



Living Independently: Tribulations of the Non-Resident Students in Jengka

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ABSTRACT

The recent large intake of students in the state campuses has necessitated certain drastic actions to be taken by the campus administrators. Any increase in student intake without the corresponding increase in related infrastructure and facilities will create a lot of problems. One particular effect of this is the increase in the number of non-resident students. While the matter has been dealt with in a careful manner so as to minimise the effects on students, there are still a substantial number of students who have had to live off-campus. This study has discovered that problems relating to finances and transportation are ranked highest among the many problems faced. The high rental rates and scarcity of rentals are also among the sources of grievance for these students. It is recommended that efforts be taken to better look after these students' welfare and prevent them from being taken advantage of by irresponsible house-owners.

Keywords: *non-residents, off-campus housing*

Introduction

Any institution of higher learning aspires to grow and develop in terms of students' size and population. A growth in this aspect is often valued as an indication of public acceptance and recognition of the quality of education offered by the institution itself. However, such increase can sometimes be a source of problem to the university. A sudden spurt in the student population without the corresponding increase in related infrastructure and facilities can create a host of problems to students, administration, faculty members and various stakeholders.

Non resident students are a unique breed. They have even sometimes been branded problematic. In one town in the United States, it was reported that town officials who were unhappy with noisy and boisterous college students who 'disrupt neighbourhoods near the campus, want Town Meeting voters to approve a bylaw preventing parents from buying houses for their college-enrolled children to share with friends' (Wallgren, 2005). This is because many houses occupied by these students became the place for parties and, thus, were noisy, disruptive and littered with rubbish. Even the police had to be called in at times to control these students (Wallgren, 2005). Thankfully, the situation in our country is not that bad. Our non-resident students are relatively well-behaved and often keep to themselves.

However, they have the reputation of being late comers to class or persistent absentees and are considered difficult to get in contact with by the lecturers or their classmates. They are the ones often missing tests or quizzes, seldom showing up for consultation and dubbed as 'missing in action'. Though this may be true for only a handful of students who have been probably problematic from the start, such perception of the NR students is an indication of the mystery that surrounds their lives. Whether we like it or not, reality dictates that they are certainly here to stay. Given the current scenario of increasing students' intake year by year and the limitations faced by the university in providing accommodation on campus, it is safe to say that their

numbers will probably increase in the years to come. Thus, the NR students will continue to be a part of this university's community for better or for worse. This paper tries to look at some problems faced by these students as an attempt to get a better perspective of life from their point of view.

NR Students in UiTM Jengka Campus

According to a list compiled by the UiTM Pahang Students' Affairs Division (HEP), there are a total of 425 students currently living off-campus. Their places of residence are as follows:

Table 1. NR students' areas of residence

Area of Residence	No. of Students
Taman Desa Jaya	35
Taman Desa Jaya 2	20
Taman Permatang Shah Bandar	105
Rantau Perintis	86
Taman Jengka Impian	73
Alps Industrial Area	56
Bandar Pusat Jengka	31
Others	19
Total	425

Because of UiTM's policy of giving preference to diploma students for hostel accommodation, it is not surprising that many of these NR students make up those who are pursuing their bachelor's degree. There are currently two degree programmes offered at UiTM Jengka namely OM221 (Bachelor in Office Management) and AC220 (Bachelor in Accountancy). However, because of the sudden increase in the new intake of students, more and more diploma students are also forced to stay off campus to give way to the new students. Many of the sixth semester students especially boys are required to find their own accommodation. The relevant authority in UiTM, namely the Students' Affairs Division (HEP) has formed a special unit, the Non-residents Management Unit to monitor these students' welfare and well-being. A special handbook (Buku Panduan Pelajar Non Residen) is also given to every NR student. This comprehensive handbook serves to guide these students in adapting to a new environment and surroundings. Besides the usual rules and regulations it also contains information on what to do in cases of emergencies, how to avoid household accidents, a list of important numbers to call and what students can do to avoid becoming victims of crimes. It also provides tips for those searching for a house and information on how to deal with landlords.

