

8th ANNUAL UKZN TEACHING & LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONFERENCE

25, 26 & 27 September 2014

Edgewood Campus,
KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION
SYSTEMIC CHANGE, CURRICULUM REFORM, QUALITY
PROMOTION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**“You cannot study when you don’t feel safe” - Making every Learning space a safe space at student residences
(A case study of UKZN).**



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Abstract:

“The provision of accessible, decent, safe and academically conducive student accommodation in South African Universities is of great importance to the quality of the higher education system and the success of our students, especially those from a rural and poor background,” (Nzimande, B in the Report on the ministerial committee for the review of the provision of student housing at South African Universities, 2011). Through an exploratory qualitative design this research looks at data on university residence student experiences with respect to safety and security, generated through focus group discussions with a select sample of residence students at the University of KwaZulu Natal. This report privileges student voice through actual words since the focus of the study lends itself to this type of reporting. The data points to the fears and anxieties of students living in residences caused through the lack of effective ‘policing’ and surveillance.



Introduction:

- Both students and institutional environments contribute to what students gain from college. Thus, the key to enhancing learning and personal development is not simply for universities to teach more and better, but also to create conditions that motivate and inspire students to devote time and energy to educationally-purposeful activities, both in and outside the classroom (ACPA *The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs*, 1996).
- Similarly South African minister of Higher Education (Dr Blade Nzimande) argues that “.....accessible, decent, safe and academically conducive student accommodation in South African Universities is of great importance to the success of our students, especially those from a rural and poor background,” (Report on the ministerial committee for the review of the provision of student housing at South African universities, 2011).

- The demise of apartheid and equal access to education for all increased pressure on HEI's to cater to larger numbers of students in residences and to conform to new non racist policies and legislations, making inter alia residences more racially diverse.
- Up until 2013 South African Higher education experienced 39 student protests many relating to student housing. This heralded its own challenges and student residences became sites of controversies at many HEI's.
- Buys (2014) argues that despite extraordinary efforts to bring about transformation on campuses, universities often stagger under the weight of the widely reported incidents of discrimination and violence among students in residences - a lingering problem and often an embarrassment to higher education in South Africa.
- A safe environment is a prerequisite for productive learning (Maslow 1970; Piaget 1936). Feeling unsafe in the classroom may decrease concentration in class and performance on assessments, yet only a few studies have focused on the contribution of feelings of safety to educational achievement (Lacoe, 2013).

- Buys adds, “After two decades of democracy, obstinate residence traditions that undermine human dignity question universities’ commitment to the Constitution and our societal commitments to reconciliation and social cohesion.
- As such, the transformation of residence cultures has not only become a barometer of universities’ intent to serve our democracy, but has also offered hope (or not) to diverse communities that reconciliation may be possible for all and everywhere.
- In men’s residences in particular, first-years are accepted when they unconditionally support the power of the seniors and all the current residence traditions”.
- Also first-years must pass the tests set by seniors to measure their loyalty and must be willing to keep malpractices secret. Such residence cultures fail because the seniors’ word is law; no dialogue or joint decision-making is tolerated.

- In 2011 Minister Blade Nzimande appointed a committee to establish the scale of the student accommodation challenges and to offer a well motivated and justifiable differentiated framework for redressing the student accommodation quandary. In higher education
- In addition, the report would provide government with a medium to long-term financing framework within a 15-year timeframe in order to intervene, as well as to provide minimum norms and standards for student accommodation, whether on or off-campus.
- A comprehensive questionnaire had been constructed and distributed to the vice-chancellors of 22 contact universities. Site visits to 49 campuses had also been done, looking at on and off-campus accommodation.
- Key stakeholders had been interviewed. During the process it had become apparent that there was a lack of research on the issue within South Africa.

