

Residential Location, Learning Conditions and Academic Outcomes among University Students in Ghana: A Comparative Analysis of On-Campus and Off-Campus Residents

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ABSTRACT

Student accommodation remains a critical yet underexplored dimension of higher education experience and academic achievement in Africa. While scholarship has long acknowledged the significance of teaching quality, curriculum relevance, funding, and institutional governance in shaping learning outcomes, relatively limited scholarly attention has been paid to the role of residential environments in mediating academic engagement and student success in Ghanaian higher education. This study examines how residential location, quality of living conditions, and contextual experiences influence academic engagement and academic outcomes among university students in Ghana, with specific focus on comparative experiences of on-campus and off-campus residents. Using a mixed-methods comparative design and data from 100 undergraduate students, the study integrates classical theoretical frameworks such as Tinto's Student Integration Theory, Astin's Student Involvement Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory with culturally grounded frameworks, including Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), place-based perspectives, decolonising African education lenses, and institutional culture analyses. Findings show that on-campus residence enhances institutional integration, access to learning resources, peer collaboration and academic participation, while off-campus residence is associated with commuting fatigue, infrastructural instability, heightened financial pressure and reduced engagement. However, academic outcomes are ultimately mediated by the quality of residential environments rather than mere location, with students in stable, socially supportive environments demonstrating stronger engagement and achievement. The study concludes that student housing in Ghana must be understood not only as an infrastructural concern but as a cultural, structural, social justice and educational equity issue. Policy implications emphasise intentional expansion of institutional housing, regulatory frameworks for private hostels, culturally responsive academic support systems and integration of housing within national higher education development strategies.

Keywords: student housing, residential location, academic engagement, Ghana, higher education, learning environment

INTRODUCTION

Residential environments play a profound role in shaping students' learning experiences, emotional wellbeing, engagement in academic activities and eventual academic outcomes. Although academic discourse often centres on teaching effectiveness, curriculum relevance, institutional leadership, funding and access, student accommodation forms a crucial yet frequently overlooked aspect of higher education quality. Student housing does not merely provide shelter; rather, it structures students' daily routines, determines proximity to institutional support systems, influences peer relationships, and conditions levels of educational engagement and academic success. In African higher education systems, housing conditions intersect with complex social realities including infrastructural limitations, socio-economic inequalities, historical legacies of educational provision, and policy gaps, making accommodation a deeply consequential academic issue.

In Ghana, the rapid expansion of tertiary education has significantly increased student enrolments without a corresponding expansion in institutional housing capacity. Consequently, a considerable proportion of students

now reside in private off-campus hostels or community-based accommodations. While on-campus housing systems are generally designed to align with academic life and provide structured welfare support, off-campus residential environments are often unregulated, variable in quality, and characterised by inconsistent access to essential utilities, security and academic support. These realities create different residential and learning conditions that may significantly shape academic engagement and outcomes.

Existing Ghanaian research has explored various aspects of accommodation such as affordability, security, infrastructure and access. However, there remains insufficient comparative analysis between on-campus and off-campus residential experiences, particularly through theoretical lenses that incorporate culturally grounded, place-based and decolonial perspectives that account for the broader structural, historical and cultural environments of Ghanaian education. This paper addresses this gap by providing a deeper investigation into how residential location influences academic engagement and learning outcomes. Specifically, the study examines the characteristics of on-campus and off-campus residential environments, how these spaces influence academic participation and engagement, the academic performance implications of these experiences, and the cultural and structural dynamics embedded within Ghana's higher education housing systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Perspectives on Student Housing, Engagement and Academic Outcomes

International scholarship has consistently established student residence as a critical determinant of higher education experience, academic engagement, persistence and academic outcomes. Early empirical work in North America and Europe demonstrated that on-campus residence environments provide structured academic support systems, enhance peer interaction, and foster institutional belonging, all of which significantly improve students' likelihood of academic success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). University residence halls are often conceptualised as intentional learning communities designed not only for accommodation, but also for cultivating intellectual exchange, academic discipline and psychosocial development. Turley and Wodtke (2010) further demonstrate that students residing closer to campus benefit from reduced travel time, lower commuting-related fatigue, better access to academic resources and greater participation in co-curricular learning experiences, indirectly strengthening academic motivation and achievement.

