

Introduction

This submission is prepared on behalf of the Australian National University's (ANU) Postgraduate and Research Student's Association (PARSA). Consequently, the main focus of this submission is on issues of concern for postgraduate students.

In 2010, the *Times Higher Education World University Ranking* placed the ANU as the 43rd best university globally. This achievement is a primary reason why numerous students select the ANU as the institution to conduct their postgraduate studies. ANU prides itself on its reputation for innovative research and teaching; a reputation that has been built and maintained, in-part, by the quality of postgraduate students who elect to work within the ANU. An important factor in being able to contribute to the ANU's international reputation and research output for postgraduate students is access to appropriate accommodation. Currently, postgraduate students enrolled at the ANU struggle to find such appropriate accommodation, and PARSA believes that the well-being of ANU's postgraduate community, as well as ANU's international reputation, is adversely affected by the paucity of accommodation options available to postgraduate students.

This submission is based on an investigation into accommodation options for Postgraduate students at the ANU prepared for Professor Elizabeth Deane, the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students) in 2009 and 2010. The information for the report presented to Prof Deane was gathered in the following ways:

- A review of the University Accommodation Services' (UAS) April 2009 Accommodation Survey, completed by 557 postgraduate students;
- A review of emails received from 45 postgraduate students in 2009 in response to PARSA's invitation to express their thoughts and concerns about ANU postgraduate accommodations; and
- The facilitation of a Postgraduate Accommodation Forum, held Thursday, 27th May 2010, in which 16 postgraduate students participated, with additional feedback provided by 6 students who were unable to attend.

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

Current accommodation options for postgraduate students at the ANU are extremely limited. There is little provision made for them in the University's accommodation guidelines, despite the fact that the majority of postgraduate students relocate interstate and overseas to pursue their studies at the ANU. This is in stark contrast to undergraduate students, who benefit enormously from the first year accommodation guarantee, whereby all first-year students undertaking full-time study at the ANU are guaranteed a place at one of the university halls of residences or their affiliated accommodation.

The ANU does of course offer some postgraduate accommodation options. For example, the Ursula Hall Laurus Wing, Burgmann College PG Village, the Bruce Hall Packard Wing, Graduate House and Toad Hall are all strongly geared towards postgraduate students. Though this may seem like a lot, in actual fact it isn't. Not only does demand for postgraduate accommodation far exceed supply, but often postgraduate accommodation is occupied by undergraduate students.

Current accommodation options at the ANU also include a temporary and emergency accommodation service. However, these services are frequently booked-out several months in advance, and consequently do little to help students in need. The Office of the Vice-Chancellor's offer to provide a letter of recommendation to realtors on behalf of students is largely unknown, and hence, under-utilised. In this manner, the ANU does not meet its duty of care to postgraduate students: there is insufficient on-campus accommodation, and students receive little help in finding alternative accommodation.

Apart from on-campus accommodation, the only other accommodation options currently available to postgraduate students are sharehouse-type arrangements or organising a private rental property through a real estate agency. However, the Canberra housing market is notoriously competitive. For example, public servants and governmental aides are preferred and prioritised by realtors; students, having neither copious expendable incomes nor recognised rental histories (due in part to international residency), are categorised as high-risk tenants. Moreover, rental properties cannot be leased in advance. Thus, students often arrive in Canberra with nowhere to stay.

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

Other tertiary institutions appear to offer more streamlined and efficient application processes for University-controlled residences. The University of Melbourne, for example, operates an intercollegiate pool which makes the application process to Halls of Residence much more transparent and comprehensible: <http://www.colleges.unimelb.edu.au/>. The ability to apply for, and be accepted online would be of particular help for international and interstate students. Although this is possible already, we believe that the online process could be made much easier.

Though other tertiary institutions do provide a model which the ANU could use to improve their accommodation offerings, it is of the uppermost importance to note that the ANU is unlike universities in other jurisdictions, such as Melbourne and Sydney, particularly in terms of the private rental market. Firstly, the physical location of Canberra is incredibly small, and there are only a handful of suburbs in which students can rent properties. Secondly, due to Canberra's unique situation as the capital of Australia, there are large numbers of (better-qualified and with a more secure income) public servants vying for the same small number of rental properties as ANU students. We therefore believe that though it is useful to look to how other jurisdictions manage

university accommodation, the ANU is a special case unlike that of other tertiary institutions.

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

Postgraduate student experience of accommodation at the ANU usually begins with the UAS, the office ostensibly responsible for administering the accommodation application process. The student experience of applying for accommodation at the ANU is often a frustrating and confusing, with students regularly given incorrect information and a lack of transparency in the application process. For example, when postgraduate students apply online for accommodation, they are likely to encounter one of two scenarios:

- a) Particularly in the case of students applying for Graduate House, they remain on housing waiting lists for up to 12 months before being allocated housing
- or
- b) Students inquire in person to an on-campus residence regarding vacancies, and may be informed that one just arose and should they be willing, they could move in within the week. It is likely that this latter scenario completely bypasses those on the waiting list and is therefore unfair to those who have proceeded through the formal channels of University Accommodations.

Further to these two scenarios, neither the UAS website, nor UAS staff members provide students with correct information about regarding the application process. Students are frequently left in the dark about the differences between applying for Graduate House and other residences such as Toad Hall or the Laurus Wing of Ursula Hall. Knowing the difference between the two is important as it affects factors such as time spent on waiting lists. Moreover, there is little coordination between UAS and the actual student residences, with the two bodies frequently providing different information.

