Whose Voice Counts in Student Accommodation? A Literature Review on Inclusion, Access, and Agency in Massified Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, the landscape of student housing has undergone significant transformation globally, driven by massification, internationalization, and widening access to higher education. In South Africa and other sub-Saharan countries, the post-1994 expansion of higher education access has led to rapid growth in enrolment, outpacing the development of student accommodation infrastructure. This literature review explores the evolving field of student housing, focusing on students' satisfaction, housing preferences, and the critical challenges associated with accommodation provision particularly in the South African context. Drawing from global and local studies, the review identifies key physical, economic, and psychosocial determinants of student housing satisfaction, such as room size, proximity to campus, facility quality, safety, and affordability. It also analyzes how housing influences academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being. The review engages with conceptual frameworks such as Ford et al.'s (2002) housing pathways model and Thomsen's (2008) typologies of student housing needs, highlighting how student preferences reflect both structural constraints and evolving expectations. Despite growing international attention, student voices particularly in sub-Saharan Africa remain underrepresented in housing policy and design. This review underscores the importance of student centered approaches in shaping sustainable and inclusive accommodation strategies. By synthesizing findings across regions, the review identifies persistent gaps in research on student satisfaction, equity in access, and quality of facilities. It concludes by recommending further empirical studies to inform policies that align with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and NSFAS standards, ultimately enhancing the student experience in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Student housing, accommodation satisfaction, higher education, South Africa, housing preferences, student well-being, infrastructure inequality, massification, sub-Saharan Africa, DHET standards, NSFAS policy

INTRODUCTION

The field of student housing has experienced rapid change over the past 3 decades. Across the world there has been an increasing shortage on students' accommodation, with massification and internationalization institutions of higher learning was outstripped to provide adequate accommodation facilities (JLL, 2016:5). In South African and other sub-Saharan countries this was observed post-1994, when South Africa embarked on a transformative journey to redress historical inequalities and expand access to higher education. Furthermore, Karodia (2019) have

shown that another factor leading to students' rapid growth in South Africa is international students enrolled at institution of higher learning (Karodia, 2019:2; Mgomezulu, 2012).

According to the transformation agenda for higher education in South Africa, access to institutions of higher learning increased steadily by the previously disadvantaged population groups (Mgomezulu, 2012). In 1999 Minister Kader Asmal sought to address critical key issues within the higher education sector such as better-quality programmes with improved access, accelerated integration and resource efficiency. The focus of study is to add to South African and internal body of knowledge regarding students' voice on accommodation policy to bring about substantive changes that address and improved accommodation in line with students' preference to create a learning environment conducive for academic work and high output. The students' views are very important as they are the beneficiary of that student accommodation. Furthermore, the objective of the present study is limited to the challenges associated with student accommodation.

Thomsen (2008:579) in her study at Norway found that there is existing gap research wise to establish the young people's housing needs. Thomsen (2008) speculated that the reason for this could be that your group has no income or due to a low economic status. To support Thompson (2008) understanding its evidence hat in South Africa the state introduce grants for studying and for the basic income for the young people. Some could reason that this is temporary nature of accommodation, thinking quality is less important than in permanent housing. Nonetheless, Thomsen (2008) emphasised the importance of the housing situation of young students and young people has encouraged research on other academic fields, where behavioural aspects and environmental relationships are focus of interest.

Several studies (Hubbard, 2009; Smith & Hubbard, 2014) has shown that student housing and their demand have a major influence on the market, and the rising student's population has influence on the university surrounding economy. Topics such as the impact that housing plays in the growth of this students to become independent adults created an interest in research done by Kenyon (1999), Ford et al. (2002), and Rugg et al. (2004).

There are five different housing pathways identified among young people by Ford et al. (2002:2455) post entering the housing market being the planned (non-student), the unplanned, the constrained, the chaotic, and the student pathway. This pathway shows social practices of housing occupancy over time and space over the concept of peoples careers as cited in Thomsen, 2007:580. This study will concentrate on the student pathway as it the one causing disruption on the housing system. Thomsen indicated that the student pathway is seen as a privileged entrance to the local housing accommodation due to the fact that the students are supported by higher education institutions and family (Thomsen, 2007:579-580).