Methodology and Respondents' Background

The findings reported here are based on a survey done to uncover facts about these students' perceived problems and ways of overcoming their problems. Questionnaires were given to 58 respondents comprising 11 males and 47 females. They made up 85% degree students from

OM221 and AC220 programmes and 15 per cent diploma level students from AS117, AC110 and AS110 programmes. Majority of the respondents, that is, 62.1 %, were staying at Permatang Shahbandar, 19 per cent at Rantau Perintis, 13.8 per cent at Desa Jaya and the rest (5.2%) at Jengka Impian. Majority of them found their houses after conducting their own search or from information gathered from friends while the rest (5.2 %) found houses based on information given by the HEP

In terms of type of houses, majority of the students (58.6 %) lived in terraced houses, 32.8 % lived in semi-detached houses and only 8.6 per cent were staying in kampung houses. Most of these students (52 %) had stayed in the same house for one to two years while the rest (48 %) had been staying in the same house for less than a year.

Most of the students rented their houses for between RM300 to RM800 per month for the whole house with only one respondent reportedly paying less than RM100 per month for his accommodation. Majority had to pay monthly rent amounting to RM500 (32.8 %) and RM 450 (29.3%) and 3 respondents reported having to pay a rent of RM800 per month for the house they were renting. This means that the students had to pay from RM40 to RM110 per person for house rent. A majority had to pay about RM 10 to RM 30 per month for utility bills.

Findings and Discussion

When asked whether they loved being NR students, there were mixed views. A total of 56.2 per cent agreed that they loved staying off-campus while 29.8 per cent did not (Figure 1). The rest (14%) were not sure of their feelings on the matter. This clearly reflects the mixed feelings these students have regarding having to live off-campus. Many seemed to love the freedom that came with staying on their own but at the same time resented the inconvenience they had to suffer. Their answer to the question depends on which aspect of life as a student is more important to them, freedom or comfort? Freedom comes at a price and in this case the price is the lack of the usual things that students who stay on-campus often take for granted, such as living within walking distance to class, being able to go to the library at any time they please or being able to enjoy sports and other facilities on campus.

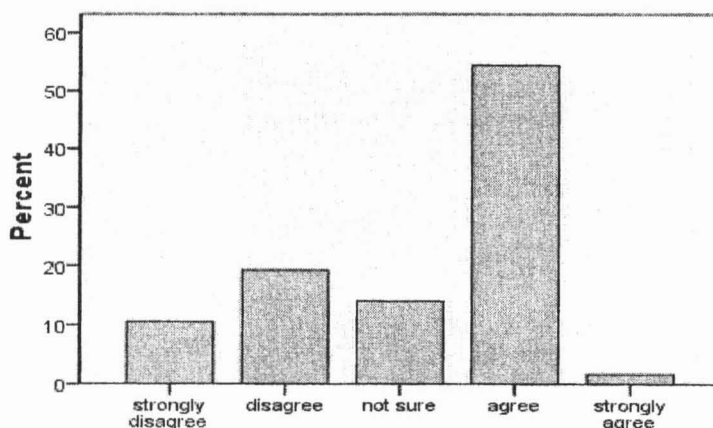


Fig 1: I love being an NR student

When asked if given the choice they would still prefer to stay off-campus, 56.1 percent disagreed while 29.8 per cent agreed and the rest (14%) were not sure (Figure 2). This means that quite a number of the respondents would still prefer to stay off-campus even if they were given the chance to stay in the hostel. This again echoes the mixed feelings they have about staying off-campus. Even with the inconvenience faced, many of them still preferred to live on their own.

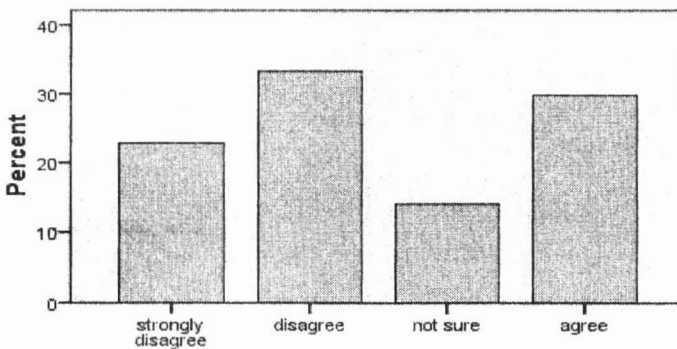


Fig 2 : Given the choice I prefer staying off-campus

Almost 80 per cent of the students agreed that life as non-residents is difficult and challenging (Figure 3). In fact, more than 91 per cent agreed that living as NR students had enabled them to learn to be more independent (Figure 4). If previously their parents helped them to make decisions, they now had to make decisions on their own regarding any problem or crisis arising in the course of their daily lives. The students had to manage in terms of their time, academic activities, finances, and social activities. Day-to-day crisis ranging from small matters such as a leaking faucet or a fused bulb to large crises like accidents or ill-health require them to think on their own or look for help from others on their own. Thus, the students have had to form their own network of support groups that can be relied on for a quick assistance if the need arises.

