

Australian Catholic University Response to the Terms of Reference

1. Current accommodation options for students enrolled in ACT tertiary education institutions providing higher education and VET programs

Australian Catholic University does not currently have any student accommodation at its Canberra Campus. Students at the Canberra Campus either continue to live at home (suitable for Canberra students and possible for those within 60 minutes of the Campus), seek accommodation at MacKillop House at Lyneham, John XXIII or Ursula Hall at ANU or now at Lyneham Hall. However, it should be noted that the priority at John XXIII, Ursula Hall and Lyneham Hall is for students at the Australian National University, meaning limited access to these facilities for our students. MacKillop House only accepts female students and for solely the first year of their studies only. The advantage of residential accommodation is that it is designed for the specific needs of tertiary students and is able to provide support pastorally and academically. The central disadvantage is that of price in most instances. Additionally, for ACU students some accommodation of this type is remote from our Campus at Watson.

The second option for accommodation for our students is that of the private rental market, either boarding or in a form of group house arrangement. After the first year of study many University students prefer a group living arrangement, which is part of the challenge of making University residential accommodation economical. In the ACT rental vacancies in many accessible areas are below 1% and at the time many students are seeking accommodation, in February, there is very significant competition for rental properties. Private accommodation suits the living needs of many students but may not cater well for their academic and pastoral needs.

2. Models used in other jurisdictions to meet accommodation needs of tertiary education students.

Other jurisdictions face similar issues to the ACT in meeting the needs of tertiary education students for accommodation. ACU is in a unique position to comment on experiences in other jurisdictions being the only tertiary institution to have Campuses in three states and the ACT.

No University in Australia is currently able to meet the accommodation needs of all students in on-Campus facilities. Universities make considerable efforts to 'source' additional through provision of rental guarantees, subsidies and accommodation services for students. In jurisdictions with a larger population base, there are greater options available for rental in the private market – though the feedback from our own students would suggest that securing affordable, safe and appropriate accommodation is a challenge in all locations.

At our Ballarat Campus, the University has effectively leased significant numbers of properties for sub-letting to students. In the ACT this scheme has been considered but the much tighter property market in this jurisdiction increases the costs to the University to the extent that it is beyond our resources to fully finance this option in Canberra. None of our other five Campuses have residential accommodation options available, though the University does direct students to estate agents and other accommodation sources.

Added to the supply of accommodation, in the ACT the nature of public transport centring on a 'hub and spokes' model actively restricts student access to the Campus without their own transport.

3. Student experiences of current accommodation options in the ACT, including the experiences of local, interstate and international students.

While local students usually have the option of maintaining their current (on admission) accommodation, this is not always the case. Many families find that they can no longer support their children at home during University studies; many students find their needs for independent living, including gaining access to Youth Allowance may require them to seek alternative accommodation. The majority of our students, especially beyond first year life independently and in the private market – they find this extremely difficult to negotiate and, when first in the rental market, find it difficult to obtain suitable references to secure accommodation. In addition, many lessors are reluctant to provide accommodation for 'group homes.'

Interstate students are increasingly challenged when seeking accommodation in Canberra. While some are able to continue to live in existing accommodation in Goulburn, Cooma and Yass; others from further afield are delaying admission or not seeking tertiary education. Reports from School Principals in Broulee, Pambula, Griffith and Leeton indicate that the dire situation with affordable and appropriate accommodation in the ACT is having a detrimental impact on the aspirations for higher education. This is problematic in terms of the Commonwealth's agenda and also, the ACT Government's Response to the Learning Capital report of the ACT Tertiary Taskforce. The ACT cannot be an attractive location for students given the current limited levels of appropriate and affordable accommodation.

The plight of International students is especially acute. Arriving close to the commencement of the academic year, with limited funds and onerous restrictions on gaining employment, International Students find negotiating accommodation extremely

difficult. There are numerous reports from students across Tertiary Education providers that students are living in temporary accommodation, sleeping in living rooms or other spare spaces. Again, the lack of Australian rental references is challenging for these students.

All students agree that the rental market in the ACT is extremely limited and quite expensive, more so in proximity to the Campus. The price of accommodation in Canberra is a serious concern for ACU students.

Residential student accommodation ranges from \$164 - \$374 per week for full board. Private rental in suburbs close to our Campus (North Canberra) range from \$300 - \$1000 per week for 1 bedroom apartments to four bedroom houses. While more onerous in terms of personal responsibility, the higher degree of freedom is a priority for many students.

The cost of student accommodation is exacerbated by the low levels of Government support for students, especially those from medium and high SES categories. Students from low SES categories and rural areas can often access full levels of Government support and some rental assistance – even so the maximum rate for Youth Allowance with Rent Assistance for the average student (single, no children and living away from home) is only \$495.10 per fortnight which includes quite substantial restrictions on earning additional income. Even the lowest cost accommodation options are not adequately supported by this level of income.

