

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The role of residence advisors in student academic advice and success: Insights and experiences from a university of technology

Basa rinoitwa nevachengeti vevana kukurudzira dzidzo: Nzwisiso nezviitiko kubva yunivhesiti etekinoroji

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Article history: Received 2 November 2023 | Accepted 11 November 2024 | Published 28 July 2025

ABSTRACT

The traditional role of student accommodation has evolved significantly in recent years, transforming from simple housing to dynamic Living and Learning Communities (LLCs) that foster both personal and academic growth. As more institutions are housing their own students, these spaces have become central to the university experience. To advance student success, continuous enhancements in academic support services and interventions have been introduced within higher education institutions (HEIs). Initiatives like academic advising increasingly emphasise an interconnected approach, acknowledging the significant impact of out-of-class learning environments on student accomplishments. However, there is limited research on the connectedness between LLCs and student support, particularly academic advising. Informed by the validation theory, this study sought to explore the connectedness of LLCs to academic advising with a specific focus on the contributions of residence advisors (RAs). Thirteen (n=13) RAs from the Durban University of Technology responded to an online open-ended questionnaire administered through Google Forms. Data indicated that the RAs functioned as a primary point of contact for students experiencing psychosocial problems affecting their academic work. They also performed vital roles offering academic guidance and counselling, significantly influencing the academic progress of students residing at respective facilities. However, the RAs had received minimal or no formal training on academic advising. The study recommends that RAs get training in academic advising for improved efficacy of their critical role on student support and success in HEIs.

KEYWORDS

Student housing, academic advising, residence advisor

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NHANGA NYAYA

Basa repano gara vadzidzi rashanduka zvakananyanya mumakore apfuura, kushanduka kubva padzimba dzeku rara kuita dzimba dzino kurudzira magariro akanaka nekukura kwemunhu mudzidzo. Nekuda kwaizvozvo nzvimbo dzedzidzo dzakuita dzichipa vadzidzi vadzo vose peku gara panzvimbo imwe izvi zvinova zvaka kosha kuma yunivhesiti. Kuti chinhanho ichi chive chino endeka, masevhisi ano fambisa mberi kubudirira kwevadzidzi pamwe neku simudzira matanho ano tsigira dzidzo akuita achi kurudzirwa mumasangano edzidzo epamusoro. Matanho akaita sekupa mazano edzidzo, ari kuwedzera kushandiswa achipa simbiso yekuva nehu shandira pamwe achi tondera kukosha kwezvimwe zvizvondo zvisinga itikire mukirasi izvo zvino simudzira vadzidzi. Nekudaro, tsvakiridzo ishoma yaka nangana nehu kama hwuri pakati kwenzvimbo dzino gara vafundi pamwe rutsigiro runo pihwa vadzidzi nekurairwa kwedzidzo runo itika panzvimbo idzi dzavano gara. Tichiziviswa nevalidation theory, chidzidzo ichi chakatsvika hukama hunga wanikwa wepano gara vadzidzi neru tsigiro hwedzidzo runo itwa nema Residence Advisors (RAs). MaResidence Advisors ano svika gumi nenhatu (n=13), vekuDurban University of Technology vakapindura mibvunzo kuburikidza neGoogle Forms. Zivo yakaratidza kuti maRA ndo vano nyanyo kutanga kuwonekwa nevadzidzi vane matambudziko, anokanganisa dzidzo. Pamusoro pazvo maRA aka wonekwa kuti vane basa rakakosha rwekupa mazano anobatsira zvakananyanya vafundi kuti vawane kufambira mberi muzvidzidzo. Zvisineyi hazvo, zvakaonekwa kuti maRA ayinge asina kupihwa dzidzo kana ruzivo rwaka kwana kuti tsika yekupa mazano muzvidzidzo ino fambiswa sei pa univhesiti. Chidzidzo ichi chinokurudzira kuti maunivhesiti ave anopa maRA dzidzo yekuti vanopa mazano edzidzo sei kuva dzidzi vavanenge vaka pihwa kuti vagare navo. Izvi zvichi ita kuti basa ravo rive raka vandudzika pakupa parutsigiro kuvadzidzi nekubudirira muzvikoro zvedzidzo yepamusoro.