However, global research also cautions against overgeneralising the superiority of on-campus residence. Scholars argue that the academic advantage of campus accommodation is contingent on the quality of living conditions, institutional support systems, residence governance and socio-emotional climate (Blimling, 2015). Poorly managed residence environments characterised by overcrowding, infrastructural breakdowns, weak mentoring systems or toxic peer cultures may diminish academic benefits. Thus, contemporary research increasingly emphasises the need to view student housing as an integrated educational ecosystem rather than only a logistical or welfare facility. This perspective is particularly relevant to African and Ghanaian contexts where student housing intersects with broader socio-economic inequalities, infrastructural fragilities and policy inadequacies.

African Contexts: Housing, Educational Inequality and University Experience

Student housing challenges in African higher education systems are deeply rooted in broader structural and policy realities. Rapid expansion of higher education enrolments across the continent, driven by massification policies and increasing demand for tertiary qualifications, has not been matched with commensurate investment in institutional accommodation facilities (Tella, 2019). As a result, many students either live in overcrowded on-campus structures or are pushed into unregulated private hostels and informal community housing. Studies across South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda reveal persistent problems including inadequate accommodation capacity, unreliable electricity, poor sanitation, safety insecurities, limited access to internet connectivity and weak institutional monitoring of private student hostels (Xulu-Gama, 2019; Olanrewaju et al., 2020).

Beyond infrastructural inadequacies, African scholars increasingly argue that student housing inequities are entangled with broader questions of educational justice, structural exclusion and socio-spatial inequality. University residence allocation systems have, in some contexts, been linked to socio-economic privilege, reinforcing disparities in access to supportive learning environments (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012). Students from rural and economically marginalised backgrounds are disproportionately more likely to reside off-campus under precarious housing conditions, limiting their ability to participate meaningfully in academic and institutional life. This aligns with emerging African higher education debates that conceptualise student housing not merely as a welfare concern but as part of a broader social justice and inclusion agenda.

Ghanaian Higher Education Housing Realities

Within Ghana, the dynamics of student housing reflect similar challenges but also possess unique contextual characteristics. The liberalisation of tertiary education and expansion of both public and private universities have significantly increased enrolment levels without parallel expansion in campus housing capacity. Studies in Ghana consistently reveal affordability, proximity to campus, security, access to utilities such as electricity and water, internet availability, and peer influence as primary determinants of residential choice (Tetteh, 2017; Nimako & Bondinuba, 2019; Masha & Agyeman, 2024). However, available literature highlights that the majority of Ghanaian students are forced to depend on private off-campus hostels, many of which are expensive, poorly regulated, structurally weak and sometimes unsafe. These housing arrangements impose financial strain, increase dependence on unreliable public utilities, and often situate students in environments that are not purposefully designed to support academic engagement.

Recent Ghanaian studies further reveal that inadequate housing conditions contribute to stress, time loss through commuting, exposure to insecurity, and reduced institutional engagement (Nimako & Bondinuba, 2019). Students living off-campus frequently experience disconnection from campus social networks, reduced opportunities for faculty interaction and limited participation in academic enrichment activities. These realities directly contradict the requirements of student involvement and integration emphasised in international engagement literature. Yet, while Ghanaian scholarship acknowledges structural housing barriers, fewer empirical studies critically interrogate the deeper socio-cultural, institutional and policy-based explanations underpinning these realities. There remains limited theorisation of how student housing experiences relate to culturally responsive educational needs, decolonial educational justice perspectives, and institutional culture frameworks in Ghana.

