

MASTER IN MANAGEMENT OF TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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TARRAGONA AS AN INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY CITY

**The opportunities and challenges to attraction, integration and retention of
higher education students in a tourist context**

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1. Introduction

1.1 Objective

This research explores the relationship between cities and their higher education student communities, focusing on the residential conditions of students as a key factor for urban integration and talent retention. The Universitat Rovira I Virgili (URV) and the city of Tarragona is taken as a case in point. While Tarragona aims to consolidate its role as a “university city”, it faces growing pressure from touristification and a tightening housing market.

As a Mediterranean tourist destination, Tarragona attracts different forms of temporary mobility that contribute to the local economy and urban vitality, including both tourists and higher education students. While these groups generate economic and social value for the city, they also compete for access to limited housing resources. In this context, the growth of tourism-related accommodation may create tensions between the city’s development as a tourist destination and its ambition to strengthen its role as a “university city”. These tensions can affect students’ housing opportunities, quality of life and residential stability, ultimately influencing their willingness to remain in Tarragona after graduation.

The main objectives of this thesis are to analyze the current housing situation of URV students; identify the main barriers to affordability and stability (based on the ongoing survey data); investigate the conflict between student residential needs; the expansion of the short-term tourist rentals (Airbnb model) in the local context; and evaluate how these housing challenges impact the “life course” of students and their eventual decision to remain in Tarragona after graduation.

As such, the following hypotheses have been outlined:

1. *What is the current housing situation for students of URV?*
2. *What are the main barriers to affordability and sustainability for students looking for housing in Tarragona?*
3. *Is there a correlation between student residential needs and the expansion of short-term tourist rentals?*

A wider ambition is to understand the pathways of integration for foreign students in the city, exploring their potential as future residents and workers. The research investigates if being a tourist city, characterized by attractiveness and diversity, acts as a stimulus for studying and living in Tarragona, thereby facilitating the process of integration. These potential benefits are contrasted with the negative impacts of the increasing “airbnbification” of homes and rising housing rents. These factors are hypothesized to diminish the attractiveness of the city for students, hindering their successful integration and, consequently, reducing their intention to stay in the region long-term.

1.2 The Neoliberalization of Higher Education and Student Landscapes

Universities have seen radical changes in the past century; from elite institutions chosen by people to deepen their knowledge we now see them being used as mass-oriented networks. This shift has altered the physical and socio-economic geography of cities across the globe (Russo and Capel Tatjer, 2007). Higher Education Institutions have moved from public and standardized educational models toward highly competitive and financialized operations (Chatterton, 2010; Sotomayor et al., 2022).

Currently, this transition has redefined the concept of the student landscape, or “studentscape”, which is no longer confined to traditional, self-contained campuses or “citadels of education” (Russo and Capel Tatjer, 2007).

In modern economies, international students have a crucial role as consumers who simultaneously sustain the economy and local housing market of their host cities (Malet Calvo, 2018). The attraction of these students has become one of the main goals not only for universities seeking higher-priced tuition fees but also for local government employing marketing strategies to position their cities as global poles (Verger et al., 2016; Sotomayor et al., 2022).

As universities are losing the funding needed for student housing, they have stopped building affordable dorms, forcing students to find expensive and unstable housing elsewhere (Evans & Sotomayor, 2021; Sotomayor et al., 2022).

1.3 Studentification vs. Touristification: The Concept of the Short-Term City

The intersection of student mobility and real estate dynamics has been widely investigated through the analytical lens of “studentification” (Smith, 2008). This conceptual framework details the process by which the mass influx of students into off-campus residential areas transforms the physical, social and economic profile of local neighborhoods (Smith & Holt, 2007; Smith & Hubbard, 2014). Traditionally, studies define “studentification” as the conversion of single-family homes into high-density student rentals. This process frequently causes neighborhood decline, friction over anti-social behavior, and the eventual displacement of long-term, working-class residents (Munro et al., 2009; Smith, 2008).

Nevertheless, the integration of digital platforms into the urban fabric has complicated these processes, giving rise to an overlapping and far more disruptive phenomenon: touristification (Sequera & Nofre, 2018). Driven by global short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb, touristification involves the systematic opening of local residential real estate markets to global tourism demand, transforming housing from a basic social right into a highly financialized asset and a vehicle for capital accumulation (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018; Rossi and d’Addona, 2025).

When touristification penetrates university cities, it radically alters pre-existing studentification dynamics, shifting the urban trajectory toward what has been conceptualized as the “short-term city” (Salerno & Russo, 2022). Under the weight of touristification, the traditional role of students as gentrifiers is inverted. In highly demanded urban cores, buy-to-let investors, multiproperty hosts and professional property management companies systematically acquire and reallocate the lower-quality housing stocks that previously formed the foundation of affordable student accommodation (Cocola-Gant et al., 2021; Russo et al., 2026). By capitalizing on the vast rent gaps between long-term residential leases and the highly profitable daily rates executed via digital platforms, corporate actors effectively “hijack” the shared rental market (Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018; Russo et al., 2026).

Consequently, international and domestic students find themselves structurally marginalized and out-competed by temporary tourists possessing significantly higher purchasing power (Hubbard, 2008; Russo & Salerno, 2023). This tourist-led gentrification does not result in a class-based substitution of residents, but rather in an absolute demographic erosion where resident student populations are replaced by temporary visitors, culminating in heightened housing precarity, and a total disruption of the urban territory (Cocola-Gant & Cago, 2021; Rossi and d’Addona, 2025).

1.4 Research Context: Tarragona and the Universitat Rovira i Virgili

This thesis investigates these overlapping urban dynamics within the specific empirical context of Tarragona, a medium-sized coastal city located in the autonomous region of Catalonia, Spain (Russo et al., 2026). With a resident population of approximately one hundred and forty thousand inhabitants (according to recent municipal records), Tarragona represents a classic case of an intermediate urban center that has experienced a radical structural reorientation over the past two decades, transforming itself into a highly successful, autonomous destination for cultural, heritage and coastal tourism (Russo et al., 2026).

The city's urban economy is anchored by its rich Roman archeological heritage, designed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, and its proximity to the environmental assets of the Mediterranean littoral, attracting massive inflows of national and international visitors that outpace traditional hotel capacities and penetrate the residential housing market (Russo et al., 2026). Concurrently, Tarragona functions as a prominent regional university hub, hosting the main infrastructure of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV). The URV is a public higher education institution that attracts a highly diverse student body across its multiple specialized campuses: the Sescelades Campus (concentrating sciences and engineering), the Catalunya Campus (concentrating human and social sciences), and the peripheral campuses located in the neighboring municipalities of Reus and Vila-Seca (focusing on business, medicine and tourism studies) (Russo et al., 2026).

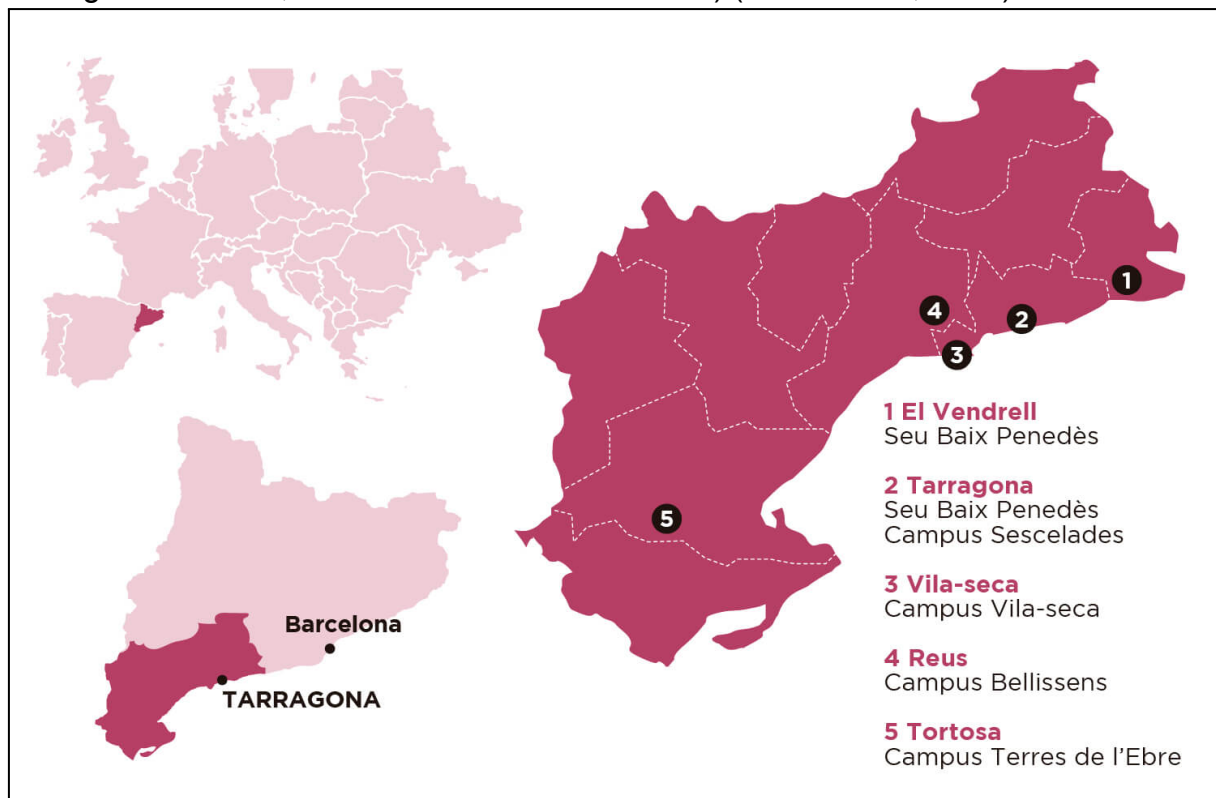


Figure 1: Map of the region of Tarragona and the campuses of URV

The ongoing internationalization strategies of the URV, combined with prestigious regional grants and international scholarships schemes such as the Fundación Carolina for Latin American postgraduates, have dramatically increased the influx of international mobile master's and PhD individuals into Tarragona's urban center (Russo et al., 2026). However, this academic expansion has unfolded in a highly constrained real estate environment. The URV possesses an extreme deficit of university-provided accommodations or affordable student residences, with available public options being highly overpriced and

quickly filled, thereby forcing the vast majority of international students to seek residential solutions within the private rental market of the city's central and historical districts (Russo et al., 2026).

Tarragona has consequently become a contested urban arena where global tourism demand, speculative real estate investments and highly vulnerable student population, compete directly for the same inelastic housing stock, making it a critical case study to analyze the short-term city crisis (Salerno & Russo, 2022; Russo et al., 2026).

1.5 Introduction to Research Design and Empirical Fieldwork

To address the outlined research objectives within the context of Tarragona, this thesis implements a mixed-methods research design. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches allows the research to capture both the broader structural transformations of the local housing market and the everyday experiences of those directly affected by these dynamics.

The qualitative dimension draws on secondary data concerning the distribution and evolution of tourist accommodation within the city, providing an overview of spatial patterns, market concentration and housing pressures across different urban areas. These data help identify which parts of the city are most affected by tourism-related housing changes and whether these areas are also where students live.

To complement this macro-level perspective, the qualitative component is based on twenty semi-structured interviews conducted with international Master's and PhD students enrolled at Universitat Rovira i Virgili. The interviews explore participants' housing trajectories, accommodation search strategies, perceptions of affordability, experiences with rental contracts and future residential intentions. Through these narratives, the study seeks to understand how broader market changes are experienced and negotiated at the individual level.