- The reality was that there was a shortage of student accommodation worldwide.
- In SA, race and gender demographics showed that black females were the majority in student residences.
- From a geographic point of view, most students were from KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and from the Southern African Development Countries (SADC).
- As a proportion of total students in 2008-2010, first year students made up only five percent of students in student residences. (Provision of Student Housing at South African Universities: Briefing by the Department of Higher Education and Training Parliamentary Monitoring Group Meeting , 5 September, 2012).
- An analysis of the research findings had shown that residence fees were kept low in order to provide greater access but it meant that there was less revenue to cover costs.
- Of students housed in residences, 71% received some form of financial aid. Residence staff-to-student ratios varied between 1:19 and 1: 535, with staff remuneration and training varying just as widely.

- At one institution, the ratio was as high as 1:1500, which was considered ridiculous.
- Based on the findings of the research, the DHET had agreed that norms and standards for student accommodation needed to be set.
- Universities would have to see to it that service providers fulfilled these norms and standards.
- The need to avoid situating university residences in areas where drug abuse and prostitution was rife was also raised. (Provision of Student Housing at South African Universities: Briefing by the Department of Higher Education and Training Parliamentary Monitoring Group Meeting , 5 September, 2012).
- South African Student Congress president Mawethu Rune said: “Institutions can’t continue with this attitude of only being concerned with teaching and learning – they should also be concerned about the conditions in which students live as this impacts on student performance.

- There is a serious student accommodation problem in the country but students are not receiving the necessary support [from universities and government].” ([Varsities run out of housing 23 Sep 2009 06:00 Monako Dibetlehttp://mg.co.za/article/2009-09-23-varsities-run-out-of-housing](http://mg.co.za/article/2009-09-23-varsities-run-out-of-housing)).
- A significant portion of South African students are living in “appalling” conditions, which is jeopardising their academic endeavours and creating health and safety risks.
- At a media briefing, Nzimande said release of the review report, completed in September last year, was delayed to allow his ministry to come up with a plan of action to begin to address the range of challenges highlighted by the 272-page document.
- Part of this plan is the allocation of a R3.8 billion infrastructure and efficiency grant for universities over the next two financial years.
- Out of this, R847 million has been earmarked just for student housing, with a major chunk - R743 million - going to historically disadvantaged institutions.

- He said discussions were also under way with the Public Investment Corporation about setting up a special fund for university accommodation, anticipated to be operational in the next three to four months, which would offer preferential rates to universities.
- The department would also hold a workshop with all universities to work through the report's recommendations and take forward the guidelines on minimum standards for student accommodation, he said.
- Among the review's recommendations is the development by each university of a rigorously implemented admissions policy that would pay particular attention to:
 - ❖ First-year students.
 - ❖ Minimum standards for student housing in public and private facilities alike.
 - ❖ Fostering well-managed public-private partnerships around student housing.
 - ❖ An improvement in the training and compensation of residence staff and a lowering of student-to-staff ratios.
 - ❖ Separation of residence budgets from university budgets. (Many students living in 'appalling' conditions - Report Sharon Dell 18 March 2012 Issue No:213).

- Nevertheless in January 2013, following the ministerial review on student accommodation, a draft policy on student housing was developed.
- The draft policy specified location of residences, access to reliable transport, student common rooms specifications for example they are to be fitted with LCD TV screens, DStv decoders and DVD players while internet access (wireless where possible) must be provided in all rooms and social spaces.
- Single rooms are to be no smaller than 8m² and double rooms 14m², with one wash basin for every four students and one enclosed toilet for every five. Self-catering student housing should have one stove for every six students, and a microwave for every 15.
- University councils were to create committees composed of equal numbers of staff and students to govern residence life, which would meet quarterly and present the minutes of those meetings to the council.
- The number of residence students to residence staff should not exceed a 1:150 ratio. (Draft policy on student housing May 6 2013 at 12:45pm By Leanne Jansen- The Mercury). <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/kwazulu-natal/r1bn-for-kzn-student-housing-1.1469498>).

