

Challenges of Student Accommodation at Institutions of Higher Learning: A Case Study of University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract

Access to higher education by the general populace in South Africa has been steadily increasing over the last decade. With this increase in access, major challenges have presented themselves that may compromise the transformational agenda for higher education in South Africa. The focus of this research was to examine the challenges associated with student accommodation. In total, 600 questionnaires were dispatched to students from the five campuses of University of KwaZulu-Natal and 453 were returned which gave a 75.5% response rate. The research instrument consisted of 31 items, with a level of measurement at a nominal or an ordinal level. Data obtained from the respondents included biographical data, quality of accommodation, accessibility and adequacy of accommodation, security, safety and health issues in the University accommodation. The questionnaire was the primary tool that was used to collect data and was distributed to students who lived in residences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The data collected from the responses were analysed with SPSS version 24.0. The study's focus was to examine various challenges associated with student accommodation in South Africa specifically UKZN and results indicated that accessibility to the university accommodation for residential purposes is a great challenge for many students. Other issues faced by students include insecurity on campus, irregular security

checks, inefficient and untimely manner of the quality of services rendered by the hall management. Good and efficient accommodative measures by the university are necessary for quality academic output; hence, the need for critical intervention, as suggested in the study.

Keywords: Student accommodation and support, University, Challenges, Quality, Education, Residence

Introduction

According to the transformational agenda for higher education in South Africa, access to higher education institutions by disadvantaged population groups has been increasing steadily over the last decade (Mngomezulu 2012). The challenges confronting student accommodation are complex and dynamic. They are compounded by the fact that there is a lack of academic and often pragmatic solutions to deal with the yearly crisis that plagues Higher education institutions for more and better accommodation. Since 1994, the post-apartheid education system emphasized five key principles essential for quality education: non-racialism, non-sexism, democracy, redress and a unitary system. In creating an effective education system, the post-apartheid government faced a two-fold challenge. Firstly, the system had to be transformed to redress the inequalities of the past in terms of access, participation, success, resources, staff complement and student bodies within higher education. Secondly, the higher education system had to be effective, efficient and ensure equity, with its limited resources, as well as the range of graduate, research and service outputs required for national development (Jansen 2001). In 1999, the then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, sought to address critical service delivery challenges such as better-quality programmes with improved access, accelerated integration and resource efficiency. The focus of this paper is to add to the international and South African body of knowledge regarding education policy to bring about substantive changes that could lead to improved accommodation and learning among students as well as a conducive physical environment that could enable efficient and ideal academic work and output. Furthermore, the objective of the present study is limited to the challenges associated with student accommodation. Student perceptions are very important as they are the beneficiaries of student accommodation.

The Research Problem and Purpose

Over time, the culture of student accommodation has changed significantly, with the majority preferring to live on campus (Bank & Sibanda 2018). A new trend has emerged where students opt to be away from home even though they live in close proximity to the institution. The increasing number of disadvantaged students registering at the universities, especially those from the rural areas, thereby place a heavy burden on university authorities to provide both on- and off-campus accommodation. It is well known that South Africa's insufficient student accommodation has reached crisis levels – there are far more students requiring accommodation than can be catered for at present (Connell 2010). This calls for an in-depth evaluation of the current challenges at tertiary institutions in South Africa and possible solutions to these challenges. The problem and challenges of accommodating students each year are exacerbated by the increasing number of student admissions as well as the need to provide quality services for the increasing demands of students essential for quality academic output. It has been noted that limited research has been undertaken in this field (Mamabolo 2018). While there are articles and studies that have been undertaken, this phenomenon as a social and economic problem has still not been well-researched in an academic context. This establishes a need for research that will empower leadership at higher education institutions in South Africa with a knowledge base that will enable them to take informed decisions. This study therefore examines the preference of students in terms of residence accommodation, their social freedom and their urgency for accommodation. The security standards, quality and standards of accommodation, access and feasibility to education and their safety and well-being are also reported in this study.

