

Compliance and Implementation Challenges of DHET Minimum Norms and Standards in Off-Campus Student Accommodation in South Africa: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This study examines the compliance and implementation challenges associated with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Minimum Norms and Standards for off-campus student accommodation in South Africa. The growing demand for student housing and increasing reliance on privately managed accommodation have raised concerns regarding accommodation quality, safety, and regulatory compliance. A systematic literature review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA framework was conducted to identify, evaluate, and synthesise existing literature published between 2015 and 2025. The review synthesised evidence from 20 eligible studies. The review analysed studies relating to student accommodation conditions, governance, compliance, and student experiences within the South African higher education sector. The findings indicate that compliance with DHET standards remains inconsistent across several areas, particularly safety and security, infrastructure maintenance, facilities and service provision, and accessibility. The review further identified weak governance and regulatory oversight, financial constraints, accommodation shortages, and the prevalence of unregulated accommodation providers as key implementation challenges affecting compliance. The findings also reveal that non-compliance has implications for student well-being, academic performance, and overall accommodation satisfaction. By consolidating existing evidence, this study contributes to the understanding of policy implementation challenges within the student accommodation sector and provides insights that may assist universities, accommodation providers, and policymakers in strengthening compliance and improving the quality of off-campus student housing in South Africa.

Keywords: Challenges, DHET Minimum Norms and Standards, off-campus student accommodation, South Africa, student housing

1. Introduction

Across the world, there has been a significant increase in student enrolment in higher education institutions. Globally, student enrolment growth has outpaced universities' capacity to provide accommodation, resulting in housing shortages and higher costs (du Plessis & Amoah, 2021). Similarly, the student housing sector has transformed rapidly, with growing student populations exceeding institutions' ability to supply accommodation (Edwards, 2019). In Sub-Saharan Africa, rapid population growth and rising demand for higher education have intensified this challenge, with South Africa becoming a key destination for students in the region (Edwards, 2019). In South Africa, the expansion of higher education can be traced back to the 1994 democratic transition, which opened access to institutions for all population groups. This process of deracialisation led to the massification of the tertiary education system, resulting in a significant massification in student enrolment, particularly among students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds (Mzileni, 2018). As a result, private off-campus student housing facilities (SHFs) have emerged as an important alternative for

students who are unable to secure on-campus accommodation (Masha & Agyeman, 2024). However, despite their growing role in student housing provision, evidence suggests that many off-campus accommodation providers do not fully comply with the DHET minimum norms and standards for student housing (Masha & Agyeman, 2024). This study provides a critical synthesis of existing literature on student accommodation in South Africa, focusing on off-campus housing. It examines the gap between policy expectations and practical implementation, highlighting systemic and structural factors that undermine effective compliance with DHET standards.

2. Literature Review

2.1. DHET Policy on the Minimum Norms and Standards for Student Housing at Public Universities

The DHET Minimum Norms and Standards apply to all public higher education institutions and university-accredited private student accommodation providers (DHET, 2015). The policy sets minimum requirements for the provision, management, and maintenance of

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student accommodation. The key provisions are summarised below.

The DHET standards require student accommodation providers to comply with requirements relating to physical infrastructure, health and safety, furnishings and fittings, maintenance, student well-being, and financial management. Accommodation must be located within a radius of no more than 20 kilometres from campus, and transport must be provided at regular intervals for residences situated more than 5 kilometres away. The standards prescribe a maximum of two students per room, with single rooms being no smaller than 8m² and double rooms no smaller than 14m². They also specify minimum ablution facilities, including one washbasin per 4 students, 1 shower cubicle per 7 students, and 1 lavatory per 5 students. In addition, accommodation must provide social and study spaces such as television rooms, communal lounges, meeting rooms, dedicated group study spaces, games rooms, gymnasias, computer centres, and reliable internet access in student rooms, study areas, and communal spaces. Providers must comply with relevant health and safety legislation, obtain annual compliance certificates, maintain secure and hygienic living environments, and conduct regular cleaning and safety inspections. Furnishings and fittings must meet minimum requirements, be properly maintained, and be replaced when beyond repair. All construction, refurbishment, repair, and maintenance work must comply with relevant legislation and be carried out by qualified personnel. Universities are also required to provide welfare support services, including first aid resources and emergency assistance, while financial management measures must ensure accountability and transparency through separate residence budgets, financial reporting, and compliance with NSFAS accommodation funding requirements.

