

## **The Standardization of Student Accommodation**

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Teaching, learning, research and community service are commonly seen as a university's core functions. However, with the rise of universities around the world this has led to a rise in student enrolments, as these institutions now need to provide a wider range of academic services, including accommodation. This occurrence comes with the need to accommodate students in a safe and secure environment to ensure the optimum academic performance necessary for the economic development in the country. Some historical internal data and reports exist to feed into the conceptualisation, construction of a methodology and analytical strategy for this project. This study looks at the role of standardisation student accommodation and impact this had on student funding.

The demand for student accommodation continues to increase given that students move from various provinces to seek insituions of higher learning. Furthermore, the growth in the enrolment numbers and limited spaces available for workspaces the demand for student accommodation particularly in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector has grown exponentially.

With more students pursuing higher education, the need for standardized student accommodation has become more crucial than ever. Standardization in student accommodation refers to setting uniform guidelines and quality standards for housing provided to students. This research report delves into the importance of standardization in student accommodation, the benefits it offers, challenges faced, factors to consider in shaping policies around student accommodation.

**Key Words: Student Accommodation, Education, Quality, Safety.**

## **Introduction and Background**

The sustainability of the National Student Financial Scheme (NSFAS) is a key concern within the post-school education and training system. As part of its student centred model, NSFAS provides accommodation allowances, amongst other allowances, to funded students. Most of the NSFAS funding budget is utilised for allowances, and in particular accommodation allowances, which is on average 60 percent compared to transport allowance claims. It is an area for constant reflection, given the large and growing sums of investment in this system as evidenced in the budget votes over recent years. This thematic area will always remain an important subject for research across different financial years. Although priority and focus might shift, there are a range of core research and policy questions that continue to drive this area. Essentially this area investigates what policy options are available for alleviating the tension between managing the budget for funding and addressing societal inequality through bursary funding and maintaining a level of quality in the provision of accommodation services.

NSFAS has prioritised the need to establish evidence to support policy on the standardisation and availability of student accommodation in the post-school education and training (PSET) system. Since 2023, the accommodation allowances have been standardised between the TVET College and University system by the introduction of an accommodation cap ( funding policy, 2023). The introduction of the accommodation cap was met with resistance by some institutions and accommodation providers living in areas where the economic activities are higher than the prescribed cap. Furthermore, NSFAS brought the accommodation cap as a means of regulating and standardizing the maximum amount that can be paid for a bed to a NSFAS beneficiary. Given that this space was unregulated for a long time, accommodation allocation process in some instances exposed the entity to abusive practices.

There is little current work to indicate whether current values are either sufficient or reasonable, reflective enough of locational differences, and compares well across the realities of the university and TVET College systems. Thus, the principles underpinning the setting of accommodation allowances require further development. Creating evidence-based research on current cost structures, availability of accommodation, clearer classification of different

accommodation types and location types will inform the development of a more fair and rational set of principles underlying the standardisation of allowance values.

## **Problem Statement**

Over time, the culture of student accommodation has changed significantly, with the majority preferring to live on on-campus (Bank & Sibanda 2018) and off-campus. Trends indicate that students opt to be away from home even though they live near the institutions they study at. The increasing number of disadvantaged students registering at the universities, especially those from the rural areas, thereby places 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 and 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 NSFAS, DHET and higher education institutions in South Africa with a knowledge base that will enable them to take informed decisions.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Olufemi, (2014) in a student housing study of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, in Nigeria, found that ‘majority of the students admitted are around the age of eighteen and a substantial proportion of them never left home or had previous hostel experience’. Likewise, residing in students’ housing faraway from family for a long period of time is an enduring experience for young students as it presents an opportunity to learn the ethos of life and how to live independently, compromise with roommates, other students who are not one’s relatives and share space, bath, toilet, dining and other facilities. Furthermore, student housing living

arrangements, Ja'afar, (2012) called it 'shared bedroom', provides opportunities for students to live and work together in an academic community and to realize more fully the ethos of the college which assist in developing citizenship and leadership in addition to their academic activities.