Combining these two approaches makes it possible to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between tourism-driven housing transformations and student housing accessibility by connecting housing market trends with the experiences of international students. This combination of methods helps answer the research questions and assess the study's hypotheses, while also providing a clear picture of how tourism-related housing changes affect the everyday lives of international students in Tarragona.

The empirical work of this thesis is organised into two distinct chapters that move from the general context to the particular experience. Chapter 4, *Initial Analysis of the Case Study Context*, establishes the structural backdrop in three steps: it first characterises Tarragona as a student–university city and the position of the URV within it (4.1); it then presents the results of a large-scale URV housing-mobility survey, which situates the residential conditions of postgraduate and international students within those of the wider student body (4.2); and it finally draws on the EURECAT diagnostic of tourist housing to map the expansion, concentration and financialisation of short-term rentals across the city (4.3). Chapter 5, *Interview Results*, then turns to the twenty semi-structured interviews, reconstructing in depth how these structural dynamics are lived, interpreted and negotiated by international Master's and PhD students. Presenting the contextual and the experiential evidence as two separate empirical chapters allows the macro-scale patterns to frame, rather than crowd out, the fine-grained qualitative analysis that constitutes the analytical core of the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Strategic Production of “University Cities”

The relationship between universities and their host cities has attracted attention in urban studies and planning research. This interaction is often described through the concept of the “town and gown” relationship, which highlights the close connections between local governments and higher education institutions in shaping urban development (Russo et al., 2007). Universities are not isolated institutions; they play an important role in influencing the economic, social and demographic characteristics of the cities in which they are located (Russo & Capel-Tatjer, 2007).

For this reason, many local governments seek to strengthen their image as “university cities”, viewing higher education as a driver of urban regeneration, innovation and economic development (Chatterton, 2010).

Beyond their direct contribution to local consumption, students, particularly those coming from other regions or countries, represent an important resource for the host territory (Malet Calvo, 2018). Their presence contributes to cultural diversity, social dynamism and the circulation of knowledge and skills within the city (Russo et al., 2007). From a longer-term perspective, attracting and retaining students can also support local labour markets and demographic sustainability; students who develop strong social and residential ties during their studies may choose to remain in the city after graduation, becoming skilled workers and active members of the local community (Verger et al., 2016). For this reason, the ability of a city to offer favorable living conditions, including access to adequate housing, can play an important role in its broader development strategy.

2.2 The Evolution of Student Housing Literature: From “Urban Nuisance” to Active Gentrifiers

To better understand how contemporary student landscapes operate, it is important to examine how students have been conceptualized within housing literature over time. In the 1980s, students were generally portrayed through a rather negative socio-spatial perspective (Munro et al., 2009; Rugg et al., 2004). They were considered a transient and socially marginal group, often willing to accept poor housing conditions due to their limited financial resources; as a result, students tended to occupy lower-quality housing stock in urban areas, particularly in neighborhoods that were unattractive to other social groups (Rugg et al., 2004). Early studies suggested that the concentration of students in working-class areas could discourage urban regeneration and private investment, while also creating tensions with local residents because of noise, lifestyle differences and other forms of anti-social behavior (Hubbard, 2008; Munro et al., 2009).

More recent research has challenged this interpretation. Contemporary urban geography literature argues that large student populations can act as an important driver of urban change through the process of “studentification” (Smith, 2008). This concept describes how the growing presence of students in off-campus residential areas can reshape the physical, social and economic characteristics of neighborhoods (Smith & Holt, 2007; Smith & Hubbard, 2014). The conversion of family homes into shared student accommodation often contributes to demographic change and, in some cases, to the displacement of long-term working-class residents (Munro et al., 2009; Smith, 2008). Therefore, in many university towns students are no longer viewed as an obstacle to development but rather as “apprentice gentrifiers”, facilitating subsequent processes of real estate investment, commercial transformation and socio-economic restructuring (Smith & Holt, 2007).

2.3 The Tourist City as a Student Destination: Overlapping Flows and Leisure Bubbles

The relationship between universities and cities becomes particularly relevant when a university city is also an important leisure and tourist destination (Russo & Capel-Tatjer, 2007). Research on international student mobility, especially in the context of “Erasmus cities”, shows that students often consider not only the academic reputation of a university but also the attractiveness of the city itself when choosing where to study (Malet Calvo, 2018; Malet et al., 2024). Factors such as a coastal location, cultural heritage, a diverse social environment and an active cultural and nightlife scene can make a destination more appealing to prospective students (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002; Malet, 2018).

At the same time, the presence of a large student population can increase the attractiveness of a city for visitors; students contribute to the development of cultural activities, entertainment venues and social spaces that enrich the urban environment and become part of the city’s appeal (Russo & Arias Sans, 2009). As a result, tourism and student mobility often reinforce one another.

Recent studies suggest that these two processes are becoming increasingly interconnected: in many cities, the experiences of international students and short-term visitors overlap, contributing to new forms of touristification and studentification that reshape local neighborhoods and housing markets (Malet Calvo et al., 2024).

Beyond their impact on housing markets and neighborhood transformation, students, particularly internationals, also influence the social and cultural dynamics of university cities. Several studies have highlighted how international students often experience a form of socio-spatial isolation from local residents due to the creation and maintenance of what has been described as the “Erasmus bubble” (Earls, 2018; Beech, 2014; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015). As a result, many international students spend most of their time within relatively closed social environments; they frequently live in student-oriented accommodation, socialize mainly with other international students and consume goods and services in English-speaking or tourist-oriented businesses, limiting their interaction with local communities, cultures and languages (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015; Earls, 2018). Although universities promote international mobility activities as opportunities for intercultural exchange and mutual understanding, empirical research suggests that students’ everyday experiences are often strongly shaped by commercial actors and entertainment industries (Mitchell, 2012; Malet Calvo et al., 2024). In highly touristified destinations, international student organizations and student associations increasingly operate according to market-oriented logistics, transforming students’ leisure time into packaged and predictable consumption experiences, similar to those offered by the tourism industry (Malet Calvo, 2018; Malet Calvo et al., 2024).

Partly as a consequence of the financial pressures associated with the neoliberalization of higher education, many student associations have gradually moved away from their traditional role as providers of student support and services, instead, they increasingly establish partnerships with nightlife venues, bar and entertainment businesses located in central tourist districts (Brooks et al., 2016; Malet Calvo et al., 2024). Through social media promotion, destination marketing and organized “Welcome Week” events, these associations channel newly arrived students into standardized circuits of consumption that closely resemble those of mass tourism (Amit, 2007; Malet Calvo et al., 2024).

A central component of this commercialized student experience is the promotion of alcohol-centered activities, including pub crawls, beer pong tournaments and open-bar parties (Bell, 2008; Malet Calvo et al., 2024). Public Relations representatives and local volunteers perform forms of affective labour, creating a sense of friendship and belonging while simultaneously directing students towards specific venues from which student

associations receive commissions on ticket sales and drinks (Farrugia et al., 2018; Malet Calvo et al., 2024). According to this perspective, the increasing commercialization of student leisure tends to weaken more meaningful forms of intercultural integration, such as the institutional buddy program and long-term interactions with local residents. These are often replaced by highly standardized and tourist-oriented experiences that encourage students to remain within international social circles (Saarinen & Wall-Reinius, 2019; Malet Calvo et al., 2024). Consequently, the Erasmus bubble is further reinforced, contributing to socio-spatial segregation, limiting opportunities for local language acquisition and increasing the social fragmentation of university cities (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Malet Calvo et al., 2024).

2.4 The “Hidden Curriculum” of Student Housing and Social Stratification

The systematic failure of universities and local governments to guarantee adequate, affordable and accessible housing options has institutionalized what can be conceptualized as the “hidden curriculum of student housing” (Sotomayor et al., 2022). Borrowed from critical educational theory, which is a sociological theory which refutes the idea that universities are a “neutral” place only based on merit but a political institution that reflects and reproduces the economic inequalities and the social hierarchies of the capital system, the “hidden curriculum” refers to the unwritten, but deeply impactful lessons, and behaviors that students tacitly absorb as a direct consequence of the structural arrangements, exclusion and organizational “invisibilization” of higher education, meaning that that universities act as if the student housing crisis does not exist, making the problem “invisible” within their official institutional structures (Giroux & Penna, 1979; Sotomayor et al., 2022). When analyzing the geography of where students study, this analytical framework challenges the common belief that students have it easy when it comes to housing. Most housing studies assume students have an institutional safety net and a safe, supervised transition away from their parents, but that's not always true (Rugg, Ford & Burrows, 2004; Sotomayor et al., 2022). Instead, the “hidden curriculum” demonstrates that the everyday struggle to secure a habitable living space in such a market, functions as a powerful, oppressive vector of socialization and stratification (Koutsouris et al., 2021; Sotomayor et al., 2022). The “hidden curriculum” of student housing becomes particularly visible in the contemporary housing market: recent studies suggest that students are increasingly facing difficulties in accessing affordable accommodation due to two parallel transformations of urban housing systems (Rossi & d’Addona, 2025).

Firstly, the reduction of public investment in student housing has encouraged the growing involvement of private investors and corporate developers in the sector (Cenere et al., 2024). Recent studies on the financialization of student housing, including the LINUS project conducted at the Politecnico di Torino, highlight how this shift has contributed to the rapid expansion of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) (Cenere et al., 2024). While these developments increase the overall supply of student housing, they are often designed for students with greater financial resources and are characterized by relatively high rents; rather than functioning primarily as student-support housing infrastructures, many PBSAs operate according to market logics and are increasingly treated as investment assets (Cenere et al., 2024). Consequently, lower-income students may find themselves excluded from these forms of accommodation, contributing to new forms of inequality and socio-economic segregation within the student population (Sotomayor et al., 2022; Rossi & d’Addona, 2025).

Secondly, students increasingly compete for housing with the short-term rental market: the expansion of digital platforms such as Airbnb has transformed many residential properties into tourist accommodation, reducing the availability long-term rental housing in several

university cities (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018; Sequera & Nofre, 2018). This process is particularly evident in destinations where tourism and student mobility overlap: in these contexts, housing is increasingly treated as an investment opportunity rather than a social good, contributing to rising rentals and growing pressure on local markets (Russo & Salerno, 2023; Rossi & d'Addona, 2025).

While students were previously described as agents of neighborhood change and gentrification, they are now affected by the same processes: in highly touristified urban areas, students often struggle to compete with short-term visitors and higher-income tenants for access to affordable housing (Hubbard, 2008; Cocola-Gant et al., 2021). As a result, many students face increasing housing insecurity, rising rents and a reduction in the availability of suitable accommodation (Rossi & d'Addona, 2025).

The “hidden curriculum” forces students to adopt the survival behaviors of the hyper-competitive neoliberal subject, requiring them to be incessantly entrepreneurial, ingenious and resilient simply to navigate a predatory rental environment (Sotomayor et al., 2022). Students are compelled to enter the informal “hustle economy”, juggling multiple low-paying part-time jobs to cover skyrocketing rent costs (Kovacs Burns et al., 2014; Sotomayor et al., 2022). This heavy mental and physical toll drains the time and energy students need for classes, labs, and studying. Ultimately, it derails their education and causes severe mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion (Franke, 2003; Sotomayor et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the “hidden curriculum” reproduces and hardens existing social hierarchies, class divisions and racialized divides within the student body (Chatterton, 2010; Sotomayor et al., 2022). While affluent students from privileged socio-economic backgrounds can easily bypass market precarity by accessing upscale, private student accommodations marginalized, low-income individuals are pushed into unsafe, overcrowded and sub-standard rooming houses or forced into exhausting, long-distance daily commutes from peripheral zones (Smith & Hubbard, 2014; Sotomayor et al., 2022).