Research Gaps and Prospect of this Study

Most Ghanaian and African empirical studies have approached student housing predominantly from infrastructural, economic or logistical standpoints. There is insufficient incorporation of culturally grounded theoretical frameworks that examine housing as part of broader educational experience ecologies. Additionally, while comparative studies exist, few have systematically examined how on-campus and off-campus residence environments differentially shape engagement patterns and academic outcomes within Ghanaian universities. Even fewer studies integrate behavioural engagement theories, ecological models, culturally responsive pedagogy and decolonial education frameworks into a single analytical model. This study therefore responds to these gaps by providing a theoretically grounded, Ghana-contextualised comparative analysis of residential location, learning conditions and academic outcomes, contributing new insights into how student housing functions as both an educational and social justice determinant in Ghana's higher education landscape.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multi-layered theoretical framework combining classical engagement and environmental theories with culturally responsive, place-based and decolonial African education lenses.

Tinto's Student Integration Theory

Tinto (1993) argues that academic success and persistence are significantly influenced by students' academic and social integration into institutional life. Residential environments play a central role in shaping belonging, identity formation, institutional attachment and commitment. On-campus housing tends to structure more opportunities for peer interaction, academic collaboration and access to institutional support, which enhances retention and success. Conversely, poor or disconnected residential experiences undermine integration and weaken academic progress.

Astin's Student Involvement Theory

Astin (1984, 1999) emphasises that academic success depends on the level of energy. This level of energy includes the time, effort and emotional investment students dedicate to learning activities. Residential conditions influence this significantly. Supportive housing environments reduce logistical burdens, release emotional and mental resources and encourage involvement in academic and co-curricular engagement. Stressful residential conditions, including commuting burdens, financial strain and infrastructural instability, diminish students' capacity to invest meaningfully in academic work.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualises human development within nested environmental systems. In this framework, the student residence constitutes a crucial microsystem, shaping daily routines, emotional states and behavioural engagement. This microsystem interacts dynamically with institutional culture (mesosystem), university governance and policy structures (exosystem), and broader socio-political conditions (macrosystem). Hence, student housing cannot be separated from national development processes, institutional arrangements, and cultural realities.

Culturally Responsive, Decolonising and Place-Based Perspectives

Drawing on Anlimachie et al. (2023), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy asserts that meaningful learning occurs when educational systems recognise, value and respond to students' lived cultural and social realities. Housing inequalities reflect deeper cultural marginalisation and shape learning opportunities. Likewise, Anlimachie, Badu and Acheampong (2023) demonstrate that place is central to educational aspiration, identity formation and engagement. Student housing forms part of students' "learning place ecologies," influencing self-worth, hope, motivation and agency.

Furthermore, Anlimachie (2026) argues that contemporary African educational inequities are deeply rooted in historical colonial structures that privilege certain groups while marginalising others. Housing disparities therefore reproduce spatial inequality and educational exclusion. Ewulley et al. (2023) further assert that institutional cultures shape how educational opportunities are experienced and distributed. Similarly, residential cultures and environments create expectations, support networks and opportunity structures influencing academic outcomes.

Therefore, integrating these frameworks, this study conceptualises student housing as a socio-structural, cultural, behavioural, emotional and academic determinant. Residential environments affect social integration, academic involvement, emotional wellbeing, environmental stability, cultural belonging, aspirations and educational equity. Thus, residential location is not merely infrastructural; it is deeply tied to educational justice in Ghana.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a comparative descriptive research design to examine differences in learning conditions, academic engagement, and academic outcomes between on-campus and off-campus university students in

Ghana. The design was considered appropriate because it allows for systematic comparison of naturally occurring groups without experimental manipulation, thereby reflecting real-world student living arrangements within the Ghanaian higher education context.

A mixed-methods approach was employed to enhance analytical robustness and contextual interpretation. Quantitative data enabled comparison of engagement indicators and academic outcomes, while qualitative interviews provided deeper insight into lived residential experiences, perceived challenges, and adaptive strategies.

