



Research Article

## A qualitative exploration of students' experiences of the living conditions in residences at the University of Limpopo (Medunsa campus)

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### Abstract

The study explored the living conditions experienced by students residing in the University of Limpopo (Medunsa campus) situated in Ga-Rankuwa, a black township in north of Pretoria, South Africa. A qualitative research was used to obtain data from the participants with a total of twenty students between ages 18 to 30, all residing on campus residences (1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, 2B, 4B, 5A, 5B, Lost city and Med city). The sample consisted of a combination of both males and females with different courses of study; year in school and nationalities (e.g. Kenya). Three focus groups were conducted to investigate students' experiences of the living conditions in residences using semi-structured interview questionnaire. Thematic content analysis was utilised to analyse the textual data that was gathered from the participants. The results of this study indicated that students from University of Limpopo (Medunsa campus) regard their living conditions as unbearable, unhygienic, broken, unsafe, unclean and not in sound health. The students further elicited that the living conditions of Medunsa campus residences affect their academic, health and social life. Furthermore, the participants indicated that males and females share residential facilities such as toilets, kitchens and bathrooms, which create an unhealthy environment. Other factors that students expressed as concerns include too much noise and alcohol consumption. Most students mentioned using disinfectants and studying at the study halls as different coping strategies to cope with these living conditions.

**Keywords:** Students; residences; living conditions; university; health; safety; risk behaviours; qualitative research; thematic content analysis

### INTRODUCTION

Fatemah(2010) states that students living in university residences experience major and severe living conditions; sharing facilities such as sharing residential areas include bathrooms and kitchens together (both males and females in one residence), being away from home, adapting to the new environment and safety. Other issues that may contribute to this, is the great consumption of alcohol (Austin et al., 2009). Although most living conditions cover health problems, it is stated that most problems lies with academics and the risk behaviours observed in residences, therefore this leads to conclude that amongst issues of safety and security, sharing and overcrowding in residences, risk behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse are but some of the most experienced living conditions in residences. The problem is the living conditions experienced by students residing in University of Limpopo (Medunsa campus). Alcohol consumption in residences where some students abuse alcohol and become violent towards other students and they also break alcohol bottles which are harmful to other students. There are diseases that are caused by infections in residences by sharing dirty toilets, showers, baths, and kitchens, causing students to be exposed to bacteria and fungi (Fish and Nies, 1994). Noise pollution is another problem in residences caused by high sound of music. Another major problem is littering,

when students eat and drink they litter anywhere in residences. All these conditions affect students' health and wellbeing. Therefore, this study aimed at exploring how students experience their living conditions in Medunsa residences. Medunsa campus can be described as a pre-dominantly black campus in which vast majority of students come from low socio-economic families.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Students living in university residences experience major and severe living conditions. These living conditions include, health conditions, alcohol consumption, infectious diseases, facilities for the physically challenged students, noise pollution and littering. These living conditions are caused by sharing facilities such as bathrooms and kitchens with both males and females in one residence. Many researches have been done regarding the conditions causing the spreading of HIV/AIDS among students who are living in residences. Findings show that the availability of condoms in many residences is limited. (WHO,1994). According to POWA young adults more especially students need to be educated about HIV/AIDS, as they are at a greater risk of getting HIV/AIDS because they are explorative and yet ignorant and not being responsible.

Alcohol consumption is serious problem or condition. According Austin et al. (2009) they defined alcohol as depressant with long term effects of alcohol abuse. Students living in residences may be dependent on alcohol leading to destructive behaviour such breaking of bottles and being violent towards other students. When they are under the influence of alcohol they are at high risk of unsafe sex, academic failure and school dropout. According to Austin *et al.*(2009) the following are the reasons why students in residences engage themselves in alcohol abuse; is to feel good about themselves, cope with anxiety, improve performance in school, curiosity and peer- pressure. Alcohol may damage the brain structure leading to depression, psychosis, paranoia and even death.

Sharing dirty toilets, showers, baths, and kitchens, has been linked with the cause of infections. Boehm et al. (1993) emphasise that bacteria, fungi and viruses spreads easier in sharing from dirty facilities leading students to be infected by various diseases. In many residences the needs of physically challenged students are ignored. Barar and Jean (2006) states that there is still more that needs to be done in residences in order to accommodate physically challenged student for them to be free, accepted and belong.Noise pollution and littering are also problems that are experienced by students at residences for they have an influence on their health and well-being. Several theories may be used to explain the interdependent between students (individuals) and their environment (residences).

## THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework of the research study was based on social ecological model.The Social Ecology Model, also called Social Ecological Perspective, is a framework to examine the multiple effects and interrelatedness of social elements in an environment.

The Social Ecological Model has several adaptations. Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological is the study of people in an environment and the influences on one another (Hawley, 1950). This model allows for the integration of multiple levels and contexts to establish the big picture in conflict communication, health or physical activity contexts.

System Theory divides factors into four levels: macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro-, which describe influences as intercultural, community, organizational, and interpersonal. This is the most utilized version. According to Duncan et al. (2007) Bronfenbrenner's perspective (1979) was founded on the person, the environment, and the continuous interaction of the two. This interaction constantly evolved and developed both components. However, Bronfenbrenner realized it was not only the environment directly affecting the person, but that there were layers in between, which all had resulting impacts on the next level. His research began with the primary purpose of understanding human development and behavior. Furthermore, Duncan et al. (2007) state that the four systems can be explained as follows:

**Microsystem** is defined as the immediate system of which the individual is a part. This includes all the people with whom the individual has direct interactions. Examples of microsystems include groups of friends and family.

**Meso-system** is defined as the set of linkages between the micro systems or settings in which the individual is located. For example when the values taught at school and at home correspond. The child will probably adjust well to these values

**Exo-systems** these systems influence behaviors in micro-systems, but the individual does not have direct contact with or influence over them. For example school governing bodies and parents place of employment.

**Macro-systems** includes large scale societal factors that have an impact on peoples live such as governmental policies and decisions and beliefs systems for example poverty and oppression.

Therefore, the Social Ecological Model was used as a tool to explore and interpret the data. The focus of this model is the interaction between the person and the environment. The present study attempted to understand student's perception and experiences of living conditions in residences, how they feel about these living conditions and how they affect them as well as how they cope with the living conditions.

## Research design

### Procedure

The investigation was qualitative in nature and data was interpreted using content thematic analysis. The study was conducted in University of Limpopo (Medunsa campus) and included the following residences (1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, 2B, 4B, 5A, 5B, Lost city and Med city). The sample of this study was obtained using snow ball sampling technique. The methods that were employed in gathering data are focus group interviews and observation of participants in the following criteria: clinical impression, behaviour, attire, psycho-motor functioning and attitude. Data were later interpreted using thematic content analysis.

### Sampling

Sample was obtained using Snowball sampling technique which is a non-probability sampling technique that is used to identify potential subjects in studies where subjects are hard to locate. In this technique students were asked to help identify people with a similar trait of interest. Three focus groups were conducted with students between the ages 18 and 30 residing on campus residences. The groups comprised both males and females with different courses of study; year in school and nationalities.

### Data collection

Data was collected in a form of a focus group interviews. Students were approached for a 60 minute in-depth interview, covering different aspects of living conditions in the University residences. Students were assured of confidentiality of the information collected. An appropriate venue was selected for the interview. The semi-structured interview questionnaire was based on students perception of the living conditions in residences, how they affect them, how they feel about them, their coping mechanisms and their expectations about these living conditions. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed to provide textual data for the purposes of analysis.

### Data analysis

The transcribed data was analysed by categorising and identifying themes. This procedure is called thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data. Qualitative data may take the form of interview transcripts collected from research participants or other identified texts that reflect experientially on the topic of study. While video, image, and other forms of data may accompany textual data, this description of thematic content analysis is limited to textual data. Thematic content analysis is about discovering themes and concepts embedded throughout the interviews (Neuman, 2006).

A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data. Therefore, a valid argument for choosing themes was built by consulting relevant literature, which allowed inferences from the interviews to be made (Constas, 1992). After the themes and the literature had been studied, the researcher formulated theme statements to develop a storyline.

In order to ensure the validity of the research, every effort was made to ensure that the participants' viewpoints, thoughts, intentions and experiences were accurately understood and reported (Struwig and Stead, 2001). Emphasis was placed on the participants' perspective and language rather than on the researchers' interpretations and terminology. Thus, the investigation was transparent and explicit (Ryan and Bernard, 2000).

### Ethical considerations

Participants were required to sign a consent form before participating in the study. As a means of protecting their identities, participants were not asked to disclose their real names and a code was given to each participant. They were

also assured of confidentiality of any information they provided. However, participants were made aware that the study will be published but re-assured of their identities remaining confidential.