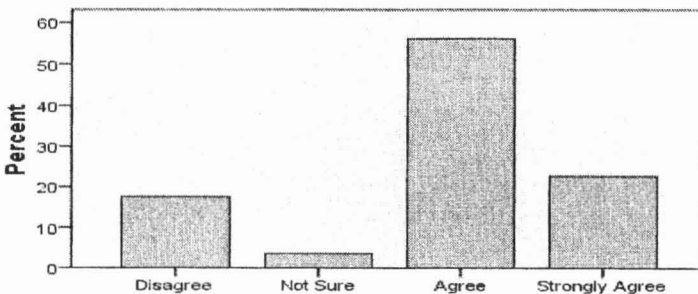


Fig 3 : Life as an NR student is difficult and challenging

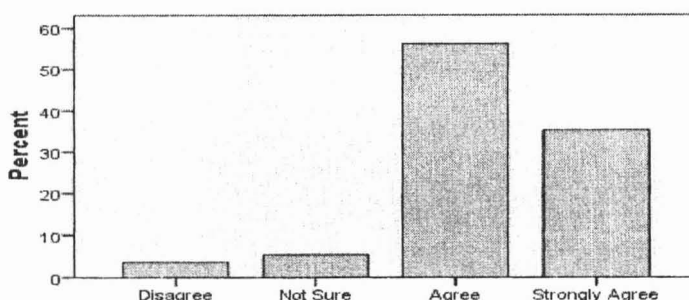


Fig 4: Living as an NR student teaches me to be independent

Some lecturers are of the impression that students who stay off-campus are often late to class because of the distance they travel daily to get to class. This, however, is disputed by majority of the respondents. 61.4% of them disagreed that they were always late to class. Only 22.8% agreed that they were always late because of the distance they had to travel daily to get to class. However, majority of those who agreed were from the diploma programmes. About 85% of the degree students did not agree to the statement. This shows that most of the degree students were always punctual to class.

The main question asked of the respondents was “What do you consider your biggest problem as a nonresident?” Interestingly the two most popular answers were financial and transportation problems which were the choice of 23 respondents each.

The fact that these students cited financial problem as their most crucial problem is not surprising. This is because these students had to incur more expenses compared to their counterpart who stayed in the hostels. They had to spend money on house rent, food and transportation other than making payment for study fees, classroom funds and other academic expenses that is considered part and parcel of every student’s life on campus. Most of the respondents (82.8%) cited the PTPTN or other loans as their main source of fund while 5.2 percent depended solely on their parents for money and the rest (12.1%) depended on both parents and study loans.

For many students, living on their own has its drawbacks. This is especially true in terms of the initial costs of living. When moving into a new house one usually has to spend money on purchasing study equipment and basic necessities such as tables, chairs, mattress, book racks, kitchen utensils and basic household appliances. Living on one’s own definitely requires one to spend more on comfort in the effort to set up of a more conducive surrounding for studying. However, we find that this initial cost of furnishing and home supplies is often overlooked. Another major drain in the students’ finances is the rental payments. Besides the usual monthly rent, tenants are often required to pay a deposit of two months’ rent on their rented house as well as a deposit on utility expenses.

In addition, many of the respondents felt that the rental charges imposed upon them were unreasonable (figure 5). A large portion of the respondents (89.5%) felt that the rental rates for houses in Jengka were too high while only 10.5% considered the rates to be reasonable.

According to some of the respondents, the cost of living in Jengka is high compared to other similar areas. This can be attested to by many of us who have experienced living here for a

number of years. The rental rates, for example, is quite exorbitant, whereby a modest three-bedroom house is normally rented out for about RM450-RM500 per month which is the norm for houses in big cities or towns but considered surprising for a rural area like Jengka. One probable reason for this is that houses up for rent are quite scarce in Jengka. There are less than seven designated planned housing areas within the vicinity of the campus. Many of the houses are occupied by their owners and, thus, only a small number are available for rent. This classic case of demand outnumbering supply has pushed home prices and rental rates even higher. Even low-cost houses are currently being rented out for way over their market value. This may be good for the economy of certain quarters but such a scenario does not augur well for our desperate students. However unfair it may seem, the landlords or house owners do seem to have the upper hand in determining the rental rates and the consumers or tenants do not appear to have much say in the matter.

