

# The Effects of On-Campus Residence on Academic Performance of University Students: A South African Perspective

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## Abstract

The article is based on a comparative study that aimed to determine whether on-campus residence may exert an influence on students' academic performance. Eighty participants from the Faculty of Humanities at one of the universities of technology in Soshanguve, South Africa, were sampled to participate in the study. The rationale behind this was that the Faculty of Humanities offers day classes and evening classes, which are attended by both on-campus and off-campus students. Quota sampling was used to select the participants. From an academic perspective, the study attempted to ascertain which of the aforementioned residences can contribute to students' academic success. The study found that on-campus students have a greater chance of performing well, when compared to their counterparts, the off-campus students. The findings further revealed that there is a dialectical relationship between students' academic performance and their residence. The study records the following qualitative variables to academic success: access to safety and an environment that is conducive to learning, academic tutorship and mentorship programmes, social and personal contact relationships, and library and internet resources. In this quest, these variables are crucial to the enhancement of students' learning development.

**Keywords:** on-campus; off-campus; academic performance; academic exclusion; evening and day classes

## Introduction

According to Radder and Han (2009, 107), residence life is a unique student experience that is associated with special benefits. They further articulate that students who reside on campus generally perform better than those who reside off campus. The rationale behind this is that on-campus students can better develop their social, personal, planning and organising skills and are more likely to persist in their studies and attain personal and academic goals and objectives.

The participating university of technology (UoT), as a public higher education (HE) institution, is primarily regulated by the Higher Education Act (Republic of South Africa 1997) and is considered one of the largest of 26 contact universities in South Africa.

The participating campus has two faculties, namely, the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Information, Communication and Technology. The Faculty of Humanities is considered the second largest faculty at the participating UoT and comprises 10 academic departments. It offers more than 60 academic programmes. In this faculty, both evening and day classes are offered. The campus has approximately 18 000 students registered in 2020. This campus is located in Soshanguve, about 30 km north of Pretoria.

## Problem Statement

According to Mbara and Celliers (2013), an increase in the number of students residing off campus leads to more opportunities for social contact with other students, which is vital for the enhancement of their learning development. Kasayira, Chipandambira and Hungwe (2007, 22) conducted an investigation on stressors normally faced by university students and their coping strategies in the Midlands State University, Zimbabwe. The findings of the study revealed that the three most common stressors were finance, library resources and accommodation.

When considering the work of Mbara and Celliers (2013); Kasayira, Chipandambira and Hungwe (2007) and Radder and Han (2009), it can be deduced that students' academic performance may be negatively or positively influenced by other social factors. What causes the dilemma is that most of the South African universities have fewer residences available on campus to accommodate their students. Most students therefore have to opt for off-campus residences.

## Objectives of the Study

Forthcoming from the above problem statement, the fundamental objectives of the study were to

- give a comparative analysis from views of on-campus and off-campus students on their academic performance,

- determine whether on-campus residences may have an influence on students' academic performance, and
- investigate the role of motivation on academic performance.

## Literature Review

López Turley and Wodtke (2010, 507) articulate that although many factors influence a student's level of academic engagement, the most important environmental factor identified in previous research is living on campus in a residence hall. Such findings were the impetus for a vast body of research examining the relationship between residences and a variety of desirable student outcomes closely linked to student engagement, such as critical thinking, persistence to graduation and academic performance.

According to the student involvement theory, the academic development of students living in different residence environments varies by the extent to which they are involved in their post-secondary institutions (Austin 1984, 1993). A highly involved student is one who “devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty and other students” (Austin 1984, 297).

Graham, Hurtado and Gonyea (2018, 255) cogently maintain that the student affairs theory and practice are rooted in the belief that opportunities for learning outside of the classroom are abundant and many of these experiences are shaped by the environments and programmes provided to those living in campus residences.

Safety and security is a great concern to most of the South African universities that are located in residential townships. This statement does not suggest that universities located in urban areas are not experiencing safety issues. However, it is arguable to indicate that the statistics of criminality in the South African context makes it clear that South Africa is one of the high risk countries globally.

