

*Hall Life Education: A Reflection on Cultivating Independence in Hong Kong
University Students*

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Abstract

In a densely populated city such as Hong Kong, one of the most remarkable experiences young university students may have is staying at the student residence and becoming “independent” in terms of taking care of themselves. Resident places in the university are highly competitive, not only because of its location on campus but also because of its relatively economy compared to renting a place in the commercial market. Young university students who would like to experience a relatively independent and private life may find this option most attractive, as the residence halls are run by the university, and thus are well-supported, safe, convenient, and generally designed to facilitate personal and intellectual growth. The author is an academic, concurrently a new Resident Master of a student residence hall in Hong Kong. The paper is a reflection on the “other” aspect of university education that is different from what takes place in the lecture theaters. From this first-hand experience of being Resident Master, the author would like to review an example of Hall Life Education, and reflect on its effectiveness in nurturing personal and intellectual growth in Hong Kong young people. Among the various factors in personal development, independence in self-care, intercultural competence, adaptation of a healthy lifestyle, and critical thinking would be the main factors discussed.

Keywords: hall life education, academic learning, leadership training, intercultural competence

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Introduction

Hall life has been regarded as an important part of university education, not necessarily academically, but in all other respects such as the opportunity for sharpening one's social skills, problem solving skills, interpersonal communication, self-care abilities, and a place of gathering of different backgrounds, which is a feature true of the original intention of a university.

I have been an academic for more than 15 years, and am recently being involved in the hall environment. Being a Resident Master, I have the chance finally to witness this other side of the university education of our Hong Kong students. This paper is a reflection of such learning opportunities and their effectiveness, based on my personal experience as a Resident Master in a local Hong Kong university. The student residence halls I am part of consist of four Halls accommodating about 1700+ students of both genders, and include both local and non-local students of all years, accommodated in closely packed twin rooms with a small number of 3-bed rooms. The Resident Master (RM) is the official director of the Hall, nominated and appointed by the Student Affairs Office, to oversee the management of student life, including disciplinary matters. A full-time Resident Community Officer (RCO), who also stays on campus, conducts the actual day-to-day interaction with students on matters of daily operation. Each residential hall has a student elected Hall Council, which represents the residents in welfare and serves as the bridge between the student body and the university administration. They have their own constitution and have a budget from the university administration to organize activities for hall residents throughout the year. Besides that, the university administration also nominates a team of Hall Tutors (HT) to station at each floor to help manage each floor. The team of HT is the official representatives of the floors and directly accountable to the RM and RCO. These HT also enjoy free lodging and a more spacious room, so that residents of the floor can gather in the HT's room for social and cultural activities.

In this paper, I would like to review a number of incidents from my experience at the Hall, as examples of educational opportunities specifically offered at the student residence, against the generally perceived benefits of staying at a student residence. These incidents involve interactions among the ordinary residents, the student leaders (HC and HT), as well as the university administration, including the RCO and the RM. As this is a reflection based on my personal experience in just one example of a student residence among the nine universities in Hong Kong, this by no means represents the overall situation in Hong Kong higher education. It is hoped that the sharing can contribute something to our knowledge about hall life as an important component of university education, and hopefully provide information for further improvement in this area. Particular attention will be paid to the following aspects of student learning: academic performance, leadership training, and intercultural competence.

Although by no means the longest standing university student residence in Hong Kong,¹ the Hall I am serving now has an 18-year history. This means that although the 1700+ beds can only accommodate a fraction of the actual needs, a system of

¹ The University of Hong Kong (HKU) is the oldest university in the city, and the residence halls are also the longest-standing. All other local universities supported by UGC has student residence.

administration and programming has already been established through the slow evolution of these 18 years. With this body of knowledge, as well as growing demand of student residence, a new complex of student accommodation is planned and is expected to be completed in 2023.² This new complex is designed and organized to accommodate not only dormitories for students, but also to house numerous venues for out-of-classroom learning, such as high-tech auditoriums, conferencing facilities, sports facilities, and laboratories for creative works. I think that this point of looking forward to the new complex is a good point in time to reflect on the system established so far, and possibly to plan for enhancement and improvement in view of the added resources for student learning.

