**CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION FOR LIVING AND LEARNING PROGRAMME (LLCP)
AT RHODES UNIVERSITY**

**1.    Introduction**

LLC as popularly known is a new concept in Africa but well established in developed countries particularly within the United States of America's higher education setting. Its aim is to enhance learning outside the classroom, particularly in residences space.

Essentially, the main emphasis is on the need to promote learning beyond the classroom. This is underpinned by the basic principle that in reality people live and learn in communities. As students adjust to university life they also adjust into new communities. Further, from well - established studies over the years, 50% of learning time is experienced outside the classroom. In fact, learning by doing has been seen to be the most effective approach where students are not passive but active participants to their learning. The purpose of this Programme is to ensure that students have a rich campus life experience where learning is the central focus within a community spirit and helps (i) foster a smooth transition into higher education, (ii) acquisition of soft skills, in preparation for study and personal development, (iii) work and (iv) community engagement.

**2.    What are Living and Learning Communities all about?**

Living and Learning Communities (LLC) is a concept that explains a strategy that seeks to enrich and coordinate university student experiences, personal development, and learning. There are different types of learning communities and LLC is an educational intervention, which is distinguished from the curricular-only learning communities (Brower and Inkelas 2007).

As some of the research on the concept assert, "living-learning programmes were created as a means to integrate students' in-class and out-of-class experiences by providing a community that fosters greater faculty and peer interaction, increased opportunities for coordinated learning activities, and an academically supportive living and learning environment" (in Inkelas and Weisman 2003). LLC programmes can also contribute towards easing the First-Year student's transition from high school education to university life in all its aspects.

Furthermore, Brower and Inkelas (2007) maintain that all learning communities have overarching principles that seeks "to create integrated, coherent learning experiences

for students, ones that blend in-class and out-of-class learning, are interdisciplinary, and treat students as active collaborators in the learning process who become engaged, critical thinkers." While there are many types of learning communities that might exist on campuses, according to Pascarelle and Terenzine (Rucconi 2011) they have two common elements: (i) shared or collaborative learning and (ii) connected learning.

In summary, both residences based and curricular-only learning communities can be regarded as integral part of an educational intervention strategy that seeks to address some of the challenges related to effective teaching and learning, and psycho-social development of students within the higher education environment (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews and Smith 1990). Cross (1998) asserts that, based on social construction theory, the purpose of learning communities is to foster active learning over passive learning, cooperation over competition, and community over isolation. As an educational intervention the idea of learning communities is grounded on some philosophical framework or theory that focuses on student development.

### 3. Student Personal Development and Checkering's Theory

For those who have as their responsibility to support student learning and create opportunities for students to grow psychologically and socially it is necessary to have some basic understanding on student development theories, because this is key in planning intentionally to enhance student success (Collins 2014). In this relation Arthur Chickering's student development theory provides an appropriate framework for a basic understanding of the processes of the designing and construction of learning communities, both curricular-only and residentially based, and the significance of their programmes. In Chickering and Reisser's work titled, *Education and Identity* (1993), the following Seven Vectors, also known as tasks, that deal with psychological development that influences student development, are identified and explained:

### i. Developing Competence

- Three kinds of competences can be acquired through learning that take place within a higher education environment, namely, intellectual competence, physical and manual skills, and interpersonal competence.
a) Intellectual competence is skill in using one's mind. It involves mastering content, gaining intellectual and aesthetic sophistication, and, most important, building a repertoire of skills to comprehend, analyses, and synthesize.
b) Physical and manual competence can involve athletic and artistic achievement,
c) designing and making tangible products, and gaining strength, fitness, and self-discipline.
d) Interpersonal competence entails not only the skill of listening, cooperating, and communicating effectively, but also the more complex abilities to tune into another person and respond appropriately.

**ii.    Managing emotions**

- Anxiety, anger, depression, desire, guilt, and shame have the power to derail the educational process when they become excessive or overwhelming.
- The first task along this vector is not to eliminate them but to allow them into awareness and acknowledge them as signals, much like the oil light on the dashboard.

