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FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: ANALYSING BEHAVIOURAL PATTERNS IN THE UTILISATION OF TEACHERS' QUARTERS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Despite continuous provision, the underutilisation of Malaysian teacher quarters persists, highlighting a mismatch between housing availability and actual occupancy. While previous research heavily focuses on housing supply, the underlying behavioural dynamics driving utilisation remain underexplored. This research conceptualises housing utilisation as a sequential journey from awareness to application and eventual access. Drawing on a survey of 6,496 Ministry of Education personnel, this study investigates application tendencies alongside perceptions of living conditions. Results indicate a substantial disconnect between basic awareness and active application, proving awareness alone cannot guarantee engagement. While perceptions of housing quality hold statistical significance, their overall impact is marginal. Conversely, systemic barriers regarding limited availability and outcome uncertainty strongly dictate application decisions. Ultimately, these results emphasise addressing both behavioural hurdles and access limitations to optimise the use of current public housing assets.

Keywords: housing utilisation; sustainable development goals (SDG), behavioural process; public housing; teacher quarters; awareness-application gap

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INTRODUCTION

Public housing is allocated to assist civil servants, notably educators, in executing professional duties across varied geographical environments (Abdul Rani et al., 2021). Within Malaysia, these quarters serve a crucial function in optimising workforce distribution and enhancing employee welfare, especially in regions lacking sufficient private residential options. Despite ongoing supply, the underutilisation of such facilities constitutes a chronic challenge, with 36.6% (17,524) of residences standing vacant (Sissoho et al., 2025). This indicates an incongruity between facility provision and practical occupancy which remains inadequately rationalised through mere supply or geographic variables alone.

Prior literature concerning public housing has predominantly emphasized provision (Yaacob et al., 2022), policy frameworks (Khair et al., 2022), alongside structural performance (Teo et al., 2025), affording marginal consideration towards behavioural dimensions of facility utilisation. Specifically, the psychological conversion from mere awareness of housing availability towards active application remains poorly theorised, despite being fundamental for dictating final occupancy outcomes. The coexistence of broad awareness alongside minimal application indicates that underutilisation likely exposes systemic fractures within cognitive pathways bridging recognition to active engagement, rather than strictly indicating material shortages or spatial disadvantages.

This research investigates the utilisation of teacher quarters throughout Malaysia as a behavioural continuum encompassing awareness, application, and access. Utilising a comprehensive questionnaire survey among Ministry of Education (MoE) personnel ($n = 6,496$), the empirical analysis evaluates application tendencies alongside residential perceptions. The results uncover a profound divergence between awareness and application, whereas perceptual variables demonstrate restricted explanatory capacity in determining formal application conduct. Conversely, tangible limitations concerning physical availability and unpredictable administrative outcomes exert a noticeably superior impact. Consequently, these discoveries emphasise conceptualising residential utilisation as a behavioural trajectory simultaneously dictated by individual decision-making frameworks and structural access constraints.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Housing and Underutilisation

Public housing discourse frequently attributes housing shortages to insufficient construction, assuming that increased physical output will automatically resolve unmet need (Ebekozen et al., 2022; Sujith et al., 2021). This supply-centric framing, however, fails to account for a recurring paradox within public housing systems: the coexistence of substantial vacancy alongside persistent demand

pressures (Ebekozi et al., 2022; Zulkanain et al., 2021). The presence of unoccupied units, particularly within government housing, challenges the assumption that vacancy reflects excess supply.

Housing mismatch literature suggests instead that vacancy in non-market systems often reflects allocative distortion rather than aggregate demand failure (Van Ommeren & Van der Vlist, 2016). Units may be technically “supplied,” yet effectively removed from consumption due to structural constraints and behavioural responses. Underutilisation is empirically linked to multidimensional demand–supply mismatch, where misalignment between housing attributes, location, access conditions, and user expectations prevents effective occupancy. Underutilisation, therefore, emerges from misalignment between housing provision and user engagement.

