolution of the studentification process that brings non-student residents into studentified areas and witnesses a blurring of the distinction between housing intended for students and that targeted towards other demographics. Contrary to de-studentification, however, post-studentification is not associated with a declining student population and an influx of other residents to fill the resulting void. On a conceptual level, through the potential to integrate a diversity of residents across a wide cross-section of the population, post-studentification offers the possibility of a more inclusive, equitable urbanism than is advanced by conventional processes of studentification and associated exclusionary
policy responses. Existing policy approaches have sought to achieve ‘balanced’ populations by limiting the number of students in an area or by encouraging the construction of exclusive PBSA set apart from other neighbourhoods (Hubbard, 2008, 2009; Pickren, 2012; Revington et al., 2020; Ruiu, 2017; Sage et al., 2013; Smith and Hubbard, 2014). Alternatively, greater enforcement of regulatory codes risks disproportionate impact on racialised low-income non-student residents (Bose, 2015; Evans-Cowley, 2006).

Yet in Waterloo, where the city has adopted an explicit policy of post-studentification relying heavily on market-based redevelopment to revitalise the near-campus Northdale neighbourhood, the result has not been a diverse and inclusive urbanism. In practice, post-studentification in Waterloo has been largely limited to a marginal non-student demographic including friends of students and young professionals. Northdale has not entirely shed its reputation as a student area, and small apartments are perceived as unsuitable for families. Post-studentification has therefore represented a continuation of gentrification and the displacement of affordable housing, has had minimal capacity to reduce age segregation and has reproduced gendered assumptions regarding urban development. For post-studentification to actually result in a more diverse and equitable urbanism would require vastly more support for public services and amenities catering to a broader range of residents, such as schools and affordable housing options, as well as provisions to ensure housing perceived as suitable for households with children. In short, it has suffered many of the shortcomings of conventional market-driven redevelopment schemes (Lees, 2008; Rose et al., 2013).

While some elements of post-studentification are widespread, such as a blurring of the boundaries of both student housing and lifestyles (CBRE, 2020; Hubbard, 2009; Smith and Holt, 2007; Uyttebrouck et al., 2020; Winchester, 2021), the Waterloo case suggests that post-studentification is most likely in cities that Foote (2017) describes as ‘knowledge nodes’. These cities host large research-intensive universities and have experienced strong growth in professional employment, attracting young adults and resulting in comparatively expensive housing markets. However, the Waterloo experience also suggests that absent deeper interventions, post-studentification will likely be limited to a hybrid mix of PBSA, co-living apartments and condominiums geared towards young professionals.

While connections between studentification and youthification have been identified (Moos et al., 2019; Revington, 2018), the particular pathways of this relationship remain largely unspecified. This study finds that post-studentification is closely tied to youthification, and therefore represents one ‘mechanism of youthification’ (Ma et al., 2018). Youthification follows studentification within a neighbourhood due to the characteristics of the local housing stock, public and private amenities and broader regional housing and employment market trends. Specifically, high housing costs and local planning provisions have favoured the development of high-density housing, beyond five-bedroom units in PBSA, in near-campus neighbourhoods where students already live.

That youthification proceeds from studentification via the mechanism of post-studentification lends empirical support to the notion that studentification shapes students’ post-graduation housing decisions (He, 2015; Sage et al., 2013; Smith, 2005; Smith and Holt, 2007), albeit in a limited way. Former students may remain in a familiar neighbourhood and housing arrangement as they bide their time before they are able to realise longer-term housing aspirations. These long-term aspirations may be quite unlike those offered in PBSA: life in studentified
neighbourhoods might shape former students’ tolerance for certain types of housing rather than their ultimate preference.

Further research is needed to determine the extent of post-studentification in other contexts, and the potential for more successful policies of post-studentification, however defined. Empirically, examples of more ‘complete’ processes of post-studentification, with a more diverse population, would offer important theoretical and practical insight. Contingencies of the studentification process – for instance as differently expressed in China (He, 2015), Spain (Garmendia et al., 2012) or Chile (Prada, 2019) compared with Anglo-American contexts – may produce alternative variations of post-studentification, presenting opportunities for crucial comparative research.

Likewise, research should revisit Northdale in the future to see how (or whether) it has evolved as build-out is completed and the neighbourhood matures: Will incipient post-studentification remain limited, as at present, or will it achieve its promise of a more diverse community? Alternatively, will it be a passing phenomenon as the neighbourhood reverts to a more ‘typical’ studentified neighbourhood? These questions are not merely of quaint local importance, but are crucial to a broader discussion of how cities may respond positively to the challenges posed by studentification (Smith, 2008). The answers would illuminate possibilities to transform town–gown relations to build diverse near-campus neighbourhoods.

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ORCID iD

Nick Revington https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5165-4440

Notes

1. Due to co-operative education programmes with rotating work terms at both universities, not ‘all’ students are gone during the summer, although there are certainly fewer.
2. The gap is small, with 180 more unmarried university-educated men than women in the 25–34 age bracket, but nonetheless unusual, with only Calgary exhibiting the same pattern. There are 4515 more unmarried men than women at any education level in this age bracket in Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo (Flanagan, 2018).

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