2.2. Compliance with DHET Minimum Norms and Standards

2.2.1. Safety and Security Compliance

Krishna et al. (2021) in their study found that over half of respondents reported feeling unsafe, citing ineffective security personnel and inadequate access control measures. A study by (du Plessis & Amoah, 2021) reported limited availability of safety infrastructure such as alarm systems. According to Gbadegesin et al. (2021), a significant proportion of students reside in unregulated accommodation characterised by overcrowding, crime, and poor living conditions. Rammubuda & Mudau (2025) emphasised that the student housing crisis has resulted in unsafe living environments for many students. Collectively, the literature highlights persistent shortcomings in security measures, access control, and student safety within many off-campus accommodation facilities. Security and access control remain ongoing challenges in shared student accommodation (Gregory & Rogerson, 2019).

2.2.2. Physical Infrastructure and Maintenance Compliance

Studies by (Ndlovu & Pophiwa, 2023; Edwards, 2019) highlight the prevalence of ageing and poorly maintained buildings. Khosa et al. (2025) demonstrate that poor housing conditions contribute to physical illness, stress, and mental health challenges among students. Mampuru & Aigbavboa (2019) found that accommodation conditions significantly influence student satisfaction, well-being, and overall academic experience. Masha & Agyeman (2024) identified dissatisfaction with infrastructure and maintenance, while (Gbadegesin et al., 2022) argue that housing satisfaction is influenced by maintenance quality, privacy, and environmental conditions.

2.2.3. Facilities and Service Provision Compliance

The DHET standards require accommodation providers to provide adequate facilities and services, including access to utilities, internet connectivity, study spaces, and supporting infrastructure. Basic services such as water and electricity are generally available across many off-campus accommodation facilities (du Plessis & Amoah, 2021). However, access to academic-support facilities and essential services remains inconsistent. Authors (Masha & Agyeman, 2024; Musundire, 2023) report dissatisfaction with internet access, plumbing systems, and drainage infrastructure. Makhoahle et al. (2025) further note that student satisfaction is influenced by the quality of facilities and services provided within accommodation environments.

2.2.4. Accessibility and Location Compliance

The DHET standards require off-campus accommodation to be located within a reasonable distance from campus and supported by appropriate transport services where necessary. The reviewed literature indicates that proximity to campus remains a key factor influencing accommodation choice and students' access to academic facilities and support services. Limited transport services, including inadequate shuttle systems, increase transportation burdens for students who rely on public or private transport (du Plessis & Amoah, 2021).

2.3. Implementation Challenges Affecting Compliance

2.3.1. Management, Governance and Regulatory Compliance

Several studies highlight governance and regulatory challenges within the off-campus student accommodation sector. Ndlovu & Pophiwa (2023) report that many accommodation facilities operate outside the DHET regulatory framework, limiting oversight and compliance monitoring. Musundire (2023) further notes that many providers lack full-time management structures and adequate tenant management practices. Khosa et al. (2025) identify

poor monitoring, weak stakeholder coordination, and limited accountability as barriers to improving accommodation conditions. Concerns regarding the implementation of DHET standards are also reflected in the discussion by (Ncame, 2016) of inconsistencies in policy implementation. As the student accommodation sector continues to expand, providers are increasingly required to comply with accreditation requirements and municipal bylaws governing student housing operations (Musundire, 2023).

2.3.2. Financial and Structural Constraints

Financial and structural constraints play a significant role in limiting compliance with DHET standards. According to Oladeji et al. (2024), government funding remains insufficient to satisfy growing accommodation demand, resulting in an increased reliance on private sector investment. This challenge is compounded by limitations in financial support mechanisms such as NSFAS, which often fail to meet the full accommodation needs of students (Mabuse, 2023). Mugume & Luescher (2015) further argue that public-private partnership models frequently create tensions between affordability, profitability, and student needs. In addition, accommodation shortages continue to place pressure on the student housing sector. Krishna et al. (2021) identify significant difficulties experienced by students in securing accommodation, reflecting a broader mismatch between accommodation supply and demand. Consequently, many students are forced to accept substandard accommodation due to limited alternatives.

2.3.3. Unregulated Accommodation Providers

The prevalence of unregulated accommodation providers emerged as a significant challenge affecting the implementation of DHET standards. The NSFAS standardisation initiative was introduced to strengthen the accreditation, monitoring, and quality assurance of student accommodation against DHET norms and standards, highlighting the continued need for improved regulatory oversight within the sector (NSFAS, 2023). Studies indicate that a substantial proportion of students reside in accommodation that operates outside formal accreditation and regulatory systems (Gbadegesin et al., 2021). Similarly, Ndlovu & Pophiwa (2023) report that many off-campus accommodation facilities function outside formal regulatory frameworks, limiting oversight and accountability. The existence of unregulated accommodation weakens the effectiveness of DHET standards, as providers are often not subjected to regular inspections, monitoring, or compliance assessments. Issues relating to safety, maintenance, service provision, and student well-being frequently persist.