Behavioural Perspectives in Housing Utilisation

Housing demand is not simply determined by demographic need or housing supply but emerges through decision-making processes in which individuals evaluate housing options, navigate constraints, and adjust behaviour in response to available alternatives. Within this perspective, housing choice is best understood as conditional and constrained behaviour, shaped by the interaction between household preferences, housing attributes, and contextual conditions.

A foundational contribution to this perspective is the argument that housing demand reflects the evaluation of bundles of attributes, rather than a simple acceptance of available housing supply (Lancaster, 1966). Accordingly, rejection of a housing option does not necessarily indicate absence of need but rather dissatisfaction with the attributes offered relative to household expectations or constraints (Dauda, 2019; Głuszak, 2015; Han, 2010). Housing demand is therefore evaluative and adaptive, reflecting how households respond to contextual conditions and available alternatives. Bramley (2013) emphasises that housing demand is elastic and conditional, shaped by behavioural adjustment rather than fixed demographic projections.

The Transition from Awareness to Application in Housing Decisions

Beyond evaluation, housing demand unfolds through sequential stages of engagement rather than a single-point decision (Megbolugbe et al., 1991). Gaetano (2023) distinguishes between potential demand (underlying need), actual demand (active search or application), and realised demand (successful occupancy), highlighting that movement between these stages is not automatic. Attrition may occur when housing options fail to meet expectations or when procedural barriers discourage participation.

Similarly, Khair et al. (2022) describe housing demand as a dynamic pathway comprising entry, living, and exit stages. Within this staged perspective,

activation represents the transition from latent eligibility and awareness to the formal expression of demand through application (Gaetano, 2023). This transition is influenced by awareness of availability, perceived eligibility, perceived suitability, and trust in the application and allocation process. A low number of applications may therefore signal informational barriers, perceived procedural risk, or reduced confidence in the application process, rather than lack of interest in housing per se.

The Interplay Between Perception and Structural Limitations

Housing choice does not occur in isolation from structural and access conditions. In many public housing systems, allocation mechanisms, matching rules, and waiting costs significantly influence acceptance behaviour (Murra-Anton & Thakral, 2024). Housing demand is therefore shaped not only by preferences or attributes but also by structural and procedural conditions that regulate access.

Perception plays a critical role in shaping engagement. Perceptions of procedural fairness have been shown to influence acceptance of housing allocation systems (Newlands & Lutz, 2020). Administrative burdens, including learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs, further shape how individuals experience housing application processes (Moynihan & Herd, 2023). Where procedures are opaque, complex, or unpredictable, they generate disengagement and reduce programme take-up.

At the behavioural level, eligible households may delay or refuse housing offers due to perceived value deficits, stigma, safety concerns, or dissatisfaction with maintenance standards (Cui & Osborne, 2023). These responses demonstrate that utilisation outcomes are shaped by both subjective evaluation and structural constraints affecting access and certainty

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature, existing behavioural models remain insufficient in explaining how structural conditions shape progression across demand stages, from awareness and application to eventual access. Existing studies tend to examine these dimensions in isolation, focusing either on housing attributes, behavioural responses, or structural conditions independently. This fragmentation limits the ability to explain how behavioural gaps, particularly between awareness and application, translate into observable utilisation outcomes.

As a result, underutilisation may arise not from the absence of housing need but from disruptions in the behavioural process linking awareness to application and access. There remains a need for an integrated perspective that examines how behavioural decision-making interacts with structural constraints to shape housing utilisation in public housing systems.

Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative approach to examine behavioural patterns in the utilisation of teacher quarters in Malaysia, with particular focus on application behaviour and underlying perceptions. A questionnaire survey was employed as the primary data source to capture user-level responses, enabling demand to be analysed as a behavioural process reflected in awareness, application, and access decisions.

The survey instrument was developed based on the study's conceptual framework and informed by relevant literature. It comprises two main components: (i) socio-demographic variables, including income, job grade, marital status, and years of service; and (ii) perception-based measures covering physical condition, living environment, location, safety, and awareness of quarters provision. Perception items were measured using Likert-scale responses, while behavioural variables such as application status were operationalised as categorical indicators.

