

**Towards halls of residence as living and learning communities:
Lingnan University's fully residential campus**



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Introduction

Lingnan University is the only university in Hong Kong that currently offers full-residence for all undergraduate and taught post-graduate students during their entire period of study.¹ Each year we also receive a considerable number of exchange students. Since moving to the Tuen Mun campus in 1995, education that takes place in halls of residence ('hostel education') has been a key part of Lingnan's liberal arts ethos, which emphasizes 'whole-person education' and 'education for service'. In this paper I will introduce unique features of hostel life at Lingnan, such as 'hostel education' being part of our non-credit bearing Integrated Learning Programme, the Warden's Office system, and the peer mentoring system for freshmen. Findings from our annual hostel residents' survey affirm hostel life as an important aspect of a liberal arts education that enables students to develop important skills. However, presently there are also many challenges in developing hostels as effective and inclusive living and learning communities. Students under the 4-year curriculum are younger, and their needs and capabilities also differ somewhat from earlier cohorts. Some students are reluctant to step out of their comfort zones, and many do not have a healthy life-style. Given greater societal awareness and sensitivity towards sexual minorities, and students with special emotional, physical or learning needs, some current policies may need to be revisited. I conclude by stressing the importance to encourage students to embrace new experiences in positive ways, as well as noting practical challenges ahead.

Structure of Student Hostel Management at Lingnan

When plans were made for Lingnan to relocate to its current site in Tuen Mun, it was designed to be a residential campus. Since then we have expanded the number of halls of residence from the initial six to ten, providing full residence for all our undergraduate and research postgraduate students. Whilst fully residential universities are not particularly rare in some other parts of the world, we are the only university in Hong Kong that is able to house all our UGC-funded students in University accommodation. This gives us distinct advantages but it goes without saying that these coexist with many challenges.

Our present policy requires all undergraduate students to reside for at least two years in halls of residence (year 1 plus one more year), and for all entry at senior year students to reside for at least one year. Students with financial difficulties meeting these requirements can apply for funds to cover their hostel fees, and those who are unable to meet residential requirements for non-financial reasons need to apply for exemption.

¹ Lingnan's ten halls of residence include the Southern hostels (four blocks), Northern hostels/Jockey Club Halls (two blocks) completed in 1995, WHC and WJY hostels (two blocks) completed in 2012, and the newest two Jockey Club New Halls (two blocks) were completed in 2014-15.

Each hostel is managed by a Warden's Office, comprising of a warden (usually a full-time academic staff), a senior tutor and four tutors (full-time staff, postgraduates students or alumni), who also reside in the hostel. The Warden's Office is allocated an annual budget and works closely with the Student Services Centre and various university offices relating to hostel and campus life. The Associate Vice President for student affairs oversees the Student Services Centre as well as Wardens' Offices. Each hostel has its own Student Hostel Association (SHA) whose executive committee is elected by residents and normally serves one-year terms of office. They are allocated an activities budget and are responsible for organizing activities for residents. Most hostels also have 'floor representatives' who, apart from the SHA, also act as liaisons between residents and the Warden's Office; they also play a role in organizing floor activities.

Challenges

For most of our students this is their first time to live away from home, and there is considerable variation in the levels of independence, readiness and skills they have in order to live in harmony with others. In addition, academic studies, extra-curricular activities, social life as well as part-time jobs increasingly compete for their time and attention. Table 1 shows that time spent on part-time jobs is on the increase, whilst time spent sleeping is on the decrease. Table 2 shows that most residents do not go to bed until well after midnight.

Table 1 Normal Daily Life Pattern mean hours (Weekdays)

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Sleeping	7.13	7.03	6.98
Academic Learning/ Classes on campus	4.46	4.67	4.68
Learning/ homework/ internet surfing for academic purpose at hostel	3.47	3.78	3.89
Internet Surfing for leisure such as Facebook and Twitter	3.39	3.34	3.31
Entertainment, chatting and social life with hall-mates	2.66	2.41	2.44
Part-time job	0.83	1.17	1.18
Others	2.06	1.60	1.52

Table 2 When do you normally go to bed? (%)

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Time			
21:00 – 22:00	3%	2%	>1%

22:00 – 23:00			3%
23:00 – 00:00	30%	30%	8%
00:00 – 01:00			21%
01:00 – 02:00	51%	55%	30%
02:00 – 03:00			26%
03:00 – 04:00	15%	12%	9%
04:00 – 05:00			3%
Other than the above time slots	1%	1%	>1%

Students need good time management skills in order to be able to jostle the demands of various commitments. As we continuously encourage students to broaden their horizons and take up new roles, we must bear in mind that they can only benefit from such experiences if their academic studies and their health are not compromised. A culture of ‘*chur*’ – pushing oneself to the limit by having a lot going on and sleeping very little – is widespread.