MAZWI AKAKOSHA

Imba yevadzidzi, kuraira kwedzidzo, chipangamazano wemugari

Introduction

The massification of South African higher education institutions (HEIs) has been both a social justice issue and a notable milestone. A multitude of endeavours has been initiated to augment the massification and academic performance of South African students underprepared for tertiary education (Hugo, 2021). Significantly, a proportion of the Durban University of Technology (DUT) student body hail from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds characterised by inadequate educational resources, limited economic means, and multifaceted social challenges, adversely affecting their readiness for university life and subsequent academic performance (Pather et al., 2020; Pirithiraj, 2017). As a result, progressive academic performance initiatives that embrace a holistic and interrelated paradigm, acknowledging the central significance attributed to formal and informal extracurricular learning settings, are key in shaping student achievement. The dearth of research on the connectedness of academic advising (AA) and LLCs prompted the present study (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011). The study sought to explore the link between LLCs and academic advising, specifically focusing on the contributions of residence advisors (RAs). The study conforms with

the institutional Siyaphumelela ('We succeed') Project whose mandate is improving South African university models to ensure student success using data analytics. The undertaking is a response to the DUT's Envision 2030 systems and processes pillar whose goal is the development of state-of-the-art infrastructure, providing contemporary work, learning and living spaces for its students in university owned, leased and privately owned accommodation in Durban.

Over the years what constitutes student housing has evolved from merely being a place where students sleep and reside. Student housing is a living and learning space, serving the dual purpose of integrating living arrangements with learning goals (Fields, 2011). Student housing, staff accommodation and other support facilities have been found to be directly and indirectly pertinent to fostering a successful living and learning environment (Abdullahi & Wan Yusoff, 2018; Abisuga et al., 2019; Gruber et al., 2010). Focusing on expectation and satisfaction, the positive impact of quality student accommodation has been documented in several studies (Amole, 2009; Cross et al., 2009; Hassanain, 2008; Nimako & Bondinuba, 2013; Oke et al., 2017; Simpeh et al., 2018). Considering this, Simpeh et al. (2018) identified LLCs as playing an important role towards the provision of quality higher education in HEIs. Groenewald (2017); Kerr and Tweedy (2006); and Wawrzynski et al. (2012) connected informal interactions and co-curricular activities within LLCs as significant contributors to student development and learning.

Navarez (2017) reiterated that quality education expands beyond classroom experience but extends to student interaction with housing accommodation. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) commented that constructive interactions between students and faculty outside of the classroom, particularly within residences, had a positive impact on student retention. Sheehan (2012) maintained that residence heads, also known as RAs, played a key part in promoting student achievement in out-of-class environments. Similarly, Van Schalkwyk et al. (2012) observed a positive impact resulting from RAs providing out-of-class support to first-year students residing in Stellenbosch University residences. Kuh (2011) pointed out that RAs dedicate a considerable amount of time engaging students in co-curricular and out-of-class environments, affording them a diverse range of experiences and opportunities to address various factors that can facilitate or hinder student attainment and participation. In addition, Navarez (2017) explained that RAs provide support for students' academic, personal, social, professional development, and make referrals to campus resources and services.