The study targeted employees under the Ministry of Education (MoE) across Malaysia, including both teaching and non-teaching staff whereby a purposive–voluntary response approach was adopted. Data were collected between December 2022 and February 2023 using a mixed-mode strategy combining online distribution through official communication channels and limited on-site administration. A total of 6,496 valid responses were obtained after data cleaning, providing sufficient variation for descriptive and inferential analysis, although the sample does not claim strict probabilistic representativeness.

Quantitative analysis was conducted in two stages. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to profile respondents and establish baseline patterns of occupancy, awareness, and application behaviour. Analyses were conducted using different respondent subsets depending on the variables examined. Perception-related analyses were based on the full sample ($n = 6,496$), while analyses of application behaviour were restricted to non-resident respondents ($n = 3,562$). Analysis of application outcomes was further limited to applicants only ($n = 510$).

Inferential analysis was then employed to examine behavioural relationships. Chi-square tests were used to assess associations between socio-demographic variables and application behaviour among non-residents. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation was conducted to identify latent perception dimensions. These factors were subsequently used in binary logistic regression to evaluate their association with application behaviour.

All data were cleaned and standardised prior to analysis. Reliability of perception constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all factors demonstrating acceptable internal consistency. Statistical findings are interpreted

as associative rather than causal, consistent with the behavioural focus of the study.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Profile and Occupancy Context

Table 1 summarises the socio-demographic profile of respondents and their quarters occupancy status. Occupancy is higher among male teachers (51.1%) than females (41.8%), and declines consistently with age, from over 60% among those below 30 to 33.0% among those aged 50 and above. A similar pattern is observed across marital status and career stage, with higher occupancy among single (59.9%) and early-career teachers (up to 60.6%), compared to married and long-serving personnel.

Income and job category further reinforce this trend. Lower-income groups ($\leq$ RM5,000) exhibit substantially higher occupancy (57.6–64.0%), while participation declines sharply among higher-income respondents (17.7%). Members of the implementing group (58.8%) also record higher occupancy than academic staff. Overall, these patterns indicate that teacher quarters are primarily utilised by younger, lower-income, and early-career employees, suggesting that utilisation is shaped by life stage and housing needs rather than uniformly distributed across the workforce.

Table 1: Crosstab: Socio-demographic Characteristics and Quarters Occupancy

Item	Variable	Total (n = 6,496)		Occupying Quarters (%)
		F	%	
Gender	Male	2321	35.7	51.1
	Female	4175	64.3	41.8
Age	Less than 25	50	0.8	60.0
	25 - 29	708	10.9	63.5
	30 - 34	926	14.3	54.4
	35 - 39	1036	15.9	48.5
	40 - 44	1275	19.6	42.5
	45 - 49	915	14.1	41.6
	50 and above	1586	24.4	33.0
Marital status	Single	1253	19.3	59.9
	Married	5243	80.7	41.6
Job grade	Academic Teacher (DG 41/42, DG44 DG48 DG52 DG54)	4798	73.9	41.2
	Academic Teacher (DG29 DG32 DG34 DG38 DG40)	362	5.6	47.0
	Members of Implementing Group (AKP)	1336	20.6	58.8
Household income	RM 2,500 and below	417	6.4	64.0
	RM 2,501 – RM 5,000	2184	33.6	57.6
	RM 5,001 – RM 8,000	2313	35.6	41.5

Item	Variable	Total (n = 6,496)		Occupying Quarters (%)
		F	%	
	RM 8,001 – RM 11,000	949	14.6	33.1
	RM 11,001 – RM 14,000	435	6.7	22.8
	RM 15,000 and above	198	3.0	17.7
Education level	Certificate (Sijil)	1063	16.4	58.9
	Diploma	438	6.7	54.1
	Bachelor's Degree	4449	68.5	41.9
	Master's Degree	536	8.3	37.5
	Doctorate or its equivalent	10	0.2	50.0
Years of service	Less than a year	253	3.9	54.9
	1-5	960	14.8	60.6
	6-10	944	14.5	50.8
	11-15	1206	18.6	42.8
	16-20	1056	16.3	45.5
	21-25	768	11.8	39.6
	26-30	786	12.1	30.8
	More than 30 years	523	8.1	36.3

Source: Author's Calculation.