The academic programmes at this university are divided into two types, namely, B7, commonly known as day classes and BB, commonly known as evening classes. The above-mentioned types accommodate both off-campus and on-campus students. In this article, it is argued that the evening type may come with some discomfort to the off-campus students. In a more practical sense, it is inconvenient to them since they must travel or walk after hours which might pose a safety risk. On-campus students do not have to travel and enter well-securitised university premises.

For this reason Mbara and Celliers (2013) postulate that off-campus students are often disadvantaged compared to their on-campus counterparts as they spend a considerable amount of time walking to and from university – time which could be used productively for studying and building important social relationships and networks. In addition, the

researchers underscore that walking to and from university is not considered the only disadvantage. The default factors of concern will always be the environment which students will occupy. The most common assumption is that those students would become criminals' immediate target.

Another critical issue that comes to the fore is fear experienced by off-campus students when the class is about to adjourn. During this time, the students are expected to concentrate on the lecture. This fear is perpetuated by criminal activities reported daily. The gist here is that off-campus and on-campus students may differ with regard to the understanding of the delivered content. In this context, the main qualitative variable was that the on-campus students are more relaxed whereas the off-campus students experience more stress. It should be noted that all these things happen during the process of teaching and learning.

It needs to be mentioned that access to the library and the internet is regarded as the main pillar of an academic institution in this article. On this issue, it is crucial to state that Section 29 (1) of the Constitution of South Africa (Republic of South Africa 1996) requires that everyone has a right to education. The default position of this statement is that education should be accessible. In this article, we argue that off-campus students have limited access to the library and internet as compared to their on-campus counterparts.

Another critical argument that comes to the fore is the one of students' engagement. Faroa (2017, 1) reported that student engagement is defined as the extent to which students are engaged in HE activities; research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes. The ubiquitous influence of the term "student engagement" was felt throughout the HE landscape.

According to Lassegard (2008, 357), the use of academic tutors and mentors in the extracurricular education of university students has become widespread at universities throughout the world. In the past few decades, there has been growing interest in this variety of student-centred education, along with the view that such education is beneficial not only to those being tutored but also to the tutors themselves. This educational practice has emerged as a form of collaborative learning (Bruffee 1995) and the concept has been expanded into areas of peer tutoring and mentoring within HE.

May (1974, 48) argues that a constructivist view of learning understands new knowledge as arising from a structured relationship between the external cultural environment and the mind of the student. Although such a view would suggest that student learning is primarily influenced by structured teaching and learning interactions, it would acknowledge that access to learning resources which support teaching and other social and personal factors in the learning environment also influence the quality of a students' learning.

Goodlad and Hirst (1998, 2) state, “Tutoring is now recognized as a way of enriching education and achieving goals that cannot be achieved by other means.” In recent years, with rapidly increasing numbers of students crossing the globe for educational purposes, many HE institutions have found it necessary to implement tutoring and mentoring programmes at both undergraduate and graduate levels, which help ease international students’ adjustment to life in the foreign country and to provide them with extracurricular instruction in language and in their area of study.

Tait and Mills (2003, 67) state that academic tutors facilitate and guide the learning of their students so that the students gain knowledge and understanding. To achieve this, tutors develop and practise a multitude of skills and strategies. It is arguable that these skills are no different to those employed by lecturers in contiguous environments, and this may be true. The main role of the subject tutor is to

- ensure that students gain a thorough grounding in the subject,
- provide students with academic support in the subject,
- help students integrate practiced work experience with academic knowledge, and
- help students explore the links between modules.

## Research Methodology and Sample Population

In this article, we concentrated on qualitative research. Face-to-face interviews were used as the method of data collection. The sample population of the article comprised both on-campus and off-campus students registered at a UoT in a rural area. A total of 40 on-campus and 40 off-campus students were invited to participate in the study. Regarding the gender parity, most participants were female (53%) and male participation comprised 47 per cent. It is important to mention that 27 per cent of the female participants attended the day classes (B7) and 27 per cent attended the evening classes (BB). With regard to the male participants, 24 per cent attended the day classes (B7) and 24 per cent attended the evening classes (BB). All these students belonged to the Faculty of Humanities, since it offers the two types of academic programme, namely day and evening classes.