Students that live far away from their parents for higher education in college campuses have a greater impact on their personalities and psychology Garg et al (2014), where new environmental set up were designed to shape them. This new environment, probably an entirely new heterogeneous community, provides a different experience all together let students struggle to adjust and adapt to the new environment. In fact, this is more pronounced especially when the physical environment does not provide what students expect from their home environment (Thomsen, 2008) and other students met are from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, it is a challenge for students to adapt themselves to this new situation that is likely to differ from their respective homes' experiences toward their personal development, citizenship and general ethos of life.

## **Literature Review**

Teaching, learning, research and community service are commonly seen as a university's core functions. However, with the rise of universities around the world this has led to a rise in student enrolments, as these institutions now need to provide a wider range of academic services. This occurrence comes with the need to accommodate students in a safe and secure environment to ensure the optimum academic performance necessary for the economic development in the country. Mbara & Celliers 2013, in Naidu, 2011, states that the universal expanding nature of tertiary institutions, coupled with globalization and the number of students seeking to enter universities, resulted in a demand for off-campus accommodation. Student accommodation is a challenge globally, with universities experiencing a similar occurrence as South African universities (Naidu, 2011). Mohamedbhai (2014), indicates that 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 is highly critical. As per the DHET Norms and Standards on Accommodation, accommodation to be made available by universities or by private providers is to comply with minimum standards of comfort and at

reasonable cost.

It is also expected 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. 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 African Universities 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 centers, and in Gauteng, students are faced with a chronic shortage of safe, secure and affordable accommodation. 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 2020 the International Finance Corporation (IFC) conducted a market assessment on student housing landscape in South Africa. IFC stated that, “it estimated that there were 2.55 million students enrolled across all tertiary institutions (universities and Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges)

Public universities make up the largest portion (44.9 percent of all students), followed by TVET colleges (30.9 percent). Enrolments at public universities are estimated to grow to 1.2 million and TVET college enrolments are set to reach 1.03 million by 2023. Demand drivers for postschool education in South Africa, and by extension student accommodation, include population growth in the youth segment, government funding for post-school education, and household income growth. These, coupled with the government’s stated goal to grow public

university enrolments to 1.6 million and TVET college enrolment to 2.5 million by 2030, are set to drive continued demand for quality, affordable student accommodation”.

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 of the society and our world market. There are 23 higher educational institutions in South Africa. 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 housing has profound influence on students’ overall socio-political life such as leadership development, behaviour, academic performance, citizenship, and sense of belonging. Student housing, integrate the social and psychological functions to satisfy the student’s needs, aspirations, and expectations as an ecological environment for learning activities. Ecological in the sense that it functions as means of interaction between students and the academic environment and vice versa which have significant influence on the students. Primarily student housing environment gives comfort, convenience and safety to students and it have great influence on the creation of favourable atmosphere for learning to achieve the desired educational needs of students. Indeed student housing is an essential and integral part of the higher education institutions facilities that help students to develop their intellectual capabilities, personal development and other academic related missions.



## **Approach**

The General Bursary Guidelines indicate that institutional accommodation, as per their classification, are allowed to claim the maximum allowed as per the classification allocated to them as per municipal demarcation of metro and non-metro. The demarcation process considers the demographic, social and economic characteristics of areas as well as linkages between constituent units to create boundaries that facilitate development planning. The boundaries are continually reassessed, and neither the historical boundaries nor the number of demarcated municipalities stay constant over time as areas are amalgamated or split. Therefore, an area can be classified peri-urban or rural in one year and urban in the following year(s). There is a process involved and this is a competency of provincial governments in consultation with the affected municipalities. Therefore, NSFAS has no role in determining the category of a municipality.