While occupancy patterns indicate selective utilisation, the transition from awareness to application reveals a more fundamental behavioural gap.

Quantifying the Awareness-Application Gap

Figure 1 illustrates a substantial gap between awareness and application among non-resident teachers. While awareness of quarters provision is nearly universal (94.6%), only a small proportion (14.3%) reported having applied. This indicates that awareness alone does not translate into application behaviour, suggesting the presence of a significant activation gap.

The disparity highlights that barriers to utilisation emerge not at the level of information access, but at the decision-making stage. Despite widespread awareness, a large majority of eligible individuals do not proceed to apply, implying that factors beyond awareness such as perceived suitability, preferences, or constraints play a critical role in shaping initial engagement with teacher quarters.

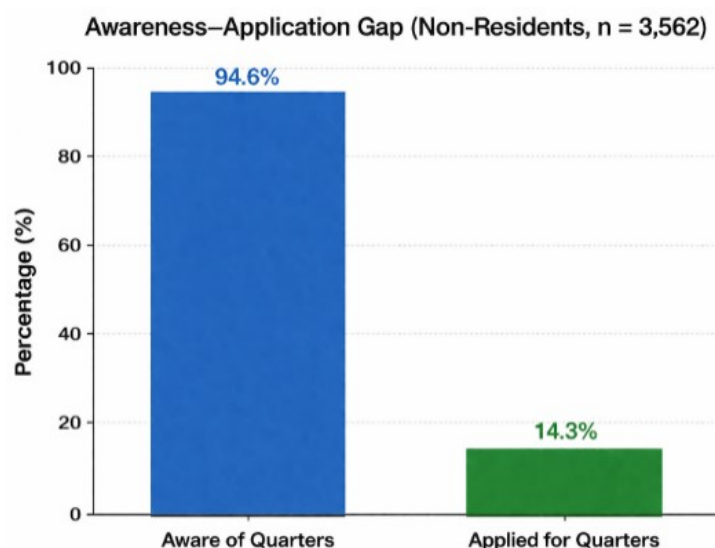


Figure 1: Awareness–Application Gap in Teacher Quarters Utilisation
 (Non-Residents, n = 3,562).

Source: Author's Calculation

Given this gap, it is important to examine whether application behaviour varies across different socio-demographic groups.

The Impact of Socio-Demographic Factors on Application Decisions

As outlined in Table 2, the propensity of non-resident teachers to apply for quarters is subject to distinct socio-demographic variations. The analysis reveals an uneven distribution in application behaviour, highlighting statistically significant correlations with the applicants' age group ($p = .004$), marital status ($p = .041$), job grade ($p = .024$), years of service ($p = .025$), and geographical zone ($p = .002$). In contrast, underlying factors such as gender, overall household income, and highest level of education demonstrate no significant statistical bearing on the decision to apply.

These findings suggest that application decisions are shaped more by life stage, employment context, and spatial factors than by basic demographic or socioeconomic characteristics. The significance of age and years of service indicates that career progression influences engagement with quarters, while the effect of geographical zone points to contextual variation in access or availability. Overall, application behaviour appears to be selectively patterned rather than broadly determined by general demographic attributes.

Table 2: Chi-Square Results: Application Status × Socio-Demographic Variables
(non-residents, n = 3,562)

Socio-Demographic Variable	χ^2	df	p (Sig.)	Relationship
Gender	1.684	1	.194	Not significant
Age Group	19.003	6	.004	Significant
Marital Status	4.183	1	.041	Significant
Job Grade	7.499	2	.024	Significant
Household Income	6.128	5	.294	Not significant
Education Level	5.887	4	.208	Not significant
Years of Service	15.995	7	.025	Significant
Zone (Geographical Region)	17.085	4	.002	Highly significant

Beyond demographic variation, understanding why eligible individuals do not apply provides further insight into behavioural constraints.