The Global Experience of Accommodation for Students at Tertiary Institutions

Teaching, learning, research and community service are commonly regarded as the core functions of a university. The rise of universities around the world, however, has led to a rise in student enrolments, as these institutions now provide a wider range of academic options. This occurrence comes with the need to accommodate students in a safe and secure environment to ensure the optimum academic performance necessary for the development of every country. According to Mbara and Celliers (2013), it was common for universities

to provide on-campus accommodation to their students. Clearly, this universal expanding nature of tertiary institutions, coupled with globalization and the number of students seeking to enter universities, resulted in a demand for accommodation off-campus (Mbara & Celliers 2013).

Student accommodation is a challenge globally, with universities experiencing a similar occurrence as South African universities. The findings from the present evaluation will provide an understanding of the impact of the challenges of student accommodation, the quality of student accommodation, the accessibility to student accommodation, private accommodation and bulk leased accommodation, and safety and security measures at universities (Williams 2011).

Students expect accommodation to be made available by universities or by private agencies to comply with minimum standards of comfort and at reasonable cost. It is also an expectation that such student accommodation is available when required. Townley (2005) identifies accommodation with food and not as a separate factor, while Harvey (2001) rates it as an important factor influencing student satisfaction. According to Harvey, Drew and Smith (Harvey & Drew 2006), studies show that students globally have been more economically and socially privileged. Historically, German and English universities have had great influence on modern day student accommodation trends. In the earliest medieval times, students sourced their own accommodation free from control of the university. In Paris, the first residential colleges were established in response to the need of the poorer students and soon this trend was followed by Oxford and Cambridge Universities (Rosenthal 1985).

Student Accommodation at Tertiary Institutions in South Africa

Universities in South Africa experience a significant increase in enrollment on an annual basis and are ill-equipped to provide accommodation for those accepted to study (Matsolo, Ningpuanyeh & Susuman 2018). According to SA Commercial Property News (Turok 2012), universities throughout the country are faced with an ever-increasing problem as their students struggle to find suitable accommodation, and many institutions have now reached student accommodation crisis levels. Students come from all over the country to attend universities in the main centres, and in Gauteng, students are faced with a chronic shortage of safe, secure and affordable accommodation. Securing part-

time and casual jobs are not easy for many students. According to the University World News Africa Edition, universities in South Africa need essential academic structure to ensure quality. Poor living conditions and student support services must be improved. In line with the constitution and the Bill of Rights (Nthai 1998), universities in South Africa are under pressure to open their doors and make education accessible, hence making student accommodation also a priority.

In South Africa, the public higher education sector aims to provide quality education towards the development in society and our world market. There are 23 higher educational institutions in South Africa. The classification and nature of the institutions are traditional universities that offer Bachelor's degrees and postgraduate research; universities of technology that provide vocationally orientated disciplines, certificates, diplomas and degrees of technology, equipping graduates and diplomats for industry; comprehensive universities with Bachelor and technology qualifications. The University of Mpumalanga is a newly formed university of higher education. Tertiary institutions strive to produce global leaders that will bring about change nationally and internationally. Higher education institutions are there to teach, nurture and grow their students to become knowledge driven, to be future leaders and ambassadors to the younger generation. Students are the recipients of knowledge transfer.

According to Mohamedbhai (2014), there is a shortage of student accommodation at South African tertiary institutions. Students then have no other options but to seek alternative accommodation, resulting in situations where students become targets of crime, and worse. Slumlords rent out dilapidated buildings, and landlords sometime abandon the buildings leaving students without basic amenities such as water and electricity; ultimately, students are left stranded.

Student Accommodation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

In order to contextualize student accommodation challenges, it is important to understand the formation of University of KwaZulu-Natal, the largest contact teaching institution in the country. With the merger of the two institutions, the University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal, the combined number of students was 40 000. The university is faced with a serious challenge with its growing number of students and the concomitant demand for accom-

modation. After the merger of the two former universities, there has been an increase in the demand for (particularly) on-campus residence accommodation. The on-campus and off-campus residence accommodation is limited. The university is unable to allocate rooms to all applicants, resulting in some students acquiring off-campus accommodation. All five campuses offer on-campus accommodation. The number of rooms available vary from campus to campus, as illustrated in Table 1. As per the Table 1, as in 2015, the on-campus site can accommodate a total of 6 493 students, while the off-campus site can accommodate 6 113, making a total of 12 606. With a student population of over 40 000, *the* UKZN faces a great challenge in meeting the accommodation demands of the students.