## **Rationale and Significance of the study**

The rationale behind the study is to explore the impact of standardising student accommodation, the link between accommodation and the success rates of students 'occupying these accommodations. Generally, students are more likely to perform better when their accommodation has amenities contributing to a proper living environment. This provides opportunities for students to get to know each other and build a strong sense of community. This also enhances students' university experience and provides support and resources for academic and personal development. The study will contribute to the deeper understanding of challenges surrounding accommodation by both practitioners and policymakers. It will contribute and enhance the policy-making process in providing provisions addressing current challenges experienced by those in the accommodation value chain.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the selected institutions. Albeit there were some challenges with the response rate, most did that with an acceptable time frame. Those that did not properly respond a request and a follow-up communication has been sent. The ethical request investigates the issues of anonymity, consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

## **Standardisation of Student Accommodation**

The ministerial review committee on student housing interrogated the provision of student accommodation and developed the norms and standards required to ensure consistency and standardisation in the provision of student accommodation. The review of student housing completed in 2012 found that only 18% of students were housed at universities at the time and just 5% of first-year students stayed in residences. The review also found that state NSFAS funding students were living in private accommodation that was inhabitable, and unfortunately this trend has not transformed much given the persistent public reports. Based on the recommendations in the review, funding was increased, and funds were allocated for maintenance backlogs, and a call for Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) was made to tackle student housing.

NSFAS as a stakeholder in the accommodation space has encountered a few challenges that need attention:

- NSFAS plays a critical role and spends a significant amount of money on student accommodation for it does not have a significant contribution on how the money is spent.
- There are many disparities between the amounts paid for accommodation between individual institutions at the university and TVET sectors.
- There are significant disparities between university accommodation and TVET accommodation.
- There are significant disparities between private accommodation allowances at an institution level, and between TVETs and universities.
- There are instances where allowances paid by NSFAS for student accommodation are used for purposes other than what is intended and authorised.
- Not all institutions accredit private accommodation thus NSFAS may pay accommodation allowances to students who stay in compromised positions.

In responding to and addressing the above challenges, NSFAS adopted a more inclusive and regulatory approach towards student accommodation.



In 2023, NSFAS introduced the accommodation cap as the first step in regulating student accommodation. Furthermore, NSFAS through its Board, approved a pilot project is being implemented to find out whether these challenges are valid and if the accommodation payment model is achieving its objectives. One objective was to ensure that NSFAS should take a more active role on student accommodation which includes, accreditation of accommodation which ensures that the accommodation is fit for purpose, the accreditation includes both university owned accommodation and private accommodation. Furthermore, this includes direct payment to the private providers. Through its operational model review, the organisation has reconfirmed the student centred model. These proposed interventions seek to alleviate the burden of accommodation from students. However, there were various issues that created challenges for the successful implementation which needs to be attended to achieve the objectives of the pilot.

The pilot has had a lot of teething problems which resulted in students boycott of the project and brief suspension. However, it is back on track and its success is of paramount importance due to its influence on other processes such as accommodation accreditation and the accommodation payments' cap. The pilot's objective leads to the following outcomes:

- Universal Norms and Standards for student accommodation,
- Universal Grading Tool,
- Fair and equitable Accommodation Payment Model,

### **Student Accommodation Tool**

The user requirements for the student accommodation tool have been formulated. The tool will allow potential landlords to register their properties on the tool. It will allow for the property to be accredited against the DHET norms and standards, it will there grade the property taking into account a number of factors such as proximity to institutions of higher learning, amenities, rural and urban classification, will standardise costs based on the grading. Furthermore, the tool will link to students to accommodation and manage student movements. Given budget limitations we are proposing that the tool be developed at risk by the service provider, and they will recoup their costs through landlord subscriptions.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The introduction of the accommodation cap although met with resistance was critical in achieving a level of standardisation in the accommodation claims given that this is the biggest cost driver of the NSFAS budget. Furthermore, the entity bears responsibility to account for the whereabouts of its beneficiaries particularly given that a significant portion of the budget is utilised for student accommodation programme.

The pilot programme for student accommodation although it proved to have teething problems, given its first time of implementation, it is important to enable NSFAS to fully account for its beneficiaries, and to improve their chances of success. All of these initiatives are geared at ensuring that the entity achieves its vision of fully implementing the student centre model.

It is recommended that further research be done to strengthen the position of the entity on the appropriate accommodation cap. Furthermore, review of the accommodation pilot be monitored to ensure the standardisation of accommodation yields the desired results.

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