

The Challenges of Non-Resident Students in UiTM Kota Kinabalu

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the challenges encountered by non-resident students in Universiti Teknologi MARA Sabah Branch in Kota Kinabalu, particularly students renting houses. The objectives involve identifying challenges faced by non-resident students. Employing a quantitative method, questionnaires were given to all non-resident students in the Non-Resident Students Telegram group (375 students). However, only 130 non-resident students filled out the questionnaire. The results show that the top challenges were finding a suitable house to stay in, difficulty in finding accommodation that is both cheap and near the campus, experiencing financial burden because of staying off-campus, and challenges in managing expenses and transportation reliability. The results also suggest that feeling lonely is the least likely challenge for non-resident students. The results offer valuable insights to the non-resident students in UiTM Sabah Branch, Kota Kinabalu, so that the support systems tailored to the specific needs of non-resident students can be enhanced. Overall, the challenges faced by non-resident student respondents in UiTM Sabah Branch, Kota Kinabalu, may not be too serious.

INTRODUCTION

Accommodation is a basic requirement for students, just like it is for everyone else, and ensuring decent, safe, and inexpensive accommodation will enable them to live happy lives, achieve high standards of living, be intellectually creative, and lead more fulfilling lives (Abubakar Ghani & Suleiman, 2016).

Student housing plays a key role as a conditioning context for student success (Xulu-Gama, 2019). Many universities provide accommodation to their students, and those staying on campus often enjoy facilities such as a café, internet connection, transportation, sports centre and other facilities to help students live comfortably. Students who reside on campus can attend classes without much difficulty and are better able to be involved in the university's activities (Abdul Razak,

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2017). However, not all students are able to stay on campus. Some universities have limited accommodation facilities, and several conditions must be met before students are provided with accommodation. For example, according to Matthew (2014), university accommodation in Nigeria will only be offered automatically to first and final-year students who are physically impaired and active in sports. Sotomayor et al. (2022) found that students have been forced to tacitly learn to be “resourceful” and “creative” to secure housing due to the lack of adequate, affordable, and accessible housing to them. However, some students purposely opt to stay off-campus for various reasons. Certain students choose to rent a house or live off-campus for privacy and convenience since there are rules and regulations that need to be observed when staying on campus.

There has been a significant increase in student enrollment in Malaysia’s institutions of higher learning, but there is no commensurate increase in student accommodation (Ghani et al., 2020; Ghani & Sulaiman, 2021). As a result, accommodation is prioritised for particular groups of students. For example, in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), those given priority to stay in the dormitory are first-semester students, the physically impaired, members of student bodies and national athletes.

The limited university accommodation led many students to rent accommodation near the university. The Resident Management Unit record of UiTM Shah Alam showed that there were 11,677 non-resident students out of the 54,000 total student population in 2012 (Muslim et al., 2012). According to the Non-Resident Unit of UiTM Sabah Branch in Kota Kinabalu, there were 275 non-resident students in 2023. Thus, what are the challenges faced by non-resident or off-campus students in UiTM Sabah Branch, Kota Kinabalu? Despite the importance of this question, there is a paucity of scholarly investigation on this subject concerning the UiTM Sabah Branch. Abdul Razak et al. (2018) studied the factors influencing students to live off-campus in several UiTM campuses, including Kota Kinabalu. However, other than that, studies on non-resident students in UiTM Kota Kinabalu campus are difficult to find. Hence, the objective of this article is to determine the challenges of non-resident students in the UiTM Sabah Branch in Kota Kinabalu. This is important so that the policymakers in the UiTM Sabah Branch and relevant authorities can better understand the challenges faced by non-resident students, particularly those not staying in their own houses, so that relevant actions can be taken to help these students overcome the challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have shown that accommodation significantly contributes to learning and student success (Yunus et al., 2018; Xulu-Gama, 2019). Thus, student accommodation is an important issue.

Importance of Quality Student Accommodation

Quality accommodation is important to the well-being of students. According to Azeez et al. (2016), when students are happy with the amenities offered in their residence halls, it benefits their academic performance and increases academic excellence. The level of satisfaction and ease a person experience in their living space is referred to as accommodation comfort. It includes various elements that support feeling comfortable and pleased in one’s accommodation.

