

Determinants of Students' Residential Choice and Implications for Academic Engagement and Achievement: Evidence from A Ghanaian University

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ABSTRACT

Student residential environments constitute a critical dimension of higher education experience, shaping engagement, psychosocial well-being, academic persistence, and achievement. This study investigates the determinants of university students' residential choice and examines how residential environments influence academic engagement and achievement using empirical evidence from a Ghanaian private university. Drawing on data from 100 students, supported by contemporary African and international scholarship, the study explores socio-economic, infrastructural, psychosocial, and institutional factors shaping housing decisions and evaluates the mediating influence of residential conditions on learning behaviour and academic outcomes. The study integrates Tinto's Student Integration Theory, Astin's Student Involvement Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to conceptualise pathways connecting residence choice, integration, behavioural involvement, and academic performance. Findings reveal that affordability, proximity to campus, security, electricity stability, internet connectivity, privacy, and peer accessibility significantly shape residential decisions. Residential environments further influence time management, social integration, study consistency, academic motivation, and perceived performance. The paper concludes that student housing is not merely a welfare issue but an educational quality and equity policy imperative in Ghana and wider Africa. Policy recommendations, implications for practice, limitations, and areas for further research are articulated.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education research increasingly acknowledges that learning does not occur exclusively in classrooms or lecture theatres; rather, it is embedded within broader living and learning environments that shape academic engagement and outcomes. Student residential settings, whether on-campus or off-campus, constitute significant spaces in which identity formation, academic interaction, psychosocial adaptation and persistence decisions occur. Residential experiences influence social integration, access to institutional resources, peer support, time management, emotional stability, and educational continuity which are crucial determinants of academic success.

Globally, universities have long understood the pedagogical and developmental role of student accommodation, investing in residence systems to enhance student development and success. However, the African context presents a contrasting reality. Rapid expansion of tertiary enrolments limited public investment, infrastructural deficits, urban congestion, socioeconomic inequalities, and unregulated private housing markets complicate student accommodation systems. These constraints create unequal residential conditions, which ultimately translate into unequal academic opportunities (Turley & Wodtke, 2010).

In Ghana, tertiary education has expanded rapidly, yet institutional housing capacity has not kept pace with student growth. Many students are compelled into private hostels and community-based housing, whose quality varies widely (Nimako & Bondinuba, 2019). Despite the magnitude of this issue, there remains inadequate systematic empirical research linking residence decisions to engagement processes and learning outcomes in Ghanaian universities.

This study addresses this gap by exploring determinants of residential choice and examining how residential conditions influence academic engagement and achievement within a Ghanaian private university context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic research underscores housing as a fundamental contributor to student success rather than an auxiliary welfare concern. Studies in North America and Europe show that residence systems support socialisation, institutional belonging, academic persistence, and improved academic achievement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students accommodated closer to academic environments demonstrate stronger engagement, enhanced participation, and higher rates of degree completion (Turley & Wodtke, 2010).

African contexts reveal more complex dynamics. Infrastructural constraints, electricity unreliability, overcrowding, lack of regulation, and transportation burdens characterise many student residential settings (Nomkhosi, 2019). Unlike Western contexts where residence enhances development, African student housing must first overcome survival-level barriers before educational gains can be realised.

Determinants of student residential location reflect an interaction between economic realities, academic aspirations, and psychosocial needs. Studies consistently identify cost, proximity to campus, security, housing quality, and access to utilities as the dominant determinants of housing choice (Nimako & Bondinuba, 2019). African research further highlights financial capacity, commuting burdens, safety concerns and peer influence as central forces shaping residence decisions (Tetteh, 2017). Students continuously balance affordability with educational desirability.