## Research Instruments

According to Nieuwenhuis (2016, 92), an interview is defined as a two-way conversation in which the interviewer asks the participant questions to collect data and to learn about the ideas, beliefs, views, opinions and behaviours of the participant. In this article, face-to-face interviews as a qualitative method of data collection was selected because it allows the participants to speak without limit in a simulation of a conversation, with the advantages of turn-taking and leading. It also allows the interviewer to follow up on the answers given by the participants. This may be regarded as a two-way communication which could increase the richness of the data (Mashiya 2011). In addition, Brynard, Hanekom and Brynard (2014, 39) reiterate that the

interview is viewed as a qualitative method of data collection which allows the researcher to know the research participants personally, to see them as they are, and to experience their daily struggles when confronted with real-life situations.

## Ethical Issues

In this study, all the participants were requested to sign a consent form after they were told that their participation was voluntary and no one should be forced to participate in a project. The participants were assured that they would be treated with dignity and respect. Issues of anonymity and confidentiality were also guaranteed and their identity would never be revealed. When reporting to the findings, the authors used letter codes such as P1 (participant 1) to refer to specific participants for data analysis and presentation purposes.

## Discussion of Findings

The analysis from this section is qualitative since open-ended questions were used and the data were analysed narratively. Prominent themes surfaced when studying the data extracted from the interview responses and are discussed next. Quotes were used to elucidate students' views and opinions. In this article, "I" represents interview and "Q" stands for question, for example, IQ1 will mean interview question 1.

IQ1. To what extent do you think on-campus residence may affect your academic performance?

To this question, most (93%) participants were of the view that academic success does not happen in isolation. It has to be supported by other factors from the support divisions which include student accommodation. The participants articulated that there is a noticeable direct relationship between on-campus residence and students' academic performance. From this response, it can be understood that even those participants who reside in an off-campus residence realise the importance of on-campus residence in their academic trajectory. Referring to the perception that on-campus residence is an essential need, participant 11 pointed out:

The on-campus environment itself is conducive for the process of teaching and learning to take place. There are free benefits such as Wi-Fi hotspots that students can always rely on for Internet connectivity. Some of us who stay off-campus have to utilise our own data in order to research about school-related issues while other students (off-campus) are accessing similar information free of charge. In this difficult economic conditions, it is extremely difficult for off-campus students to have sufficient data that can sustain them until the end of an academic year.

Another participant mentioned another critical aspect:

Some tutors and mentors stay on-campus and one can always use the opportunity to engage them about the things I did not understand in class. They are always available to

assist students like me but my challenge is that I am available during the day, because my time-table is packed. I can only consult them when my boyfriend is available, since Soshanguve is not safe at night. Personally, I take time to understand what the lecturers say in class and sometimes I am shy to pose questions, because the other students will laugh at me, since my English proficiency is not up to standard. However, when the same content is delivered by an academic tutor, I understand it better because I do not mind to ask questions using my first language. (P30)

Participant 21 revealed the following:

At some stage I was academically excluded because of the challenges that I faced as a result of off-campus residence. My academic performance started to improve immediately after I got the space in Telkom Residence. It was easier for me to communicate with my classmates about school work, particularly where I am experiencing problems.

From the above transcriptions, it is arguable to submit that there is a dialectical relationship between students' academic progress and residence. In this context, the participants' conception is that on-campus residence has an influence on their academic performance. In this article, we, however, caution that there are those students who stay off-campus but who are doing well academically. On the other hand, there are those who stay on-campus but who are still experiencing challenges with their studies.

IQ2. In what way might off-campus residence affect your studies?

A total of 58 per cent of the participants posited that off-campus residence does not promote healthy teaching and learning. The issue of safety was a great concern to most participants. It is plausible to state that the consulted literature researched argues that off-campus students are often disadvantaged compared to their on-campus counterparts as they spend much time walking to and from university and sometimes in uncomfortable situations (Mbara and Celliers 2013). Participant 9 shared:

I have been mugged more than once and every time when I have to walk to campus I feel like history will repeat itself. The University offered me free psychological help which helped me to easily cope with the incidents. However, I am a human being and those memories will always come back when I approach a group of boys who do not look like decent people.