Furnished rooms are essential for contemporary students, making it easier for them to settle in their new homes (Pace, 2007). Students prioritise accommodation with a dependable and high-speed internet connection for personal needs and academic work. This enables them to interact with classmates, access online resources, and take part in virtual learning activities. Central air conditioning systems, especially in hot climates, are also important (Nimaku & Bondinuba, 2012).

In addition, kitchen amenities such as refrigerators and microwave ovens make it easier for individuals to prepare meals and store food, encouraging a more independent and healthy way of life.

Reasons for Staying Off-Campus

Living on campus and having a favourable living and learning environment significantly contribute to student growth (Muslim et al., 2012). The benefits of living on a college campus include convenience, freedom, security, and privacy (Thomsen, 2008). In addition, staying on campus has several advantages, such as better leadership opportunities, access to academic support, and a free Internet connection (Thomsen, 2008). Despite the advantages of staying on campus, there are several reasons why students may opt to stay off campus. Thomsen (2008) identified several significant negative factors associated with living on campus, such as being unable to cook meals, lack of a private bathroom, lack of parking accommodation, and the presence of roommates who may lack common sense. The same author identified several significant reasons for students intending to live off-campus. First, students liked the independence and practicality of preparing their own meals, regulating their nutritional preferences, and saving money by cooking their own meals. Second, the availability of parking facilities, particularly for students who own or drive a car. Having designated parking spaces made travelling convenient. Third, it is important to be able to live with friends or have friends nearby. Lastly, a private living place. Having one's own room or flat offers a greater sense of privacy and personal space compared to shared living situations. Similarly, Abdul Razak et al. (2018) stated that factors influencing students' desire to live off-campus include distance from the university, free from university rules and regulations, and having choices to stay in one house with their friends. Furthermore, most students prefer rented houses more than rented rooms and family houses (Abdul Razak et al., 2018).

Non-resident students tend to prefer houses near campus. Several factors affect the selection of rental houses by students, such as proximity to campus, privacy and transportation (Abdul Razak (2018). Similarly, Joseph and Olatunde (2010) stated that some students prefer a school close to their home.

Accommodation and Challenges faced by Non-Resident Students

Studies on the challenges to non-resident students are not new. For example, according to Thomsen (2008), one persistent challenge to students living off-campus is the distance between the housing and the campus, especially when there are limited or no rentable houses available in close proximity to the campus. This is because those living far from college may find their repeated commute physically and mentally draining. Furthermore, they might have to deal with traffic or take public transport, which can take time and cost more. Hence, the reliance on public transportation can be challenging for non-resident students. Ifti (2021) found that students living far from universities often rely on public transportation, such as buses, for transportation between their places and the university. However, some places lacked public transportation (Muslim et al., 2012). Some bus conductors only allow a limited number of students to board during busy hours to and from class (Ifti, 2021). As a result, students are forced to walk long distances to and from school because they need to save on transportation expenses. Hence, students need more transportation options (Mjinga, 2002). In addition, one of the main problems faced by passengers relying on public transportation is having unpredictable travel schedules (Mugoro, 2010). Hence, students who need to travel long distances to attend class often miss the morning class and prefer taking the afternoon class because of the availability of transportation (Joseph & Olatunde, 2010).

Another challenge faced by non-resident students is related to uncondusive living conditions. Muslim et al. (2012) elaborated on this challenge in their study of non-resident students in Shah Alam, where non-resident students had to live in a limited space where community facilities and services such as parking and free internet were lacking. Some lived in unpleasant surroundings such as noise from commercial activities, unpleasant odours, bad smells from rubbish bins, loud neighbours, and even theft). Students were also exposed to negative social activities, such as immoral behaviour

Another challenge faced by non-resident students is related to finance (Medani et al., 2024; Muslim et al., 2012). Students had to pay expensive rental rates and limited financial support (Muslim et al., 2012). Students' pressing need for housing provided some private developers with an opportunity to charge outrageous rent rates, where the student housing market is the most "exploited housing market" since students pay high rental rates for living accommodations (Donaldson et al., 2014). Thus, when a significant number of students enrol in schools, colleges, or universities in a particular location, it creates a surge in demand for housing, putting upward pressure on rental prices (Gopal, 2008). Residing in a rented house is considered more challenging than living in a family-owned home since renting a house usually means making monthly bills, which can take up a big chunk of a person's income (Muslim et al., 2013). Paying rent on time and in full can put a lot of worry and strain on a person's budget. According to Cotter (2009), many students who study away from home rely on the private residential sector for housing.