- Strange and Banning (2001) in their study found that academic engagement was encouraged by learning spaces that were comfortable, open, flexible, and appealing.
- The central question addressed in Lacoë's research is: Does feeling unsafe in the classroom affect student academic performance? Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs which places safety above only breathing, food, and water (Maslow 1970) and evidence that neighbourhood conditions such as community violence affect children's cognitive ability (i.e. Sharkey 2010), Lacoë hypothesizes that feeling unsafe in the classroom will negatively affect student performance on standardized assessments.
- However, tensions arise when attempts to enhance the safety and security of the campus are in conflict with the community's desire for convenience and easy access to facilities.
- Students often resist what are thought to be unreasonable impositions of authority and control, and community members often express concerns about privacy and the intrusiveness of measures such as background checks and surveillance cameras (Smith, 1988; Wills, Hines and Johnson, 1994).

- An examination of case law reveals three general principles underlying institutional responsibility and liability in the area of campus safety.
- The first is special relationship, whereby institutions are expected to possess both a commitment to the safety and general welfare of their students and an obligation to provide appropriate levels of security to promote their safety (the “duty of care” doctrine).
- This special relationship is different from in loco parentis, but courts have drawn parallels with landlord- business invitee and landlord-tenant relationships.
- The second principle is foreseeable risk, whereby colleges and universities have a duty to provide protection from foreseeable injury or criminal acts; and 3) contractual obligation, whereby institutions are expected to follow through with any commitments, both explicit and implicit, made with members of the community in regard to their enhanced duty to protect said members (Burling, 2003, 1991).

Theoretical framework

Situational crime prevention through environmental design:

- According to criminologist C. Ray Jeffery, crime results partly from the opportunities presented by physical environment therefore it is possible to alter the physical environment so that crime is less likely to occur.
- He argues that sociologists overstated the social causes of crime, and neglected both biological and environmental determinant (Jeffery, 1977).
- Situational Crime Prevention introduces discrete managerial and environmental changes to reduce the opportunity for crimes to occur.
- It is focused on the settings for crime and seeks to predict the occurrence of crime.
- It suggests that much offending can appropriately be viewed not simply as the product of deep social, economic, and psycho-logical causes but also as the result of deliberate choices by individuals. Therefore by making criminal action less attractive to offenders, criminal behavior can be curbed (Clarke, 1997).

Routine activities theory

- Routine activity theory focuses on situations of crimes (e.g., you are more likely to be robbed or a victim of assault in the park than in your locked home).
- This theory is commonly used to explain why and how youth are at a heightened risk of being involved in offending behaviour and of being victimized.
- Since an individual's demographics influence their daily activities, they are predictive of their risk of victimization.
- The idea that daily activities create the convergence in time and space of the three elements necessary for a crime to occur: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians. The theory argues that available opportunities are an important component in the crime calculus.
- Choices in lifestyle on the part of potential victims may create or curtail crime opportunities for the motivated offender (Jeffery, 1977). Routine activities theory provides a macro perspective on crime in that it predicts how changes in social and economic conditions influence the overall crime and victimization rate.

- Felson and Cohen (1980) postulate that criminal activities are a “structurally significant phenomenon,” meaning that violations are neither random nor trivial events. In consequence, it is the routine of activities people partake in over the course of their day and night lives that makes some individuals more susceptible to being viewed as suitable targets by a rationally calculating offender.
- Routine activities theory relates the pattern of offending to the everyday patterns of social interaction. Crime is therefore normal and is dependent on available opportunities to offend. If there is an unprotected target and there are sufficient rewards, a motivated offender will commit a crime.
- In terms of suitable targets, the choice is influenced by the offender’s perception of the target’s vulnerability; the more suitable and accessible the target, the more likely that a crime will occur.
- The number of motivated criminals in the population also affects crime levels. It is held that offenders are less likely to commit crimes if they can achieve personal goals through legitimate means.
- This implies that criminal motivations can be reduced if offenders perceive that there are alternatives to crime.

- The presence of capable guardians is also held to deter individuals from offending. Guardianship can be the physical presence of a person who is able to act in a protective manner or in the form of more passive mechanical devices such as video surveillance or security systems.
- These physical security measures help limit an offender's access to suitable targets.
- The essential aspect of routine activities theory is the interaction of motivation, opportunity and targets. In this way, the presence of guardians will deter most offenders, rendering even attractive targets off limits.
- Therefore, the presence of opportunity coupled with a lack of guardianship increases criminal motivations and the likelihood of an offence taking place.