Table 3 shows that residents are in general fairly satisfied with the hostel environment, and in particular they consistently feel that it is a safe environment. However, noise nuisance remains one of the lowest scoring items. Whilst some hostels have designated ‘quiet floors’, this is not always well observed and enforcement is difficult for practical reasons. A small minority of students, believing that as they have ‘paid’, may feel entitled to do as they please, ignoring hostel rules and the welfare of others. Some of them even believe that hostels should not be quiet. Only a very small number of such students are needed create enough noise nuisances to affect an entire wing. The Warden’s Office and the Student Disciplinary Committee handle violations and disruptive behaviors. Wardens as well as senior tutors meet regularly amongst themselves to share their experiences and to discuss policy matters. More importantly is the need to strengthen the sense of community in order to counteract self-centered, ‘consumerist’ attitudes that can cause serious disruption.

Table 3 Satisfaction on Hostel Environment (mean scores, 10 point scale)

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Hostel Living Environment	6.85	6.83	6.88
Cleaning Service	7.06	7.09	7.16
Security and Access Control	7.48	7.67	7.48
Repair and Maintenance	6.39	6.85	6.25
Internet Service	5.97	6.42	5.46
Noise Nuisance	5.64	5.89	5.85
General Satisfaction Rate	7.13	7.15	7.17

The vast majority of students are able to adjust well but unavoidably some encounter difficulties, particularly in their first year of hostel life, when they are most likely to be sharing rooms with someone they do not know well, perhaps even a non-local student, as are still trying to settle into a new environment. Lingnan is able to receive a large number of exchange students in part because of the availability of hostel places. Their diverse cultural backgrounds, living habits as well as priorities may differ from local students. As can be seen in the table below, local students are, in general, lukewarm about the prospects of rooming with non-local students. Some of the newer halls have triple rooms but again not many students are keen to choose such arrangements. Our current policy allows for students to make an application swap rooms during designated periods, with the aim of minimizing discontent and ‘illegal’ room-swapping.

Table 4 Would you like to choose the following hostel/ living environment? (Mean scores, 10 point scale)

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Triple Room with Bunk Bed	4.51	4.63	4.79
Reside with non-local students	5.03	5.20	5.41

To address these issues, currently we have the following policies or measures in place:

Social support networks

Recognising the importance of a good social support network, formal as well as informal channels are in place for students to make new friends. New students (including exchange students) have the opportunity to attend the university-wide New Students Orientation, hostel orientation camps (organized by SHAs) as well as faculty orientation camps (organized by Faculty Student Associations). Most academic Programmes will also organize their own ‘welcoming’ events where new students can meet staff and fellow students. Nevertheless, it is still possible for late entrants to have missed these opportunities. For these and all other new students, they will still have the support of 4 to 6 peer mentors who reside in the same hall of residence as they do, who are designated to help the new student adjust to university life.

Internationalisation

To promote internationalization, all non-local degree seeking and exchange students should normally room with a local student (for non-local degree seeking students, they should do so at least for their first year at Lingnan). Local students mostly agree that such experiences are beneficial, but more often in hindsight. As freshmen are randomly assigned roommates, they are more likely to end up rooming with non-local students. More attention needs to be given to these students and in this regard, Warden’s Offices team, SHAs as well as informal social support networks are particularly important. Providing infrastructure for social networks and opportunities for students to step out of their comfort zone proves to be

perceived positively by our students.

Integrated Learning Programme

Lingnan students have to complete at least 5 hours of 'hostel education' as part of the Integrated Learning Programme (ILP), which is a non-credit bearing graduation requirement. Many of these programmes are also open to all students regardless of their need to fulfill ILP requirements. ILP hostel education are organized by Warden's Offices, some of which can be joint-hostel activities. These are good opportunities for Wardens' Offices to take a lead in providing opportunities for students to broaden their horizons and experiences that are conducive to whole-person development.

Conflict management

With the 4-year university system in place since 2012, new students are one year younger than before. Having 'survived' one rather than two public exams also mean that they may be less resilient than students who went through the A-level system. Many of them are used to being pampered by their parents or domestic workers; in extreme cases they may even lack basic self-management skills. Some of them also lack interpersonal and problem solving skills and tend to handle conflict in the wrong ways or avoid facing them rather than pro-actively seek resolution. It takes time and effort to make students understand the importance of hostels as living and learning communities, and not treat the University as a property management office and themselves as little more than tenants. They often rely on the Warden's Office and the Student Services Centre to resolve their inter-personal conflicts.

All items in table 5 below show increase in mean scores over the past three years, and in particular, items 'I learn from interpersonal relationships', 'I believe that taking care of people who are in need is everyone's responsibility' consistently scored high over the past three years. 'I trust my ability to lead others' and 'I know how to allocate tasks to group members' scored lowest consistently though, indicating that students lack confidence in their leadership abilities. Students have many opportunities to develop their leadership skills on campus. The challenge is to enable students to see the connection between what they learn from interpersonal relationships and their strong sense of community and leadership that is based on such qualities. In other words, we are in a good position to nurture leadership that is based on team spirit, mutual trust and support, and good communication.

In this regard, the Student Services Centre is instrumental in providing institutional support, activities and framework for students to develop leadership skills. At the same time, the Warden's Office plays a key role in providing guidance to residence on a day-to-day basis. For example, by working with the Student Hostel Association, Floor Representatives and activity organizers, the Warden's Office can provide advice them on operational as well as interpersonal issues. Table 5 summarises the findings from the annual hostel survey, indicating that hostel life offers positive impact on a number of important dimensions.