In this competitive field, the housing search becomes a site of intersectional discrimination, where landlords deploy illegal financial barriers, credit requirements and explicit racialized or national-origin gatekeeping, forcing highly vulnerable groups into a state of structural housing poverty and hidden homelessness that permanently compromises their academic success and future life courses (Broton, 2020; Sotomayor et al., 2022).

2.5 Gaps and New Research Objects

Despite the growing amount of research on urban transformation, higher education and tourism, these topics are often studied separately, leaving an important gap in research at their intersection. Traditional urban planning and housing studies have thoroughly investigated the phenomenon of “studentification”, mapping how the physical and socio-demographic fabric of local neighborhoods is altered by the mass influx of student populations. Concurrently, critical geography has increasingly focused on touristification and on the growth of the “short-term city” shaped by digital platforms such as Airbnb.

However, very little academic literature has explored how these two fields, student residential needs and short-term tourist rental expansion, directly collide and reshape one another. While previous studies on student geographies tend to focus on relatively stable, middle-class student experiences supported by strong university systems, they pay much less attention to the vulnerabilities faced by international students dealing with rising housing costs and tourism-driven gentrification. Furthermore, while existing literature frequently details the short-term transactional pressures of housing markets (such as rising rents and displacement), there is a lack of research connecting these real estate dynamics to the long-term ability of cities to retain residents. Few studies have examined how the “hidden curriculum” of student housing and platform-driven housing precarity shape the

long-term experiences of international postgraduate students, particularly their decisions to remain in or leave the host region after graduation. Finally, the vast majority of current studentification and touristification research is heavily biased toward capital cities, large metropolitan areas or highly hyper-touristified global destinations (such as Barcelona). Intermediate, medium-sized university hubs, such as Tarragona, have been largely overlooked by empirical studies. Intermediate cities represent a distinct type of urban environment in which universities play an important role in attracting and developing regional talent, but where the local, inelastic housing is highly vulnerable to being transformed into short-term rentals through digital platforms.

This thesis explores a research area that has received little attention so far. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combined short-term rental data with the personal experiences of international Master's and PhD students to better understand how tourism-driven housing pressures affect student life. More specifically, the study examines how the growing commercialization of urban space can weaken the ability of an intermediate university city to support, integrate and retain highly skilled international students over the long term.

3. Methodology

3.1 Mixed-Methods Research Design

The contextual quantitative analysis presented in Chapter 4 draws on two secondary sources. The first is a URV student housing and mobility survey, comprising 2,501 valid responses across the university's campuses, of which 834 were completed by students living outside the family home and 151 by postgraduate students in that situation; this instrument captures residential status, housing type, rental costs, contract conditions and a set of 1–5 satisfaction ratings (location, quality, search experience and cost fairness) directly comparable to Block C of the interview schedule. The second is the EURECAT report *Diagnosi de l'Habitatge d'Ús Turístic a Tarragona 2025* (Russo et al., 2026), used to characterise the short-term rental market. Analyses of the survey reported below rely on descriptive statistics and group comparisons (independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA) rather than regression, a choice better suited to the categorical structure of the data and to the descriptive, contextual purpose these results serve. The narrow quantitative exercise that integrates the interview Block-C data with neighbourhood-level tourism indicators is reported separately, alongside the qualitative findings it complements, in Chapter 5.

To capture the structural complexity of tourist-led gentrification and its immediate impacts on student housing accessibility, this study deploys a rigorous mixed-methods research design that bridges macro-analytical quantitative secondary data with deeply contextualized, qualitative primary narratives (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Sotomayor et al., 2022).

The research design is structured into two main analytical pillars:

1. **Quantitative Secondary Data Integration:** The quantitative macro-framework leverages the comprehensive findings of the policy report titled “Diagnosi de l'Habitatge d'Ús Turístic a Tarragona 2025”, compiled by the Technological Consultancy Department of EURECAT under the scientific supervision of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili (Russo et al., 2026). This report provides a fine-grained longitudinal diagnostic of short-term tourist rentals (*HUTs; Habitatges d'Ús Turístic*) at the sub-municipal scale of urban zones and census tracts (*seccions censals*) (Russo et al., 2026). By integrating official public registries from the Generalitat de Catalunya with data from AirDNA (extracting performance metrics from Airbnb and Vrbo), this report quantifies indicators of urban pressure, listing professionalization, property concentration and rental profitability (ADR and RevMonth) (Russo et al., 2026). These spatial metrics are systematically cross-tabulated with local sociodemographic variables from IDESCAT to chart the precise geography of real estate financialization in Tarragona (Russo et al., 2026).
2. **Qualitative Primary Narrative Collection:** The qualitative micro-framework consists of 20 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with international mobile students currently enrolled at the URV and residing across different urban sectors of Tarragona and Salou. These interviews were designed to capture the subjective lived experiences, preferences, searching strategies and personal vulnerabilities of students confronting the local housing crunch, directly mirroring the methodological approaches deployed in contemporary human geography and critical higher education studies. Moreover, the quantitative data collected from these interviews was

also employed to integrate with the data from the EUROCAT report (see Appendix A and B).

3.2 Qualitative Sample Profiling and Coding Scheme

The qualitative sample consists of 20 international mobile students carefully balanced by age, gender, level of study and nationality to ensure a highly representative cross-section of the URV's international student body.

The sample details are systematically cross-tabulated in Appendix A.

The 20 interviews were fully transcribed using computer-assisted transcription software and subsequently analyzed through an inductive thematic analysis approach, which enabled the identification and organization of recurring themes and categories. The transcripts were organized around three macro-blocks of investigation matching the structural logic of the quantitative report:

- **Block A Sociodemographic Pathways:** Detailing age, nationality, specific institutional channels of arrivals (e.g., scholarships), and campus distribution.
- **Block B Qualitative Motivation and Integration Vectors:** Focused on the micro-mechanisms of housing search, interaction with digital platforms (Airbnb), linguistic barriers with the local Catalan-speaking population and post-graduation long-term staying or leaving plans.
- **Block C Residential Conditions Metrics:** Capturing quantitative housing indicators, including monthly rent costs, household size, tenancy length, contract durations and explicit satisfaction scales (1-5) evaluating position, quality and quality-price ratio fairness.

3.3 Ethical Protocol, Data Protection and Procedural Compliance

The qualitative pillar of this study was executed under strict adherence to the formal ethical protocols and data protection mandates established by current Spanish and European Union legislations. The research protocol and investigative tools were submitted to and officially approved by the Ethics Committee for Research into People, Society and the Environment (CEIPSA; Comitè d'Ètica de la Investigació en Persones, Societat i Medi Ambient) of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili. Prior to the execution of the 20 in-depth qualitative interviews, each participant was provided with a standard institutional "Participant Information Sheet" (Full d'Informativa al Participant). This document explicitly informed the international candidates regarding the title of the study, the name of the master's student investigator, the research supervisor, the structural objectives of the final thesis and the academic center responsible for the study, namely the Territorial Analysis and Tourist Studies (GRATET) research group within the URV Department of Geography.

The formal administrative interaction with participants relied on the mandatory execution of the standard "Informed Consent Form" (Formulari de Consens Informat). Before signing, each international student acknowledged having received, read and fully comprehended the participant information sheet. The candidates were granted formal space to raise personal doubts and received transparent clarifications regarding the potential benefits and total absence of risks associated with their participation.

The informed consent text structured their participation under the explicit parameters of volunteerism, granting each student the absolute right to discontinue their involvement and withdraw their formal consent at any specific moment of the inquiry without needing to provide any form of justification, and guaranteeing that such a tactical withdrawal would not trigger any negative consequence or structural penalties. Furthermore, the consent sheet provided the participants with explicit tick-box options to authorize or deny the long-term storage, publication and subsequent reuse of their encoded responses within future related academic research projects once this master's thesis is completed.

To ensure absolute confidentiality and data protection compliance, the research staff implemented rigorous technical and organizational security measures in full alignment with Organic Law 3/2018 of December 5 on the Protection of Personal Data and Guarantee of Digital Rights, alongside the general parameters of Regulation(EU) No.2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of April 27, 2016 (GDPR). The personal identities of the 20 international students were immediately dissociated from their interview text through anonymization and coding procedures.

All qualitative transcripts were processed using alphabetical and numerical codes, and literal text quotes deployed throughout the thesis rely on fake pseudonyms to permanently obscure the real identities of the participants. The processing of the data utilized the protected information system of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili, applying the data security measures mandated by Royal Decree 311/2022 that regulates the National Security Scheme (Esquema Nacional de Seguretat).

The raw qualitative files were stored exclusively as Microsoft Word documents inside password-protected OneDrive servers managed by the URV network infrastructure, with subsequent analytical processing executed via the software ATLAS.ti. Direct data access was strictly limited to the master's student investigator and the principal thesis supervisor through individual authentication protocols, with a formal commitment to preserve the archive for a legal period of 5 years following final thesis submission before permanent deletion.

3.4 Analysis of Qualitative Data

The transcripts from the 20 semi-structured interviews were analyzed using a qualitative thematic approach, based on a direct and inductive reading of the interviews texts.

This process facilitated the organization, comparison and interpretation of participants' narratives, allowing connections to emerge between individual experiences of housing precarity and the broader urban dynamics associated with the expansion of short-term rental markets.

To support the analysis, participants profiles (Appendix A) were systematically cross tabulated in order to map the diversity and inherent dissimilarities of the interviewed postgraduates. The sample represents a stratified group of non-local, internationally mobile students balanced by gender, age (ranging from young Master's students aged 23 to PhD researchers aged 50) and different geographic origins. All interviewees had relocated to Tarragona for higher education purposes, providing insights into the housing experiences of students navigating an unfamiliar rental market while adapting to a new social and institutional environment.

The qualitative analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, allowing patterns and themes to emerge directly from the interview material. Through reading, comparison and categorization of the transcripts, the findings were organized into four major thematic narratives. These themes operationalize the lived experiences of housing insecurity among international students and situate them within the broader theoretical frameworks of the "hidden curriculum" and urban segregation.

4. Initial Analysis of the Case Study Context

This chapter assembles the structural context against which the lived experiences of Chapter 5 can be read. It proceeds from the institutional and demographic profile of Tarragona as a student city (4.1), through the survey evidence on how URV students, and international postgraduates in particular, are housed (4.2), to the diagnostic of the short-term rental market that competes with them for that housing (4.3).

4.1 Tarragona as a Student–University City

Tarragona is a medium-sized coastal city of roughly 140,000 inhabitants in southern Catalonia, and the principal seat of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV), a public university created in 1991 from the consolidation of pre-existing faculties in Tarragona and Reus. The URV is not a single campus but a constellation of specialised sites distributed across the territory: Sescelades (sciences and engineering) and Campus Catalunya (human and social sciences) within Tarragona itself, alongside the Reus campuses (medicine and health sciences, and business at Bellissens), Vila-seca (tourism and geography), and smaller centres in Tortosa, Coma-ruga and Vilafranca (Russo et al., 2026). This polycentric structure is consequential for housing: students do not gravitate toward a single university quarter but must weigh proximity to a specific campus against the pull of the city centre, where most services, social life and transport connections concentrate (Russo et al., 2026). As several of the survey and interview respondents make clear, the result is that a student's housing decision is rarely a simple matter of living "near the university."