Methodology:

- A desktop review of literature relating to student housing in South Africa and internationally was conducted and appropriate information used to inform the literature review and the interview guide.
- Empirical data for the study was generated qualitatively through focus group discussions with participants. In this respect an interview guide was developed in consultation with the director Student Housing and previous residence students.
- The questions sought descriptive data on participants' social experiences.
- Six focus group discussions were held with participants, residing at university owned residences In Pietermaritzburg and Howard College.
- The focus groups were as follows: x 1 female only group (1st, 2nd and 3rd year students) x 1 male only group (1st, 2nd and 3rd year students) on each campus.
- The focus group discussions lasted between 45 minutes to an hour each. Participants were selected by Resident Assistants who ensured representation in terms of physical year of study.

Limitations of the study:

- Access to respondents according to the research design sampling frame was a challenge due to the slow response of the staff involved with student residence matters.
- Co-ordinating focus group discussions to dovetail with the groups' availability also proved challenging.
- A further challenge was access to participants from the Westville and Nelson Mandela Medical School campuses as per the initial sampling frame .

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

- Taking seriously how students define and understand their experiences is a starting point of broader investigation into the quality of student experiences. This empirical evidence recognizes the reality of students as they experience their residence lives. Using thematic analysis the data generated four broad themes. They are discussed hereafter.

Theme 1: Theft in residences

- Security challenges have been and continue to pose a threat to students at many universities including the University of KwaZulu Natal.
- In a commissioned study by Magwaza et al in 2007 the researchers concluded students are critical and concerned about security at UKZN. The following account is indicative of the continuing security risks at UKZN. : “Last semester a girl at Romley (name of a residence) was held at gun point and things were stolen from her room,the security guards were there, but since then the security system has been changed,”;
- A further account ,: “Security is a huge issue! (unanimous response),” Like last year my room was broken into and my laptop was stolen. If you buy a laptop, I’m sure within two weeks it will be stolen. Even when you are in the room,”; Participant C shared, : “when my room was broken into my laptop was stolen I had morning lectures and decided not to go I ended up going at 10h30. This was just one lecture, one lecture!!! For 45 minutes. When I came back my room was broken into and I asked myself how could this happen. How was it possible, when I was here nothing happened? I just disappeared for 45 minutes and everything is a mess now.

- Even food items are at risk at residences as respondent C mentioned , “Talking from experience, last semester some dudes randomly walked in, I don’t know if they were walking around the res but they walked into our kitchen and they took everything from the deep freezer, food etc. you can imagine we had meat there and burgers. And they just took everything.”
- Another respondent recounted her roommate’s experience, “My roommate saw these guys while she was walking out her friends’ room. As she walked into the kitchen she saw the guys. She just thought they were there for their friend or something so as she opened the deep freezer she noticed that it was empty, empty, empty! And luckily I was in my room and she said somebody stole all our food. So I was like, how is this possible? So I walked out of my room and as I was walking I saw the guys up there with our food and we just knew it was them. Luckily we had this other dude and he chased the guys and we got our food back

Theme 2: Female Fears

- Another issue that was raised especially with female respondents was the many break-ins to the extent that they do not trust security guards anymore, as some females reported:

“You cannot study when you don’t feel safe, because you are scared that something bad may happen to you”

- Another female respondent (C) mentioned when she goes home for a few days, her roommate can never sleep alone in the room. She sleeps in her friends’ room because she is scared to sleep alone.

Theme 3 Laying Blame

- Students and security staff were equally blamed for students victimisation
Respondent F maintained , “Personally I believe the fault lies with the students because we have people standing at the gates asking to be swiped in and we don’t even know whether they are students at UKZN or strangers from outside. You will never know whether they are swiping in a serial killer... you will just never know. This thing really annoys me! I think if a friend is coming over I think they should call you to please come at the gate so you can swipe them in, so we don’t have people standing at the gate asking to be swiped in.”