Table 1. The quantity factor accessible on each campus

CAMPUS	Howard College & Medical School	Westville Campus	Edgewood Campus	Pietermaritzburg Campus	Total
On-Campus	2 071	1 817	648	1 957	6 493
Off-Campus	2 628	1 788	1 341	356	6 113

The quality of a student's life '*forms the heart and the raison-d'être of any university and their welfare and well-being is a primary concern of the institution*'. The need to provide a safe environment is a challenge for universities and their security personnel. A safe environment is imperative for students to work, study, live, teach and research. Student perceptions of safety and security at university are relatively unknown, hence the need for the current study to investigate the perceptions of students and provide solutions in addressing these issues.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted amongst students living at a University residence on

Campus, and off-Campus residences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The university had approximately 12 000 students who reside in the residences, and from which a representative sample of 600 were selected. A survey questionnaire was designed consisting of 31 questions specifically to satisfy the objectives of the study. The questionnaire in this research study was open and close check-ended and administered to the 600 students. This was done via the University's notice system to students. Hardcopies of the questionnaires were also administered in English to students in the various residences.

Data Analysis

The data from the completed questionnaires were captured onto a computer using SPSS version 22 software. Data were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics enables the presentation of results by means of frequency measures of central tendency and dispersion. Results were presented in tabular format. Inferential statistics using T-test, Anova, and Cronbach's co-efficient of alpha and multiple regression were used to evaluate the hypotheses.

Findings

The research instrument consisted of 31 items, with a level of measurement at a nominal or an ordinal level. The questionnaire was divided into 4 sections which measured various themes, as illustrated below.

- A. Biographical data
- B Quality of accommodation
- C. Accessibility and Adequacy of Accommodation
- D. Safety And Security Conditions Of Accommodation

Section A: Biographical Data

The general findings of biographical data indicated a youthful population (18–22 years) among students of UKZN. The predominant youthful population of 18–22 years found in the study also accounts for the high undergraduate stu-

dents observed in the study as illustrated in Figure 1, which showed a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) between the number of undergraduates and postgraduates respondents with 81.9% of the respondents being undergraduates, whereas 18.1% were postgraduate students. This finding is further confirmed from Fig. 2 where it is found that nearly two-thirds of the respondents were busy with their undergraduate degree (1–3 years or 64.5%). This group was significantly more than the others ($p < 0.001$).

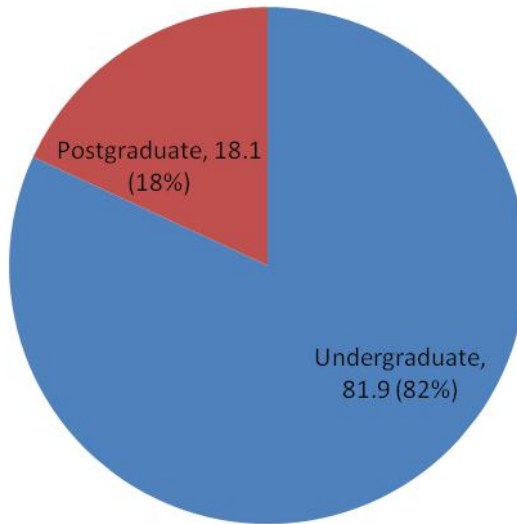


Figure 1: Educational level of respondents

It is interesting to note that these findings synergistically suggest that the largest age bracket of 18–22 years are undergraduate students predominantly in their first three years of study, whereas the postgraduate students representing the smallest group (18.1%) are mostly above the age of 23 (>23), representing 25.1% of the study population. These findings are in conformity with a number of studies conducted in South Africa that suggest a predominantly youthful age of 18–25 years at most tertiary institutions and this age bracket is predominantly made up of undergraduate students (Flisher, Beer & Bokhorst 2002; North, Johnston & Ophoff 2014). Currently in South Africa, there is a strong realisation and sensitisation for young men and women in

particular to aspire to higher education and not settle with a high school certificate or less; hence the increment of enrolment of both gender, especially women, at the universities in South Africa (Walker 2018). It is also worth noting that most of the respondents who fall within the age bracket of 18-22 years are unemployed and most rely on their beneficiaries for financial assistance in securing accommodation and a livelihood at the university (Bawa 2019).