The information collected from the interviews were grouped under seven themes. These themes that were identified came from the literature review, the phenomena being studied as well as the participants' responses: The themes were clustered together as meaningful components for gaining insight on student experiences of the living conditions in residences. The following are the seven themes that were identified from the data:

1. Living conditions experienced by students in residences.
2. Students' expectations of Medunsa residences
3. Coping strategies of living conditions experienced by students
4. Students' feelings or emotions towards the living conditions
5. Effects of the living conditions experienced by students
6. Feedbacks that student get after reporting to the wardens and matrons
7. What students think should be done regarding the living conditions

### **Living conditions experienced by students in residences**

The living conditions experienced by students residing in Medunsa residences include, toilets, showers, bathrooms, corridors and kitchens, the conditions in the bedrooms, studying patterns and noise and alcohol consumption in residences. Results show that these conditions are heritable but they are not the best. One student thinks that these living conditions are just unbearable at some point. The students' perceptions on these conditions will be discussed on the sub themes below.

#### **Toilet/ Showers/ Bathrooms**

Sharing dirty toilets, showers, baths, and kitchens, has been linked with the cause of infections. According to Boehm et al. (1993) bacteria, fungi and viruses spreads easier in sharing facilities leading students to be infected by various diseases. This literature is supported by the findings on the following perceptions of students.

Participant one (1) of focus group A said: *"I live in 5A and I don't like the fact that I have to share the shower and the bathroom with so many people because most of the people are.... they are not very hygienic ... and you go to the toilet and you see that someone lives something so filthy and everything, and you have to live with that which is not fair because I am a hygienic person."*

She also said: *"If I am going to use the toilet, if it's clean I'm going to live it clean exactly the way it was so that when the next person who is going to use it will use it in a nice condition."*

#### **Corridor/ Kitchen**

Like Boehm et al. (1993) have mentioned, sharing facilities such as kitchens and corridors leads students to be affected by various diseases. This is supported by our findings were students said the following:

Participant four (4) from focus group C said: *"you can imagine from now you are coming from a long weekend you know it means the last time they cleaned was last Friday and there was no school on Monday you should have seen the dust bins my room was full of flies."*

Participant three (3) from focus group A supported by saying: *"I'll add on to the kitchen, the kitchen sink was blocked and the water just spitted out, there was like a situation where the water was just on the floor this weekend and it was...., people just kept on pouring water and you just don't understand that at all."*

#### **Bedrooms**

Students mentioned the conditions of their bedrooms as follows:

Participant one (1) from focus group A said: *"I hate the quality of the things that are in our rooms, example the clothing closet it looks so old it's like my great great grandmother once used it...(participants laughing) I think that they should at least try to renovate at some point yah .Yah and the fact that the closet doesn't have drawers yah."*

Participant two (2) from focus group C also added that: *"My other problem with the room that I'm now in it's so small. It's tiny, you barely can't breathe in it. You can't cook, you can't fit anything, but it's cool though."*

This is supported by Participant 4 from focus group C when she said: *"Oh, I'm staying in 1B neh. I also stay in a small room single room."*

## Studying and noise

Noise pollution is also problems that are experienced by students at residences for they have an influence on their health and well-being. Several theories may be used to explain the interdependence between students (individuals) and their environment (residences). In this case the noise is seen as the environmental condition that is affecting the individual and their patterns of studying.

Participant four (4) from focus group C said: *“so my neighbor always singing 24/7 I don’t know how other people are coping maybe who study who prefer studying here in res nna I can’t. The problem is, they told me the walls are thin very thin, so whatever happens next door you know (Laughing). Most people who stay there are senior students so you understand what I’m trying to say, so I felt that eish, you know what, no I’m still... it’s not my time yet so then I’m thinking of staying there until I get a bigger room there in 1B.”*

This is supported by Participant three (3) from focus group B when she said: *“Like my neighbour she plays gospel music every night but then you come to the agreement that okay, because you have your Bible study at 10 o’clock til 11 and during this time you play gospel music, during this time I will go out there, I will not study, cause I can’t study with noise and then afterwards I expect you to switch it off and I’ll get back to studying.”*

## Alcohol consumption in the residences

Alcohol consumption is serious problem or condition. According Austin et al. (2009) they defined alcohol as depressant with long term effects. Students living in residences may be dependent on alcohol leading to destructive behaviour such breaking of bottles and being violent towards other students. When they are under the influence of alcohol they are at high risk of unsafe sex, academic failure and school dropout.