Factors Deterring Application

As depicted in Figure 2, the rationales for non-application among non-resident teachers are multifaceted. The predominant factor is current home ownership, accounting for 55.2% of responses, succeeded by concerns regarding the overall suitability of the living environment (27.3%). Remaining variables, encompassing building typology, perceived safety, and specific locational preferences, exert a marginal individual influence (each below 10%). Consequently, the decision to abstain from applying is primarily dictated by personal housing status, compounded by a variety of qualitative housing concerns.

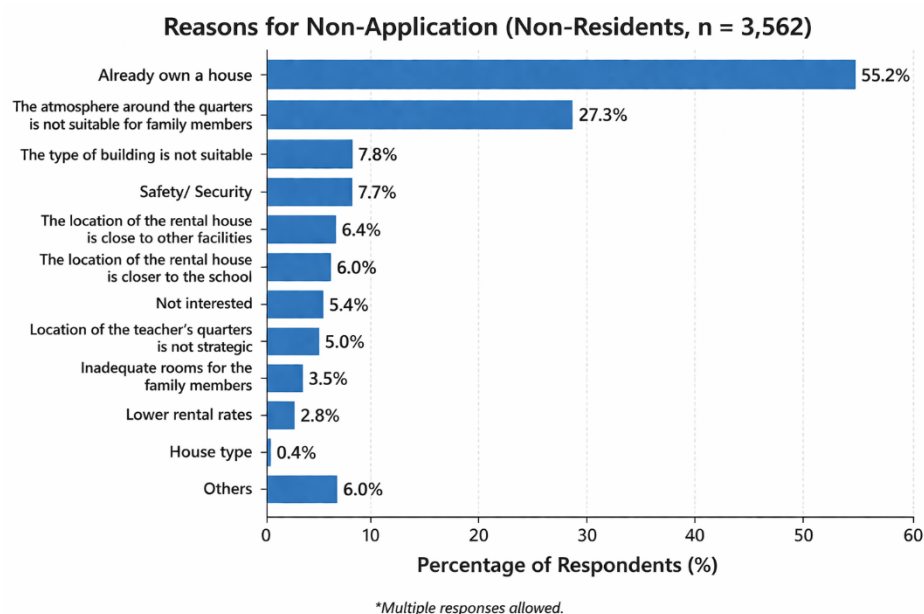


Figure 2: Reasons for Non-Application (Non-Residents, n = 3,562)
 Source: Author's Calculation

The findings reflect both behavioural and structural influences on application decisions. Ownership and preference-based factors suggest that some individuals opt out due to alternative housing arrangements, while concerns related to environment and design indicate evaluative judgments about suitability. However, open-ended responses further reveal that structural constraints play a substantial role, with 83.9% of responses referring to issues such as lack of vacancy, absence of quarters, or long waiting lists. This indicates that non-application is not solely a matter of preference, but is also shaped by perceived or experienced limitations in housing availability and access.

In addition to reported reasons, broader perception patterns offer a more comprehensive view of residential decision-making.

Perceived Barriers to Residing in Teacher Quarters

Respondents were asked about their perception of barriers to residing in teacher quarters. Table 3 presents respondents' perceptions of factors influencing unwillingness to reside in teacher quarters. The highest levels of agreement are associated with physical and environmental conditions, with over 85% of respondents indicating poor physical condition (86.6%) and non-conducive living environments (85.4%). Maintenance-related concerns (78.7%) and home

ownership (75.6%) also feature prominently, followed by locational advantages of alternative housing (69.8%) and safety-related issues (66.4%).