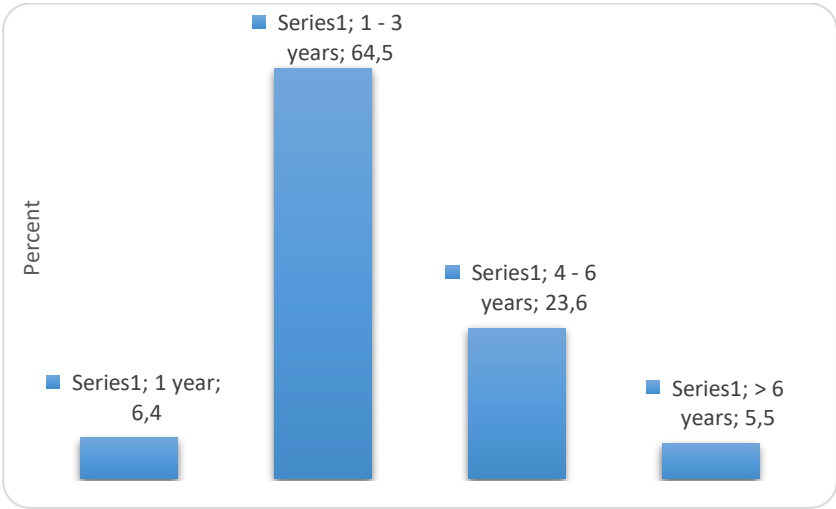


Figure 2: Length of Stay of respondents in University of KwaZulu-Natal

Section B: Quality of Accommodation

The study indicated that 71.9% of students were not satisfied with the quality of living conditions of the university residences. Very few students (17.6%) were satisfied with the quality of living conditions of the university residence and 10.5% were neutral about the response. This finding shows that there are significantly more respondents who were dissatisfied ($p < 0.001$) with the general quality of services in the University residences.

Section C: Accessibility and Adequacy of Accommodation

In the current study (Figure 4), it was noted that many respondents experienced problems (53.8%) in securing accommodation, compared to respondents who

did not (46.2%). However, the difference in this figure was not significant ($p=0.108$). This indicates that generally students have challenges in accessing university residences for accommodation.

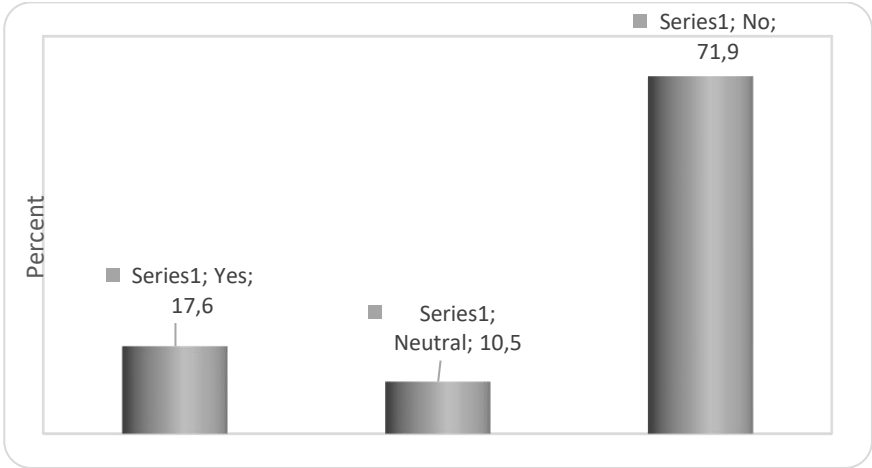


Figure 3: Are you satisfied with the quality of living conditions in the university residences?

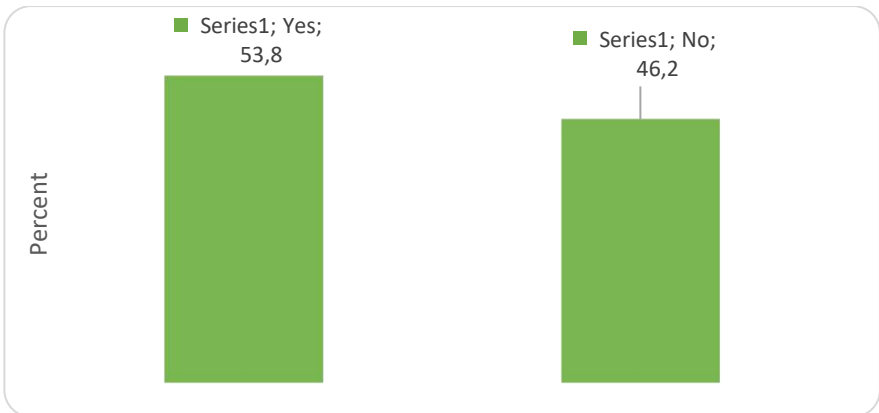


Figure 4: Did you experience challenges in securing residence accommodation?