Participant five (5) from focus group C said: *“You can’t study during the weekend you know people get drunk.”*

Participant two (2) from focus group C added and said: *“but your res futhi especially it’s a drinking res you know.”*

## Students’ expectations of Medunsa residences

When students were accepted in Medunsa, they had certain expectations in regards to the living conditions in residences. These are some of their expectations:

Participant two (2) from focus group A said: *“I was expecting like a very clean place all the time, the one that smells good...especially the showers and the laundry and the kitchen (showing hands).”*

## Coping strategies of living conditions experienced by students

Students use several coping strategies to cope with their living conditions in residences. The following subthemes discuss the different coping strategies they use:

### How they cope with the conditions in the toilets, showers and bathrooms

From the findings, this is how students cope with the conditions in the toilets, showers and bathrooms:

Participant four (4) from focus group A said: *“there are staff that you can use to cope as in like the minute the ladies come to clean the corridor that’s when you decide to go use the toilet or take a shower that’s how we cope and then or I normally bath in my room because I just can’t stand it at all and here the toilets it’s an issue I normally put some stuff and put tissues and stuff before I decide I wanna sit down. It takes a lot of effort to say I am going to the toilet.”*

Participant five (5) from focus group A added by saying: *“I don’t go to the showers, since two years back.”*

### How they cope with issues of corridors/ kitchen

From the findings, this is how students cope with the conditions in the corridors and kitchens:

Participant four (4) from focus group A said: *“in the corridor you uhhh you write notes. I normally do that. Yesterday it was just blocked and staff I just had to write a note in the wall. It worked, now no water in the floor.”*

Participant six (6) from focus group B also said: *“I do my dishes and in my own room. I have a dish there, I go there, cause I cannot risk put my cup where somebody has just done something there you know.”*

### How they cope with noise, studying and the conditions of the bedrooms

From the findings, this is how students cope with noise, studying and the conditions in their bedrooms:



Participant three (3) from focus group A said that: *"I just like stay in my room, close my door and close my window."*

Participant four (4) from focus group A supported and said: *"You go bang the other person door when they are making a lot of noise."*

In regards to coping when studying, participant 5 from focus group C said: *"uh for my res I know that during the day you can't study I have to do an assignment and when everybody is asleep maybe around 1 o'clock that's when I will study until maybe 5 so if I have a morning class uh I don't know and that means am gonna end up sleeping in class cause I don't have any other choice over the weekends same thing."*

Participant two (2) from focus group B said: *"if I cannot study in my room at night. I mean you just take your bag, walk to the study hall even if I have to spend the night there."*

### **Students' feelings or emotions towards the living conditions**

This is how students expressed themselves in regards to the living conditions that they find themselves in:

Participant four (4) from focus group A said: *"to be honest coming to Medunsa is the most depressing thing ever. Serious! When I think about it from the gate the minute you are on the gate and you see Medunsa there and you walk all the whole way to these dirty res there is no way you goanna feel good about it. It drains you the moment the taxi stops and then you have to walk all the way in the sun and then there is no ....it's like gravel in or something you get to the res you have to think of going to the toilet that is dirty it's the worst. It's unbearable."*

Participant one (1) from focus group A said: *"I feel disappointed ummmcause when I was in high school I was happy that I was going to varsity and going to live in a nice res then I came here it's like totally a different thing."*

### **Effects of the living conditions experienced by students**

Students are affected differently by the living conditions in residences. These conditions may affect them academically, socially, their health, and their safety and security. According to Austin et al.(2009) when they are under the influence of alcohol they are at high risk of unsafe sex, academic failure and school dropout. These effects are discussed in the following subtheme:

#### **Effects on students' academics**

Academically, this is how these living conditions affect students:

Participant four (4) from focus group A said: *"can I be honest with you that one it does affect your academics because when you think about it when you wanna do something it drains your energy it's like I have to ok I have to study yes but the thing is when you think of going to your room you know your neighbor is gonna be making a lot of noise and you just wanna go bang on the neighbors door."*

Participant seven (7) from focus group A added and said: *"you think about too many unnecessary things instead of studying. You wanna go do this but you think this is gonna happened rather go there but this happens there and so somewhere along the line you just close your books and sit in your room."*

Participant three (3) from focus group B said: *"And every time I had to wake up and study, I had to switch on my roommates light by her side, and then I'm bugging her now cause she wants to sleep and I want to wake cause she's a light sleeper, when I switch on the light she wakes up, so I just had to do stuff in the dark."*

#### **Effects on students' social life**

Socially, this is how these living conditions affect students:

Participant two (2) from focus group A said: *"well they don't affect me academically but it affects me to a point where I can't call someone like a friend to come over ,I can't do that because hey if they see where I am living from a university they gonna think what the hell you know I don't want that. It's basically how they affect me in that sense."*

#### **Effects on students' health**

According to Boehm (1993) bacteria, fungi and viruses spreads easier in sharing facilities leading students to be infected by various diseases. Students mention how they cope to avoid being infected with these diseases.