2.4. Theoretical Framework: Institutional Theory and DHET Regulatory Compliance

This study is theoretically underpinned by Institutional Theory, with a particular focus on regulatory compliance and governance in complex policy environments. Institutional Theory is widely used to explain how organisations respond to formal rules, professional norms, and taken-for-granted practices within their institutional environments (Scott, 2014; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The theory is especially appropriate for analysing policy–practice gaps, where regulations exist but are unevenly implemented, as observed in off-campus student accommodation in South Africa (Ncame, 2016; Khosa et al., 2025). The DHET Minimum Norms and Standards for Student Accommodation constitute a formal policy instrument intended to regulate the quality, safety, and management of student housing. However, the persistence of non-compliance—particularly in privately managed off-campus accommodation—suggests that regulation alone is insufficient. Institutional Theory explains this by conceptualising institutions as comprising three interrelated pillars: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive (Scott, 2014).

2.4.1. Regulative Pillar

The regulative pillar encompasses formal rules, policies, enforcement mechanisms, and sanctions that compel organisational compliance (Scott, 2014). In this study, the DHET Minimum Norms and Standards represent the primary regulative framework governing student accommodation provision in South Africa. These standards outline minimum requirements relating to safety and security, infrastructure conditions, service provision, accessibility, and management practices (DHET, 2015). However, prior research demonstrates that the effectiveness of regulative institutions is contingent on consistent monitoring, enforcement capacity, and credible sanctions (Parker & Nielsen, 2011). The literature reviewed in this study reveals persistent weaknesses in these areas, particularly in relation to off-campus accommodation. Several studies report that many private accommodation providers operate outside formal accreditation systems or are inadequately monitored by universities and regulatory bodies (Ndlovu & Pophiwa, 2023; Musundire, 2023). As a result, compliance is often superficial, limited to easily verifiable provisions such as water and electricity, while broader regulatory requirements relating to safety, maintenance, and management are neglected (du Plessis & Amoah, 2021; Gbadegesin et al., 2022).

2.4.2. Normative Pillar

The normative pillar refers to professional standards, social obligations, and stakeholder expectations that define appropriate organisational behaviour (Scott, 2014; Suchman, 1995). In the context of student

accommodation, normative pressures arise from universities, students, parents, and society, all of whom expect student housing to support well-being, dignity, safety, and academic performance (Gopal & Van Niekerk, 2018; Mampuru & Aigbavboa, 2019). Findings from the reviewed literature highlight a consistent misalignment between regulatory compliance and student expectations. While some accommodation providers may meet minimum regulatory criteria, students frequently report dissatisfaction with privacy, security, maintenance quality, and service reliability (Krishna et al., 2021; Masha & Agyeman, 2024). This suggests that compliance is interpreted narrowly, focusing on regulatory checklists rather than on normative expectations relating to the student living experience. Institutional Theory explains this as a form of decoupling, where formal compliance is claimed without substantive adherence to underlying norms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

2.4.3. *Cultural-Cognitive Pillar*

The cultural-cognitive pillar comprises shared beliefs, routines, and taken-for-granted assumptions that shape how actors perceive problems and solutions (Scott, 2014). In South Africa, the chronic shortage of student accommodation, coupled with financial constraints and massification of higher education, has contributed to the normalisation of substandard off-campus housing (Mzileni, 2018; Oladeji et al., 2024). Several studies indicate that overcrowding, poor maintenance, and inadequate security have become widely accepted as unavoidable consequences of accommodation scarcity (Gbadegesin et al., 2021; Rammuda & Mudau, 2025). This acceptance reduces pressure on accommodation providers and weakens regulatory urgency, reinforcing cycles of non-compliance. From an institutional perspective, these cultural-cognitive conditions undermine both regulative enforcement and normative expectations, allowing substandard practices to persist with limited resistance (Scott, 2014).

