

Shortfall in student accommodation contributes directly to poor pass rates

South African universities are midway through the first semester, fresh out of the first series of tests for the year.



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As the term grinds along and grade cut-offs rear their heads, student failure and drop-out rates are drawing due attention. In particular, the student housing shortfall that sparked the #Shackville protest in February will have had a toll on student adjustment and success this year - here is why.

Back in 2010, only 20% of enrolled students in South Africa were accommodated in university housing. A 2011 report by the Department of Higher Education and Training concluded that, given the home situation of most students in South Africa, universities should be providing at least 50%-80% of enrolled students with accommodation, and some institutions up to 100%.

Yet, in February 2016 the University of Cape Town was pushed to announce that it has the means to accommodate 6,680 students, while 27,000 require accommodation. This dramatic and to-date unresolved shortfall has and will contribute directly to poor pass rates.

Capacity to adjust

“Studies conducted locally and abroad have shown that throughput of students in residences is better than those who live off campus. When a student is placed in temporary accommodation or is required to stay with family or friends in crowded private homes, their capacity to adjust to and excel in the academic year is significantly disrupted,” says John Schooling, director of student accommodation group, STAG African.

“We have a situation in which only 20% of first years in lower income institutions are passing their courses, demonstrating that we are not meeting students’ academic needs,” says Schooling. It is estimated that over 60% of learning at the tertiary level occurs outside of a lecture hall, confirming that well-designed living spaces are crucial to student performance.

“University curricula in the 21st century require greater connectivity and flexibility than ever before. Best-practice models for student housing globally have adopted the idea of creating ‘living-learning’ spaces in recognition of this,” notes Schooling.

Students in developing economic contexts are at even higher risk of falling behind if not properly accommodated. Many have full or part-time jobs in order to cover their study and living costs. They fit their coursework around shifts, and require safe, conveniently located and connected housing in order to do so successfully.

Far from home

Most students in South African residences originate from KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape or neighbouring SADC countries and study far from home. Seventy one percent receive some form of financial aid, for which a lack of household income is a key consideration.

“Building adequate, low-cost student housing facilities are achievable if we think innovatively about how we design, construct and maintain these developments. The best means of doing so is if the private sector gets involved,” says Schooling.

STAG African was established on the principle that university residences are social communities, and that their design can advance or detract from our academic and societal goals. “Addressing the crisis of pass rates begins with providing students with the living environment that 21st century student life requires,” concludes Schooling.

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