I personally do not see how off-campus residence can be beneficial in any way. I am originally from Soshanguve and I stay at home because my parents do not understand why I should have on-campus residence. My problem is that every day when I get home I am expected to do some of the house chores which I find to be very disruptive. Sometimes I need to rest but I am expected to cook. My other friends at university residence can go a week without cooking but I have to cook, almost every day.

When commenting on the advantages and disadvantages of off-campus residence, participant 43 said:

Some of the students who are attending evening classes learn by friends. The reason for saying this is that you need to rely on your friends in order to attend your classes accordingly. Sometimes I happen to miss the classes not that I want to, just because my friends are not interested in attending the class. The only choice that I have is to become vulnerable to victimisation by walking alone in a scary environment that is full of Nyaope boys who are targeting vulnerable students. I rather miss a class than to become a statistic on crime-related issues.

The above-mentioned student's viewpoint underscores the centrality of safety and security on university students, particularly those who reside off-campus. In this article, it is disappointing to record that students may opt to miss a class owing to fear of criminal activities that might be experienced on their way to or from campus. In addition to the above-quoted response, one of the participants mentioned the following:

If truth were to be told, there is nothing that is good about off-campus residence. We are dealing with many things that the university should take into consideration when we appeal to our academic exclusion. It is extremely difficult to survive when you stay off-campus; we are being mugged now and then and our lives are always at high risk due to a high rate of crime in this location. The most painful part is that students are the target of criminals because they know that we are vulnerable.

**IQ3. Describe the relationship between students' type of residence and their academic performance**

In this article, this aspect is crucial, since it centres on whether students' academic performance can be influenced by on-campus residence. Most participants (94%) held the perspective that off-campus and on-campus residences cannot be compared, since they do not have a similar infrastructure. They cogently reasoned that on-campus residence is equipped enough to support the students' learning objectives. Participants 4 and 16 submitted the following:

Off-campus residence was not meant for students but any individual who is working in a Shopping Mall is affected. For the future generation, the University should just build more residences to ensure that all the registered students are provided with on-campus residence because it is not fair to be assessed in the same way with those students that have a luxurious resources. For example: One day I had to study with a candle after the landlord did not pay a municipality bill and the electrical inspectors had to cut the electricity until the bill was settled. It was painful because we never missed to pay any rent but we were the ones who suffered most, since the incident took place during Test Week. (P4)

Most of the landlords in this location are just after money. They do not care about our security. The surprising issue is that we are paying rent on a monthly basis and there is

no single house that has electric fences. The University should just instruct these landlords that those who wish to accommodate its students should ensure that their houses/rooms meet certain security requirements. Students' safety should come first, not money. (P16)

The participants in the previous interview question expressed their views on safety and security in off-campus residences. The participants highlighted their vulnerability. In this context, it is arguable to mention that this shows the seriousness of the students' concern. In this article, the implication of this concern may be that it could negatively affect the academic performance of certain students, particularly those who reside off-campus.

IQ4. From your academic experience, what could be the benefits of on-campus residence?

This question was aimed at the exploration of advantages that can be associated with living on on-campus residences. It is prominent to mention that a significant majority (95%) of the participants opined that campus residence benefits students. It is evident from this response that both on-campus and off-campus students share a similar perspective that residence can be linked to good academic performance and feeling secure and safe. The most dominating benefits were the following:

- safety of the environment during the day and at night;
- internet connectivity through open labs and Wi-Fi hotspots;
- job opportunities where preference might be given to on-campus students;
- opportunities to share academic-related challenges with other students; and
- access to the library until it closes.