2.4.4. *Institutional Theory and Policy–Practice Gaps in DHET Standards*

By integrating the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars, Institutional Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the persistent policy–practice gap in the implementation of DHET Minimum Norms and Standards. The findings of this study illustrate that non-compliance is not merely a technical or financial issue, but an institutional outcome shaped by weak enforcement mechanisms, competing market logics, and normalised acceptance of inadequate housing conditions (Mugume & Luescher, 2015; Khosa et al., 2025). Consequently, improving compliance requires institutional reform that addresses governance structures, accountability mechanisms, and stakeholder engagement alongside regulatory requirements.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) to identify, evaluate, and synthesise existing research on compliance and implementation challenges relating to the DHET Minimum Norms and Standards for off-campus student accommodation in South Africa. An SLR was considered appropriate because it allows for the systematic identification, evaluation, and synthesis of existing evidence relating to compliance and implementation challenges within a defined research context. The review was guided by the PRISMA framework, which provides a structured process for identifying, screening, and selecting relevant studies.

3.1. *Search Strategy*

Relevant studies were identified through Google Scholar, supplemented by selected government reports, policy documents, and sector publications relevant to student accommodation and DHET compliance. Google Scholar was selected as the primary database due to its broad coverage of journal articles, conference papers, theses, dissertations, and government publications relevant to student accommodation research. Search terms included combinations of “off-campus student accommodation”, “private student housing”, “student accommodation challenges”, “DHET minimum norms and standards”, “student housing compliance”, and “South Africa”. The search was limited to studies published between 2015 and 2025.

3.2. *Selection of Studies*

Studies were screened using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Included studies focused on student accommodation in South Africa, particularly off-campus accommodation, housing conditions, governance, compliance, and student well-being. Studies conducted outside South Africa, focusing exclusively on on-campus accommodation, or unrelated to student accommodation compliance and challenges were excluded. The screening process followed the PRISMA framework. A total of 41 records were identified, 2 duplicates were removed, and 39 studies were screened. 13 studies were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, while 6 studies could not be retrieved. Consequently, 20 studies were included in the final review.

3.3. *Data Extraction and Analysis*

Relevant information relating to compliance with DHET standards and implementation challenges was extracted from the selected studies. The extracted data were analysed using thematic analysis, whereby recurring issues and patterns were coded and grouped into broader themes. These themes formed the basis of the findings and discussion section.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

The study relied solely on publicly available secondary sources and did not involve human participants. Therefore, ethical clearance was not required. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the study selection process.

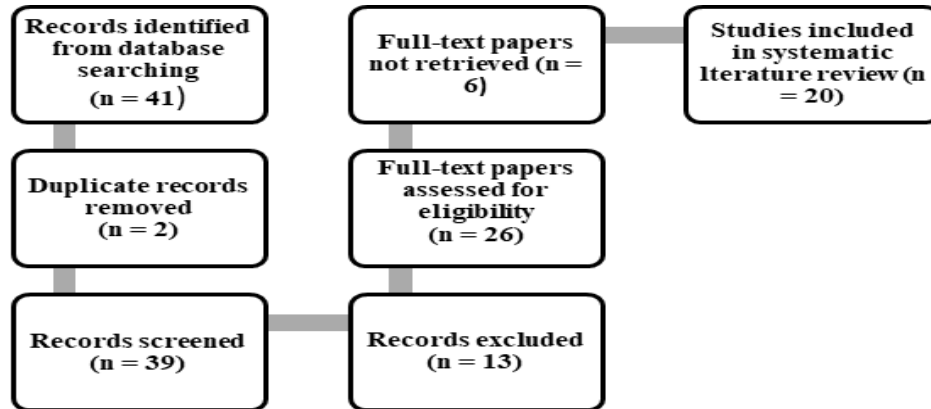


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Overview of Key Findings

The final review included 20 studies published between 2015 and 2025, supplemented by selected policy reports and sector publications. The reviewed studies comprised journal articles, conference papers, theses, and dissertations, with most focusing on student accommodation conditions, governance, housing provision, and student experiences within South African higher education institutions. Table 1

summarises the main compliance issues identified in the literature.

4.2. Compliance Issues with DHET Standards

The literature indicates that compliance with DHET

standards remains inconsistent across several areas. Safety and security emerged as one of the most frequently reported concerns, with students reporting inadequate security measures, ineffective access control, and exposure to crime (Krishna et al., 2021; Gbadegesin et al., 2021). Similar shortcomings were identified in relation to infrastructure and maintenance, where ageing buildings and poor maintenance practices negatively affected student living conditions (Edwards, 2019; Ndlovu & Pophiwa, 2023). Compliance challenges (Table 2) were also evident in facilities and

Table 1: Compliance Issues Identified in the Literature

DHET Area	Key Issues Identified	Studies
Safety and Security	Inadequate access control, ineffective security personnel, crime, overcrowding	Krishna et al. (2021); Gbadegesin et al. (2021); Rammuda & Mudau (2025); Gregory (2022)
Infrastructure and Maintenance	Ageing buildings, poor maintenance, inadequate living conditions	Edwards (2019); Ndlovu & Pophiwa (2023); Khosa et al. (2025)
Facilities and Services	Poor internet access, plumbing and drainage issues	Masha & Agyeman (2024); Musundire (2023); Makhoahle et al. (2025)
Accessibility and Location	Transport challenges, distance from campus	Krishna et al. (2021); du Plessis & Amoah (2021)