Residential environments shape the structural conditions under which academic engagement occurs. Proximity to campus is associated with enhanced access to learning resources, increased frequency and quality of interaction with faculty, and the development of more robust peer learning communities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In contrast, extended commuting demands, overcrowded living spaces, elevated noise levels, and unreliable electricity supply collectively and substantially impair study regularity, concentration on academic tasks, and overall cognitive preparedness for learning (Masha & Agyeman, 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on an integrated theoretical framework that combines Tinto's Student Integration Theory, Astin's Student Involvement Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, situated within broader socio-cultural understandings of educational experience. Together, these theories offer a holistic lens for interpreting how residential environments shape students' academic engagement and achievement in a Ghanaian university context.

Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Theory conceptualises student academic success as a function of the degree to which students become academically and socially integrated into the institutional environment. According to the theory, students' persistence, commitment, and academic success are shaped by their interaction with campus experiences, institutional culture, peer networks, and opportunities for meaningful engagement. Within this framework, residential spaces are not merely accommodation facilities; rather, they constitute critical environments where belonging, identity formation, academic interaction, and institutional attachment are cultivated or undermined. Thus, student housing becomes a structural determinant of integration, where conducive residential environments strengthen commitment and retention, whereas stressful or alienating environments weaken academic continuity.

Complementing this perspective, Astin's Student Involvement Theory emphasises that student success is strongly related to the quality and intensity of their psychological and physical investment in educationally purposeful activities (Astin, 1984, 1999). The theory posits that students who expend greater energy in studying, participating in academic activities, and engaging with peers and faculty are more likely to experience positive learning outcomes. Residential proximity to campus and supportive student housing environments enhance the likelihood of such sustained involvement by reducing logistical barriers, encouraging participation in learning communities, facilitating peer collaboration, and enabling continuous engagement with academic resources. Conversely, unfavourable residential conditions such as long commuting distances, poor infrastructure, insecurity, and financial strain reduce the time, motivation, and emotional energy available for academic investment.

Situating these frameworks within a broader socio-cultural theoretical orientation, the study draws inspiration from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which conceptualises human development as occurring within nested environmental systems that interact dynamically to influence behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this ecological framing, the student residential environment represents a critical microsystem, directly shaping daily routines, social relationships, emotional well-being, and academic engagement. This microsystem interacts with broader institutional arrangements (the mesosystem), university governance, educational policies, and national socio-economic conditions (the exosystem and macrosystem), producing cumulative effects on academic performance. Recent African scholarship reinforces this understanding, demonstrating how educational outcomes are embedded within interconnected social, institutional, and environmental structures (Ewulley, Anlimachie, Abreh, & Mills, 2023).

Drawing on our earlier study on Ghanaian school cultures and educational outcomes, Ewulley et al. (2023), which argues that school types, institutional cultures, and contextual learning environments significantly mediate educational outcomes through their influence on norms, expectations, and resource access, this study extends that analytical logic to the level of student housing. In the same way that school cultures structure learning opportunities, residential cultures and environments shape engagement possibilities, exposure to academic networks, sense of belonging, and motivation. Thus, the nexus between residence choice, engagement, and achievement reflects broader socio-cultural dynamics embedded in Ghana's higher education landscape, where infrastructural inequalities, economic constraints, policy gaps, and institutional arrangements converge to influence students' lived academic realities (Anlimachie 2026: Ewulley et al. 2023).

Collectively, these interlinked theoretical perspectives illustrate that residential environments are not neutral spaces. But they are active determinants of academic behaviour, engagement, and achievement. They frame student opportunity structures, regulate exposure to academic support systems, influence psychosocial wellbeing, and condition the degree of involvement and integration students experience. This theoretical alignment therefore provides a strong analytical foundation for examining the determinants of students' residential choices and their implications for academic engagement and performance in the Ghanaian university context.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive cross-sectional mixed-methods design was employed to capture both quantifiable trends and deeper experiential insights.

The population comprised undergraduate students of the selected Ghanaian university. A total of 100 students participated. A stratified sampling approach ensured representation across levels, programmes and residence categories.