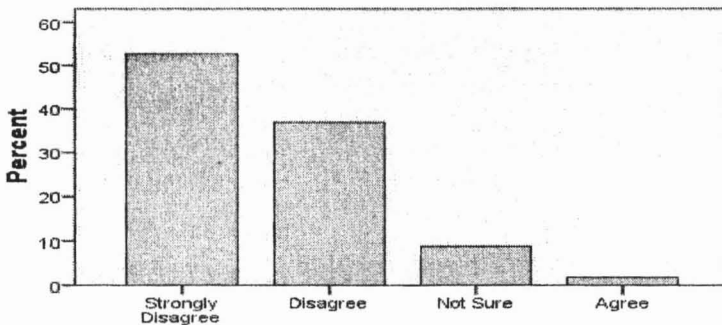


Fig 5: The rental rates in Jengka are reasonable

A couple of respondents complained that rates charged to students were higher than those charged to other tenants who were not students. How far this claim is true is difficult to ascertain. This is because rental rates depend on the house condition, location, as well as the house owner's own consideration. Some houses have been renovated and, thus, placed at a higher rate. Some tenants may have negotiated personally with the house owner to reduce their rent. Some house owners in the past justified charging a higher rent by saying that they would have to undertake repairs after the tenants had vacated the house. As said earlier, the tenants are almost powerless as far as rental rates are concerned.

One way the students overcome the problem of scarcity of houses is by cramming as many tenants in a house as possible. Thus, it is not surprising to see ten or more students occupying a house. It may not be comfortable as the rooms are quite small and living in such cramped space can be quite challenging. Furthermore, basic amenities such as water may be also scarce. Some students in the past had also become victims of unscrupulous landlords who would partition areas such as the kitchen even further to make room for even more occupants but thankfully such practice has been stopped. The writer had also visited students who were staying at the upper level of shop houses. These quarters were renovated as hostels. There were 10 double decker beds and lockers provided for the tenants' use. Even though the living area was a bit cramped, the owner also provided a lounge and kitchen area on the ground floor for the tenants to relax. Such living arrangement is not too bad but it is felt that more should be done to ensure comfort and safety of students living there.

Obviously there is very little in the way of our students to protect themselves against mistreatment by the house owners. It is as though they have very little rights as tenants. As mentioned in an article that appeared in The New Paltz Oracle in its November 2002 issue, 'Over and over again, student tenants feel threatened to speak up about their problems with rentals in fear that their landlord will penalize them. What they may not realize is that student tenants have the same rights as anyone else. If we make a complaint to our landlord, a proper response is expected. Some landlords abide by that and attend to their tenant's needs. Others do not even know the meaning of maintenance' (www.newpaltz.edu). This seems to apply to the NR students in Jengka as well. When asked if their landlords were willing and available to help when there was any problem relating to the house, only 26.3 per cent agreed and the rest either disagreed (49%) or were not sure (24.6%) (Figure 6). This shows that many of our student tenants do not consider their landlords to be helpful or responsible in the maintenance of their rentals.

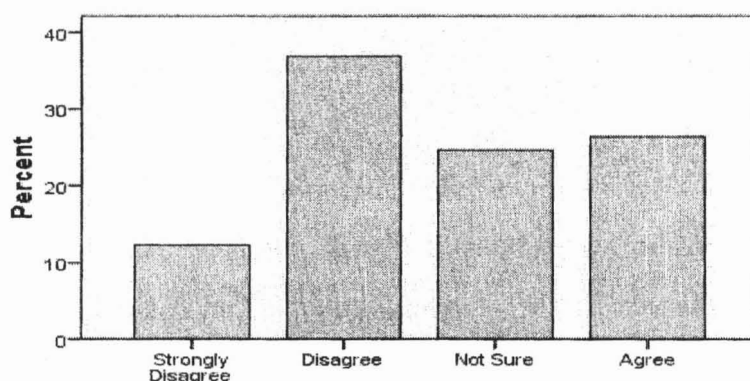


Fig 6 : My landlord is willing and available to help if I have any maintenance problem around the house

Cost of living does not only constitute rental payment but also other expenses including food and transport. Some respondents also complained that they were not given food incentives like their hostel counterparts. Food is expensive in Jengka and to save on food expenses some students cooked their own food. However, during the day they would still have to buy food at the café after class. Thus, the high cost of food was still considered a burden to them.