In short, RAs play roles similar to that of academic advising. AA responsibilities include curriculum guidance, advice on academic matters, facilitating seamless integration into the educational institution, providing guidance on programme selection, conducting orientation programmes, offering elements of mentorship, collaborating with various institutional support services, providing psychological support, fostering engagement with both academic faculty and administrative personnel (Hawthorne et al., 2022). AA within the DUT is conceptualized as a mechanism for supporting students throughout their academic journey, emphasising an integrative approach to their development. Academic advising seeks to support students and ensure overall success. Additionally, academic advisors assist students who are struggling to find the best ways to proceed to their end

goals and those failing to adapt to university life (Antoney, 2020). Similarly, Wyner (2021) states that AAs help students stay academically engaged thus promoting persistence to eventually graduate. In this regard, RAs serve multiple roles that are directly related to the objectives of student affairs and university housing in which they are employed (Harris, 2021; Wyner, 2021). As such the Department of Higher Education and Training (2011) mentioned LLCs as strategic tools to promote student success and create sustainable living and learning environments (Xulu-Gama, 2019).

As the number of students attending universities has increased significantly, so has the number being housed by HEIs. Hence, there is a pressing need to understand the experiences of residence advisors (RAs) and their impact on student success outside the campus environment. According to the Statista Research Department (2023), South Africa's gross tertiary enrolment ratio has risen by 0.4% since 2019, reaching a peak of 24.24% in 2020. This massification has caused student support resource systems like student housing and residence life, critical components of university systems, to continuously transform and develop. For example, at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), the pressure has been felt as the number of students seeking accommodation soared to an estimated 14 000 in 2023. Therefore, this study is both timely and necessary as it aims to document the experiences of RAs in providing academic advising, as well as outline the future role of RAs in the Department of Student Housing and Residence Life at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) within the broader context of the Envision 2030 framework. To assist students, Kanyumba and Shabangu (2021) recommend that higher learning institutions upskill their staff in this post-pandemic era.

Theoretical framework

The validation theory is useful in understanding the role of RAs in university residences. This theory posits that RAs are typically responsible for creating a supportive and inclusive living environment for students and its principles of validation are instrumental. Rendon (1994) explained that the validation theory is enabling, confirming that support processes initiated by in-class and out-of-class agents foster academic and personal development. Rendon (1994) proposed two types of validation offered by the in-class and out-of-class agents namely (1) academic and (2) personal endorsement in achieving academic success amongst students. The present discourse expounds on a conceptual framework comprising six core elements related to the validation process in student development (see Rendon, 1994).

1. Residence advisors (RAs) are responsible for initiating contact with students and offering institutional support within the confines of LLCs.
2. The significance of self-worth and feeling competent, engendered through validation.
3. The importance of constant validation by RAs as a catalyst for growth in students residing in LLCs.
4. Continuous validation in both in-class and out-of-class contexts.
5. Validation is an ongoing developmental process that unfolds over time and facilitates a multifaceted student experience.

6. The profound impact of early validation during the transition phase into higher education on student personality development.

Research methods

This study utilised a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of residence advisors (RAs) in DUT LLCs. 40 open ended questionnaires were sent to the Outlook email addresses of the RAs. Thirteen (n=13) completed questionnaires were submitted. The data were analysed using thematic analysis; the findings are presented next in this article. The study aimed to gain insight into RA experiences in academic advising through a qualitative lens, which Bezuidenhout et al. (2014) advocate in exploring the depth of human experience and arbitrary interpretations associated with specific incidents. The study involved participants from diverse fields of study employed by the Housing and Residence Life Unit of the DUT.

Findings

This section outlines the thematic findings derived from the open-ended questionnaires. The analysis encompasses six key themes: (1) current experiences, (2) experiences in academic advising, (3) challenges in providing academic advising, (4) RA capacity in providing academic advice, (5) the importance of RA academic advising proficiency, and (6) resources RAs need to provide academic support.