Despite the challenge in securing university accommodation, the study further sought the respondents' view on whether they perceived the university accommodation as an advantage. The study shows that majority of the respondents conceived the university residence as an advantage and the major reason for this preference was primarily due to easy access to university resources. However, other reasons are safety and convenient transport services. These are the reasons students may prefer a university residence rather than off-campus accommodation.

Section D: Safety and Security Conditions of Accommodation

The study revealed that 50.8% of the respondents did not feel safe on campus; 43.2% indicated their sense of safety on campus; and 6.0% were neutral about their safety on campus, as shown in Figure 5. Students generally believe that there are synergistic factors contributing to the unsafe environment on a university campus. This includes the lackadaisical appearance of security personnel on campus, as well as too many visitors visiting the campus, with insufficient ID checks carried out by security personnel on students and visitors.

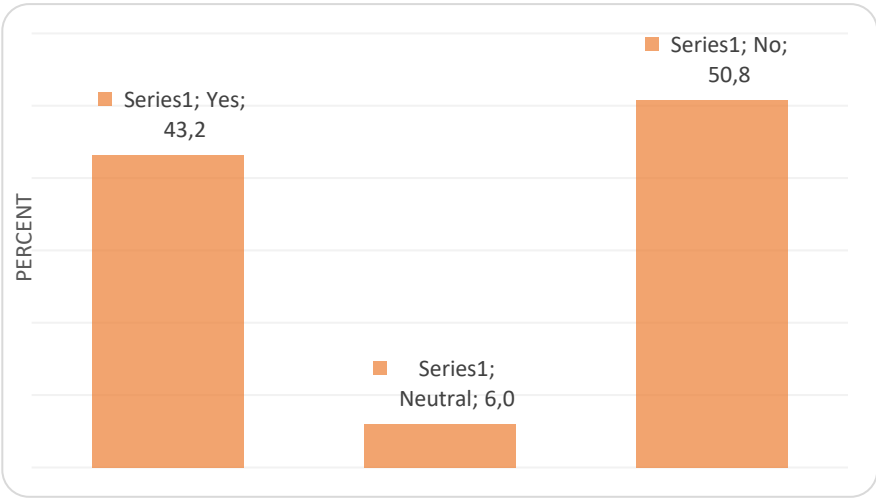


Fig. 5: Do you feel safe on the campus?

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the empirical study and also in line with the objectives and aims of the study:

1. Higher learning Institutions must take into account the ever-growing population in their institutions and provide accommodation prior to admission.
2. Universities should ensure that services at the halls of residence are of a high standard: services should be delivered efficiently and in a timely manner.
3. Safety and security issues on campus must be a priority to University management. Security issues and safety measures must be put in place to ensure the safety of every student admitted into the university.

Conclusion

Access to accommodation and adequacy of the accommodations have been highlighted as issues that are of great concern to students. General security and services of the university staff are also areas that need much attention insofar as the views of students are concerned. The empirical data indicate that most students would like to occupy university halls of residence for accommodation; however, there is generally inadequate accommodation in university residences with respect to the ever-growing number of students in higher education. Most of these students go through several challenges in securing university residence accommodation. Security issues are of great concern to the respondents of the study. All these factors impact on the environment that is meant to ensure good quality academic output. Accommodation issues in higher institutions are of great concern in this era of ever-increasing number of people who want to attain higher learning. Universities are not only in the business of educating and awarding certificates to individuals, but are also responsible for the general welfare of students, which leads to their efficient academic output and an acceptable quality of life while at university.

Conflict of Interest: Authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Clearance: Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the Durban University of Technology (Institutional Ethics Committee (REC 152/15)).

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