The study method employed a carefully structured questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. The questionnaire was designed to capture comprehensive information across multiple dimensions relevant to the research objectives. The first section elicited demographic characteristics of respondents, including age, gender, level of study, programme of study, and type of residential arrangement. The second section consisted of a Determinants of Residential Choice Scale, measuring the extent to which cost, proximity to campus, security, access to utilities, peer influence, and privacy affected students' accommodation decisions. A third section contained an Academic Engagement Scale assessing students' study consistency, participation in group learning, use of campus facilities and interaction with faculty. A fourth section captured self-reported CGPA as an indicator of academic performance. Finally, an open-ended section enabled respondents to describe their residential experiences in depth.

The instrument underwent expert validation by higher education scholars who provided guidance on clarity and construct alignment. A pilot study was conducted, leading to refinement of ambiguous items. Internal consistency reliability exceeded recommended thresholds. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research ethics committee. Participation was voluntary, informed consent obtained, and confidentiality strictly upheld.

Quantitative data were coded, cleaned and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to summarise trends and explore relationships. Qualitative data were analysed thematically, enabling deeper interpretation of students' lived residential and academic experiences.

FINDINGS

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, organised around three major thematic domains: determinants of students' residential choice, patterns of academic engagement associated with residential environments, and perceived academic performance outcomes. Quantitative trends are integrated with qualitative insights from students' open-ended responses to provide a holistic interpretation of residential experiences.

Determinants of Students' Residential Choice

The findings indicate that students' residential choices are shaped by a complex interaction of economic, infrastructural, psychosocial, and academic considerations. Among these factors, affordability emerged as the most dominant determinant, reflecting widespread financial constraints among students. A majority of respondents reported that accommodation decisions were primarily driven by their ability to meet rental costs rather than by optimal academic considerations. This finding highlights the structural inequalities embedded within student housing systems, where financial capacity significantly mediates access to conducive learning environments.

Proximity to campus was identified as an equally influential determinant. Students consistently expressed a preference for accommodation located within walking distance or requiring minimal commuting time. Reduced travel distance was associated with lower physical fatigue, improved punctuality, increased participation in academic activities, and enhanced access to campus resources such as libraries and internet facilities. Students residing farther from campus reported significant commuting stress, transportation costs, and time losses that negatively affected their study schedules.

Security considerations also played a critical role in residential decision-making. Respondents prioritised accommodation in areas perceived as safe, well-lit, and socially monitored. Fear of theft, harassment, and nighttime insecurity influenced housing choices, particularly among female students. Security concerns were not merely personal safety issues but were closely linked to psychological well-being and academic focus.

Infrastructural factors, particularly electricity stability and internet connectivity, emerged as decisive determinants. Students emphasised the necessity of reliable power supply to support nighttime study, device charging, and online learning activities. Unstable electricity and weak internet access were frequently cited as sources of academic disruption. These findings underscore the increasing centrality of digital infrastructure in contemporary higher education.

Privacy and peer influence further shaped residential decisions. Students expressed a preference for accommodation that allowed personal study space and minimal noise interference, while also valuing proximity to peers for collaborative learning. Peer networks influenced housing choices through shared information, collective renting, and perceived academic support.

Overall, residential choice was not a simple lifestyle preference but a strategic decision negotiated within financial constraints and academic aspirations.

Residential Environment and Academic Engagement

The findings demonstrate a strong association between residential conditions and patterns of academic engagement. Students residing in conducive housing environments characterised by stable utilities, manageable occupancy levels, quiet surroundings, and proximity to campus reported higher levels of academic involvement. These students described consistent study routines, effective time management, frequent group discussions, and active use of campus academic facilities.

In contrast, students living in less conducive residential environments experienced fragmented engagement. Overcrowding, excessive noise, frequent power outages, and long commuting distances disrupted study schedules and reduced concentration levels. Several respondents described having to study late at night after

electricity restoration or during early morning hours to avoid noise, leading to fatigue and diminished academic efficiency.