Thus, non-resident students tend to be disadvantaged compared to on-campus students in terms of accessibility to facilities and resources, security, safety and convenience, as well as having less interaction with other students and staff (Tinto, 1987 as cited in Asadullah, 2021). Housing can have a great impact on health. Since students tend to lean towards cheaper housing due to limited funds, they often live in lower quality or poor housing that might result in respiratory problems caused by mold, transmission of communicable diseases, or the development of mental health issues such as anxiety or depression (Westwood, 2023). In addition, students also experienced weight change and psychosocial challenges (Medani et al., 2024). The standard of accommodation for non-resident students poses significant obstacles not just for students but also for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), governments, and private developers in their efforts to assess and provide students with a healthy living environment and comfortable accommodations that align with their academic goals (Nimaku & Bondinuba, 2012).

The rapid growth of the student population, urban growth and change, in general, suggest that the issue of student accommodation is dynamic, and studies on challenges faced by non-resident students need to be updated from time to time. Although several studies on non-resident students' challenges have been done in Malaysia, most were done in West Malaysia. There is a clear paucity of similar studies in Sabah. Since such studies should be context-specific, there is a need for such studies in the state of Sabah.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Sampling

The research design used is quantitative research. It is a descriptive and cross-sectional study using questionnaire surveys involving Likert Scale-type measurement. A close-ended questionnaire was developed in Google form and distributed to all the 375 non-resident students in the Non-Resident Telegram group during the October 2023 - February 2024 semester in UiTM Sabah Branch in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. However, only 130 non-resident students responded.

Data collected was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), which entails transforming raw data into a form that offers information to explain the number of aspects of circumstances by modifying and organising the collection of raw data (Rahman & Muktadir, 2021). Descriptive statistics such as frequency and mean were used to interpret the data.

FINDINGS

The challenges of non-resident students are presented below.

Table 1. Challenges of non-resident students

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
1. I experience financial burdens because I stay off campus.	1	14	35	39	41	3.81
2. Finding a suitable house to stay in as a student is challenging.	5	12	19	50	44	3.89
3. I have problems paying the rent every month.	15	34	34	32	15	2.98
4. It is difficult to find accommodation that is both cheap and near the campus.	5	11	24	52	38	3.82
5. I have difficulty catching the bus on time and avoiding being late for classes.	13	19	41	34	23	3.27
6. It is challenging to find a convenient parking place for my car on campus.	15	15	48	25	27	3.26
7. I find it challenging to get the necessary housewares and utensils.	15	28	37	37	13	3.04
8. I find it challenging to adapt to off-campus living.	14	31	38	35	12	3.00
9. I find it challenging to manage my expenses when staying off campus.	5	14	30	47	34	3.70
10. One of the challenges I experience living off campus is transportation reliability	8	13	34	42	33	3.61
11. I find my academic performance getting worse staying off campus.	10	30	48	30	12	3.03
12. I have difficulties studying when staying off campus.	9	30	35	40	16	3.18

13. I find it more difficult to do group assignments when staying off campus.	9	16	37	44	24	3.45
14. I find it challenging to attend extracurricular activities when staying off campus.	11	9	30	48	32	3.62
15. I often feel lonely when staying off campus.	22	38	29	30	11	2.77
16. I find it more challenging to get healthcare when staying off campus.	16	20	44	38	12	3.08
17. I am more worried about my safety when staying off campus.	8	13	36	40	33	3.59
18. I find my surroundings unsuitable for studying when staying off campus.	9	27	44	34	16	3.16
19. I feel less motivated to study when staying off campus.	11	24	35	39	21	3.27
20. I am easily distracted in my studies when staying off campus.	9	24	36	38	23	3.32
21. It is more challenging to find a place to eat when staying off campus.	22	27	32	34	15	2.95
22. It is more challenging to get food when staying off campus.	22	24	38	33	13	2.93
23. It is generally more challenging to find help when staying off campus.	7	15	36	43	29	3.55
N=130						

Table 1 above shows the data on the challenges of non-resident students in the UiTM Sabah Branch. Referring to the measurement scale, an answer of 1 (strongly disagree) or 2 (disagree) indicates the absence or lack of challenge, while 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree) indicates the presence of challenge—students who choose 3 (neutral) as answers are unsure whether there is a challenge or not. Items or questions having a mean of 3.50 and above indicate the presence of a challenge. Eight items have a mean of 3.50 and above as listed below (items 2, 4, 1, 9, 14, 10, 17, and 23) as listed below. The highest mean is 3.89 (item 2, “finding a suitable house to stay as a student is challenging”), indicating the most challenging item.