Over the past two decades the URV has pursued an active internationalisation strategy, recruiting a growing body of international Master's and doctoral students, supported in part by scholarship schemes such as the Fundación Carolina for Latin American postgraduates (Russo et al., 2026). This academic expansion has, however, unfolded in a constrained residential environment. By comparison with other Catalan university cities such as Girona, Tarragona offers a relatively thin supply of university-managed or public student accommodation; the places that do exist are quickly filled and, as the survey data below confirm, comparatively expensive (Gutiérrez et al., 2017). The practical consequence is that the great majority of students who do not live with their families must enter the private rental market and they do so in a city whose centre and historic core are simultaneously the object of intense tourist demand, a tension developed in 4.3.

Tarragona therefore presents the defining features of what the literature terms an intermediate university city: large enough to host a research university with international reach, yet small enough that its inelastic central housing stock can be rapidly reshaped by competing demands. It is precisely this combination, a university actively importing mobile students into a city whose housing is increasingly oriented toward tourism, that makes Tarragona an instructive case for examining the collision between student residential needs and short-term rental expansion. The two sections that follow quantify each side of that collision in turn.

4.2 Housing-Mobility Survey Results

To situate the experiences of the twenty interviewees within the wider student population, this section draws on a URV student housing and mobility survey comprising 2,501 valid responses. Two-thirds of respondents (1,667) reported living with their families, a reminder that for a large share of the predominantly local undergraduate body the housing market is simply not encountered. The analysis here therefore focuses on the 834 respondents who live *outside* the family household, the population that actually confronts the rental market,

and, within them, on the 151 postgraduate students whose situation most closely matches that of the thesis's interview sample.

Among students living outside the family home, the dominant residential solution is the shared rented flat, reported by roughly two-thirds of respondents (548 of 834), followed at a distance by university residences (78), individually rented flats (73) and various owned arrangements. Reported monthly rent is concentrated in the lower bands, the largest single group (363 respondents) pays between 150 and 350 euros, typically for a room in a shared flat, but the distribution has a long upper tail, and individually rented flats and university residences command markedly higher costs. The pre-computed report tables put the mean monthly rent for a university-residence place at roughly 639 euros and for an individually rented flat at roughly 591 euros, against about 375 euros for a room in a shared flat, confirming that the privacy and security of independent or institutional accommodation carry a substantial premium, the very premium that pushes lower-resourced students into shared arrangements.

The survey's four satisfaction ratings (each scored from 1, very poor, to 5, very good) reveal a clear internal hierarchy. Students rate the *quality* of their accommodation reasonably well (mean 3.69) and its *location* relative to campus adequately (mean 3.58), but they rate the *experience of searching* for housing distinctly poorly (mean 2.90) and its *cost fairness* lower still (mean 2.75). In other words, students are broadly satisfied with where they end up living but markedly dissatisfied with how hard it was to get there and with what it costs them — a profile that points to the search process and affordability, rather than the housing stock as such, as the locus of difficulty.

Rating (1–5)	Mean	n
Housing quality	3.69	826
Location relative to campus	3.58	827
Search experience	2.90	819
Cost fairness	2.75	834

Table 4.1: Mean housing satisfaction ratings, students living outside the family home (URV housing-mobility survey, valid responses).

Crucially for the present study, these difficulties are not evenly distributed. Splitting the sample by nationality shows that foreign students rate both the search experience and cost fairness significantly worse than their Spanish peers. On the search-experience item, Spanish students average 2.99 against 2.49 for foreign students; on cost fairness, 2.83 against 2.44. Both gaps are statistically significant (independent-samples t-tests, both $p < 0.001$), and they echo the EURECAT report's own breakdown, which finds that foreign students face appreciably higher housing costs, North American respondents in particular reporting the highest mean rents in the survey. The disadvantage compounds when life stage is added: postgraduate students living outside the family home rate the search experience at just 2.24 and cost fairness at 2.36, significantly below the figures for undergraduates in the same situation (3.07 and 2.84 respectively; both $p < 0.001$).

Group (outside family home)	Search experience	Cost fairness
Spanish students	2.99	2.83
Foreign students	2.49	2.44
Undergraduates	3.07	2.84
Postgraduates	2.24	2.36

Table 4.2: Mean ratings by nationality and study level; all pairwise differences significant at $p < 0.001$ (URV housing-mobility survey).

This is the single most important contextual finding for the thesis. The students at the intersection of the two disadvantaged categories, international postgraduates living independently, are precisely the interviewees of Chapter 5, and the survey confirms that their pronounced difficulty with the housing search and its cost is not an artefact of a small or unrepresentative sample but a structural pattern visible across hundreds of respondents. The survey also lends weight to the affordability constraint the interviews describe: across the open-ended motivational items, students living with family cite economic constraints and the lack of opportunities as leading reasons for not moving out, while the comparatively high cost of independent and institutional accommodation shown above explains why those who do move out cluster so heavily in shared flats.

Two limitations should be noted. First, the survey population is predominantly undergraduate and overwhelmingly local, so the postgraduate and foreign subgroups, although large enough to support the comparisons reported here, are minorities within the instrument; the figures for these subgroups are robust but should be read as characterising those subgroups rather than the student body as a whole. Second, the survey is cross-sectional and self-reported, capturing perceived satisfaction at a single moment rather than housing trajectories over time. These caveats notwithstanding, the survey provides exactly the contextual anchor the thesis requires: it demonstrates, at scale, that international and postgraduate students experience the Tarragona housing market as significantly harder to navigate and less affordable than their local, undergraduate counterparts do, the structural condition whose lived texture the interviews of Chapter 5 go on to explore.

4.3 Evolution and Spatial Concentration of Short-Term Rentals

The quantitative dataset established by EURECAT diagnostic report reveals a massive, absolute expansion of short-term tourist rental (LT-Lloguers Turístic) across the municipality of Tarragona over the eight-year period from 2017 to 2025.

As of July 2025, the total stock of tourist accommodations reached an unprecedented volume of 2,700 registered and unregistered units¹, supplying an estimated total capacity of 12,359 bedplaces. Advanced filtering algorithms applied to platform calendars indicate a highly conservative estimate of 89.0% active listings (amounting to 2,403 active units and 11,023 active places), which demonstrates that short-term holiday letting has become a highly structural, permanent commercial function within the local housing market.

¹Registered = apartments that have a legal tourist license (HUT in Catalonia). Unregistered = properties rented to tourists via digital platform (Airbnb) without valid tourist licenses.

This longitudinal growth is far from linear; between 2017 and 2025, the total volume of active listings expanded by an overall rate of +87.9% across the city. While the period between 2019 and 2021 witnessed a temporary contraction and tactical “deactivation” of tourist listings due to global COVID-19 pandemic mobility restrictions, where many property owners provisionally pivoted toward medium-term residential contracts; the post-pandemic period (2022-2025) triggered a violent rebound. Active tourist units expanded by +27.1% and active bedplaces by +20.6% in the last four years alone, entirely recovering and exceeding pre-pandemic peaks.

Spatially, this intense proliferation exhibits a pattern of hyper-concentration within specific, high-value urban areas. Advanced cartographical point-pattern and hot-spot analysis (Fig.2 & Fig.3) demonstrates that the touristification of housing is clustered within three primary tourist zones of the city, which collectively capture 75.7% of the total active stock: the single-family coastal resort zone of Urbanitzacions de Llevant (607 active units; 25.3%), the medieval historic center of the Part Alta (612 active units; 25.5%) and the central commercial core of the Eixample Tarragona (598 active units; 24.9%).

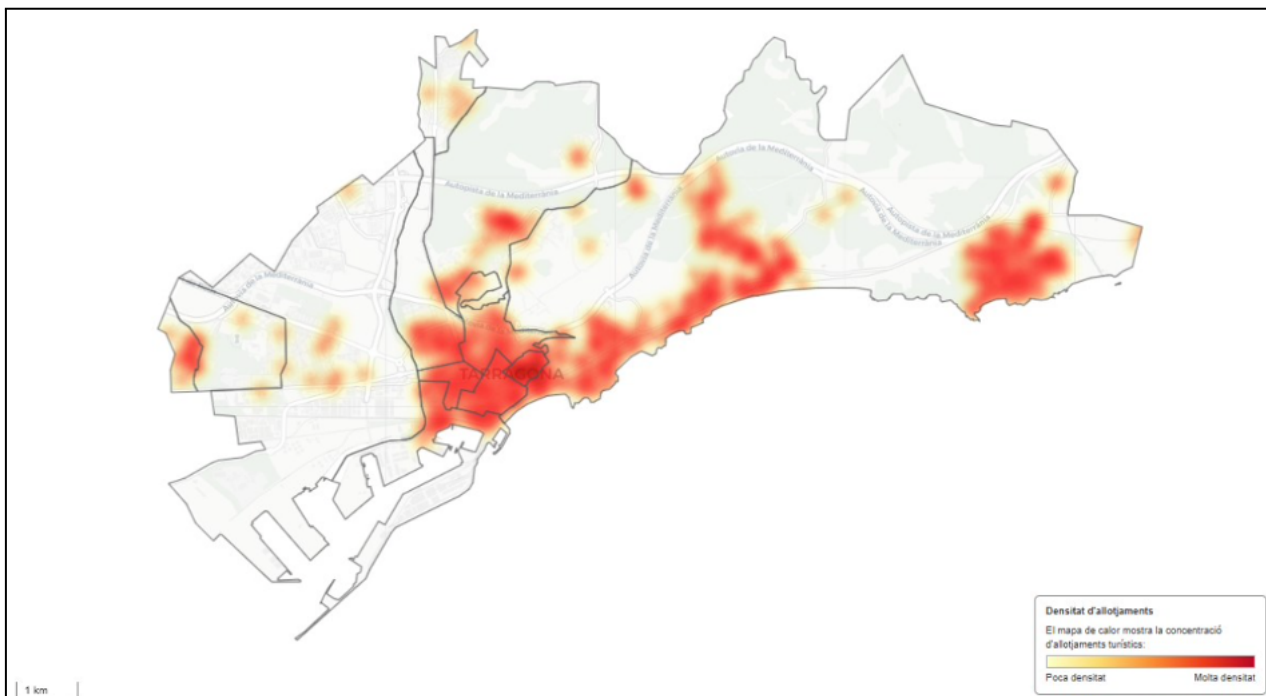


Figure 2: Hot-spot analysis of the area surrounding Tarragona including Salou and Reus. (EURECAT).