Study Population and Sample

The study population comprised undergraduate students enrolled at a public university in Ghana. A sample of 100 students was selected using stratified sampling to ensure proportional representation of both residential categories. Participants were grouped as follows:

On-campus residents ($n = 50$)

Off-campus residents ($n = 50$)

Inclusion criteria required participants to have resided in their respective accommodation type for at least one academic year, ensuring adequate exposure to residential conditions relevant to learning and engagement.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using two primary instruments:

Structured Questionnaire

The questionnaire captured information on:

- Demographic characteristics
- Academic engagement (class attendance, study hours, participation in group learning)
- Learning environment conditions (noise levels, electricity reliability, internet access, safety, and space adequacy)
- Self-reported academic performance (GPA range)

Likert-scale items were used to assess perceptions of learning conditions and engagement intensity.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sub-sample of 20 students (10 on-campus and 10 off-campus). Interview guides explored:

- Daily academic routines
- Residential challenges and benefits
- Perceived influence of housing on motivation, stress, and concentration

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean comparisons, to identify patterns across residential groups. Qualitative interview data were transcribed

verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, allowing for identification of recurring experiential themes linked to engagement, environmental quality, and academic functioning.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review committee. Culturally responsive and respectful ways were used to reach out to and engage participants within their place exigencies and the cultural ethos (Anlimachie and colleges 2019; 2023; 2026) Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained.

FINDINGS

Residential Conditions and Determinants of Location Choice

The findings reveal clear contrasts between the living conditions of students residing on-campus and those living off-campus. For many students, residence choice was not purely a matter of preference but was significantly shaped by affordability, space availability, socio-economic background, and institutional accommodation limitations. On-campus residents reported benefitting from physical proximity to lecture halls, libraries, laboratories, faculty offices and learning support centres, which substantially reduced commuting fatigue and optimised time for academic tasks. Many described campus accommodation as offering a sense of institutional belonging, structured living routines, and access to student support services. However, some noted occasional overcrowding, competition for shared facilities, and pressure on utilities during peak academic periods.

Conversely, off-campus residents experienced more varied and unequal living conditions, largely dependent on their financial capability and the quality of available private hostels. For many, rent constituted a major financial burden, leading to choices of substandard or overcrowded living spaces. Frequent electricity fluctuations, unstable water supply, weak internet connectivity, and exposure to unsafe environments were commonly reported. Transportation emerged as a major challenge; students spent considerable time commuting, experienced traffic delays and incurred additional transportation costs. These logistical burdens reduced available study time, contributed to stress, and occasionally disrupted class attendance. Despite these constraints, some off-campus students valued perceived independence, privacy, and social autonomy offered by private residence arrangements.

Academic Engagement Patterns

Clear engagement differentials emerged between the two residence categories. On-campus students reported higher levels of participation in structured and unstructured learning activities. They were more likely to attend evening study sessions, engage in group discussions, consult lecturers, utilise library facilities, and participate in academic clubs. Many attributed this to ease of access, supportive peer networks and campus culture that subtly reinforces academic involvement. On-campus students demonstrated stronger collaborative learning behaviours, reflecting both institutional integration and peer influence in shaping study discipline.

In contrast, off-campus students frequently described difficulty sustaining consistent engagement. Commuting fatigue, residential distractions, financial stress and anxiety over personal safety reduced motivation and diminished capacity to participate in campus-based learning opportunities. Some students reported missing tutorials or arriving late to lectures due to transportation difficulties. Others avoided evening study activities because travelling at night was unsafe or inconvenient. However, students who lived in higher-quality off-campus hostels with supportive peer communities exhibited relatively stronger engagement, reaffirming that environmental quality rather than location alone determines academic involvement.