Theme 1: Current experiences

This theme, drawn from data collected in April 2023, provided insight into the general experiences of being a residence advisor at DUT residences. The participants shared the high points and difficulties of the job, the value of preparation, and the necessity of providing students with both academic and personal assistance. The participants recognised that the RA position came with some psychological complications. Challenges experienced in respective residences revolved around the issue of infrastructure and student wellness. The participants' experiences were reflected in the following statements:

P1: *"... stressful. Always solving problems because the students come to you for everything."*

P2: *"... moderately challenging, with most of the issues based on maintenance and illness of the students."*

P4: *"... I have managed to deal with all issues generally well. However, maintenance of my Res has been a priority struggle. I have dedicated most of my time at Res at resolving these issues with the support of my landlord ..."*

P11: *"I am having issue with maintenance in the res. Roommates' conflicts, but I managed to resolve."*

A subset of the RAs conveyed a sense of gratification stemming from their involvement in the study, attributing it to their contribution to societal well-being. Notably, it was

discovered that the participants derived enjoyment from these experiences, leading to personal growth in their cognitive capacities.

P4: *"I have though implemented a few programmes that touched the students' heart[s], and I have set up a good network of student leaders at my Res to fulfil roles of HC, GCI, Insika and Qakaza; all leaders are working very well with me to support my students' needs and generally keep the peace at our home."*

P6: *"It has been both exciting and overwhelming. Exciting because you get to learn a lot about the students and yourself."*

P10: *"I connect well with my students ..."*

Theme 2: Experiences in academic advising

The primary objective of the enquiry was to ascertain whether RAs had provided academic support to students and to explore their corresponding experiences. The findings revealed that students actively sought academic consultation from the RAs. Indications by eight out of the thirteen RAs confirmed instances of students approaching them with the intention of seeking academic advice. Interviewees highlighted their experiences as academic advisors as a key area as evident from the excerpts:

P1: *"I assisted the student with an assignment. The module was not in my field of expertise but I assisted with the technical part of the assignment."*

P4: *"Yes, it was an experience where I was confronted with a student struggling to meet workload demands. I engaged with the student at length in my office at Res ..."*

P5: *"Yes some students ask to assist them with accounting."*

P11: *"Yes, and I referred the student to the Writing Centre."*

It also emerged that some RAs were not sure what was meant by academic advising. This suggests that some RAs were helping students not knowing that what they were engaging in was classified as academic advising. One participant had this to say about their understanding:

P6: *"I am not sure if it is academic advising, but I have discussed with students how best they can manage their time and how they can answer questions that require them to discuss or elaborate."*

Theme 3: Challenges in providing academic support

The study recognised the challenges encountered by RAs in delivering academic support within their assigned residential areas. RAs were observed to adapt and employ improvised approaches to the provision of academic assistance, driven by their diverse areas of expertise. It was observed that most of the RAs were postgraduate students and qualified academics. However, the challenge stemmed from the fact that students in the halls

of residence represented various fields of study. The allocation process by the housing department did not account for field of study when assigning residents to halls. The following excerpts shed more light on the issue:

P1: *"Our expertise. We are allocated students who are in different field from ours."*

P2: *"Sometimes I'm not aware of other course demands, sometimes it becomes difficult to provide academic advice ..."*

P6: *"I am not well equipped."*

P7: *"Not having full information on the requirements of each course."*

P8: *"Some issues may be general and easy to deal with, however, some issues require one to understand the course of interest so you can advise accordingly ..."*

P11: *"Lack of understanding other field/s of study."*

Theme 4: RA capacity in providing academic advice

The issue of whether RAs were adequately equipped to offer academic advice within their assigned residences was examined and deliberated on. Participants expressed the belief that RAs were well-suited to provide academic guidance based on their academic achievements and experiences. The perception was that their notable academic achievements positioned them to offer some form of academic advising, given their expertise and knowledge in their respective fields. The sentiments are captured by the excerpts below:

P1: *"Not in all aspects but to some extent yes, as RA are also qualified scholars. Therefore, they to some degree have an understanding of the academic environment."*

P4: *"Yes, if they get the required training because most of the RA's are senior postgraduate students."*

P5: *"Yes. If they have been students and lectures themselves then they can provide some degree of academic advantages."*