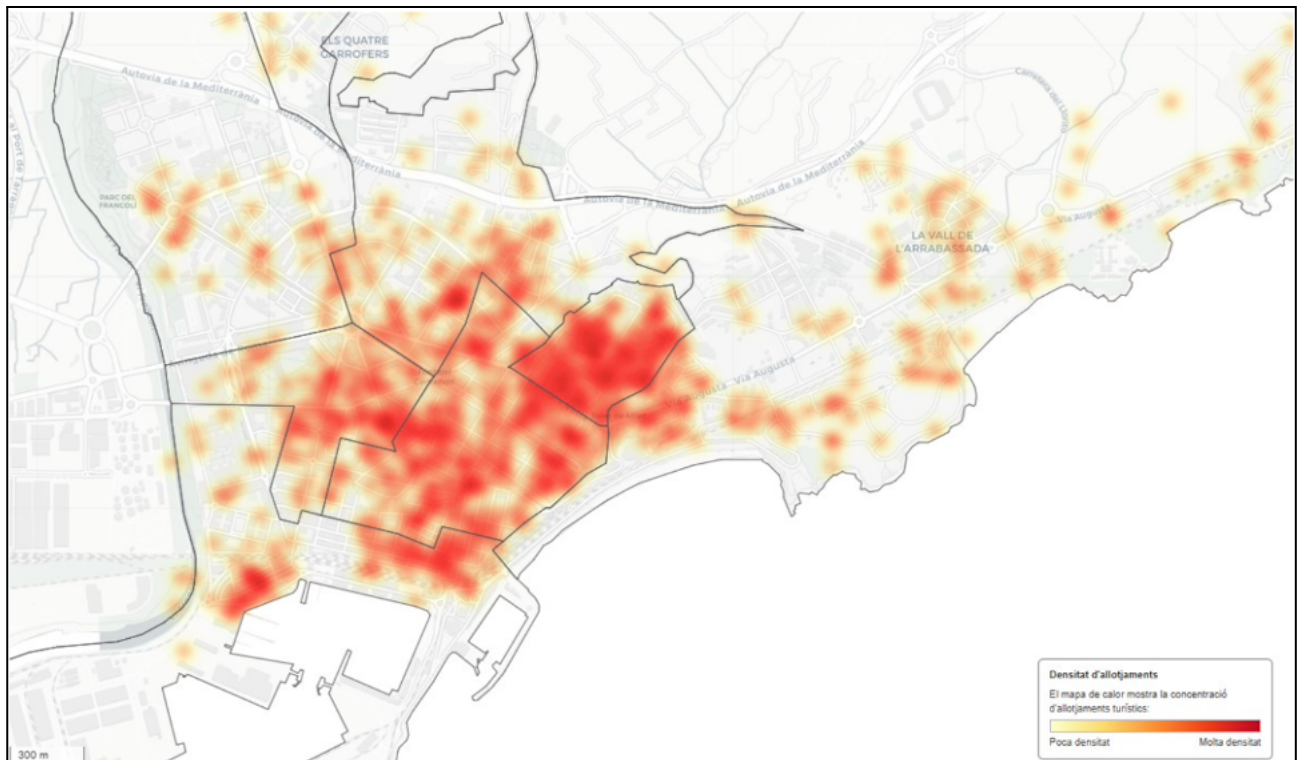


Figure 3: Hot-spot analysis of the city of Tarragona (EURECAT).

In sharp contrast, peripheral, working-class residential neighborhoods located to the west and north of the city (such as Campclar, Bonavista and Torreforta) display an almost total absence of platform hospitality, with active listings staying close to zero.

This geography of concentration reveals that while early platform rhetoric promised a democratic, spatial dispersal of tourism benefits toward peripheral neighborhoods, digital hospitality has instead followed a strict logic of capital re-concentration within localized clusters of high tourist attractiveness and natural amenities (historic cores and beaches).

The concentration of short-term rentals is particularly relevant when considered within the broader role of Tarragona as both a university city and a tourist destination. As discussed in the previous sections, recent studies have increasingly highlighted the connections between studentification and touristification, especially in cities where higher education and tourism coexist as important urban functions (Malet Calvo et al., 2024; Russo & Salerno, 2023).

Tarragona represents an interesting example of this dynamic. On one hand, the city hosts important facilities of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV), attracting both domestic and international students and contributing to regional development (Gutiérrez et al., 2017). On the other hand, Tarragona's historical heritage, coastal location and tourism economy generate a strong demand for short-term accommodation (Russo & Capel-Tatjer, 2007). As a result, students and tourists increasingly compete for the same housing resources, particularly in central and historically attractive areas of the city.

This conflict over the shared housing stock is visible inside the historical quarter of the Part Alta. According to the reports produced by Gutiérrez et al. (2017) for the Càtedra Universitat i Regió del Coneixement, the neighborhood was characterized by a significant number of vacant residential units and low-rent traditional housing stocks. Over time, many local families moved away from the area due to several practical disadvantages, including limited accessibility and the difficulties associated with living in a medieval urban fabric that was not well adapted to modern mobility needs (Gutiérrez et al., 2017). As a result, a stock of low-cost housing became available and was gradually occupied by university students, who found in the Part Alta an affordable residential option close to the university.

However, the rapid growth of short-term rental platforms after 2017 has significantly transformed the housing landscape of the neighborhood (Russo et al., 2026). Properties that had traditionally been rented to students were increasingly purchased or managed by investors and commercial operators seeking to profit from the expanding tourism market; through the conversion of long-term rental housing into short-term tourist accommodation, these actors have contributed to the financialization of the local housing stock (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). The substantial difference between the returns generated by student leases and those obtainable through short-term rentals has incentivized this shift, reducing the availability of affordable housing for students. As a consequence, a significant portion of the residential stock that once accommodated the local student population has been redirected towards tourism, altering the social composition of the neighborhood and replacing a relatively stable residential community with a more transient population of visitors (Piñeira Mantiñán, 2025).

The pressure on the student housing market is further worsened by the limited availability of university-provided accommodation in Tarragona: compared to other medium-sized university cities in Catalonia, such as Girona, Tarragona has a relatively small supply of student residences and public accommodation options (Gutiérrez et al., 2017). As a result, the existing places are highly competitive and often insufficient to meet demand, particularly at the beginning of the academic year; consequently, many incoming students, especially international postgraduates, have little alternative but to rely on the private rental market (Russo et al., 2026).

Furthermore, these housing constraints are closely linked to the spatial organization of the Rovira i Virgili University, whose campuses are distributed across different locations, including Sescelades, Catalunya, Reus and Vila-Seca (Russo et al., 2026). Many master's and PhD students regularly move between these sites as part of their academic activities; in this context, the limited availability of affordable housing in central Tarragona can create additional challenges, particularly for the international students, who often face greater difficulties in accessing the local housing market. As housing costs increase, some students are compelled to seek accommodation in surrounding municipalities or more peripheral areas, resulting in longer commuting times and additional financial and logistical burdens (Sotomayor et al., 2022). These dynamics may affect students' daily experiences and their integration into university and city life, while also reducing the potential contribution that a stable student population can make to the social and cultural vitality of the city center.

4.3.1 Typologies, Marketing Channels and the Rise of “Irregular” Offers

The structural composition of Tarragona's Short-Term Rental (STR) market underscores a systemic reallocation of urban housing stock away from residential use and toward tourism consumption. Data from 2025 reveals a market overwhelmingly dominated by full-property listings rather than peer-to-peer homesharing models. Out of 2,403 active units, an absolute majority of 92.4% (2,221 units, controlling 10,664 active bedplaces) consists of entire apartments or flats (*apartaments sencers*). Conversely, shared housing configurations remain statistically marginal: private rooms in shared apartments (*habitacions privades*) account for just 7.3% (176 units), while shared rooms (*habitacions compartides*) plummet to an insignificant 0.2% (6 units). This structural asymmetry intensifies in highly touristic zones; in the Urbanitzacions de Llevant, for instance, whole-property letting reaches a near-absolute saturation point of 98.9% of total active capacity. This spatial concentration confirms that STR platforms in Tarragona function primarily as mechanisms for commercial property exploitation rather than the collaborative "sharing economy" narrative often promoted by digital platforms.

Beyond spatial typology, a triangulation of data across public registries and commercial data platforms unveils a deeply fragmented ecosystem divided by marketing channels and varying degrees of legal compliance. Rather than a homogenous marketplace, the active supply can be structured into three distinct typologies of digital hospitality:

- **Class 1: LT "Legals" (24.3%):** Dwellings actively promoted on digital platforms (such as Airbnb and Vrbo) that explicitly display a validated, legitimate tourist license (*Habitatge d'Ús Turístic* or HUT) verified by municipal inspection teams.
- **Class 2: LT "Irregulars" (13.8%):** Active platform listings operating outside institutional boundaries. This segment utilizes fraudulent or non-existent registration codes, or engages in "license camouflaging", the strategic replication of a single valid code across multiple distinct property listings.
- **Class 3: HUT "No Comercialitzats" (61.9%):** Formally registered tourist licenses that do not appear within active digital databases (e.g., AirDNA). These units represent either dormant licenses or properties marketed through conventional offline networks, independent property agencies, or specialized non-digital tour operators.

Crucially, tracking these typologies reveals a sharp rise in illegal and unlicensed activity (Class 2) during the post-pandemic recovery period. Between 2021 and 2025, active unlicensed "irregular" listings on digital platforms surged by an explosive 80.0% city-wide, while irregular bedplaces climbed by 42.0%. This underground expansion is heavily concentrated within the city's densest urban and historical sectors. Inside the historic *Part Alta*, unlicensed digital listings expanded by an astronomical 175.0% over the four-year period, while climbing by 100.0% within the commercial *Eixample*.

From a regulatory standpoint, this spike in irregular supply can be directly linked to the implementation of institutional barriers, specifically, the legal moratoria on new tourist licenses passed under the framework of Regional Decree-Law (DL 3/2023). Rather than curbing the growth of tourist accommodations, the municipal freeze on formal legal channels inadvertently catalyzed an informal market. Speculative actors and small property owners deliberately bypassed institutional oversight, flooding digital platforms with unlicensed listings to capture lucrative tourist rents during peak seasons. This phenomenon illustrates a classic regulatory friction, where top-down zoning and licensing restrictions trigger informal, digitized resistance from property markets.

4.3.2 Urban Concentration and Real Estate Finalization

The internal metrics of property ownership and platform hosting confirm a progressive consolidation, professionalization and financialization of the short-term rental market in Tarragona, moving rapidly away from the primitive myth of peer-to-peer "sharing hospitality". Out of the 417 uniquely identifiable digital hosts operating inside the AirDNA database in 2025, a majority of 73.6% are categorized as individual single-property listings (*unipropietaris*), who command a shrinking share of 33.5% of total digital properties.

The structural weight of the market has shifted decisively toward multi-property operators and professional property managers (*multipropietaris*), who represent 26.4% of total active hosts but directly command a commanding majority of 66.5% of the total active digital listings.

This structural concentration is segmented into distinct tiers of property accumulation:

- **Small *Multipropietaris* (2-5 units):** Represent 21.6% of identifiable hosts and control 25.1% of the property stock.

- Medium *Multipropietaris* (6-20 units): Comprise 3.8% of local hosts but command 16.6% of the active listings, showing stable growth since 2017.
- Large Corporate *Multipropietaris* (>20 units): Represent a tiny elite of 1.0% of active hosts (4 corporate entities) that systematically control an absolute share of 18.9% (173 active units) of the entire digital supply.

This multi-property concentration operates through clear spatial strategies, with corporate operators focusing on the purchase of *propietats* verticals, entire residential buildings acquired from vulnerable owners or working-class tenants, completely refurbished and integrated into the platform market as un-regulated, corporate apartment blocks. City-wide, 48.0% of all valid tourist licences are heavily clustered within 165 singular addresses that contain more than 3 active HUTs each, while 16.0% of total licenses are concentrated within 19 large addresses that host more than 10 tourist listings each.

The report explicitly details 29 singular addresses hosting more than 8 active tourist units, including 11 addresses that have been entirely converted into corporate tourist blocks. Prominent examples include Plaza de los Carros 12 (34 tourist units out of 34 total residential units), Rambla Nova 20 (34 tourist units out of 40 residential units) and Carrer Reial 1 (30 tourist units out of 30 residential units).

Cadastral cross-checks reveal that many of these properties underwent total structural renovations immediately prior to conversion (e.g., Plaza Carros in 2019, Carrer Reial in 2021), confirming that deployment of systematic buy-to-let financial strategies that permanently extract entire physical structures from the conventional long-term residential housing market.