"Finding a suitable house to stay as a student is challenging" (Item 2)

"It's hard to find a place that's both cheap and near the campus" (Item 4)

"I experience financial burden because I stay off campus" (Item 1)

"I find it challenging to manage my expenses when staying off campus" (Item 9)

"I find it challenging attending extracurricular activities when staying off campus" (Item 14)

"One of the challenges I experience living off campus is transportation reliability" (Item 10)

"I am more worried about my safety when staying off campus." (Item 17)

"It is generally more challenging to find help for anything when staying off campus" (Item 23)

As the list of challenges faced by non-residents above suggests, students usually prefer affordable housing near the university. Hence, it is not surprising that finding a suitable house to stay in constitutes a significant challenge to non-resident students in the UiTM Sabah Branch. The lack of public buses exacerbated the need for a suitable house (near to the campus and affordable). Staying off campus also financially challenges students and limits their ability to attend extracurricular activities. Safety is a concern for students living off campus. They feel it is more challenging to get help.

A mean of 2.50 and below indicates the absence of challenge. All the items in the Table above, apart from items 2, 4, 1, 9, 14, 10, 17, and 23, have means above 2.50 (2.77 to 3.45). Thus, although these items cannot be conclusively considered challenging, they cannot be conclusively considered not challenging too. Such an answer can mean the respondents have not fully given a thought about the item to make a conclusive answer. It is interesting to note that a significant number of students chose 3 (neutral) as an answer. For example, in item 1, 35 (26.9 percent) respondents chose 3.

DISCUSSIONS

Based on the findings, the most challenging aspect of being a non-resident student renting off-campus is finding a suitable house to stay in, especially finding a cheap place near the campus. Living off-campus also results in financial challenges. Other challenges relate to difficulty attending extracurricular activities, reliable transportation and safety. These findings echoed previous findings in other locations (e.g., see Thomsen, 2008; Joseph & Olatunde, 2010; Abdul Razak et al., 2018; Muslim et al., 2012; 2013; Ifti, 2021): the findings both tangible (e.g. financial) and intangible (psychological, such as security) challenges.

One implication of the findings is the need for the local government and the university management to help students find suitable accommodation, such as collaborating with public and private bodies to build a database for all available accommodations near the campus. Another implication is the need to help ensure the availability of reliable transportation to non-resident student organizations, including requesting public bus transportation to have a regular schedule going into UiTM Sabah in Kota Kinabalu. Furthermore, e-hailing services such as Grab and Maxim should be facilitated since the UiTM Sabah campus in Kota Kinabalu is difficult to access without a vehicle because of its location.

Security and the need to engage in extracurricular activities can be alleviated with better connectivity made possible by our digital world. Despite living off-campus, students should be able to engage in class assignment activities via Zoom and other media platforms.

CONCLUSIONS

The article seeks to identify the challenges faced by non-resident students at UiTM Sabah in Kota Kinabalu through questionnaires distributed to non-resident students. The findings suggest that the challenges faced by non-resident respondents are finding a suitable house to stay in that is both cheap and near the campus, financial burden, reliable transportation, difficulty in attending extracurricular activities, and safety and finding help challenges. Though concerning, the level of challenge is not that severe based on the mean of challenge in the findings. However, continued increases in housing and rent and the rise in cost of living may increase the challenge of living off-campus in the future. To meet these challenges, the relevant authorities need to help non-resident students find suitable accommodation and facilitate reliable transportation to the campus.

The limitations of the study include the small sample size that does not allow the findings to be generalised to the whole non-resident student population in UiTM Sabah in Kota Kinabalu, as well as the limited depth of the data that does not allow a more detailed understanding of the challenges identified. Future studies should employ a qualitative approach to fully understand the challenges faced by non-resident students and their implications.

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