P10: *"Yes, most of them are studying towards their Masters and PhDs, therefore their seniority must be given back to the juniors."*

P11: *"Yes, they interact with students more than lecturers or academic departments."*

Theme 5: The importance of RA academic advising proficiency

The participants unanimously recognised the significant value of RAs possessing knowledge and skills in academic advising. They expressed a shared sentiment that RAs held great importance in being reliable student counselling resources. It was acknowledged that students regarded RAs as their primary point of contact when encountering difficulties or challenges. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on the need for RAs to be well-versed

in academic advising to effectively support and assist students in navigating academic concerns. The participants shared their views:

P1: *"It is crucial. A lot can be done in the residence instead of seeking help elsewhere."*

P2: *"Because students' believe in RAs, and they are tasked a monumental job to create a space that assist the students to excel academically."*

P8: *"It is highly important, as students really look up to RAs to provide useful guidance with every challenge they go through, and academic advising being the one that is at the top in an institution of higher learning."*

P14: *"Very important. Most often lecturer is limited in terms of time and they need to deliver on the academic program to numerous students but RAs on the other end have lot of time with students at Residences."*

Theme 6: Resources RAs need to provide academic support

The participants emphasised the necessity of university departments facilitating capacity development for RAs. Specifically, they highlighted the need for the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching to play a more active role in organising and conducting academic advising training workshops. Additionally, some participants expressed the requirement of essential resources like computers, whiteboards, and reading materials to enhance their capacity to provide effective academic support within their respective roles as RAs. These needs were underscored in the responses:

P1: *"Computers, printers, internet access."*

P2: *"The residence advisor must be knowledgeable of other units within the university that can assist in supporting the students to excel academically such as CELT, library, computer labs etc."*

P3: *"We need Academic Development Workshop and Provision of relevant materials in order for us to be able to assist students."*

P10: *"RAs need guidance and support from CELT."*

Discussion

This study sought to explore the connectedness of LLCs to academic advising with a specific focus on the contributions of residence advisors (RAs). The DUT is fully dedicated to fostering a supportive LLC atmosphere for students despite some challenges that include maintenance issues and limited resources. In the context of this study, this commitment was conceptualized as a supportive educational environment that enhances student outcomes. Previously, university residences were primarily regarded as mere accommodation for students to reside, with the added benefit of proximity to campus. However, this perception has since evolved, now they are recognised as settings where students both live and engage in learning, facilitated by various programmes offered by

the university. The Durban University of Technology (DUT), for example, has implemented numerous facilities to support students in their pursuit of academic success. These include flexible bus transportation, libraries, computer laboratories, leadership programmes, networking initiatives, and entrepreneurial programmes.

While RAs have traditionally been assigned by the university to ensure the maintenance of law and order within residences, other miscellaneous duties arise from the role (Kanyumba & Shabangu, 2021). The study perceived that the role of RAs had evolved as it also encompassed psychosocial and academic support. This was reflected in the testimonials provided by residence advisors (RAs) during data collection. The subject of academic advising on campus has been explored, whilst its off-campus counterpart has not, despite its critical role to student success. And there is where the impact of RAs on student success beyond campus life can be observed, specifically through their provision of academic advice, which surpasses the RA role in upholding institutional policies.

Due to their academic merit, RAs are responsible for offering institutional support within residences (Rendon, 1994). The study found that RAs at the DUT were required to at least hold a master's degree to qualify for the position; with some of the RAs being university staff and registered postgraduate students. Their level of education and work experience allowed RAs to share academic tips and services they used within the institution with the students under their care. This placed them in an ideal position to facilitate academic support programmes. However, a large number expressed doubts about the capacity of RAs to address the departmental academic requirements for each course, and this imposed limitations to their academic advice skills. Nonetheless the findings revealed that a majority of the participants believed that providing academic advising was part and parcel of RA responsibilities given their experiences.