4.3.3 Rental Price Inflation and Spatial Injustice

The intense reallocation of conventional apartments into short-term platform spaces has triggered a deep crisis of rental affordability across the urban geography of Tarragona. Between 2017 and 2025, the Average Daily Rate (ADR) of platform accommodations expanded by an overall rate of +42.4% city-wide, climbing from a mean of €93.5 per night to an unprecedented average of €133.1 per night in July 2025.

This pricing mechanism exhibits massive spatial variations, peaking at a mean ADR of €201.2 per night inside the high-end coastal villas of Urbanitzacions de Llevant, and reaching €113.9 per night inside the commercial Eixample and €106.0 per night in the historic Part Alta.

This platform revenue model translates into immense monthly yields for property owners, out-competing any residential lease option. In July 2025, the city-wide monthly revenue generated per platform unit (RevMonth) reached an average of €875.3 per month, representing an astounding longitudinal growth of +482.2% since 2017, when a single unit generated only €150.4 per month.

This revenue potential climbs to a localized mean of €1,077.1 per month inside Urbanitzacions de Llevant, €861.1 per month inside the Part Alta and peaks at an extraordinary average of €1,155.4 per month inside the coastal working-class neighborhood of Barris Marítims (which recorded a +110.3% revenue jump in the last four years alone).

When cross-examined with official residential lease benchmarks from Idealista, these platform revenues help explain the structural dynamics behind spatial injustice and tenant displacement. City-wide, the average platform revenue of €875.3 per month systematically exceeds the average long-term conventional residential lease cost of €792.0 per month for a standard 70-square-meter apartment.

This rent gap reaches extreme proportions inside the Barris Marítims, where a landlord operating a platform unit extracts a +65.0% financial premium compared to a conventional

residential tenant (€1,155.4 platform yield vs. €700.0 conventional lease). Inside the historic Part Alta, the platform premium remains positive at +4.0% (€861.1 vs €826.0). By making conventional long-term leases economically uncompetitive, this rent gap creates a strong incentive for landlords to evict stable residents, block tenancy renewals and reallocate properties into the platform market, driving intense residential vulnerability across the city's working-class and historic cores.

4.4 Analysis of Quantitative Data

This section outlines how the quantitative material was processed, integrated and modelled in order to address the third research question: whether a measurable association exists between the local expansion of short-term tourist rentals and the residential conditions (housing-search ease and cost) reported by internationally mobile students at the URV.

To support the mixed-methods design, data from both the secondary and primary sources were organised and prepared for analysis through a process of selection, coding and integration. The quantitative macro-data were derived from the EURECAT report *Diagnosi de l'Habitatge d'Ús Turístic a Tarragona 2025* (Russo et al., 2026). From the original dataset, only the indicators relevant to short-term rental activity within the municipality of Tarragona were retained. Particular attention was given to the density of tourist accommodation, operationalised through three complementary indicators reported at the level of the city's twelve urban zones: the number of active tourist-rental units per 100 conventional dwellings (Table 9 in the source report), the number of tourist-rental places per 1,000 inhabitants (Table 10), and the number of units per 100 inhabitants (Table 8, the threshold metric used by Decree-Law 3/2023). The first of these was treated as the primary measure of tourism-related housing pressure, as it most directly captures the share of the conventional residential stock absorbed by the short-term market.

Because the EURECAT indicators are aggregated to the neighbourhood scale whereas the interview data describe individuals, the two sources were joined through a contextual merge: each respondent was geocoded to the urban zone of their declared term-time address, and the corresponding tourism-pressure values were assigned to that individual. The interviewed students were distributed across four zones, Eixample (n = 9), Part Alta (n = 6), Sant Pere i Sant Pau (n = 3) and Barris Marítims (n = 1), together with one respondent residing in Salou, a separate municipality not covered by the EURECAT report. The Salou case was therefore excluded from the regression, yielding an analytical sample of n = 19.

The interview data themselves supplied the dependent and control variables. Responses to Block C were coded into numerical form: perceptions of accommodation quality, of the location relative to campus, and of the ease of finding suitable housing were each converted into a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good), while the cost-fairness item ran from 1 (very expensive) to 5 (very inexpensive). Monthly housing costs, originally recorded as banded categories, were standardised to the midpoint of each band (e.g. €351–500 → €425; €751–1,000 → €875) to permit treatment as a continuous variable. Two further Block C items, the number of accommodation changes during studies and household size, were retained as control variables.

The relationship between tourism pressure and student residential conditions was estimated using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, a method for estimating the parameters of a linear model by minimising the sum of squared residuals, implemented in

Microsoft Excel. Separate bivariate models were specified with neighbourhood tourism density as the independent variable and, in turn, housing-search ease, cost fairness and standardised monthly rent as dependent variables.

It must be stated at the outset that this quantitative exercise is exploratory rather than confirmatory, and three features of the data constrain the inferences that can legitimately be drawn from it. First, the sample is small ($n = 19$). Second, because tourism pressure was assigned at the neighbourhood level, the nineteen respondents collapse onto only four distinct values of the independent variable, which sharply reduces the effective variation available to the model and inflates the influence of any single zone. Third, and most consequentially for interpretation, a neighbourhood-density measure captures only the *spatial* dimension of short-term rental expansion; as the qualitative findings below make clear, the mechanism through which students actually experience this expansion is largely *temporal*, the seasonal conversion of their dwellings, which a static density indicator cannot register. The regression results are therefore reported as a descriptive complement to the qualitative analysis, not as a stand-alone test of causation.

The regression provides no statistical evidence of an association between neighbourhood tourism density and the residential conditions students report. Regressing housing-search ease on the number of tourist-rental units per 100 conventional dwellings produces a near-flat slope ($b = 0.034$, $SE = 0.041$) that is not significantly different from zero ($r = 0.20$, $R^2 = 0.04$, $p = 0.42$), meaning that neighbourhood tourism intensity accounts for roughly four per cent of the variation in how easily students found their housing. The models for cost fairness ($r = 0.24$, $R^2 = 0.06$, $p = 0.33$) and for standardised monthly rent ($b = 8.04$, $r = 0.29$, $R^2 = 0.09$, $p = 0.23$) are likewise non-significant, as are the equivalent specifications using places per 1,000 inhabitants as the predictor (search ease $p = 0.48$; rent $p = 0.23$). In none of the models does the relationship reach conventional thresholds of significance.

A simple descriptive comparison reinforces the point and, indeed, runs counter to the direction that the gentrification literature would predict. Students living in the highest-pressure zone, the Part Alta, where the EURECAT report records 19.3 tourist-rental units per 100 dwellings, by far the most intense concentration in the city, reported, on average, marginally *better* search experiences (mean = 2.83 on the 1–5 scale) than those in lower-pressure zones (mean = 2.62), while also paying higher rents (€650 vs €537 per month). Rather than indicating that tourism pressure eases student housing difficulty, this pattern most plausibly reflects a selection effect: the Part Alta is a small, high-amenity historic core whose comparatively well-resourced student residents (several of them paying in the €751–1,000 band) are precisely those least exposed to the search difficulties experienced by lower-income peers elsewhere. The density measure, in other words, is partly capturing the affluence and desirability of a neighbourhood rather than the housing precarity of its student population.

Taken together, the quantitative analysis returns a null result: at the spatial resolution available, no significant correlation between short-term rental density and student housing satisfaction or cost can be established. This finding should not be read as evidence that no relationship exists. As the following qualitative analysis demonstrates, the impact of the short-term rental market on these students is substantial and consistently reported; the divergence between the null statistical result and the strong qualitative evidence is itself a central finding of this study, and is interpreted in Section 4.2 and discussed in Section 4.5.

5. The Experience of International Students at URV: Results from the Fieldwork

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the qualitative pillar, which constitutes the analytical core of the study. Drawing on the twenty semi-structured interviews with internationally mobile Master's and PhD students at the URV, it reconstructs how the macro-level housing dynamics described in Chapter 4 are encountered, interpreted and negotiated in everyday life. The analysis is organised into four thematic narratives that emerged inductively from the transcripts: the mechanics of the housing search and the financial asymmetries that structure it (5.1); the temporal pressure exerted by the short-term rental market through the "scholar contract" (5.2); the dynamics of social integration, language and belonging (5.3); and the post-graduation horizon of staying versus leaving (5.4). A concluding section (5.5) integrates these qualitative findings with the contextual quantitative analysis of Chapter 4.

Throughout, the analysis foregrounds the differentiating elements between groups rather than treating the international student body as homogeneous. Three axes of variation prove especially salient: the geographical origin of the student (broadly, Global North versus Global South), which conditions the financial and practical resources available to absorb housing shocks; the level and life stage of study (younger, often unattached Master's students versus older PhD researchers, several with families or partners and year-round residence requirements); and the channel of access to housing, which divides those who entered the open digital market from those who bypassed it entirely through pre-existing personal, familial or co-national ties. These axes intersect, and the sections below trace how they combine to produce markedly unequal residential experiences.

5.1 Housing Search Mechanism, Financial Squeezes and Global Asymmetry

The first and most immediate finding concerns the near-total absence of an institutional safety net at the point of arrival. Across the sample, the University's own housing infrastructure was experienced as either inadequate, prohibitively expensive or simply non-functional. participant20, a US Master's student, found the official channel broken at the precise moment he needed it:

"I went onto the URV website and all the links were broken and I couldn't get a response from the administration... I don't know if they were just understaffed, but I didn't get much help on that regard."

The same broken links and unanswered emails recur in the accounts of participant19, who abandoned the URV portal after discovering that listings "asked for a Spanish contract" he could not provide, and of participant 2, whose unsuccessful search pushed him into a commercial student residence as a last resort. Where institutional housing did exist, its cost placed it out of reach for precisely those students with the fewest resources. participant10, an Iranian Master's student, captured the paradox with particular clarity:

"The university offered accommodation, like a student residence. They filled really quick and the price was really expensive; a single room in Tarragona is between €400 and €550 normally, but for one single room in residence, it was around €900. So most of the students had to find a room in Tarragona."

The institutional vacuum thus channels virtually all students into the private rental market, but it does not channel them on equal terms. The most consequential differentiating element to emerge from the interviews is not the difficulty of the search in the abstract (reported satisfaction with search ease was, in fact, almost identical between Northern and Southern students, averaging 2.6 on the five-point scale for both groups) but the consequences of that difficulty and the resources available to absorb it. Here a sharp asymmetry opens up between students from the Global North and those from the Global South.

For Northern students, housing costs registered as an irritant rather than a threat. Participant 20 articulated his own relative privilege with unusual self-awareness, explicitly contrasting his position with that of his flatmates:

“It doesn’t impact me as much as others because I’m going back to the US in the summer... I have a friend from Iran, he can’t exactly go back to Iran, obviously. My friend from Syria, my roommate, he can’t go back to Syria right now, so for them, it’s a lot harder. For me, I’m kind of spoiled in that regard. I can just hop across the ocean back home.”

This statement is analytically significant because it names, from within the sample, the very mechanism the literature describes: the capacity to exit, to return to a home country over the summer, is unevenly distributed, and that distribution maps onto geopolitical lines. For students from the Global South, the same housing barriers carried materially heavier consequences. Participant 12, a Moroccan Master’s student, described the compounding effect of linguistic exclusion and distance on the open market:

“I had many difficulties; first I found something on Idealista, the problem was that being a non-Spanish speaker, owners don’t speak to you easily and since I was calling from abroad most of the time they didn’t even answer the phone... I saw mostly just small ‘boxes’ with high prices.”