As mentioned earlier, other than financial problem, transportation was ranked high on the NR students' list of pressing problems. Such problem often includes difficulty in getting to campus or class as well as to town or other places such as the bank, post office, shops, internet cafes, etc when the need arises. Most of the NR students did not have their own transport and, thus, had to rely on UiTM buses or the privately operated mini vans. The UiTM buses were limited and the mini vans, being privately owned, were profit-oriented and not very reliable as students sometimes had to wait a long time for their services. Transportation was a big problem especially for students who were living in areas that were not often frequented by buses or vans. Those who owned motorcycles also said they faced difficulty going to campus during rainy days.

Another problem mentioned by the students was security or safety (Figure 7). This is understandable as the NR students are on their own without trusted adults nearby to monitor or look after their well being. Living within the outside community means these students are exposed to the various dangers lurking within the society such as burglary, snatch theft,

harassment and other crimes. Being young and sometime quite naïve make these students easy target for some unscrupulous groups in the community.

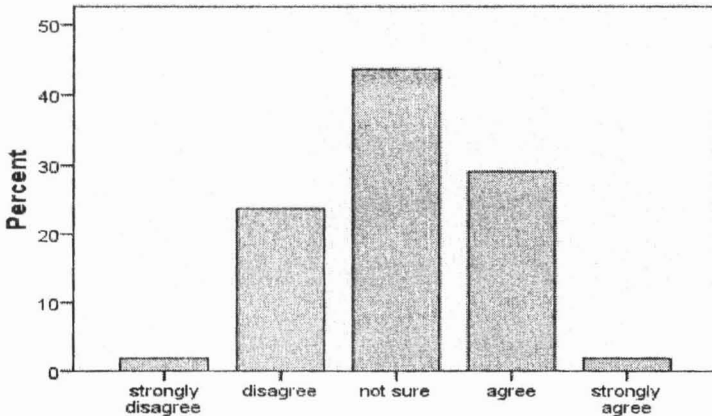


Fig 7: The neighbourhood I live in is safe

Some students mentioned that they faced problems in studying because of their living condition. They do not have easy access to the facilities such as the library. Doing group work is also a challenge because many of them stayed at different places and finding time to meet and discuss lengthily on group projects is difficult. Water supply is another problem mentioned by the students. This is especially serious in some areas in Jengka. Those living in specific parts of a housing area might face irregular water supply because of the location of their rented house. This maybe because some areas experience low water pressure that affects their water supply. For houses that were packed with tenants some students were forced to bathe at their friends' houses or elsewhere during the rush or peak hours to enable them to be ready for class on time. Thus, the unreliable water supply becomes a source of stress for them.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Being a non-resident is fraught with challenges. However, despite the many challenges students who have good attitude and a positive outlook will thrive no matter what the circumstances are. It is recommended that the students take steps to prepare themselves well for life outside campus. They should be equipped with specific skills to enable them to cope with living independently such as money management, time management, study and social skills. The students should always remember that they carry with them the responsibility of maintaining the good name of the university. Their behaviour within the community can strengthen or tarnish the image of the university.

It is already established that many house owners in this area see our students as a way for them to gain profit by charging high rental rates. To avoid our students from being taken advantage of it is recommended that the management negotiate with the house owners to set a reasonable limit to the amount they can charge and the number of tenants per house. Issues, like safety and maintenance should also be discussed since many of these students are still minors.

Safety equipment such fire extinguishers should be provided especially for those who are living in dorm-like quarters. The management should take note of students' bad experiences with certain house owners and blacklist them if necessary.

It is also recommended that an online bulletin board be introduced. Such a facility can provide a forum for current and prospective non-resident students to exchange information especially about past experiences with certain landlords. (www.newpaltz.edu).

Thus, there must be strong support from various parties including the campus administration, lecturers, counselors, fellow students as well as from members of the community. Let their experience here be the groundwork to train and expose them to the ways of living within the society. These students are only here for a short while and they deserve our understanding, support and care to achieve their full potential as future members of society.

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