

Student accommodation: Designing for the new normal

 By [John Schooling](#)

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The Covid-19 pandemic continues to create uncertainty for the country's higher education sector. In addition to the cost of shifting to online learning, massive losses in revenue and unpredictable 2021 enrolments will see universities face increasing financial strain. For current and prospective students, lockdown-related job losses will impact their families' ability to afford fees and accommodation. The provision of well-designed, affordable student housing could hold the key to the future of higher learning in South Africa.



John Schooling, director, STAG African

By accepting that this pandemic, and others like it, are going to be a part of everyday life, well into the future, we can begin to prepare for the new normal. For student housing, this means two things: designing residences that allow students to remain on campus during a pandemic, and ensuring that housing is affordable so that students and their families can continue to pay university and accommodation fees, even during difficult times.

Socio-economic inequalities

The pandemic has put a spotlight on the massive socio-economic inequalities that have hindered our progress as a country, especially in terms of access to education. While some students are able to continue learning online at home during lockdown, many more lack the infrastructure needed to succeed academically. In the South African context, a move to full-time online tertiary education is not viable because so many students do not have access to Wi-Fi, electricity and other essential amenities.

On-campus accommodation is vital for students whose home environments are not conducive to learning. Under Level 3 lockdown, only 33% of students are currently allowed back on campus and in residences. This leaves the majority

of the country's student population at home for an indefinite amount of time. Many of these students are also struggling to afford the dual cost of living at home and paying rent for accommodation that they aren't living in.

Build a different future

Covid-19 is teaching us that the old system is deficient, and we must prepare to build a different future. If we fall into a rhythm of sending students home every time infections spike or a new threat emerges, tertiary education, and the country, will enter a state of stagnation. This will result in fewer university graduates, particularly from previously disadvantaged groups.

In addition to building accommodation that allows for social distancing, providers of student housing need to start looking into innovative solutions. For example, adding isolation wards within a residence so that sick or infected students can remain on campus and receive care. To administer this care, universities can assign a nurse, as well as a house parent to each residence. While this kind of design may cost more initially, it will save lives and ensure students can remain on campus throughout the academic year.

The challenge for universities and student accommodation providers is to look past the immediate circumstances, and project ourselves forward into a new reality. If we are willing to prioritise the construction of affordable, pandemic-ready student housing, we can ensure the accessibility of tertiary education across income brackets.

ABOUT JOHN SCHOOLING

John Schooling is the founder and MD of STAG African - a multi-dimensional green property development, student accommodation and renewable energy group.

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