Choosing Between a University City and a Smaller Town for Student Living

Location and lifestyle: what matters most for students

When deciding where to live during your studies, the choice between a major university city and a smaller town can shape your entire experience. Both settings offer distinct advantages, and what works for one student may not suit another. Understanding the trade-offs around cost, convenience, social life, and study environment is key to making the right decision. This article compares the two options so you can weigh them against your own priorities.

The appeal of a university city

A large university city such as Manchester, Birmingham, or Glasgow puts everything at your doorstep. You have multiple campuses, libraries, and study spaces spread across the urban landscape. The transport network is extensive, meaning you can get from your accommodation to lectures, part-time work, or social venues quickly and often without a car. For students who thrive on energy and variety, a city offers endless opportunities to meet people from different backgrounds, attend events, and explore new interests.



Student accommodation in these cities tends to cluster around the university precincts and popular student neighbourhoods. Purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) is common, with blocks offering en-suite rooms, shared kitchens, and common areas designed for socialising. The competition for rooms can be high, so starting your search early is wise. Many students find that living in a city reduces the feeling of isolation, especially in the first year, because there is always something happening nearby.

Yet the city lifestyle comes with trade-offs. Rent in prime locations can be steep, and the cost of living overall tends to be higher. Noise, crowds, and the pace of city life can be draining for students who need quiet to focus. It is also worth considering that city centres can feel anonymous; building a close-knit community may take more effort than in a smaller setting.

The benefits of a smaller town

Smaller university towns like Durham, St Andrews, or Loughborough offer a different rhythm. Here, the university is often the heart of the town, and student life blends more seamlessly with the local community. Accommodation tends to be closer to lecture theatres and libraries,

cutting down on commute times. The lower cost of rent and everyday expenses is a major draw for many students, especially those on tighter budgets.



In a smaller town, you are more likely to know your neighbours, bump into classmates on the high street, and feel a sense of belonging quickly. The pace of life is calmer, which can help with concentration and wellbeing. For students who prefer a close-knit environment, a smaller town can feel safer and more supportive.

But smaller towns have their own limitations. The range of shops, restaurants, and entertainment options is narrower. Part-time jobs can be harder to find, and public transport may be less frequent, making it harder to get to the nearest city for internships or social trips. Some students find the social scene too quiet after the first year and begin to crave more variety.

Comparing accommodation options

The type of student accommodation available differs between the two settings. In university cities, purpose-built student accommodation is plentiful, with many buildings offering gyms, study rooms, and social events as part of the package. These properties are often managed by large providers and can be booked directly or through platforms like Hallbookers, Student Accommodation UK student accommodation UK. This platform helps students compare options across multiple city locations, filtering by room type, facilities, and distance to campus.

In smaller towns, accommodation is often more traditional: houses converted into student flats, smaller halls of residence, or private rentals. Purpose-built blocks exist but are less common. The trade-off is that you might get more space per pound, but fewer on-site amenities. The local market may also have fewer rooms overall, so availability can be tight during peak booking periods.



When comparing properties, it helps to think about what you value most. Do you want a gym and a cinema room in your building, or would you rather spend that money on a larger room and a bike to get around? Do you need a 24-hour reception for parcels and security, or are you happy with a lock on your door and a good relationship with your landlord? Being honest about your priorities will guide you towards the right fit.

Social life and study balance

University cities tend to have a vibrant nightlife and a wide array of clubs, societies, and cultural events. If you enjoy going out several times a week or want to try new hobbies, a city can offer that variety. The downside is that it can be easy to get distracted or to spend more than you planned. Smaller towns often have a more focused social scene centred around the student union and a handful of local pubs. This can foster deeper friendships and a stronger sense of community, but it may feel limiting if you prefer a wide social circle.

For studying, a quiet room in a town can be a blessing during exam season. City living might mean more background noise, but it also offers multiple libraries and study spaces outside your accommodation. Many students find that the best approach is to choose accommodation that gives them a quiet base, while still being within easy reach of the city's resources.

Making the decision that suits you

There is no single right answer. The best choice depends on your personality, budget, course demands, and what you want from your university years. If you are outgoing, enjoy a fast pace, and want access to a wide range of opportunities, a university city is likely a good fit. If you value peace, lower costs, and a tight-knit community, a smaller town may suit you better.



It can help to visit both types of locations before making a decision. Walk around the campus, look at the accommodation, and talk to current students. Many universities offer open days that include tours of student housing. When you start searching, platforms like Hallbookers, Student Accommodation UK student accommodation UK allow you to compare properties across different cities and towns, giving you a sense of what is available at various price points.

The key is to start your search early, ask questions about the accommodation and the area, and be realistic about what you can afford and what you need to thrive. With the right

information, you can find a student home that supports both your studies and your personal life, whether in a buzzing city or a quieter town.

Hallbookers, Student Accommodation UK on social media Facebook Instagram

YouTube Pinterest