4. Strategies adopted by ACT tertiary education institutions to meet student accommodation and welfare needs.

Australian Catholic University seeks to address the accommodation needs of students, especially prospective students through the Campus Life Officer who provides a liaison service for estate agents and members of the community who are seeking boarders. The Campus recognises the growing need for affordable accommodation and is seeking to replicate, in a modified fashion, the initiative undertaken at the Ballarat Campus of letting accommodation for the purposes of sub-letting to students. We also have close ties to MacKillop House which ensures that a number of places are initially reserved for ACU prospective students.

Student welfare needs are addressed through the Office of Student Success, which comprises Study Skills, Counselling services and Campus Life staff; the Campus also provides strong services to students through our Campus Ministry staff. These latter staff are linked in to the broader services provided by CatholicLife, the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn's adult education and youth support network.

The University makes available a number of scholarships to students seeking to relocate to Canberra from rural locations; these are enhanced through additional scholarships from a number of our employer and stakeholder partners.

5. Anticipated demand for student accommodation in the ACT in light of Commonwealth and Territory Governments' priorities for the tertiary education sector.

As indicated throughout this submission, the challenges presented by the current Commonwealth agenda mean that ACU is seeking to grow substantially, including in the Canberra area. This is supported by the agenda framed by the *Learning Capital* report and the ACT Government's response to that report. It is recognised that much of the growth in the tertiary education sector in the ACT will, in fact, come from regional NSW. The South Coast, South West Slopes and Riverina areas are large potential pools from which the ACT could draw significant numbers of future tertiary students. The lack of sufficient, affordable and appropriate accommodation is creating a new barrier to tertiary education in a context where there is significant deregulation of other previous barriers.

Australian Catholic University's enrolment plan calls for a 30% - 40% increase in student numbers at the Canberra Campus over the next three years. This increase will come from expanded places in existing programs; targeted programs for students from equity groups, especially from regional locations; and, from the introduction of new courses, especially in health and welfare disciplines. Achieving the enrolment plan targets would mean an additional 300 – 400 students on the Canberra Campus.

In order to meet the accommodation needs of this number of additional students Government support and assistance would be welcomed. At this stage, additional capital funding from the Commonwealth appears unlikely and the University has a number of demands on its capital budget to meet the needs for teaching and learning spaces.

6. Coordination and planning measures adopted by the ACT Government to meet anticipated needs in student accommodation.

The ACT Government has made available funds and support in kind to both the University of Canberra and to the Australian National University to buttress a range of student support and accommodation needs. Further, other capital grants to cover the

costs of teaching and learning, enable such institutions to make space in their capital works budgets to provide student accommodation. No such offers have been made to Australian Catholic University and the lack of a transparent and public process to apply for such grants prevents ACU from applying. On occasions when ACU has sought Government assistance feedback has been given that our University is not a priority for the Government.

Australian Catholic University's Canberra Campus enrolls a higher proportion of students from equity groups than the other universities in Canberra and a significant number of students from regional areas. The accommodation needs of such students are particularly acute especially in terms of availability and support. The provision of rental assistance, an improvement in the planning process to provide for additional student accommodation (potentially provided by local business) and logistical support to all the tertiary education providers on an equal basis would be most welcome.

7. General factors influencing availability and access to appropriate accommodation for the core demographic group (18 – 25 year olds).

As indicated throughout this submission students and aspiring students seeking to come enter tertiary education in Canberra face four significant obstacles in terms of accommodation:

- availability of suitable accommodation
- price pressures for suitable accommodation
- location of suitable accommodation
- entering the rental market for the first time

Added to these particular ACT issues there are also the additional demands on University budgets to develop infrastructure to cope with the additional demand for places and the downturn in the provision by private enterprise of suitable university residences.

This emerging and expanding situation may limit the possibility of the ACT Government achieving its stated goals in relation to tertiary education. One potential avenue for a transparent process of assistance would be provide significant funds specifically earmarked for tertiary accommodation to the anticipated *Learning Capital Council* for distribution on a needs basis to the various tertiary education providers.

8. Any other relevant matter

Australian Catholic University has a current enrolment of 754 at the Canberra Campus and anticipates this growing to at least 1000. The lack of appropriate student accommodation,

especially within close proximity to the Campus disadvantages students from equity groups and those seeking to relocate to Canberra. In addition, the very limited structure of public transport does not assist students travelling from, for example, Belconnen to Watson or from parts of the Tuggeranong Valley – the locations where students are able to source affordable accommodation. This necessitates private transport arrangements causing another barrier to participation by people from low SES groups.

The ACT Government could assist tertiary education providers through a coordinated approach to planning processes and through assistance to source private accommodation, perhaps providing rental bonds, acting as a form of referee for new entrants who are tertiary students, and grants to tertiary providers on an equitable and transparent basis.