At this historical moment for my liberal arts oriented university, it is interesting to refer to an earlier time when the student residence was first developed as an essential part of the liberal arts education in America. Mary Ashby Cheek in her 1936 article in *The Journal of Higher Education* referred to the growth of college life in the 1920s and 1930s as the mark of liberal arts education. “Traditionally, one characteristic of the American liberal-arts college has been the growth among its students of an aura of group activities and characteristic ways of living, popularly known as college life” (Cheek, 1936, p. 371). The development of “college life” included not only a wide range of “extra-curricular activities” but an overall stricter selection of qualified students to be admitted to the college, which produced at the end of the Great Depression “a group of students of wider interests, better training, and keener intellectual appetite” (Cheek, 1936, p. 372). With this group of capable students, “[s]tudent government began to take on the positive function of training for citizenship instead of satisfying itself with the older negative responsibility for the enforcement of regulations” (Cheek, 1936, p. 372).

In this model that Cheek described, in order to enhance the intellectual training for students, faculties were also brought into the residence either as guests, or mentors for the residents, to enable close interaction between the students and the faculties to facilitate learning. This move had the effect of blurring the academic and the non-academic curriculums, the resulting learning experience becoming what is now known as general education/common core programme. While Cheek’s interest in the development lay in tracing the blurring of curriculum between academic and non-academic as a trend in higher education, I am more interested in the emergence of this model of education, and how the foreseen benefits of such a model can materialize today. In the following I am going to refer to a few incidents in my experience to review the original ethos of the college/residential halls as part of the university education, to evaluate how much the original aims of this education model have been achieved in today’s design and operation.

Academic learning

In a study about the effectiveness of learning community for university students, it was found that “[r]esidential learning communities can be especially influential as

² The new residential-cum-learning complex is named Care Village, holding student residences, relevant administrative offices, a gymnasium, lots of multi-purpose rooms for students to organise their activities, and a concert hall and film theatre of performance standard. This new complex will double the residence capacity, but still far from fully satisfying all the needs of local as well as non-local students.

they tend to be associated with greater social interaction with peers and extracurricular involvement, higher persistence and graduation rates, and greater gain in critical thinking and reading comprehension” (Zho & Kuh, 2004, p.118). As it was shown that students who join several classes together learn better because of the continuous interaction established in the shared learning experience; the residential halls prove to be an effective space for learning. In this situation, students are housed in an environment when they have a lot of close interaction with one another throughout the semester. It was concluded that “membership in resident learning communities enhances overall involvement in educationally purposeful activities, which in turn directly and positively affects indicators of student success (e.g., persistence)” (Zho & Kuh, 2004, p. 118). Besides seeing the residential halls as a learning community, other studies focusing on students’ academic performance also suggest that on-campus living resulted in students feeling “more engaged with the academic environment” (Li, Shelley & Whalen, 2005, p. 28), and in general achieving better success in terms of academic performance.

My experience of academic learning in the student residence offers a different picture. Although there is no lack of individual students achieving very good GPAs, it is generally admitted in my university that staying on campus for many students has a detrimental effect on their academic performance. In fact, one of the first tasks I did as a new RM was to write a letter of appeal for one of the student leaders in my hall, as the student was academically at-risk for two consecutive semesters (meaning the GPA is below 1.67/4 for two consecutive semesters). I supported the student’s appeal by explaining that her role as a student leader had taken up much of her time, and that after her stepping down from such leadership role, she would have the time and energy to catch up with her studies. The student finally was saved from dismissal, was put on academic probation for one semester, in order to assess her ability to continue her study. This was not an exceptional case, as other RMs shared similar experiences with me. For ordinary student residents, even without the responsibilities of the leadership role, juggling between academic work and full engagement with what is regarded as “hall life” has constantly impacted negatively on academic performance.