**iii.    Moving through autonomy toward interdependence**

- A key developmental step for students is learning to function with relative self-sufficiency, to take responsibility for pursuing self-chosen goals, and to be less bound by others' opinions.
- Emotional independence means freedom from continual and pressing needs for reassurance, affection, or approval. It begins with separation from parents and proceeds through reliance on peers, nonparent adults, and occupational or institutional reference groups.
- Instrumental independence has two major components: the ability to organize activities and to solve problems in a self-directed way, and the ability to be mobile.
- Developing autonomy culminates in the recognition that one cannot operate in a vacuum and that greater autonomy enables healthier forms of interdependence.
- Interdependence means respecting the autonomy of others and looking for ways to give and take with an ever-expanding circle of friends.

**iv.    Developing mature interpersonal relationships**

- Developing mature relationships involves (1) tolerance and appreciation of differences (2) capacity for intimacy.
- Tolerance can be seen in both an intercultural and an interpersonal context. At its heart is the ability to respond to people in their own right rather than as stereotypes or transference objects calling for particular conventions.
- In addition to greater tolerance, the capacity for healthy intimacy increases.
- Developing mature relationships means not only freedom from narcissism, but also, the ability to choose healthy relationships and make lasting commitments based on honesty, responsiveness, and unconditional regard.

**v.    Establishing identity**

- Identity formation depends in part on the other vectors already mentioned:

- competence, emotional maturity, autonomy, and positive relationships. Developing identity is like assembling a jigsaw puzzle, remodelling a house, or seeking one's "human rhythms,"
- Development of identity is the process of discovering with that kinds of experience, at what levels of intensity and frequency, we resonate in satisfying, in safe, or in self-destructive fashion.
- Development of identity involves: (1) comfort with body and appearance, (2) comfort with gender and sexual orientation, (3) sense of self in a social, historical, and cultural context, (4) clarification of self-concept through roles and lifestyle, (5) sense of in response to feedback from valued others, (6) self-acceptance and self-esteem, and (7) personal stability and integration.
- Establishing identity also includes reflecting on one's family of origin and ethnic heritage, defining self as a part of a religious or cultural tradition, and seeing self within a social and historical context.

## vi.  Developing purposes

- Developing purpose entails an increasing ability to be intentional, to assess interests and options, to clarify goals, to make plans, and to persist despite obstacles. It requires formulating plans for action and set of priorities that integrate three major elements: (1) vocational plans and aspirations, (2) personal interests, and (3) interpersonal and family commitments.
- It also involves a growing ability to unify one's many different goals within the scope of a larger, more meaningful purpose, and to exercise intentionality on a daily basis.

## vii.  Developing integrity

- Developing integrity is closely related to establishing identity and clarifying purposes. Our core values and beliefs provide the foundation for interpreting experience, guiding behaviour, and maintaining self-respect.
- Developing integrity involves three sequential but overlapping stages: (i) Humanizing values-shifting away from automatic application of uncompromising beliefs and using principled thinking in balancing one's fellow human beings (ii) personalizing values-consciously affirming core values and beliefs while respecting other points of view, and (iii) developing congruence-matching personal values with socially responsible behaviour.

The Seven Vectors can be a backdrop against which LCPs are designed and constructed in that they are about the development of a well-rounded student and responsible citizen.

4.      **The Characteristics of Living and Learning Communities (LLCs)**

Living and Learning Communities (LLC) is a concept that explains a strategy that seeks to enrich and coordinate university student experiences, personal development and learning, they are residentially based, and, in this way, they are distinguished from curricular-only learning communities (Brower and Inkelas 2007). Learning communities that are curricular-only involves activities or interventions such as Student Peer Mentorship Programme (SPMP) in the faculties and in the residences. This form of "learning communities seek to restructure the very classrooms in which students find themselves and alter the way students experience both the curriculum and learning within those classrooms" (Tinto 2003).