The focus of this study will outline the student's satisfaction purely on the physical characteristics of student housing, which Thomsen (2007:580) refer to them as 'objective' or measurable physical housing attributes. For almost 3 decades the issues of student's accommodation has caught the attention of researchers globally (Oppewal et al., 2005; Ijasan & Ahmed, 2016; Verhetsel et al., 2016; Tazelaar, 2017).

The preference approach, as applied by Oppewal et al. (2005) in United Kingdom student accommodation, a method employing designed hypothetical profiles with respondents rating and choosing between options. The results indicated accommodation preferences and students' satisfactions are influenced by the size of the room, the sharing ablutions, and the distance from campus (Oppewal et al., 2005:122).

In a study done by Palmer et al (2008) it was reported that Infusion of the institutional logos and crests in the design of student housing influence the rating of student satisfaction from resident students. In another study done at *China*, the level of student's satisfaction on the physical facilities, using a combination of case study analysis, the focus group and questionnaire survey, showed that the core facilities were in good condition, while support facilities required improvement (Ning & Chen, 2016). In *Ghana* in a survey study of 700 students, Bondinuba et al.'s (2013) found students' desire satisfaction with the ability to harness core facilities, enabling facility and support facilities in their accommodation. The nature of the memorandum of understanding between the institution and the private partners dictates service quality satisfaction in the case of a partnership (Baiden et al., 2011).

Najib et al. (2011) reported that in *Malaysia*, students survey recorded 74% satisfaction level with the facilities within the student residential satisfactory framework (Najib & Abidin, 2011). Also in Malaysian study, Najib et al. (2011) found significant relationship between overall satisfaction and loyalty behavior. In the *US*, students were found to be dissatisfied about housing types and amenities, encompassing private bedroom, onsite parking, double beds, onsite laundry facilities, Internet access, proximity to campus, fitness center, private bathroom, cable TV, and satellite dining for them (La Roche et al., 2010). In *Australia*, students were more concerned about the quality of both internal and external fabrics and facilities, which prompted universities to channel more resources into student housing (Macintyre, 2003).

User satisfaction outcomes emanated not only from the physical appurtenances but also from psychosocial (physical, morphological, emotional, and social) elements. In the *US*, perceptual opinions of students' satisfaction and feeling-at-home thinking from students express a satisfactory mood (Palmer et al., 2008). In *Malaysia*, Najib et al. (2011) incorporated social and physical elements in the evaluation of satisfaction on student housing, using face-

to-face surveys with participants through a cluster sampling technique. It indicated that students are generally satisfied in this context. Nonetheless, there is a need for improvement. Across the leading universities, in *Malaysia*, Najib et al. (2011) posited that many student categories were satisfied with social and emotional aspects. UN and UNESCO do not downplay the importance of facilities and support infrastructural services as the indicators of sustainable higher education (Wals, 2014).

The institutions of higher learning in sub-Saharan Africa including South Africa enrolment rate had almost double from 4.3 to 8.6 per cent from 2000-2014. PWC (2015) reported that a young population seeking accommodation space are the main drivers of the real estate sector in Africa (PWC, 2015:15). This has resulted in increased demand for student housing in sub-Saharan, including South Africa which saw this massification post-apartheid (JLL, 2016:3). This study is relevant in South Africa for students' voice on accommodations, and it is supported by the report of the World Bank figures which also show that Africa has the lowest median age of all the continents. PWC (2015), also reported they African population dominated by the age range between 15-24 with the possibility of double from 226 million by 2045 which will plunge the stressed student's accommodation sector more if no interventions are done (PWC, 2015:15).

More studies need to be done to establish the extent to which SA institutions of higher learning are facing accommodation problems. Rensburg (2016) reported more than double growth from 500 thousand to 1.2 million the past decade, a growth observed just in two decades after 1994 (Rensburg, 2016). South Africa's 26 public universities and 50 TVET colleges are facing huge challenges as far as housing their students is concerned.

The student housing commercial interest started only after the publication in 2012 of the 'Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Provision of Student Housing at South African Universities' by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (Rensburg, 2011). It was only at that time when all stake holders namely the government, the universities and private sector became aware of the true extent of the student housing shortage (Schooling, 2015).