Engagement disparities were also evident in social and academic integration. Students in closer proximity to campus and peers reported stronger academic networks, easier access to study groups, and increased participation in co-curricular learning activities. Conversely, students living farther away often felt socially disconnected from campus life, limiting their engagement beyond scheduled lectures.

Qualitative responses further revealed that residential environments influenced academic motivation and emotional regulation. Supportive housing conditions fostered a sense of stability, control, and readiness to learn, whereas unstable environments generated stress, frustration, and reduced academic confidence.

Residential Conditions and Academic Achievement

With respect to academic outcomes, most respondents reported CGPAs ranging between 2.5 and 3.6, indicating moderate to strong academic performance overall. However, students consistently attributed performance limitations to residential challenges rather than academic ability.

Structural barriers, such as electricity outages, unreliable internet, overcrowded rooms, financial stress, and commuting fatigue, were cited as factors undermining cognitive readiness and sustained learning. Students noted that these constraints affected assignment completion, exam preparation, and class participation.

Importantly, students in better residential environments perceived greater academic control and confidence, while those in poorer housing contexts expressed feelings of academic vulnerability and inequity. These perceptions highlight how housing conditions shape not only objective performance but also students' academic self-concept and persistence intentions.

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the findings in relation to existing literature and the study's theoretical framework, situating the results within the broader context of higher education in Ghana and Africa.

Residential Choice as a Socio-Academic Negotiation

The dominance of affordability and proximity in residential choice aligns with prior Ghanaian and African studies (Nimako & Bondinuba, 2019; Tetteh, 2017), confirming that students continuously negotiate between economic survival and academic optimisation. Unlike contexts where housing choices reflect lifestyle preferences, Ghanaian students' decisions are constrained by structural inequalities and limited institutional support.

This finding reinforces Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory by illustrating how macro-level economic conditions and institutional capacity shape students' microsystem experiences. Residential choice emerges as a constrained decision-making process embedded within broader socio-economic realities.

Residential Environment and Student Integration

The strong association between residential conditions and academic engagement provides empirical support for Tinto's Student Integration Theory. Students in conducive housing environments reported stronger academic and social integration through peer interaction, campus presence, and participation in learning communities. In contrast, students in unstable housing contexts experienced fragmented integration, undermining persistence and continuity.

The findings suggest that integration is not solely an institutional or curricular process but is deeply influenced by residential infrastructure. Housing environments either facilitate or inhibit students' ability to belong, connect, and remain engaged within the academic community.

Housing and Student Involvement

Consistent with **Astin's Student Involvement Theory**, the study demonstrates that residential proximity and stability significantly increase students' capacity to invest time and energy in academic activities. Reduced commuting time, reliable utilities, and accessible peer networks enhance opportunities for involvement in study groups, independent learning, and co-curricular engagement.

Conversely, unstable housing conditions divert students' energy toward coping and adaptation, reducing the cognitive and emotional resources available for learning. This confirms that involvement is environmentally mediated rather than solely motivational.

Infrastructure as an Academic Equity Issue

The prominence of electricity and internet connectivity highlights a uniquely African dimension of student housing research. While Western literature often assumes infrastructural reliability, this study demonstrates that in Ghanaian contexts, infrastructural instability constitutes a primary academic barrier.

These findings align with emerging African scholarship emphasising that before housing can enhance academic development, it must first meet basic functional thresholds (Nomkhosi, 2019; Masha & Agyeman, 2024).

Infrastructure should therefore be conceptualised as an academic equity issue rather than a logistical concern.

Reframing Student Housing within Higher Education Policy

Collectively, the findings challenge traditional institutional perspectives that treat student housing as peripheral to academic missions. Instead, the study provides compelling evidence that residential environments function as critical educational ecosystems influencing engagement, performance, and persistence.

By integrating ecological, integration, and involvement theories, the study advances a holistic framework for understanding housing as an academic determinant. This reframing is particularly relevant for African higher education systems grappling with massification, inequality, and infrastructural constraints.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the determinants of students' residential choice and the implications of residential environments for academic engagement and achievement within a Ghanaian private university. Drawing on Tinto's Student Integration Theory, Astin's Student Involvement Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study demonstrated that student housing operates as a critical educational context rather than a peripheral welfare issue.