While I do not have access to all the students’ GPA records, I understand the study environment of the halls from the number of complaints about noise and other types of disturbance by both local and non-local students. The student residence observes quiet hours between 11 pm and 7 am, but there are frequent complaints about noise well into early morning. I myself witness such disturbance during night-time student activities (which are very frequent) and everyday at a certain hour in the morning when there was screaming from amidst the residents. The RM’s flat is on the top floor of the 20-storey building, and if the noise is clearly heard at this level, the disturbance to student residents who are living in the lower floors can be imagined. Another “evidence” of such negative impact on academic performance can be seen in the suggestion by Senior Management of the University to add GPA requirement as one of the factors to consider admission to the halls. On-campus residence is highly competitive in Hong Kong, and for now our university can only guarantee local students one year of residence in their 4-year degree. The Senior Management’s suggestion shows indirectly that the current general academic performance of student residents is not favourable, making it hard to justify resources put into this costly facility.

Leadership training

Another perceived benefit from living on campus, in terms of learning, is the opportunity for “social interaction and positive involvement with peers, faculty, and communities” (Li, Shelley & Whalen, 2005, p. 28). In numerous studies about student satisfaction with college/university life, it was shown that students living on-campus were “more satisfied with college experience than those who live off campus” (Li, Shelley & Whalen, 2005, p. 28). This satisfaction came from a number of key factors, and one of the top factors is leadership opportunities. “The characteristics of leadership, teamwork, cohesiveness, and sense of identity are qualities associated with a strong residence hall community” (Li, Shelley & Whalen, 2005, p. 35). Leadership opportunities occur in a community. Other studies about student satisfaction also refer to the existence of this community: “residential students were more likely to express overall satisfaction with their undergraduate experiences, and were particularly satisfied with student friendships, faculty-student relations, institutional reputation, and social life” (Foubert, Tepper & Morrison, 1998, p. 41).

This kind of study results reveal to us the benefits perceived by the community of students residing in a structured environment: companionship and leadership. For the average student residents, “a sense of emotional support and expression has been found to be the most significant contributing factor in students’ decision to remain on campus” (Foubert, Tepper & Morrison, 1998, p. 42). The top four sources of student satisfaction in university residence, from a study conducted at the College of William and Mary, were: quality of physical facilities, quality of relationship with residents’ roommates, whether unit members care about them, and whether quiet study is possible (Foubert, Tepper & Morrison, 1998, p. 43). It can be seen that among the top four reasons, two reasons are about the relationship with fellow residents, even more so than a favourable environment for study. The quality of interpersonal relationship is definitely a strong benefit of hall life as perceived from students’ position.

As described earlier, there are opportunities for students to assume leadership positions in my university student residence. The HC is a committee of 10 students elected by the residents, the HT is a team nominated and selected by the university office to help manage the floors, and there are also Non-local Mentors (NLM) on every floor specifically to help non-local students to adapt to local life. These student leaders are present in the various committees related to different aspects of hall life, and have an opportunity to convey the opinions of residents to the university management. At the same time, their cooperation is required in the management of hall life, in terms of bringing messages from university administration to the residents, and in other matters requiring student compliance. In my university, one of the major events of the year is the calculation of “hall contribution” marks of the individual residents, for this have a most direct impact on whether the student can “return” to the residence in the coming year. The HT of each floor will give a mark to all the residents of the floor, to indicate the value of their contribution to the Hall. This mark, together with marks of other factors, such as travel time, special awards, will become a “returning” mark of the students should they want to live in the Hall for another year.