Table 2: Implementation Challenges Affecting Compliance

Challenge	Key Issues Identified	Studies
Governance and Regulation	Weak monitoring, poor enforcement, limited accountability	Khosa et al. (2025); Musundire (2023); Ncame (2016); NSFAS (2023)
Financial Constraints	Funding shortages, NSFAS limitations	Oladeji et al. (2024); Mabuse (2023); World Bank (2021)
Accommodation Shortages	Demand exceeding supply	Krishna et al. (2021); Mzileni (2018)
Unregulated Providers	Non-accredited accommodation	Gbadegesin et al. (2021); Ndlovu & Pophiwa (2023)

service provision, particularly regarding internet access, plumbing, and drainage systems (Masha & Agyeman, 2024; Musundire, 2023). Accessibility concerns centred on transport availability and the location of accommodation facilities relative to campuses.

4.3. Implementation Challenges Affecting Compliance

The literature indicates that compliance with DHET standards is influenced by several implementation challenges. Weak governance structures, inadequate monitoring, and inconsistent regulatory enforcement were identified as major barriers to compliance (Khosa et al., 2025; Musundire, 2023; Ncame, 2016). In addition, financial constraints continue to affect the provision of quality student accommodation, with insufficient government funding and limitations in NSFAS support contributing to increased reliance on private accommodation providers (Oladeji et al., 2024; Mabuse, 2023). The growing demand for student accommodation has further intensified accommodation shortages, resulting in a mismatch between supply and demand and forcing many students to occupy substandard accommodation (Krishna et al., 2021; Mzileni, 2018). Another recurring challenge is the prevalence of unregulated accommodation providers operating outside formal accreditation systems, which limits oversight and weakens the implementation of DHET standards (Gbadegesin et al., 2021; Ndlovu & Pophiwa, 2023).

4.4. Implications of Non-Compliance

The literature highlights several consequences associated with non-compliance with DHET standards. Poor accommodation conditions have been linked to increased stress, illness, and mental health challenges among students (Khosa et al., 2025; Rammbuda & Mudau, 2025). Similarly, Sibanda (2022) found that accommodation-related challenges contribute to academic, emotional, social, and financial difficulties among students residing off campus. Nyangiwe et al. (2020) similarly found that living environments influence student behaviour and overall well-being. Inadequate accommodation also affects academic performance, with poor living environments contributing to reduced concentration, lower academic achievement, and diminished student engagement (Masha & Agyeman, 2024; Khosa et al., 2025). Furthermore, dissatisfaction with maintenance, privacy, safety, and service quality negatively affects students' overall accommodation experiences (Mampuru & Aigbavboa, 2019; Masha & Agyeman,

2024; Gbadegesin et al., 2022). These findings demonstrate that compliance with DHET standards extends beyond regulatory requirements and plays an important role in supporting student well-being, academic success, and overall satisfaction.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

This study examined the compliance and implementation challenges associated with the DHET Minimum Norms and Standards for off-campus student accommodation in South Africa through a systematic literature review. The findings reveal a persistent gap between policy requirements and their implementation within the off-campus student accommodation sector. While some providers comply with basic requirements such as water and electricity provision, challenges remain in relation to safety and security, infrastructure maintenance, service provision, accessibility, and governance. The review further identified weak regulatory oversight, accommodation shortages, financial constraints, and the prevalence of unregulated accommodation providers as key barriers to compliance. The findings also demonstrate that non-compliance has important implications for student well-being, academic performance, and overall accommodation satisfaction. Addressing these challenges is essential to improving the quality of student accommodation and ensuring that the objectives of the DHET standards are achieved.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings, stronger enforcement of the DHET Minimum Norms and Standards is required, particularly within off-campus student accommodation. Universities and regulatory bodies should strengthen monitoring and accreditation processes through regular inspections and appropriate measures for non-compliance. Accommodation providers should establish formal management structures and improve accountability through responsive maintenance systems and effective mechanisms for addressing student complaints. Greater attention should also be given to safety and security measures, including access control, surveillance systems, and emergency preparedness. Furthermore, stronger collaboration between universities, accommodation providers, government departments, NSFAS, and student representatives is necessary to improve compliance and enhance the quality of student accommodation.

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