The review report published more than 2 decades reported that almost 110 000 university residence beds were available in 2010, indicating that only 18 per cent of students can be accommodate of the 583 000 enrolled full-time students, including only 5 per cent of first-year students. The shortage was a consequence of limited resources for student housing infrastructure, coupled with the maintenance and operating costs of residence buildings (DHET, 2016). To date a very few to none of the SA institutions of higher learning have met the report recommended that accommodation should be provided for 50 per cent to 80 per cent of students. The department, furthermore, projected an extra 400 000 beds would be needed by 2030 in order to meet the enrolment targets encompassed in the National Development Plan and the Post- School Education and Training Policy (DHET, 2016:3).

A decade ago, already Andeson reported that approximately 207 000 South African university students and 400 000 Further Education & Training (FET) students were struggling to find the accommodation (Anderson, 2014). The internationalization and globalization with massification seen post-apartheid exert pressure on the deteriorating student accommodation system of the 26 institutions in SA, as 95% struggle to get accommodation (Anderson, 2015). With steadily rising numbers the government aims to accommodate approximately 1.6 million students by 2030 (Rensburg, 2016).

The situation at the TVET colleges is even worse. According to the DHET 2015 survey of the 50 public TVET colleges only 10 120 beds were available for 710 000 college students, making a ratio of 1:70 bed: students, scarcely 1.4 per cent. The SA government estimated 100 0000 students beds are needed for the TVET colleges (DHET, 2016). Since the publication of the ministerial report review, the situation has deteriorated further, with increasing numbers of students relocating to the cities to join colleges and universities (Rensburg, 2011).

According to the ministerial report review, approximately R82.4 billion was needed to overcome that shortage by 2021. This was a mammoth task for goverment alone, looking at the costs like this the private sector assistance could contribute significantly as a stakeholder in the provision of student accommodation (Rensburg, 2011). Academic institutions and property companies across the country have noted the student accommodation shortage in SA, and companies are increasingly making it their exclusive business to build and manage housing for university students (Anderson, 2014).

In gaining control of student accommodation the DHET in 2015 gazetted a policy on student housing standards. In an efforted to improved student accommodation, close to R1.7 billion has been apportioned for student accommodation development (Mahlaka, 2016).

The recent growth in both accredited and none-accredited accommodation in SA whereby the private sector see the viable market due to rising student population in Bloemfontein and Welkom towns in the Free State. Monitoring of student's satisfaction is necessary to ensure all CUT students enjoy environment conducive for learning as per DHET (2015) standards. This research on students' satisfaction in the field is important to get the students voice amid shortage of adequate residential accommodation and possible exploitation. Furthermore, in addition to the quantitative scarcity, the old infrastructure is poorly maintained, and shortfall is also qualitative.

Planting (2014) shared the need also to address the proximity to campus, the quality of the accommodation and its suitability as a place to study for our students (Planting, 2014). In order to understand students' satisfaction on accommodation needs, problems encountered by the students should be investigated. New buildings should be developed, and existing buildings adapted according to preferences and satisfaction to the current student's needs.

Universities worldwide are progressively experiencing a shortage of student housing due to factors such as ageing infrastructure, increased student enrolments, and a lack of funding. To accommodate the expanding student body, new facilities must be built, and existing structures must be modified to meet the evolving needs of the current student body. Not as much research has focused on the issue of student satisfaction or problems encountered at student housing as it has in the overseas institutions, despite developing nations like South Africa having a diversified student population. Furthermore, very few studies have truly concentrated on the satisfaction and analysis of university students' accommodation choices, despite the fact that there has been a lot of study on student housing conducted worldwide.

The research should identify these challenges faced by the students, students' preferences and the drivers behind them. According to Macintyre (2003), student housing is a crucial component of the range of services that universities can provide. Students are increasingly viewed as academic consumers who are looking to purchase the greatest educational package. It's critical to comprehend how students select their housing, even from a marketing perspective and universities ensure compliance to the DHET 2015 and NSFAS guidelines for accreditation.

Future studies should identify the challenges faced by the students by investigating what aspects of accommodation they don't find attractive and desirable. In the process, the researcher expects to identify suggestions that might be of value for providers of student housing.

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