Academic Performance

Academic outcomes reflected moderated but noticeable differences between residence groups. While students from both categories reported CGPA ranges between 2.50 and 3.60, on-campus students exhibited a marginal

performance advantage. Many on-campus residents reported experiencing greater academic focus, stronger discipline, and structured study routines. Off-campus students experienced academic disruption arising from stress, inconsistent study environments and lost academic time. Nonetheless, findings also revealed that academic success was not determined solely by residence location; students who resided in well-resourced off-campus hostels with stable infrastructure demonstrated competitive and sometimes superior academic outcomes. This underscores that residential quality, socio-emotional stability, and supportive learning environments mediate performance more significantly than residence location classification.

Learning Environment Challenges

Several structural barriers emerged as critical across residence categories. Electricity outages, poor internet connection, noise pollution, overcrowding, and financial stress significantly hindered optimal academic functioning. Off-campus students particularly highlighted insecurity, high cost of accommodation, unreliable utility supply and isolation from institutional learning communities. Meanwhile, on-campus students reported pressure on facilities due to oversubscription and challenges securing accommodation, reflecting systemic capacity constraints.

Culturally Responsive and Contextual Interpretation of Findings

Interpreting findings through culturally responsive and decolonial lenses reveals that residential experiences are embedded in broader social inequities. Students' emotional security, sense of belonging, hope, aspiration and identity formation were closely tied to residential environments. Students who felt valued, safe and institutionally connected displayed greater academic confidence and resilience. Conversely, spatial exclusion and precarious housing experiences perpetuated marginalisation, reinforcing educational inequality and diminishing academic potential. Residence therefore emerges not merely as shelter but as a site of social positioning, institutional inclusion and educational possibility.

DISCUSSION

The findings affirm and extend existing theoretical and empirical insights on the relationship between residence environments, student engagement and academic achievement. Consistent with Tinto's Student Integration Theory, students residing on-campus demonstrated stronger academic and social integration, greater institutional attachment and enhanced likelihood of academic persistence. The campus environment operated as a space of belonging, facilitating peer networks, academic interaction, and emotional connection to the university community. Students who experienced weakened integration—particularly many off-campus students—were more vulnerable to disengagement and reduced academic performance.

Similarly, the findings validate Astin's Student Involvement Theory. Students' engagement levels were shown to depend greatly on their capacity to invest energy, time and emotional commitment into academic activities. On-campus residence removed numerous logistical burdens, allowing students to channel mental and physical energy into learning. Conversely, commuting stress, financial anxiety and environmental instability drained emotional resilience of many off-campus students, reducing their involvement in learning activities.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is strongly supported. The residential environment functioned as a primary microsystem shaping daily routines, academic behaviours, wellbeing and development. This microsystem interacted with institutional support structures, urban spatial dynamics, and national infrastructural realities. Where microsystems were supportive, students thrived; where they were fragile, learning capacity diminished. This demonstrates that Ghanaian student housing challenges cannot be separated from broader national development issues, urban infrastructure and governance arrangements.

From culturally grounded theoretical perspectives, findings align strongly with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) arguments by Anlimachie et al. (2023), emphasising that meaningful learning occurs when education systems respond to learners' lived realities. Housing inequities represent deep cultural disconnects and socio-structural neglect that shape academic opportunity. Students in marginalised living conditions face

educational disadvantage not due to academic incapability, but because learning environments fail to affirm and support their lived realities.

The findings also reflect place-based educational insights (Anlimachie, Badu & Acheampong, 2023), demonstrating that residence is not a neutral space. It profoundly shapes identity, aspirations, hope and sense of future possibility. Students in dignified and supportive environments felt capable, motivated and academically secure, while those in fragile environments experienced diminished agency.

Furthermore, housing disparities echo decolonial critiques (Anlimachie, 2026), revealing how inherited inequalities and policy neglect reproduce educational marginalisation. Many off-campus students carry structural burdens resulting from underdeveloped infrastructure, inadequate urban planning, and insufficient state investment in student welfare. This confirms that housing should be viewed as a social justice and equity concern rather than merely a logistical or administrative issue.