Table 3: Perceived Barriers to Residing in Teacher Quarters (All respondents, n = 6,496)

No	Perceived Barriers to Residing in Teacher Quarters	% Agree
1	Poor physical condition of quarters	86.6
2	Non-conducive physical environment	85.4
3	High maintenance costs	78.7
4	Already own a house	75.6
5	Better access to facilities in alternative housing	69.8
6	Security and social concerns	66.4
7	Unsuitable building type	63.8
8	Unsuitable house type	65.2
9	Inadequate space for family	60.3
10	Unsuitable living environment for family members	58.7
11	Preference for housing closer to school	58.1
12	High proportion of vacant units	53.8
13	Unstrategic location of quarters	48.2
14	Lower rental cost of alternative housing	46.5

Source: Author's Calculation

The pattern suggests a clear perception hierarchy, where decisions are primarily shaped by evaluations of physical quality and living conditions, followed by comparative considerations with alternative housing options. Design-related factors, including building type and space adequacy (60.3–65.2%), and locational preferences further reinforce this pattern, while financial considerations such as lower rental costs of alternative housing (46.5%) appear comparatively less influential.

Overall, the findings indicate that reluctance to reside in teacher quarters is driven more by perceived inadequacy of physical conditions and comparative housing advantages than by cost considerations alone, highlighting the importance of perceived quality and suitability in shaping residential decisions.

To further examine how these perceptions are structured, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted.

Latent Perception Structure (Exploratory Factor Analysis)

Table 4 presents the results of the exploratory factor analysis, which identifies four underlying dimensions shaping perceptions of teacher quarters, explaining a total of 67.69% of variance. The first factor, *Family and Design Suitability* (21.49%), captures concerns related to spatial adequacy, housing design, and environmental suitability for family living. The second factor, *Physical and*

Maintenance Condition (17.74%), reflects perceptions of structural quality and the burden of upkeep.

The third factor, *Locational and Ownership Alternatives* (14.77%), represents preferences for private housing options, including proximity to amenities and schools, as well as home ownership. The fourth factor, *Safety and Financial Concerns* (13.68%), relates to perceptions of security risks associated with vacant units and comparatively minor financial considerations.

Overall, the factor structure indicates that perceptions are not isolated but organised into distinct yet interrelated dimensions, with physical condition and family suitability emerging as primary evaluative domains, alongside comparative and contextual considerations influencing residential decision-making.

Table 4: Exploratory Factor Analysis of Perceived Barriers to Residing in Teacher Quarters (All respondents, n = 6,496)

Factor	High-Loading Items (≥ 0.60)	Variance Explained (%)
Family and Design Suitability (Factor 1)	Inadequate space for family (.79); Unsuitable living environment for family members (.78); Unsuitable house type (.73); Unsuitable building type (.71); Unstrategic location of quarters (.58)	21.49
Physical and Maintenance Condition (Factor 2)	Non-conducive physical environment (.87); Poor physical condition of quarters (.87); High maintenance costs (.82)	17.74
Locational and Ownership Alternatives (Factor 3)	Better access to facilities in alternative housing (.82); Preference for housing closer to school (.80); Already own a house (.76)	14.77
Safety and Financial Concerns (Factor 4)	High proportion of vacant units (.85); Security and social concerns (.78); Lower rental cost of alternative housing (.60)	13.68
Total Variance Explained		67.69

Note: Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis; Rotation: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Source: Author's Calculation.

Building on this structure, the next analysis examines whether these perception dimensions influence application behaviour.

Influence of Perception on Application Behaviour

To examine whether perception dimensions are associated with application behaviour, a logistic regression model was estimated using data from non-resident teachers (n = 3,562), focusing on activation-stage decisions among those not currently residing in quarters.

As shown in Table 5, three of the four perception dimensions are statistically significant. *Family and Design Suitability* (OR = 0.839, $p < .001$) and *Locational and Ownership Alternatives* (OR = 0.844, $p = .002$) are negatively associated with application, indicating that stronger perceptions of spatial inadequacy or preference for alternative housing reduce the likelihood of applying. In contrast, *Physical and Maintenance Condition* shows a positive association (OR = 1.268, $p < .001$), suggesting that more favourable evaluations of physical conditions increase the probability of application. *Safety and Financial Concerns* does not demonstrate a statistically significant relationship.