Table 5 18 Agreement to the statements based on what you have learned from hostel life (mean scores, 10 point scale)

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
I feel comfortable building relationships with people from different backgrounds	7.40	7.36	7.54
I learn from interpersonal relationships	7.46	7.49	7.63
I cooperate successfully with other students in a variety of situations	7.36	7.3	7.46
I feel comfortable to present my ideas in front of others	7.05	7.13	7.35
I know how to communicate my ideas in a situation that is new to me	7.11	7.21	7.32
I participate effectively in group discussions and activities	6.62	6.87	7.16
I trust my abilities to lead others	6.41	6.6	6.94
I know how to allocate tasks to group members	6.35	6.6	6.97
I can plan activities independently	6.73	6.87	7.19
I feel confident in tackling problems	7.12	7.12	7.4
I understand that problems usually have more than one cause	7.36	7.4	7.59
Before I solve a problem, I gather as many facts about the problem as I can	7.14	7.28	7.43
It is my responsibility to help improve the community	6.99	7.17	7.44
I believe that taking care of people who are in need is everyone's responsibility	7.53	7.46	7.59
I act as if my behaviors make a difference in other people's lives	7.08	7.32	7.47
I like to explore and appreciate new cultures	7.39	7.55	7.54
I have the sense of the global dimensions of citizenship	6.88	7.24	7.34
I am able to work with people from other cultural backgrounds	7.21	7.31	7.44

From table 6 below we can see that students see hostel life and its activities having a positive impact on their interpersonal and communication skills, as well as adaptability and independence. However, their perceived impact on civic and global awareness is much lower. As most hostel ILP activities are social and practical in nature, there are fewer that directly aim at instilling civic and global awareness.

Table 6 How much have Hostel Activities impacted your development on these aspects?

(mean scores, 10 point scale)

Items	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Interpersonal skills	7.09	7.26	7.34
Communication skills	7.09	7.34	7.32
Management skills	6.35	6.88	7.09
Problem Solving and Analytical Abilities	6.62	6.82	7.15
Social Responsibility and Civic Awareness	6.55	6.72	7.04
Global perspective	6.32	6.43	6.93
Independence	7.50	7.74	7.52
Sense of belonging towards Lingnan	6.92	7.35	7.23
Sense of belonging towards my Hostel	7.01	7.31	7.27
Adaptability	7.37	7.54	7.46
Self-confidence	6.93	6.97	7.15

Looking to the future

Trust is very important in enabling students to see the Student Services Centre and the Warden's Office as their partners in campus life. We are thankful for our small campus, which allows for close interaction between residents and staff, and there are many informal opportunities for good communication and trust to be built. It is important for students to acknowledge that 'we' are here to help them in their journey towards self-development; 'we' are not here to police them and we are never their enemies. In this regard, we try to lead by example and to embody the values of mutual respect, mutual care and reason. Education is a costly business in terms of time and attention to students if nothing else! Commitment to invest such time and attention in our students is crucial if we truly believe in hostel life as a transformative experience.

More practical matters also demand attention. The current arrangement of double/triple rooms and single sex floors or wings may not have taken into account students of different sexual orientation, religion, physical or mental health status, those who also have family issues, and special education needs. Many existing policies and infrastructure have not considered diversity in our student body. The existing policies need to be revisited in order to meet with the diversity in our student body.

Most of our senior tutors and tutors are postgraduate students, full-time staff or alumni. Quite a number of postgraduate students are non-locals, but due to their lack of familiarity with local cultures, they are not always suitable to take up the role of hostel tutors. Alumni and full-time staff, on the other hand, may not be able to devote adequate time to hostel matters due to their job commitments. One suggestion is to have senior year students to serve as tutors, but this idea is not generally supported, as students think that this may create a 'special class' amongst students.

Appendix I Background of respondents and response rate

Personal Particulars

Study Level	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
UG	93%	97%	96%
PG	7%	3%	4%

Year of Study	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Year 1	37%	37.2%	35.6%
Year 2	42%	25.1%	27.2%
Year 3	17%	36.0%	23.9%
Year 4	4%	1.70%	13.3%

Response Rate

Year	Total No. of Residents	Total No. of Respondents	Response Rate
2015/16	2271	511	22.5%
2014/15	2155	406	18.8%
2013/14	2127	311	14.6%

Appendix II Additional Questions for 2015/16 Survey

Through living with roommates and floormates, I have learned:

Items	Mean
Independence	8.08
Interpersonal Skills	7.81
Sense of Community & Responsibility	7.57
Problem Solving	7.74

Through immersion interaction with other residents, Warden's Office who came from different study disciplines; and through structured hostel education programmes:

Items	Mean
My Intellectual Development and Horizons have been enriched	7.33

Through social interactions with residents from all over the world, I have **enhanced**:

Items	Mean
My Language Skills	6.73
My Appreciation of Different Cultures	7.07
My Global Perspectives	6.86

Through participation in Floor Committees and Student Hostel Associations, I have learned:

Items	Mean
Leadership	5.78
Self-governance	6.39