As some of the research on the concept assert, "living-learning programmes were created as a means to integrate students' in-class and out-of-class experiences by providing a community that fosters greater faculty and peer interaction, increased opportunities for coordinated learning activities, and an academically supportive living environment" (in Inkelas and Weisman 2003). In this way the programmes also contribute towards easing the First-Year student's transition into university life and learning.

5.      **Key Six (6) Focus Areas**

The following are the Key Six (6) Focus Areas that constitute most of university's LLC Programme and as it is, they are expected to be intentional in their objectives and envisaged outcomes, and more body of knowledge can be produced as student's development practitioners and professionals within residences domain continue to engage and learn more about them, and plan activities around them:

5.1      **First Years' Experience (FYE)**

As new students enter the university or post-school education's setting, they bring with them a set of complex needs related to making a successful transition into a new environment, and the expectation is that they should be provided with the necessary support for the smooth transition. According to Heirdsfield, Walker and Walsh (2008) "research suggest that the first six weeks in higher education are critical for student adjustment and subsequent success and that social networks and support are key factors in preventing student attrition." In essence, supporting 1st Year students in their transition into university life requires specialized skills, proper planning, and collaboration from all the relevant stakeholders to enable them to succeed in their studies.

It is not only their studies that have to be prioritized to ensure their success but also their psycho-social development. Through learning communities, as educational intervention strategy that connects in-class experiences with out-of-class residential

experiences, 1st Year students can also be effectively supported in their transition from high school to higher education institution's environment. For example, "by taking courses together and regularly discussing their experiences in a structured first-year programme, learning community students supposedly have better opportunities to make meaningful undergraduate experiences at college" (Rucconi 2010). This can also be achieved when students leave together and have platforms to share their experiences.

Furthermore, Tinto (2010) asserts that "students are more likely to progress when they find themselves in environments in which they are able to learn what is expected for success, that hold high expectations for their success, provide frequent feedback about their performance and in turn needed academic and social support, and actively involve them with other students and faculty learning." The learning communities programme for 1st Year students should be intentional and have as its aim to support particular cohort of students in their transition to higher education environment with all its challenges and opportunities.

Mentoring Programmes can also be encouraged as part of support for 1st Students academic success and development, and more importantly Heirdsfield et al (2008) notes maintain that "peer mentoring programmes provide avenue for new students to be supported by more experienced mentor students to make social connections with other new students."

## 5.2    Enhancing students' academic success through LLCs

Globally, the issue of student preparedness for higher education is the biggest concern amongst higher education providers, and there are number of strategies through which an attempt is made to address this challenge. However, students' success in university life depends both on their living environment, learning in the classroom and psyho-social support

As explained above, students are more likely to succeed in environments that are rich in both the academic and social support (Tinto 2010). Concurring, student development practitioners and professionals within residences are of the opinion that the students' living experiences should be integrated with their learning in a seamless fashion (Long, 2014). This requires a close collaboration between the academic and student affairs divisions.

Members of the academic staff are key stakeholder in students' learning experiences therefore they need not be left out in learning community structures. They also give learning community programs legitimacy as they partner with students' affairs officers in coordinating the community programmes. They could be part of steering committees or research guides for interested students.

## 5.3 Effective Student Leadership within LLC space

In most higher education institutions student leaders, serving as student representatives, play a critical role in ensuring effective and efficient institutional student governance processes. In this regard, LLC Programmes are among other things expected to have interventions that focus on the general student leadership development and training. From these interventions a certain cohort of students can be capacitated with skills that will enable them to be in a position to provide ethical and effective student leadership within student residences system, contribute to the development of student life programmes and organising of significant events. This can obviously be achieved by designing student leadership development and training programmes with specific learning objectives and outcomes

As Magolda (2005) explains "student leaders reap many benefits and rewards as a result of their involvement with campus organizations. In addition to enjoying the respect of their peers, they have opportunities to meet a variety of faculty, staff, and students, exposing them to a range of different personalities and cultures."

## 5.4 Entrepreneurship for Africa's socio-economic development

The development of entrepreneurship education and training is critical for Africa's socio-economic development in that it can also contribute towards addressing unemployment among the youth. Tesfayohannes (2012) notes that "genuine entrepreneurs are the engine of sustainable economic growth and innovation in African nations. Under proper governance and encouraging environment, they can make a pivotal contribution to the socio-economic development of the continent."