Participant two (2) from focus group A said: *"I also have this opinion that you know Medunsa and all of that that this is a medical school right it is suppose to train health professionals and its doing that but I think the residence also have to reflect that in terms of health because you cannot be health conscious no and intend to live in a dirty area it just doesn't*

*connect rather if you are this health student you are staying in the healthy environment and the residence should be like that but here it's not the case."*

Participant three (3) from focus group A also added and said: *"o.k. am not gonna talk this happened to a friend of mine in this thing sharing showers and people living it dirty and then she had those infections on the body like the fungal infection and staff so it's also affecting himself."*

### **Students effect on their safety and security**

With regards to the students' safety and security, this is how these living conditions affect students:

Participant seven (7) from focus group A said: *"its safe as it can be but it's not safe but it's better than nothing people go in and out anytime of the day I mean the doors or the gates or whatever they work or they don't anyone just goes in and come out."*

Participant four (4) from focus group A said: *"I think security is just o.k. like it's not the best but it's just o.k. we can live with it but in some cases there was some person in 4b, there securities I don't know what happened and that day there was ladies walking around naked in the res. Securities were there looking at her and they were just laughing so for me it was not."*

Participant five (5) from focus group B said: *"sometimes when you go to reses you find securities sleeping and when the security is sleeping anyone can get in."*

Participant two (2) from focus group B said: *"I don't feel safe at all especially cause I almost got raped in Lost city, Lost city is something else, they don't use cards that side, everything is open, their houses, they don't lock their houses at night so anybody can just get in and out, Lost city, there is no light by Lost city, its completely..., it's in the dark hey, at night."*

### **Students get after reporting to the wardens and matrons**

This is the feedback that students got when they reported issues regarding their living conditions to the wardens and matrons.

Participant four (4) from focus group A said: *"when you call the people to come fix it takes like days for them to come to fix it, so that is my living conditions."*

Participant two (2) from focus group A said: *"we have broken taps and showers and all of that so basically she is aware of this problem but she hasn't done anything so far so for us as students we can't do anything because we don't have the power to bring up that change I guess the only thing is to keep on going to her telling her that we have a problem that's it."*

Participant five (5) from focus group B said: *"we report but nothing happens."*

### **What should be done regarding the living conditions?**

According Barar and Jean (2006) there is still more that needs to be done in residences in order to accommodate everyone who resides in student residences. The following is what students think should be done in the Medunsa residences to make the living conditions heritable and favourable:

Participant one (1) from focus group A said: *"I hate the quality of the things that are in our rooms, example the clothing closet it looks so old it's like my great great grandmother once used it...(participants laughing) I think that they should at least try to renovate at some point yah."*

Participant five (5) from focus group C said: *"I think if we get washing machines that work properly then yah meaning if the school can spend renewing our parking then they should have money to buy us washing machines. And those washing machines should be at each and every floor."*

Participant four (4) from focus group C added and said: *"Not just one, two on 1 floor cause that's gonna take time to that means I have to wash my clothes after a month."*

## **CONCLUSION**

The authors recognise that this study has certain limitations and therefore the following recommendations have been made for future studies: as there was an unequal representation among the groups (more females than males), the recommendation for future studies would be that the researcher may use advantageous sampling that will allow for both equal number in males and females to avoid bias; furthermore in using snow balling sampling most of the participants

were friends and therefore influenced each other recommendation would be using another sampling technique that would try to avoid biased answers.

With regard to perceptions of what constitute safe housing students feels that securities should patrol twenty four seven around the campus at the same time checking students cards when accessing residences and cameras being put in noticeable positions, thus the authors recommend that future researchers should consider conducting studies around safety of students within Medunsa campus. Furthermore, more studies needs to be conducted relating to the coping mechanisms that students use in order to deal with living conditions in Medunsa residences.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of 2012 honours students who assisted in the project: Mnyayiza Y, Mukhavhuli L, Seemise K and Thihe D.

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