Findings revealed that affordability, proximity to campus, security, electricity stability, internet connectivity, privacy, and peer accessibility significantly shape students' housing decisions. More importantly, residential conditions were shown to influence study consistency, academic motivation, social integration, and perceived academic performance. Poor housing environments imposed structural barriers that undermined cognitive readiness, emotional stability, and sustained engagement with learning.

The study concludes that student housing must be repositioned as a core component of educational quality assurance and equity policy in Ghana and similar African contexts. Expanding on-campus housing, regulating private hostels, stabilising infrastructure, creating structured academic community spaces, and embedding housing within formal academic policy frameworks are essential steps toward improving student success.

Ultimately, addressing student housing challenges is not merely about accommodation provision; it is about safeguarding learning opportunities, reducing structural inequalities, and strengthening the capacity of higher education institutions to fulfil their developmental mandate.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study carry significant policy implications for university administrators, regulators, urban

planners, and national higher education policymakers in Ghana and comparable African contexts. Evidence from this study demonstrates that student housing conditions are deeply intertwined with academic engagement, psychosocial stability, and learning outcomes. Consequently, residential accommodation must be repositioned from a peripheral welfare concern to a central component of educational quality assurance, equity, and student success policy.

Expansion of University On-Campus Housing

The persistent dominance of affordability and proximity to campus as determinants of residential choice underscores the urgent need for expanded on-campus housing provision. Universities in Ghana have experienced rapid enrolment growth without commensurate investment in residential infrastructure, resulting in chronic accommodation shortages. This imbalance compels students—particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds—into unregulated off-campus housing environments that often undermine academic engagement through overcrowding, commuting fatigue, and infrastructural instability.

Expanding on-campus housing would significantly reduce spatial and temporal barriers to learning by bringing students closer to academic resources, libraries, laboratories, and faculty. Proximity facilitates increased academic involvement, consistent study routines, participation in co-curricular activities, and stronger institutional attachment, aligning with Astin's Student Involvement Theory and Tinto's Student Integration Theory. From a policy standpoint, universities should prioritise phased residential expansion through public-private partnerships, alumni investment schemes, and targeted infrastructure funding. Such expansion should also deliberately incorporate affordability models to ensure equitable access for economically disadvantaged students.

Regulation of Private Hostel Operations

Given the structural reality that universities alone cannot meet housing demand, private hostels will continue to play a dominant role in student accommodation ecosystems. However, findings from this study reveal significant variability in housing quality, safety, and infrastructural reliability within the private sector. The absence of enforceable regulatory frameworks exposes students to substandard living conditions that directly impair academic engagement and well-being.

There is therefore a compelling need for formal regulation of private hostel operations through collaboration between universities, municipal authorities, and national housing regulators. Minimum standards should be established for room occupancy, sanitation, noise control, safety, electricity reliability, and internet access. Universities can further institutionalise accreditation systems for private hostels, linking approval status to compliance with defined academic-supportive housing standards. Such regulatory interventions would protect students, standardise quality, and reduce inequalities in learning environments across socio-economic strata.

Stabilisation of Electricity and Internet Supply

Reliable electricity and internet connectivity emerged as critical determinants of both residential choice and academic engagement. In the contemporary digital learning environment, unstable power supply and poor internet access directly disrupt study continuity, access to learning management systems, online resources, group collaboration, and assignment submission. These infrastructural deficits impose cognitive and emotional strain on students, eroding motivation and academic confidence.

Policy responses must therefore extend beyond institutional boundaries to national infrastructure planning. Universities, in partnership with utility providers and telecommunications companies, should prioritise student residential zones for stable power supply and broadband access. At the institutional level, investment in alternative energy sources such as solar power, backup generators, and campus-wide internet expansion can mitigate national infrastructural deficiencies. Ensuring stable electricity and connectivity is not merely a technological issue but a foundational academic equity intervention.