Table 5: Logistic Regression of Perception Factors on Application Behaviour
 (Non-Residents, $n = 3,562$)

Predictor	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Family & Design Suitability	-0.176	0.049	13.017	.000	0.839
Physical & Maintenance Condition	0.238	0.049	23.829	.000	1.268
Locational & Ownership Alternatives	-0.170	0.055	9.663	.002	0.844
Safety & Financial Concerns	-0.077	0.050	2.334	.127	0.926
Constant	-1.746	0.050	1233.109	.000	0.174

Note: Model $\chi^2(4) = 48.773$, $p < .001$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.024$. *Source: Author's Calculation.*

Although the model is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 48.773$, $p < .001$), its explanatory power is modest (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.024$), indicating that perception alone explains only a small proportion of variation in application behaviour. This suggests that while perceptions are associated with activation decisions, other factors beyond evaluative perception play a more substantial role in shaping application behaviour.

However, application alone does not guarantee access, making it necessary to examine outcomes at the next stage.

Application Outcomes

Table 6 presents the distribution of waiting time and application outcomes among non-residents applicants ($n = 510$). Waiting time varies considerably, with 40.4% receiving a response within one month, while 24.9% report waiting more than one year. In terms of outcomes, 43.3% are successfully allocated quarters, whereas 17.5% cite lack of vacancy and 17.1% report receiving no response, with the remainder rejected or unresolved.

Table 6: Waiting Time and Application Outcomes among
 Non-Residents Applicants (n=510)

Category	Items	%
Waiting Time	1–4 weeks	40.4
	1–3 months	22.0
	4–12 months	12.5
	More than 1 year	24.9
Application Outcome	Accepted	43.3
	No vacancy available	17.5
	No response	17.1
	Rejected (unspecified/other)	22.1

Source: Author's Calculation.

These findings indicate that application does not consistently translate into housing access, reflecting variability in availability and response processes. The presence of extended waiting periods and uncertain outcomes suggests that progression from application to occupancy is not guaranteed, potentially influencing willingness to apply at earlier stages.

Taken together, these findings provide a basis for synthesising the behavioural and structural dynamics shaping utilization

Moving Forward: Synthesis and Strategic Recommendations

The findings collectively indicate that utilisation of teacher quarters is fundamentally behavioural rather than purely supply-driven. Despite near-universal awareness, the substantial gap between awareness and application demonstrates that access to information does not translate into engagement, highlighting a clear activation gap at the initial stage of the utilisation process.

These findings indicate that housing utilisation is shaped by the interaction between behavioural considerations and structural constraints, where perceived suitability influences decisions but does not fully determine engagement. The presence of availability limitations and uncertain outcomes suggests that improving utilisation requires not only addressing perception-related concerns but also ensuring consistent access and reliable allocation processes

CONCLUSION

Underutilisation of teacher quarters in Malaysia persists despite continued housing provision, indicating that the issue cannot be explained by supply conditions alone. This study demonstrates that the gap lies within the behavioural process linking awareness to application, where high levels of awareness do not translate into corresponding levels of engagement.

The findings highlight a key insight: housing utilisation is not solely determined by individual perceptions or preferences, but by how behavioural

decisions interact with conditions of access and certainty. While perception-related factors influence evaluation, their explanatory power in shaping application behaviour is limited. Instead, constraints related to availability, waiting conditions, and uncertainty of outcomes play a more decisive role in determining whether individuals proceed to apply.

This study contributes to the literature by reframing underutilisation as a behavioural process rather than a purely supply-driven issue. By focusing on the transition from awareness to application, it provides an integrated perspective that links individual decision-making with access conditions, offering a more precise explanation of how utilisation gaps emerge in public housing systems.

From a practical perspective, improving utilisation requires moving beyond increasing provision or enhancing housing attributes alone. Greater emphasis should be placed on reducing uncertainty in application outcomes, improving transparency of access, and ensuring more consistent availability. Addressing these factors can strengthen behavioural engagement and support more effective utilisation of existing housing stock.

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