- Other respondents complained that, “Even the cameras they have around res, they don’t work,”; “There is no proper communication between housing and the security guards. When you go to housing they tell you go to the security. When you get to security they tell you go back to housing. Then you wait the whole day for the police to come, and when they come, you’ve already touched everything and they want to check for fingerprints. Even that investigation can go on for the whole year.
- I had my laptop stolen in first year and the investigation is still continuing,”; “I remember this one time one of the student’s laptop was stolen in Malhob (name of residence) so he had to go to RMS and he reported everything there. He asked them if they could check through their camera footage if they could see something and they did. You know what they said? They said the cameras are unable to see the face. I don’t know the technology with their camera...actually it’s a mess, it’s not working,”; “I had my stuff stolen and when I got there they only had a record of like 10 seconds.

- Students were sceptical about the effectiveness of security cameras. Respondent D recounted, “During the time I had my laptop stolen they said the cameras were not working. I think it’s just something that’s recorded. When you get there they just show you something to appease you. It’s really just for formality,”; “Another thing, there’s not enough cameras. A friend of mine, they stole her laptop. The only thing they told her was that they could see the guy going in with the bag and then he’s coming out and that’s it. They just lost him somewhere, no sign of him on any of the other cameras” .
- Another respondent (F) commented that RMS systems can detect when an unusual number of students are being swiped into the campus, “The other thing I heard about the RMS is that their system is able to detect that a student is coming in and if you are swiping your friend in, example 7 people at the same time, it’s able to tell that something is happening of which is not usual. They have that ability to block access on you card, but they don’t do that. I’ve seen guys swiping 10 people there,”; “Last year here in WOB, someone just came in and stole a laptop. Luckily someone recognized him. They ran after him and he was wrenched! The RMS tried to intervene but the students beat him up,” “ RMS doesn’t have any power to protect us, they’re just there as a formality.”

- Another respondent (G) recounted her initial experience, “When I came to this varsity I had a bad experience. At my previous varsity, the security was okay. Every day you felt safe, even if you leave your room open, you’ll find your stuff there. But here we have a system...starting with the reses, you can even open the room without using a key. Another thing, the security guards are really just teddy bears by the gates. They are just there with their navy uniform and nothing else,”; “I remember someone’s room was broken into and she happened to notice who was in her room. She was in the kitchen and her room was locked. When she came back her room was open and she saw the guy. She chased after the guy. The guy was about to go out the gate he didn’t have a card. As she was chasing after him, she was also shouting “stop that guy!” The RMS instead of stopping that guy, swiped that guy out.”
- Other incidences that respondents related are, “In first year my room was broken into for the second time, this time they just cut the padlock. I first went to the security and asked to see any footage, but they said the cameras were not working. But funny enough they were working until 9am and this happened around 10am and then after that they started working again. Second thing is when I went to report the matter, I was told to collect all the padlocks that were cut off. We can’t rely on RMS. There should be a student forum on crime,”; “When it comes to the varsities property being stolen the criminals will always be caught, but when it comes to students, they don’t mind.

Theme Four- The Role of the Student Representative Council (SRC)

- For another respondent the SRC has a particular role to play which she expressed as, “The student unions first mandate should be this. I know there mandates are financial aid; more spaces for students to come into varsity; free education, but they should also look into the security. Not only the reses, but the whole campus and make it a priority. It’s something that’s always happening constantly and we have a lot of instances that occur. Personally, when they have their next strike I’m going to just say “put in some security right there.” Another respondent maintained, “They always saying security, security but nothing changes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- The data analysis highlighted concerns with issues of safety and security in residences specifically with respect to ineffective risk management services, poor technology such as cameras, inability of RMS staff to apprehend offenders, students having to take responsibility for security matters and vulnerability of female students. Since these were illustrated as major concern one of the key recommendations of this study is to undertake further participatory research on what students understand and suggest as effective security at residences. This is an addition to the technical recommendations of stricter access control, better security cameras and an increase in the number of visible security guards at residence.

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