Identifying Socio-Spatial Inequalities in Student Housing in London

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Project Background

This project aimed to analyse existing spatial patterns in student accommodation and, based on student's preferences, suggest the most suitable areas for students in London. Previous research on students' residential decision making has shown that students often cluster into areas around the university, ignoring better options available on the market. So, this study proposed a computing multi-criteria attractiveness index in order to select the most suitable areas for student housing. The results of the study should support students in making more informed residential decisions and serve as guideline for real estate consultancies in targeting areas for purpose built student accommodation.

Data and Methods

Existing spatial patterns and criteria for the index were identified based on Student Accommodation Survey results provided by University of London Housing Department. The dataset included 4,699 survey replies from students who rent from the private sector (shared flats, studio, and landlord's house). The criteria for the attractiveness index were weighted using pairwise comparison after analysing the spatial inequalities of student preferences across London.

An open-source tool MCDA4ArcMap, designed for spatial multi criteria analysis in GIS software, was applied to assign an attractiveness score to all the areas in the dataset. The areas with the highest score were seen as the most suitable locations.

Key Findings

The attractiveness index was built upon the following criterion: proximity to university, cost of the area, safety and attractiveness of the area (deprivation measure). Criteria were weighted based on the spatial analysis of student preferences. It was observed that there are significant spatial inequalities in factors, which students hold important about the location of their accommodation.

To accommodate the spatial differences, the attractiveness index was first calculated using the examples of University College London in central London and St George's, University of London, in south London. Those universities were selected due to their high volume of respondents that were geographically clustered near their campuses. For the UCL sample, proximity to university was ranked by students to be more important than cost. So, most suitable areas were expected to be close to the university. Surprisingly, this was not the case and instead Paddington and Maida Vale, which are around 4km away from UCL, received the highest attractiveness score. Those areas have lower weekly rents than areas with a high concentration of students (for example Camden). Similarly, areas in the immediate surroundings of St George's University, where student concentration is high, received lower suitability scores compared to the other surrounding areas due to lower area attractiveness and higher crime rate.

The study concludes that to receive better living conditions students should consider areas with low student concentrations and not the immediate surroundings of the university. Most suitable areas are around 3-6 km away from the university.
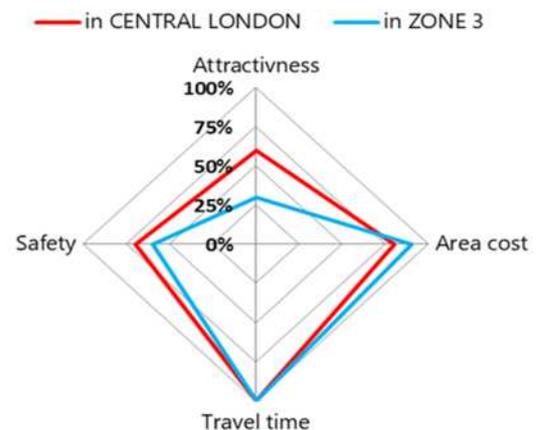

Figure 1. Percent of students that ranked each of the factors as important

Value of the Research

This paper introduced a methodology to define the most suitable areas for student accommodation based on student surveys on the example of 2 universities. Similar analysis could be conducted for all London universities to observe, if any areas stood out as generally the most suitable. This would be valuable input for real estate consultancies which are planning to establish purpose built student accommodation in London and are looking to find the best suitable locations and learn more about student preferences and expectations for the accommodation.