Participant 10’s experience was starker still: arriving without secured housing, he spent a week in a hotel sending unanswered messages before securing an overpriced room he himself described as “not that much good and it’s overpriced, but this is what it is.” His search-ease rating of 1 (“very poor”) and his cost rating of 2 (“expensive”) are the lived correlates of a market that, as the “hidden curriculum” framework anticipates (Sotomayor et al., 2022), tacitly filters by nationality, language and the ability to perform financial solvency from abroad.

Yet the North–South axis alone does not exhaust the variation, and it would be a simplification to read it as a clean binary. The single most powerful predictor of a smooth entry into housing, across the whole sample, was not wealth but access to a pre-existing personal network. Fully eight of the twenty respondents bypassed the open market altogether through family or friends, and these students, regardless of region of origin, reported the least distress. Participant 9 rented a spare room directly from his sister, already resident in Tarragona, and rated his search ease 5 (“very good”) despite arriving with limited English; participant 8’s uncle “helped me to talk to the landlord” and vetted the contract on her behalf; participant 14 and participant 19 both relied on a father’s friend; participant 11 found her flat “thanks to a friend” within the Iranian community. These cases reveal that the market’s exclusionary mechanisms operate most violently on those who confront it without intermediaries, disproportionately, though not exclusively, students from the Global South arriving alone and from abroad. Conversely, those exposed directly to Idealista, Fotocasa and Facebook (participant 10, participant 12, participant 15,

participant 20, participant 1) absorbed the full force of language barriers, deposit demands, scams and seasonal restrictions.

A gendered dimension cuts across these accounts as well. Several women living alone or as the sole female tenant described prioritising safety and proximity in ways that narrowed their already-constrained options. Participant 4, a Brazilian PhD researcher without a scholarship, explained that “as a woman living alone, I wanted something that’s not that far from downtown, walking distance for most facilities,” a criterion she balanced against a price ceiling set by the need to work alongside her studies. Participant 1, a Mexican scholarship-holder, foregrounded “the level of trust” of the landlord after reading “a lot of really bad experiences” of scams circulating within her Fundación Carolina cohort. For these students, the housing search was not merely a financial transaction but an exercise in risk management under conditions of informational asymmetry.

Taken together, the first narrative establishes that the institutional failure to provide accessible housing does not produce a uniform hardship but a stratified one. The market sorts students according to their nationality, their command of Spanish or Catalan, their gender and, above all, their access to trusted intermediaries, reproducing within the microcosm of the URV’s international intake the global socio-economic hierarchies from which these students depart.

5.2 The Impact of Airbnb, Seasonal Evictions and the “Scholar Contract” Trap

If the first narrative concerns who struggles to enter the market, the second concerns the distinctive temporal mechanism through which the short-term rental economy reproduces that struggle year after year. The defining instrument here is what several respondents independently termed the “scholar contract”: a lease that expires at the end of June, releasing the dwelling for conversion to higher-yielding tourist accommodation over the summer peak. This mechanism surfaced, directly or indirectly, in the accounts of at least eight respondents, and crucially it appeared *across* neighbourhoods of widely differing tourist density, a point that the contextual quantitative analysis (Chapter 4) helps to interpret and that section 5.5 develops.

Participant 10 provided the clearest single account of the mechanism operating as an explicit gatekeeping decision by a landlord:

“I asked another owner: she had a room in the downtown... she asked me, ‘how many months do you want?’ And I told her, ‘around three months,’ and she said that was not doable because in June tourists come and she had to give the room and she wanted to do the Airbnb thing. She then told me before June, but then I couldn’t accept because in June I have an exam.”

The incompatibility participant 10 describes is structural rather than incidental: the rental calendar of the tourist economy and the academic calendar of the university are misaligned by design, and the student is required to absorb the mismatch. Participant 2, living in a commercial residence in a quite different part of the city, observed the same June boundary without initially understanding its cause:

“All the contracts here end on the 30th of June, so I assume it has really something to do with that... I’m pretty sure it has something to do with it because I had some problems at first to find a flat and it was very difficult.”

Participant 14, a Syrian Master's student living beside the Plaça de la Font in the Part Alta, was in the process of being displaced by exactly this dynamic at the time of interview, and articulated its cascading effect on the search for a replacement:

"The one I am in right now has the same problem, which is I need to leave at the end of June, because they are going to rent it as Airbnb. Now looking for different apartments, everyone is doing the Airbnb thing, so it's way more expensive. They won't allow a student to live there and that's a major problem. Now I'm looking in Tarragona, Reus, even Barcelona, and I can't find good things because of this."

Participant 14's testimony demonstrates that the seasonal mechanism does not merely displace a student from one dwelling; it degrades the entire replacement market, pushing the search outward to other municipalities. Participant 7, a Vietnamese PhD researcher, recounted abandoning an otherwise ideal flat for precisely this reason:

"They have very fixed term, for example, I can only enter from September until June, and after that three months without renting... even though the price and the place were very nice, I had to find another place."

The interviews also reveal that even a *valid, signed* long-term lease offers only partial protection, because landlords actively seek to recover properties for summer conversion. Participant 12 described receiving a pre-emptive eviction probe despite holding a one-year contract:

"My flatmates and even me received a text from the house owner asking if I was leaving in June, and I said 'No, I have a one-year contract with you,' so I think he's trying to get us out to try and rent it."

Participant 15, a Russian Master's student in the Part Alta, described having to "fight" for a contract that would not expel her mid-studies: "some of the houses I looked at were perfect but they expected me to leave at the end of May and obviously that couldn't work for me because I'm studying." Her search-ease rating of 1 reflects the cost of that struggle even when it ultimately succeeded.

The most extreme manifestation of the temporal squeeze appears in the case of participant 16, a Russian PhD researcher and the sample's sole resident of Salou. As an older researcher conducting year-round doctoral work, her thesis, with some irony, concerns the very impact of tourists on residents, she cannot vacate for the summer, and has been forced to internalise the landlord's forgone tourist income as a personal surcharge:

"We're living now in a touristic apartment... now of course I pay, I think, twice more than a normal person pays in Salou, because it's a tourist apartment with a tourist license and, not to have to move out, that makes you pay or compensate the owners for the summer period."

Participant 16's case crystallises the differential burden the seasonal mechanism imposes by life stage. Younger Master's students such as participant 20 can dissolve the problem by leaving the country for the summer; year-round PhD researchers (participant 16, participant 4, participant 7, participant 6) cannot, and must either pay a summer premium or undertake repeated, destabilising moves. Participant 6, a Peruvian PhD student in the Part Alta, recalled that the platform listings he encountered "were only temporal or scholar period rentals... it's like a boom right now," and counted himself fortunate to have found a

year-round contract at all. The temporal structure of the short-term market thus interacts with the temporal structure of the degree: the longer and more continuous the student's required residence, the more acutely the seasonal eviction cycle bites.

Two analytical observations follow. First, the mechanism is contractual and seasonal rather than purely spatial: it is encoded in the terms landlords offer, and it is felt by students dispersed across the Part Alta, the Eixample, Sant Pere i Sant Pau and Salou alike. Second, the EURECAT report's independent finding that irregular short-term listings rose by roughly 80 per cent city-wide between 2021 and 2025, under the licensing moratorium (Russo et al., 2026), corroborates the students' perception that this pressure intensified precisely during the years of their tenancies. The students were not imagining a trend; they were living inside its leading edge.

5.3 Integration Dynamics, Linguistic Barriers and the Insular Foreign Bubble

The third narrative turns from the housing market to the social fabric, where the interviews document a pervasive pattern of socio-spatial isolation, the "Erasmus bubble" or "foreigner bubble" identified in the literature (William Earls, 2018; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015), alongside instructive exceptions that clarify the conditions under which it is, or is not, overcome. The dominant experience was one of encountering closed local social circles. Participant 7, reflecting comparatively on her mobility across European cities, located the difficulty in the very "localness" that makes Tarragona attractive:

"In local cities like Tarragona here... it's very difficult in order to socialize because it's very local. So normally the people already have the circles... it's difficult to get into the circles. So it's also difficult to socialize and build a sense of belonging."

This barrier was repeatedly attributed to language, and specifically to the active enforcement of Catalan. Participant 12 described the experience as a deliberate marking of insider and outsider status:

"There is a lot of elderly in this town; my biggest problem is that they all start to speak to you in Catalan, even when you tell them you don't understand and sometimes even if you try to speak Spanish... there is a big difference between 'them' and 'us.'"

Participant 8 echoed the perception that linguistic competence functions as a precondition for any social contact at all, "if you don't know at least Spanish it's like 'no contact'", while distinguishing, as several younger respondents did, between unwelcoming elderly residents and more open younger ones. The consequence, for many, was a retreat into linguistically homogeneous enclaves. Participant 15's account is representative of a coping strategy that simultaneously resolves and entrenches the isolation:

"Mostly it was the Russian-speaking community I found online that helped out. I don't really feel like bars and events helped; I don't speak Catalan, so either way it would've been difficult for me to interact with locals."

For participant 9, the combination of late arrival, limited English and no Spanish produced a sense of exclusion that fed directly into his feelings about the city and, ultimately, his intention to leave:

"I didn't really feel 'welcomed' when I arrived; that is why I don't really like the place and I don't feel like I really belong here."

Crucially, however, the sample contains counter-cases that reveal the bubble to be a contingent outcome rather than an inevitability, and that sharpen the analysis by isolating the variables that matter. The decisive factor is not nationality but the conjunction of *language acquisition*, *life stage* and *durable local anchoring*. Participant 16, although Russian, had studied Spanish before arriving and pointedly refused the co-ethnic enclave: “I do not like to talk or form the bubble of Russian-speaking people... my friends in Salou are Catalan friends.” Participant 6, a Peruvian PhD student, deliberately invested in the local language, “it’s important to learn the language of the city where you are living”, reaching a C1 level of Catalan and reporting a gradual, reciprocal acceptance: “step by step... they answer back in Catalan as well, which is nice.” Participant 3, a US PhD researcher with a family, integrated through the dense, ready-made local sociability of neighbours and children’s schooling: “we found local people here and we’ve befriended them... most of my neighbours are from here.” Participant 17 likewise built her social world “through my daughter, through the other mothers” and through fellow PhD parents.

The contrast between these cases and the isolation reported by younger, monolingual Master’s students is analytically telling. Integration in Tarragona appears to require an investment, in language, in time, in the institutions of family and neighbourhood, that the structurally precarious, short-stay, summer-displaced Master’s student is least able to make. The very housing instability documented in 5.2, by foreshortening tenure and dispersing students across the city and beyond, materially undermines the conditions under which belonging might otherwise develop. Social integration and residential stability are, in this sense, not separate findings but two faces of the same process.

5.4 Post-Graduation Career Horizons: Stayers vs Leavers

The final narrative concerns retention, the central policy question of whether Tarragona can convert the international students it attracts into long-term residents and workers. The interviews reveal a population sharply divided into “leavers” and “stayers,” and the division correlates closely with the axes of life stage, integration and economic opportunity traced in the preceding sections. Almost uniformly, respondents identified the local labour market, not housing in isolation, as the binding constraint on remaining; but housing precarity and social isolation operated as powerful amplifiers of the decision to leave.

The “leavers” were concentrated among younger Master’s students, several of whom combined a weak emotional attachment to the city with a clear-eyed economic appraisal. Participant 20 articulated the structural mismatch between housing costs and local wages most explicitly, again linking it directly to the tourist economy:

“When it comes to cost of living it is actually more here than where I’m from in the U.S., however salaries are one third... you are priced out of the housing market due to the tourism industry.”