Further revelations were that RAs served as the initial point of contact for students facing psychosocial and academic difficulties. Students often expected RAs to be able to solve any problem they encountered, including academic and other individual matters. The validation theory highlights that constant validation from RAs could be a catalyst for student growth (Rendon, 1994). Kanyumba and Shabangu (2021) found that first-year students look to their seniors for support and encouragement. Consequently, RAs are expected to possess a broad range of academic skills and psychosocial knowledge base, regardless of whether or not they specialize in their students' specific fields of study. This underscores the importance of re-evaluating and broadening the responsibilities of residence advisors (RAs) to promote inclusivity and amplify their influence in bolstering student support. It may also warrant considering the appointment of RAs whose qualifications align with the academic needs of the students residing in a particular residence.

Finally, the RAs viewed academic advising as a prescriptive task, suggesting that advisors possess a superior understanding of all aspects of student challenges. These data showed that RAs believed that they could execute the role of academic advising in their respective residences efficaciously. To carry out this role successfully at the DUT, Ras need to attend academic induction programmes hosted by staff development departments such as the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

Conclusion

The DUT has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to creating a sustainable living and learning environment for its students, with the aim of nurturing their academic success. Previously, university residences were primarily viewed as basic accommodation, but this perception has evolved over time within the context of the DUT. Residences are now acknowledged as essential factors in students' overall development, offering a wide range of programmes and human resources to support their academic aspirations. The present study centred on the role of residence advisors (RAs) in academic advising. Traditionally, RAs were primarily responsible for maintaining order and discipline within the residences, but over time, they have assumed additional roles, particularly in the provision of academic advice and support. Students residing in these accommodations now turn to RAs as trusted sources of assistance and guidance in their academic pursuits. In this regard they are enabling agents who foster academic and personal development (Rendon, 1994).

The roles of residence advisors (RAs) within university residences extend beyond the realm of maintaining order, as they play a fundamental role in the provision of guidance to students through their professional experience and academic qualifications. Many RAs at the DUT are concurrently employed by the university while pursuing postgraduate studies at either master's or PhD level. Given their dual roles and established networks, offering academic advice is a task well within their capabilities due to their wealth of experience. This exemplifies their potential to provide valuable academic guidance to students who may be at risk academically. Therefore, the influence of RAs on student development is indisputable. It is advisable to broaden the responsibilities and promote inclusivity and amplify RA impact in fortifying student support by offering them specialized training in academic advisory services.

It is imperative for relevant departments, including the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, to provide training to residence advisors (RAs) in the domain of student support and development. Although there are existing academic peer support advisors who collaborate with students on campus, RAs can also be empowered with the capacity to offer such skills. This is particularly advantageous since RAs spend a significant amount of time with students in university residences. Such an approach would establish an around-the-clock support system for students when they face academic challenges, thereby contributing to the enhancement of student retention and the reduction of attrition rates at DUT.

Limitations and recommendations

The study recognises certain inherent limitations: notably, its confinement to the Durban University of Technology (DUT), which is one of four universities in KwaZulu-Natal. This limitation was largely due to the diverse institutional research ethics across different universities, which necessitated the selection of the DUT's Living and Learning Communities (LLCs) as the focus of the research. Insights from residence advisors (RAs) at other institutions could have provided valuable perspectives for comparative analysis. Based on these findings, two key recommendations are proposed: all incoming and current RAs in

other institutions should (1) undergo academic induction and (2) participate in academic training programmes facilitated by the staff development units within their respective institutions before commencing duties.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the participants for their contributions.

Ethics statement

The study was approved by the Durban University of Technology Institutional Review (IREC) Reference number: Ethics Clearance Number: IREC 087/23.

Potential conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding acknowledgement

This study did not receiving any funding.

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How to cite:

Manatsa, I., & Khumalo, M. (2025). The role of residence advisors in student academic advice and success: Insights and experiences from a university of technology. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 13(1), 59-71. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v13i1.4872.

