

Title: €26,000

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Disclaimer: This article is based on the author's own research. She is not a legal expert and this article may contain factual errors.

At the end of November, most of us were hit with a room charge. Some units were charged over €200 per person. Of course, we were outraged. Not only are we subjected to living in units that violate some basic standards of living, but even then we are unfairly (over)charged for regular wear and tear, for the unnecessary replacement of items, and for "missing" items that never were. The summed charges exceeded a whopping €26,000. Of course we were outraged, but we were also too busy to fight it.

Before delving into the intricacies of how and why the system works, let's first recap what the housing arrangement at UCU entails. I'm not a lawyer and this recap should not be taken as law, it is simply the information I can gather from the website. The company Lekstede Wonen owns the housing on campus and seems to rent it out to UCU. UCU then rents it to us, but without an actual rental contract and only a "Campus Agreement" that states many responsibilities of the tenant, but none of the landlord. Without a written rental contract, students cannot know their rights without knowing the law. Thus, students are given units and charged in ways that are not legal under the default contract law.

We move into units without doing a walkthrough with the landlord, get charged without proof of damage, pay €11 for a €1.50 trash can, and have no system to dispute any of it. On top of this, first and second years are required to live on campus. Of course, when these issues are raised, UCU housing argues that the burden of proof is on the tenant according to "rental law," but can this even apply to students who haven't even signed a rental contract? Thus, we are in a complex system with unclear rules that ultimately harms the students.

UCU housing uses two strategies to continue acting this way: they wait until you graduate and they hope you're too busy to fight. Firstly, UCU keeps its (probably) borderline illegal housing practices by letting you graduate. This facilitates the collective amnesia of students. No one is at this school long enough to pass on the memories and anger at the way student housing works. In a few years, no one will know the number €26,000 because we'll all have graduated. This collective amnesia is why none of us know if this has happened before.

Have students always been charged for wear and tear? Have they ever previously disputed charges? If the precedent is there, we don't know it. Therefore, any path forward to dispute outrageous charges is uncharted territory. Uncharted territory means current students have no blueprint to follow, so fighting charges takes even more effort. Additionally, we have no way of warning incoming students that they should not sign the campus agreement before they come to UCU, thereby entrapping a new generation of students into this system each year.

The second way UCU maintains this system is by hoping you're too busy to fight. We mostly live through it because we do not have the bandwidth to fight it. Even if we did have the energy to fight it, it's only three years. "What's one more year?" third years say, focusing on figuring out life for the year after. Younger students can blissfully hope they can find off-campus housing after just another one or two years. We endure Maarten Diederix's verbal abuse and move into units which already have mice,

reminding ourselves that it's only temporary. UCU then further exacerbates the fact that you can't find the space to protest their housing arrangement by creating such a convoluted arrangement that becomes nearly impossible to navigate.

Thus far, it appears that I'm blaming "UCU housing," but what, or who, is UCU housing? Is it the landlady, Management Team, or Lekstede Wonen? Could it be the UU real estate team? With these four options, and many people within the latter three, all parties can pass around the blame while the students are ultimately burdened with paying the costs. Further playing with semantics, some members of management insist that we cannot call the charges "fines," thereby utterly missing the point of our complaints. Eventually, student fervor will die out and, even if they can't charge us this year, they can overcharge again in two more.

So, it is clear that the system is a ploy to extract money and bypass the law, even if we don't necessarily know who is responsible. So how can we fix this system? We can use sustained collective action. This year, we've already started collective action, and now we need to sustain it. The process is not over when students get their full deposits back. It is only over when we have created checks and balances to ensure that, firstly, we are all clear about the responsibilities of Lekstede, UCU, and the students; secondly, that the system of checking and charging units is transparent and abides by the law; and thirdly, that students have a mechanism with which to dispute unfair charges.

On a more individual level, you can combat the collective amnesia by passing the story of last year's charges on to your younger unitmates. Beyond this, I don't have a flashy response that will definitely make our voices heard. But I do know that our voices will never be heard if we do not speak. UCU is taking advantage of us. This is not our fault. Our problem is that we let them. Both together and individually we can ensure that our rights as tenants are being respected. We don't need luxury housing, but we do need legal housing.