Establishment of Structured Academic Community Spaces

Beyond physical housing units, the study highlights the importance of structured academic and social community

spaces within residential environments. Students in supportive residential contexts reported stronger peer interaction, collaborative learning, and academic motivation. Conversely, those in fragmented or isolating housing environments experienced diminished engagement.

Universities should therefore intentionally design residential environments as living–learning communities that integrate study rooms, group discussion areas, mentorship hubs, and quiet zones. These spaces facilitate peer-assisted learning, academic discourse, and psychosocial support, reinforcing the integration processes emphasised in Tinto’s framework. Policy should mandate the inclusion of academic community spaces in both on-campus and accredited off-campus housing, thereby transforming residences into extensions of the academic ecosystem rather than mere sleeping quarters.

Framing Student Housing as Formal Academic Policy

Perhaps the most critical implication of this study is the need to formally recognise student housing as an academic policy domain. Current institutional approaches often situate accommodation within student affairs or welfare units, detached from core teaching and learning strategies. This separation obscures the profound influence residential conditions exert on engagement, persistence, and achievement.

Universities and national regulatory bodies must explicitly integrate housing into academic planning, quality assurance frameworks, and accreditation standards. Housing indicators—such as accessibility, infrastructural reliability, study conduciveness, and proximity—should be incorporated into institutional performance metrics. At the national level, higher education policy must acknowledge housing as a determinant of learning outcomes and allocate funding accordingly. Framing housing as academic policy aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory by recognising residential environments as critical microsystems shaping educational development.

Collectively, these policy implications underscore the necessity of holistic, cross-sectoral approaches to student housing reform. However, while the study provides valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged, which are discussed in the following section.

Practical Implications for University Management

Beyond policy, the study offers concrete guidance for university leaders and student affairs practitioners. Housing must be built into enrolment planning to prevent accommodation shortages. Residence life programmes should be strengthened to support academic mentoring, peer learning, and psychosocial care. Student affairs units should work closely with academic departments so residential spaces advance institutional learning goals.

Training for on-campus and private hostel managers should address students’ academic needs, mental health, and study routines. Together, these measures can turn residences into intentional learning-support environments rather than mere living spaces.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research

This study offers important insights into the determinants of students’ residential choice and their implications for academic engagement and achievement, but several limitations must be noted. First, it was conducted in a single Ghanaian private university, which limits generalisability to public universities or other African institutions with different governance, funding, and student demographics. Housing experiences in public universities, for instance, may differ due to larger enrolments and state-controlled accommodation. Second, the sample of 100 students, though adequate for exploratory mixed-methods work, restricts the statistical power of inferential analyses. Larger, multi-institutional samples would permit more robust modelling of links between residential conditions, engagement, and academic outcomes. Third, academic performance was based on self-reported CGPA, which may be affected by recall bias or social desirability. Although widely used, such measures could be strengthened in future research by triangulating self-reports with institutional records. Finally, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference: while strong associations emerged between residential environments, engagement, and perceived performance, longitudinal studies are needed to establish temporal and causal pathways. Despite these limitations, the study provides credible, contextually grounded evidence that advances understanding of student housing as an academic determinant in African higher education.

As a way forward, this study recommends the following directions for future research. First, longitudinal studies following students across several academic years should examine how residential transitions affect engagement, persistence, and degree completion, and assess cumulative housing effects over time. Second, comparative studies of public and private universities in Ghana and other African countries, including cross-national analyses, should explore how institutional type, governance, and funding shape housing quality and academic outcomes. Third, future work should include objective environmental measures—such as noise levels, room density, electricity outages, and internet bandwidth to complement students' self-reports and strengthen causal explanations through integrated environmental and academic data. Finally, qualitative ethnographic studies of students' daily residential routines should investigate how housing conditions influence time use, emotional regulation, peer learning, and academic identity, thereby advancing ecological and integration theories.

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