Within universities the inculcation of the entrepreneurship spirit and competencies amongst students, inside-class and out-of-class, is something that can have both short-term and long-term benefits. As a learning community student entrepreneurship initiative can provide students with opportunities of generating their own funds to support their own activities and projects.

## 5.5 Creating ICT mediated residence environment

Without any doubt, the academic aspect of learning communities could be enhanced with the use of technologies, such as social media where groups of students could have a Facebook page, WhatsApp group, email platform, twitter and many others that would link students and enhance their access to various platforms that would effectively support teaching and learning within the university and specifically residence spaces.

Technology is critical a tool that academics and student's development practitioners and professionals can develop and utilize in partnerships with students as well as cross functional teams for enhancing learning and student services and support.

## 5.6    Off-campus students' support - Oppidan

With the number of students accessing higher education in most universities of the world it has become difficult for universities to provide on-campus accommodation to all their students.  As a result, through their Student Affairs Division they have resorted to finding an alternative way of providing accommodation to some of their students in a form of off-campus student accommodation, and in most cases is through partnership with third-party. In this regard, it is important that all the stakeholders become committed to ensuring the creation of a safe, conducive living and learning environment for students.

Notwithstanding the above, most institutions in Southern Africa have more than 50 % of students residing off-campus if not more. Various research findings have demonstrated the correlation between students living conditions and their academic success (Pascarella and Terenzine 1991; Long, 2014), and this can only be achieved when off-campus students are provided the necessary support and there are intentional LLC Programmes in their space.

## 6.    Envisaged LLC Programme at Rhodes University

The Living and Learning Communities (LLC) Programme at Rhodes University is a residence-based programme that encourages and provide support for students' learning outside the classroom. The LLC concept is relatively new at RU; however, students have always engaged in number of activities that provided them with a plethora of opportunities to interact with their peers and experience an enhanced campus life. The list consisted of activities such as First Year Orientation, Residences Sports, Residences Academic Mentorship Programme, First Years' Academic Expo, and others.

The emphasis is that through the following list of activities opportunities should be created for students to interact with one another and their community and in the process develop certain set of skills:

i.    Academic and career development activities
ii.   Social and recreation activities
iii.  Sports
iv.   Community Engagement

With Goal 3 of its Institutional Development (IDP) 2023-2028, namely, **Create an engaging and transformative student experience that promotes holistic**

**development**, and the related Ten (10) strategic objectives that constitute the Strategic Plan of the Division of Student Services and Development, Rhodes University has declared its commitment to ensuring that students have a positive experience of a university.

As mentioned above, the main purpose of learning communities is to inculcate the spirit of active learning over passive learning, cooperation over competition, and community over isolation, and the following are the key objectives of the LLC Programme at RU:

i. To provide support and equip students to make a successful transition from secondary school life to university life, and to ensure that they are effectively supported so that they can succeed in their studies

ii. To assist students to acquire life skills essential for their survival on campus and to succeed in their studies.

iii. To expose students to the RU Graduate Attributes intended to prepare them for life beyond university life, namely, **Ethical Leader, Empathetic, Curious & innovative, Life-long learner, digitally competent, and Critical & engaged citizen**

iv. To cultivate a culture that values student development and success.

v. To make students proud of and being part of RU community

## 7. Implementation

In line with the Six (6) Key Focused Areas of LLCs and the Division of Student Services and Development Strategic Plan 2023-2028, and its Operational Plan, an intentional **3 Year RU LLC Programme**, responsive and relevant to the developmental and learning of the University's students, will be developed. The main objective will be to create safe and creativity spaces within RU residences and enhance student experience. This will be in consultation with the students themselves, collaboration between the Division of Students Affairs and Development, Academics Affairs (Faculties), Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL) Community Engagement, Residences Operations and other relevant stakeholders. Already the FYE is a flagship of the University and is supported by all the divisions and departments that are interested in student development and academic success.

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