For others, the decision to leave was bound up with the social isolation documented in 5.3. Participant 5 and participant 13, both Italian Master’s students who had socialised almost entirely within international circles, saw no reason to remain once those transient networks dispersed; as participant 13 put it, “all of them are staying because they all study abroad, none of them are locals, so it wouldn’t make sense for me to stay.” Participant 12 and participant 9, whose accounts of exclusion were among the sharpest, both reported an absence of any factor that would induce them to stay. For these students the city had functioned as a temporary, instrumental backdrop to a degree, and the combined experience of housing precarity and social closure had given them no reason to revise that framing.

The “stayers,” by contrast, clustered among older PhD researchers who had achieved precisely the linguistic and social anchoring that the leavers lacked. Participant 6, with his C1 Catalan and deliberate cultural investment, was unequivocal: “I want to learn more, I am possible to stay here... I feel like I am connecting with the Catalan culture, I feel more comfortable here.” Participant 16, having unexpectedly come to regard the region as “my new home,” wished to remain despite the housing surcharge she endures. Participant 3, a US PhD researcher, represents a particularly instructive case because he confounds any simple North-equals-leaver reading: his decision to stay rests not on economics, “I don’t earn that well, but that doesn’t matter to me”, but on family, safety, language and the European future he wants for his children. participant 11 and participant 18 similarly tied their wish to stay to quality of life and, in participant 18’s case, the perceived opportunities of the regional industrial cluster.

A third, intermediate category emerges with analytical clarity from the responses to the closing question: the “forced leavers”, students who would prefer to stay but expect to be driven away by the absence of specialised employment. This was in fact the modal position in the sample, selected by a clear majority including participant 4, participant 14, participant 7, participant 8, participant 19, participant 17 and participant 16 herself. Their accounts are marked by genuine ambivalence and even regret. Participant 14’s is emblematic:

“If I could find a job in Tarragona, I would choose it over any job in Barcelona because of the city... I see myself relaxed in Tarragona more than any other city I’ve been to.”

The existence of this sizeable “would-stay-but-cannot” group is arguably the single most important retention finding, because it identifies a cohort that the city has succeeded in attracting and even in winning over emotionally, yet stands to lose for want of employment, and whose tenuous foothold is further eroded by the housing instability documented throughout this chapter. The conjunction is what makes the dynamic self-reinforcing: a precarious, seasonally displaced, socially isolated student who also cannot find specialised work has every structural incentive to leave, and almost none to stay. Tarragona’s ambition to retain international talent runs directly against this combined grain.

5.5 Integrating the Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The third research question asked whether a correlation could be established between the expansion of short-term tourist rentals and student housing satisfaction and cost. Read across the two empirical chapters, the evidence returns a deliberately two-sided answer, and the tension between its halves is itself among the study’s principal contributions.

The contextual quantitative analysis presented in Chapter 4, which assigned each respondent the tourism-pressure value of their neighbourhood of residence, found no significant association between short-term rental density and students’ reported housing-search ease, cost fairness or rent. Indeed, the weak associations that did appear ran counter to the direction the gentrification literature would predict, with residents of the highest-density zone (the Part Alta) reporting marginally easier searches than peers elsewhere, a pattern best explained as a selection effect, whereby that small, high-amenity historic core is occupied by comparatively well-resourced students. Read in isolation, this is a null result.

The qualitative evidence assembled in this chapter, however, shows the relationship between short-term rentals and student housing precarity to be one of the most consistently and forcefully articulated themes in the entire sample. The reconciliation lies in

recognising that the two analyses measure different things. The neighbourhood indicator captures the standing spatial concentration of tourist rentals at a single point in time; the interviews describe a temporal and contractual mechanism, the June eviction, the summer price premium, the refusal of year-round tenancies, that operates across neighbourhoods and is, by construction, invisible to a static density measure. A student displaced each June by a “scholar contract” experiences acute precarity whether the flat sits in the saturated Part Alta or in lower-density Sant Pere i Sant Pau; what matters is the term of the lease, not the density of the census tract.

This divergence carries a methodological lesson that reaches beyond the present case. Studies that rely solely on neighbourhood-level density metrics to assess the impact of short-term rentals on resident populations risk underestimating, or missing entirely, the precarity experienced by groups, such as internationally mobile students, whose vulnerability is structured by the timing and terms of tenancy rather than by spatial exposure alone. For this population, as the case of participant 16 in Salou demonstrates most vividly, the relevant unit of analysis is the contract, not the census tract, and indeed the most acute single case in the sample falls, quite literally, outside the boundary of the spatial dataset. The finding thus reinforces rather than undermines the value of the mixed-methods design: the qualitative pillar did not merely illustrate the quantitative result but corrected the inference that the quantitative result, taken alone, would have invited.

6. Discussion & Conclusion

This research explored the intersecting dynamics of student housing needs and the rapid expansion of short-term rentals in Tarragona, highlighting how the transition toward a “short-term city” impacts the integration and retention of international postgraduate students (Salerno & Russo, 2022). By utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study uncovers the nuanced mechanisms through which touristification displaces student populations, reproducing structural inequalities and undermining the city’s ambition to consolidate itself as a talent-retaining “university city”.

A central contribution of this thesis is the identified divergence between the spatial density of short-term rentals (STRs) and the actual lived experiences of student housing precarity. The quantitative analysis yielded a null result, showing no significant correlation between neighborhood-level STR density and students’ reported housing search difficulties or costs. However, the qualitative narratives revealed that the housing crisis is driven by a temporal and contractual mechanism, rather than a purely spatial one.

The pervasive use of the “scholar contract”, which mandates that students vacate their apartments by June, demonstrates how lucrative summer tourist calendar overrides the academic calendar. This temporal squeeze forces students into precarity across the entire city, regardless of the specific STR density of their local neighborhood. This dynamic is vividly illustrated by the case of participant 16, a PhD student residing in the municipality of Salou. The participant lives in a licensed tourist apartment and is forced to pay double the standard residential rate simply to avoid seasonal displacement. Notably, because Salou falls outside the Tarragona municipality, this housing precarity is invisible to the EURECAT spatial density dataset.

The participant’s case underscores the methodological limitation of relying solely on neighborhood-level metrics to assess housing vulnerability; it indicates that future research should expand quantitative datasets to include neighboring tourism hotspots like Salou, providing a more comprehensive view of regional student housing dynamics.

The findings further confirm the operational reality of the “hidden curriculum of student housing” in Tarragona (Sotomayor et al., 2022). Due to a deficit in affordable, university-provided accommodations, international students are pushed into a highly financialized and predatory private rental market. Crucially, this thesis reveals that the consequences of this institutional failure are not distributed equally. An important global asymmetry dictates the housing search: while students from the Global North generally possess the financial safety nets to absorb rising rents and significant deposits, students from the Global South face severe financial squeezes, restricted scholarship budgets and discriminatory gatekeeping. In this context, the local real estate crisis actively reproduces global socio-economic stratification, transforming the search for shelter into a powerful vector of exclusion for the most vulnerable students.

Beyond the challenges of the housing market, this study shows that the tourist-oriented urban environment can increase the socio-spatial isolation among international students. Instead of experiencing the cultural exchange of international mobility, many students in Tarragona report living within a “foreign bubble”. This segregation is intensified by linguistic and cultural gatekeeping from the local Catalan-speaking population, which discourages meaningful integration and generates deep feelings of non-belonging.

Ultimately, these combined pressures directly threaten the city’s long-term demographic and economic sustainability; the expansion of the short-term rentals has contributed to

rising housing costs that are not matched by local salary levels. As a result, many international master's students plan to leave the region after completing their studies. Although some PhD researchers choose to stay due to environmental and lifestyle amenities, they often face financial difficulties.

Overall, the touristification of the housing market reduces Tarragona's attractiveness as a study destination, hindering the successful integration of skilled international graduates and limiting their intention to stay in the region long-term.

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Appendix A

ID	Age	Gender	Nationality	URV Level	Main Campus	Address/Residence Sector
1	23	Female	Mexican	Master	Sescelades	San Pere i Sant Pau, Tarragona
2	23	Male	USA	Master	Sescelades	Plaza Imperial (Residence), Tarragona
3	44	Male	USA	PhD	Catalunya	Carrer Comte de Rius, Tarragona
4	37	Female	Brazilian	PhD	Vila-Seca	Avinguda Catalunya, Tarragona
5	23	Female	Italian	Master	Reus	Carrer de Jaume I Illa, Tarragona
6	34	Male	Peruvian	PhD	Sescelades	Parte Alta, Tarragona
7	32	Female	Vietnamese	PhD	Catalunya	Plaza de Oli, Tarragona
8	25	Female	Moroccan	Master	Sescelades	Rambla Nova, Tarragona
9	36	Male	Syrian	Master	Sescelades	Rambla Nova, Tarragona
10	26	Male	Iranian	Master	Sescelades	San Pere i Sant Pau, Tarragona
11	32	Female	Iranian	PhD	Sescelades	San Pere i Sant Pau, Tarragona
12	24	Female	Moroccan	Master	Sescelades	Rambla Nova, Tarragona
13	24	Female	Italian	Master	Vila-Seca	Carrer d'Higini Angles, Tarragona
14	26	Male	Syrian	Master	Reus	Rambla Vella, Tarragona
15	30	Female	Russian	Master	Sescelades	Part Alta, Tarragona
16	44	Female	Russian	PhD	Vila-Seca	Carrer Lleida, Salou
17	50	Female	Honduran	PhD	Catalunya	Via Augusta, Tarragona
18	42	Male	Russian	Master	Sescelades	Pres. Luis Companys (Resa), Tarragona
19	23	Male	Chilean	Master	Catalunya	El Serrallo, Tarragona
20	29	Male	American	Master	Sescelades	Rambla Vella, Tarragona

Appendix B

ID	Monthly Rent Tier	Contract Duration	Position Scale	Quality Scale	Search Ease	Fairness Scale
1	€351 - €500	Academic Year	1	2	3	3
2	€501 - €700	Academic Year	3	3	2	3
3	€751 - €1,000	1 - 5 Years	5	5	4	5
4	€351 - €500	1 - 5 Years	1	5	3	3
5	€351 - €500	Academic Year	1	3	3	3
6	€751 - €1,000	1 - 5 Years	3	4	3	4
7	€351 - €500	1 - 5 Years	5	3	4	4
8	€351 - €500	1 Year	5	4	3	4
9	€351 - €500	Not Applicable	2	3	5	4
10	€351 - €500	1 - 6 Months	3	3	1	2
11	€501 - €750	2 Years	5	5	1	5
12	€351 - €500	1 Year	3	4	1	2

13	€351 - €500	1 - 6 Months	1	3	2	3
14	€351 - €500	1 - 6 Months	1	4	2	3
15	€751 - €1,000	Academic Year	3	2	1	3
16	€751 - €1,000	Academic Year	4	3	1	2
17	€751 - €1,000	1 - 6 Months	3	4	3	5
18	€751 - €1,000	Academic Year	5	5	5	2
19	€501 - €700	Academic Year	3	4	2	4
20	€351 - €500	1 - 6 Months	3	4	3	4

Scale reference:

- Position/Quality/Search Ease: 1 = Very Poor; 2 = Poor; 3 = Neutral or Indifferent; 4 = Good; 5 = Very Good
- Fairness Cost Scale: 1 = Very Inexpensive; 2 = Inexpensive; 3 = Fair; 4 = Expensive; 5 = Very Expensive