When emphasising the above-mentioned benefits of on-campus residences, participants 22 and 7 pointed out the following:

I always visit my friends who stay on-campus and I so wish I had that kind of opportunity. Landlords do not worry about students' safety because the university has sufficient security officers day and night. They have cleaners who take care of their kitchen, bathroom and sitting room areas. (P22)

Students do not learn in the same way and I am that type of student who can do anything in my room. For me to study attentively, I need to be in the library the whole day. I have classes four days a week and the only time I can access the library is over weekends. If I had accommodation inside the campus, I would go to the library and study until they close because my safety cannot be violated. (P7)

Regarding the job opportunities that may be grabbed by on-campus residence students, participant 38 posited:

My friend forms part of the Residence Committee and she is already building her curriculum vitae. I love leadership but I am limited to participate in such committees because I stay off-campus. It looks like the university is designed for those who stay on-campus. To add on this, I once attended a job interview at the library when they were looking for student assistants and I was asked whether I stay off-campus or on-campus. I did not take the question seriously until I realised that the selected candidates were chosen on the assumption that their safety will not be compromised when they close the library at 22:00. The decision to stay off-campus is not a matter of choice, it is simply because the universities do not have sufficient accommodation that can cater for all the students. However, off-campus students are sometimes disadvantaged as if they went to location by choice.

When expounding the above-quoted views and perspectives from both on-campus and off-campus students, most participants in this study agreed that there is a connection between on-campus residence and students' academic success. The participants mentioned the qualitative variables that play a crucial role in the academic journey of students in general.

Based on the participants' responses, a general conclusion is that there is a direct relationship between on-campus residence and students' academic performance. However, this does not imply that off-campus students perform poorly when compared to their counterparts, the on-campus students.

### **Qualitative Themes that Emerged from the Findings**

#### *Qualitative Theme One: Learning and Safety*

In a country characterised by a high crime rate, most female participants shared a similar perspective that off-campus residence poses a security threat when they walk to and from campus daily. It was found that some of the academic programmes offered in the evening accommodate only on-campus students, because their safety will not be compromised. In this context, the contentious issue to be considered is that for one to learn effectively, one has to feel safe and comfortable about the environment in which learning is taking place. Emanating from the participants' responses, it emerged that on-campus students are not concerned about their safety, since the university employed sufficient security personnel.

#### *Qualitative Theme Two: Learning and Access*

Academic programmes benefit on-campus students more than those who reside off-campus. In this article, it became evident that on-campus students have more advantages than their off-campus counterparts. The reason for this is that the on-campus students have easier access to the library and internet connectivity, which play a crucial role in students' academic success. The participants also stated that opportunities such as tutorship and mentorship programmes benefit on-campus students more than off-campus students. The rationale behind this is that on-campus students can easily access and use the opportunity to consult the tutors and mentors after hours.

### *Qualitative Theme Three: Learning and Intrinsic Motivation*

Regarding this theme, the participants argued that one cannot learn to one's fullest potential if one is not academically motivated. It was reasoned that for students to retain their space in a university residence, a certain academic performance percentage is required. Similarly, for a student to qualify to stay in a single room, a certain percentage is mandatory. The aforementioned are some of the contributing factors why on-campus students are directly pressurised to do well in their studies. Unlike off-campus students, poor academic performance has no implications for their residence. Leadership opportunities to participate in residence committees and student assistance opportunities in the library and other campus support services can be given to well-performing students. In this context, on-campus students may be prioritised if the work hours extend into the evening.

### *Qualitative Theme Four: Learning from Peers*

One contentious issue that has given rise to this article is that students do not learn in the same way. Some students learn better from lecturers whereas others learn better from their peers. In this article, it was revealed that students that learn better from their peers need to spend more time on campus. Their social-contact time with the other students should be maximised and the on-campus residence in this context is the only platform that provides that kind of opportunity. Ample opportunity to share academic challenges with their peers can contribute to students' success.

## Conclusion

The authors encapsulated what the research participants articulated with regard to research questions and objectives to complete the findings of the study. The article aimed to determine whether students' academic performance can be influenced by on-campus residence. The consulted literature research and data from the participants confirmed that on-campus residence may have an influence on students' academic performance. It is anticipated that the finding of this article may help to resolve the problem statement under debate and pave the way for future research on a larger scale, i.e. conducting a national language survey on the relationship between students' academic performance and on-campus residence. With regard to this article, it is arguable to articulate that the process of quality learning does not happen in isolation. It must be supported by certain qualitative variables which should be regarded as the major contributing factors to learning.

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