An Exploratory “Baseline” Development Study on the Impact of the NUS University Town Residential College Experience on Students’ Holistic Development

Farnaz Rajabi MEHR, LAKSHMINARAYANAN Samavedham* and TAN Tai Yong
Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning, National University of Singapore, Singapore

*Corresponding Author’s E-mail: laksh@nus.edu.sg

Keywords: Living-Learning Programmes; Residential Colleges; Undergraduate Students; Holistic Development; Student’s Learning Experience.

Extended Abstract

Both in-class and out-of-class learning elements complement and complete the undergraduate student learning experience at universities (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 1991). To create such an environment, many universities around the world are linking students’ academic experiences with other aspects of their lives by creating programmes that integrate curricular learning and co-curricular activities. These programmes, which are called Living-Learning Programmes (LLP), intend to facilitate academic, cultural and social integration in undergraduate students.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) has, since 2011, offered the University Town College Programme (UTCP) in its newly constructed University Town. The UTCP curriculum comprises five multidisciplinary modules offered in small class settings (max. 15 students). Comprising two Residential Colleges (RCs) when University Town first opened—Tembusu College, and the College of Alice & Peter Tan—about 1200 students were admitted to these two Colleges through a selection process which took into account their aptitude, interests and preferences. Students can stay in the residential college for two years to extract the optimal benefits of residential learning and multidisciplinary engagement. A third Residential College will be opened in 2015.

Many studies so far have explored how students’ participation in LLPs affect their outcomes in different aspects such as academic outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Pike et al., 1997; Edwards & McKelfresh, 2002; Purdie, 2007), learning and intellectual development (Pike, 1999; Clarke et al., 1988; Pasque & Murphy, 2005; Eck et al., 2007), and sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2007). In 2004 and later in 2007, the National Study of Living-Learning Programmes (NSLLP) conducted surveys in 34 higher education institutions across the United States. The purpose of NSLLP was to understand the impact of LLPs on various student outcomes. The NSLLP survey instrument was designed based on Astin’s (1993) “Input-Environment-Outcome” (I-E-O) model.

To better understand the impact of the NUS University Town residential college experience on students’ holistic development, an exploratory study using a mixed method approach was adopted. To this end, the questionnaire that incorporated aspects of the I-E-O model was designed and administered to students at the UTown Residential Colleges (target group), students living in the university’s Halls of Residence (where students live and have opportunities to engage in extracurricular and social activities) and students who live off-campus. The latter groups served as control groups for this study. We collected the data through an online survey that had two main sections. The first section was meant to collect background information of participants such as demographic data, educational aspirations and high school achievement. The second part focused on students’ perception of their university experience and outcomes, including peer and faculty interaction, intellectual development, diversity climate and outcome, extracurricular activities, satisfaction and sense of belonging, skills development, identity development and self-confidence. The survey also included customised sections for students residing at the UTown RCs and the Halls of Residence—this helped in collecting student experiences specific to their “local” experience at their respective RC or Hall of Residence.

In all, 5,333 undergraduate students responded to the questionnaire with 2,959 completing the survey. The incomplete surveys provided useful albeit partial information. We also observed student groups in their natural study and social groups and collected data through rapid interviews with members of these groups. Several focus group discussions were also conducted to provide the qualitative basis for this research and to complement the quantitative data.

Analysis of all the collected data show that the Residential College students have a higher appreciation for faculty and peer interaction, and believe that they have gained in terms of intellectual abilities, academic skills development, and communication skills compared to students in the control group. The collected data also indicate that there is no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of Residential College students on their teamwork abilities compared to the control group. We note that these results are based only on the pilot phase of this investigation. An in-depth, longitudinal study of the UTown RC experience will be initiated in the near future.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Kiruthika Ragupathi, Charina Li Ong, Naviyn P. B., Low Zhiqi, and Masters of the UTown Residential Colleges and Halls of Residence for their support during the different stages of this study.
References