Collectively, the findings advance Ghanaian scholarship by demonstrating that student housing is a deeply educational, socio-cultural and policy issue. The study reveals that improving academic outcomes cannot rely solely on curriculum reform or teaching quality enhancement. Without supportive residential environments, student success remains uneven and structurally constrained. Universities, therefore, require more intentional housing strategies that integrate academic support, student development, and cultural responsiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how residential location and living conditions shape students' academic engagement and academic outcomes within a Ghanaian university context by comparing the experiences of on-campus and off-campus residents. The findings demonstrate that residential environments are not peripheral welfare considerations but fundamental determinants of students' academic trajectories. Residence shapes daily routines, emotional wellbeing, access to institutional support, participation in collaborative learning, and ultimately, academic achievement. On-campus students generally benefited from proximity to learning resources, structured academic communities, stronger institutional belonging, and reduced logistical burdens, which together fostered greater academic engagement. Conversely, off-campus students frequently navigated commuting fatigue, infrastructural instability, financial strain, insecurity and social isolation, which constrained their capacity to participate fully in academic life.

Yet, one of the most important conclusions of this study is that *residential location alone does not determine success*; rather, the quality of the residential environment and the presence of supportive academic and social structures ultimately mediate outcomes. Students who lived in stable, adequately resourced and socially supportive environments—regardless of being on-campus or off-campus—were better positioned to maintain academic motivation, discipline, and resilience. This underscores the need to shift higher education discourse in Ghana from a simplistic “on-campus versus off-campus” debate to a more nuanced understanding of residence as a learning ecology requiring intentional design, investment and governance.

Theoretically, the study reinforces Tinto's assertion that academic and social integration are essential for persistence and success, while strongly validating Astin's position that involvement is directly influenced by environmental facilitation and emotional stability. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective is powerfully affirmed, revealing residence as a pivotal microsystem that interacts with broader institutional and national systems. When interpreted through culturally responsive pedagogy, place-based education and decolonial lenses, residential disparities also emerge as manifestations of broader structural and historical inequities. Student housing thus becomes not only an infrastructural concern but a critical educational justice and social equity issue embedded within Ghana's higher education development pathway.

Empirically, this research contributes to the relatively limited Ghanaian literature on student housing by providing a theoretically grounded, context-sensitive and comparative analysis that moves beyond logistical concerns to interrogate deeper socio-cultural and policy dynamics. Practically, the study foregrounds the urgent need for universities and policymakers to recognise student residence as an integral component of academic success architecture rather than a secondary welfare responsibility. Failure to address housing

inequities risks perpetuating educational marginalisation, undermining student wellbeing, and weakening national human capital development aspirations.

In conclusion, student residential environments profoundly matter. They shape who students become, how they learn, what they can achieve, and how equitably they can participate in higher education. Enhancing student housing provision, governance and quality is therefore not simply an administrative obligation; it is a strategic academic imperative and a moral commitment to equitable, inclusive and culturally responsive higher education in Ghana and across Africa.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Universities must treat student housing as academic infrastructure essential for quality learning. Policy measures should include expansion of institutional residence facilities, establishment of regulatory frameworks for private hostels, improvement of electricity and internet access, development of structured academic communities within residence spaces, and student transportation support for off-campus residents. National policy should integrate student housing into Ghana's human capital and higher education development strategies.

University administrators must incorporate housing within student development policy frameworks. Student welfare systems must be culturally responsive and context sensitive. Private hostels should be effectively governed to align living environments with academic success.

The study is limited by its single institution focus, reliance on self-reported performance data and cross-sectional design, which restricts causal inference. Therefore, future studies should adopt longitudinal designs, wider national comparisons, intersectional analyses of gender and socio-economic background, and evaluations of policy effectiveness. Socioeconomic, and disciplinary differences in residential experiences would also deepen understanding of equity dynamics within student housing systems.

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