The mechanism of having the HT to give a mark to the residents is built on certain beliefs and expectations. It is believed that the HT is the best person to know the

engagement of fellow residents, as it is the HT's duty to take care of them. Their responsibilities also grant them the power to (indirectly) determine whether students can return to the Hall for another year. But this also allows abuse because no one can argue with the HT whether the marks are fair or not. Besides the HT, the HC also has the right to make a list of recommendations about fellow residents they hope can return to the hall. Each year the RM has a discretion list which allows the RM to support residents to return if they cannot meet the returning marks. This list is the RM's responsibility, after considering students with needs, and suggestions by HC. HC and HT groups are both aware of this mechanism, and they can therefore strategically plan their mark-giving, and recommendations for RM discretion list. My short experience with cooperating with HC and HT has led me to discover a very distinct variation in our understanding of our roles and relationship. While I perceive our relationship as a cooperation to provide a good living and learning environment for the students, it is quite clear to me that the student leaders see me and the university administration as an opponent to their asserting their independence and authority.

Intercultural competence

In our university (and in most other universities), the hall community is a good place to acquire and practice intercultural competence for both the local and non-local residents. With students from different cultures and parts of the world living in close proximity, this internationalised space is good opportunity to embrace differences and practice inclusiveness. In a study about international students staying at university accommodation in Australia, it was found that they "were able to easily establish new social networks, had many opportunities to interact with non-co-culturals and were assisted in learning about Australian culture" (Paltridge, Mayson & Schapper, 2010, p. 362). Although this is an example about international students and their integration into the Australian society, from my own previous experience as an international student, as well as our university's engagement with international students through organising a variety of cultural and social events, I can see that this benefit is generally accepted to be the case.

In my Hall, the top few complaints in the student residence include noise, and differences in lifestyle causing arguments, and subsequently applications for change of rooms and halls. Noise is also a lifestyle difference, as most of the non-local students fail to understand why local students start their activities way after quiet hours start. In fact, one of the reasons for having a NLM on each floor despite having the HT already, is to facilitate the harmonious co-existence of these "two groups" of students. Despite the system in place for so many years, at the beginning of this academic year, I still received recommendations from HC/student leaders that the non-local students should be put in a different building simply because their lifestyle is very different, and they do not participate very much in the activities organised by the HC anyway. When we talk to non-local students about their participation in Hall activities, we have feedback about language barrier in these activities – most of the posters publicising these events are in Chinese, and the official language of these activities Cantonese.

Over the months of June to December (the time of this paper's revision), when Hong Kong society was experiencing a split in political orientation, the campus was also

submerged in a similar split. Students of different cultural backgrounds had voiced their concerns and anxiety about their personal safety simply because of the language they speak. University administration was also very aware of the potential risk should these differences become enhanced in the rather packed accommodation environment. In the middle of November, when some local students pro-actively took measures to “protect” the campus, university administration encouraged all student residents (both local and non-local students) to leave campus and go home for safety considerations. Although there was no serious confrontations between local and non-local students, the differences in political views were quite clear, and clearly manifested in the residential hall area.

Conclusion

With new conditions of life and a fast-changing global environment, there are different challenges to upholding the residential halls both as a space of student accommodation and an environment for whole person education. Besides the shrinking budget which is an individual challenge for some student residences, other conditions in the global community results in habits and ways of behaviour in young people that are counteracting the rationale of gathering students in a community to live and learn together. The expanded use of online education, (Blimling, 2015, p. 291) for example, may mean that there is no need to physically attend classes anymore, thus lessening the learning community effect. Young people’s “continuing use of social networking sites” (Blimling, 2015, p. 296) leads to a tendency of multitasking, which not only changes the mode and quality of learning, but has a knock on effect on students’ GPA achievement, or having too much private information online, etc. These changes in the way of life means that young people learn and interact with others very differently from the days when the student residence was designed to be a place for community interaction and learning. These create other problems besides academic and co-curricular learning, problems that the residence education office has to tackle in order to maintain student residence’s role of being the location of whole person education.

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