If students are accepted into an on-campus residence, they are generally given only 48 hours to respond to the notification email before the offer lapses. This is problematic as students may not have access to their email when the 48 hour window is open, and thus lose their chance at securing on-campus accommodation. Moreover, this gives students little time to organise their finances. Should a postgraduate student accept the offer of accommodation, more often than not they are required to take up tenancy (or begin paying rent) in as little as two to three weeks¹. This is difficult for

¹ The Graduate House FAQ states: "Graduate House management endeavours to give four weeks notice to wait listed applicants (where possible, though shorter notice may be given) prior to a vacancy becoming available" (page 2); however it has been indicated to PARSA that the four weeks notice is the exception rather than the norm, something which is certainly not apparent in the above statement.

students who may be occupying rental accommodation, and may have other matters to attend to before being able to move. This does not allow students the four weeks notice they are required by ACT law to provide their landlord and frequently results in postgraduate students paying rent in two separate locations at the same time; something the majority of postgraduate students can ill-afford.

Based upon both their experiences at other (national and global) universities and information from the ANU, many students believe that acceptance of an ANU offer of admission, they would be eligible for university accommodation. If they had more accurate knowledge of the actual state of ANU housing and the Canberra rental market, not only would they have discounted University Accommodations from the beginning, but they would have taken this into serious consideration when deciding whether or not to accept ANU's offer of admission.

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

Before outlining some of the factors influencing availability and access to accommodation, we take issue with the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs' identification of the core demographic group comprising 18-25 year olds. For example, 88% of the respondents to the 2009 Postgraduate Accommodation Survey were over the age of 24. Often postgraduate students are aged from their mid-twenties to early thirties, and PARSA strongly believes that this age group should be given the same consideration as the age group that characterises undergraduate students. The very fact that the age group identified by the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs excludes postgraduate students shows just how maligned postgraduate students, and how little their needs are considered when allocating housing to tertiary students.

As well as being older than their undergraduate counterparts, postgraduate students come from a variety of backgrounds – they are much more likely than undergraduates to have partners and dependent children. The profile of students who responded to the "Residential Accommodation Survey of Post-Graduate Students 2009" showed not only an extensive age distribution, but also varied household compositions and preferences. While some students live independently, significant proportions live as couples and families with up to 4 children. This characteristic is reflected in their accommodation preferences: 20.6% preferred a unit in a student residence (with access to common facilities), 37.2% preferred a self-contained apartment (no additional facilities required), 21.4% preferred a townhouse with small garden, and 20.8% preferred a house in the suburbs. Ideally, postgraduate students should be offered a mix of accommodation options: accommodation for families and for individuals, as well as sharehouse type arrangements, where there are several people living in one apartment.

There is a dearth of family-oriented accommodation options, a matter which is particularly relevant for postgraduate students. PARSA recognises that postgraduate

students may have young families, and believes that these students should be offered the same opportunities and services as all other postgraduate students. In this regard, there is considerable support for the provision of on-campus accommodation catering to families with children. To accommodate the noise and lifestyle of children, PARSA recommends that family accommodation be contained in a separate building or wing. Additionally, PARSA would also like to see the resurrection of off-campus ANU-operated housing in areas within 10 kilometres of the University. This would not only be expedient for families, but could also operate as share-houses as required.

The current 48- and 52-week accommodations contract system is not supportive of postgraduate studies. Higher degree research students commence at various times throughout the year, and are not bound by the semester timetables. Accordingly, the current fixed-week contract system is often inappropriate for postgraduate needs. As an alternative, PARSA recommends implementing 6- or 12-month leases for postgraduate students. Similarly, postgraduate students undertaking fieldwork should have the opportunity to sub-let university accommodations to pre-approved “Temporary Accommodation” applicants, rather than being forced to vacate their residence, in a manner similar to the policy in place at Graduate House. Furthermore, postgraduate research students should not be asked to leave ANU residences prior to the acceptance of their thesis, as opposed to the current policy of some residences that require students vacate residences upon thesis submission. The ANU should continue to recognise the inherently different nature of undergraduate and postgraduate studies in its approach to providing accommodation services.

Any other relevant matter

An area of interest in terms of accommodation is whether postgraduate and undergraduate students should be housed separately or together. For example, Toad Hall and Graduate House are exclusively postgraduate residences, with no undergraduates. On the other hand, several Halls of Residence, such as Burgmann College, Ursula Hall and Bruce Hall, have accommodation options for both groups of students. Postgraduate students feel that the lifestyle led by many undergraduate students is frequently incompatible with their own living requirements: specifically, noise disturbances that can emanate from undergraduate student social activities on weekends, at the beginning and end of semester, and during semester breaks. In many cases, postgraduate students do not have the luxury of time-off from their work during these occasions and high noise levels interfere with their ability to successfully perform the work required of them.

The data available to PARSA illustrates that the majority of postgraduate students desire accommodation that is specifically for, and restricted to, postgraduates. Such premises would have the ability to tailor their services and infrastructure towards that required by postgraduate students. It is envisaged that not only would such accommodations increase the appeal of the ANU to prospective postgraduate students, but it may also improve the academic performance of current postgraduate students.

However, it must also be recognised that residences which house both undergraduate and postgraduate students can provide significant opportunities to postgraduates, such as leadership opportunities, and opportunities through Academic Mentor-type programs to share their skills and knowledge.

A further issue is the amount of pastoral care that should be made available to postgraduate students. Postgraduate students are certainly more independent than their undergraduate peers, and by virtue of their mature age, require a different level of pastoral care than do undergraduate students. However, though their needs may differ, it is still recommended that postgraduate students be offered some form of pastoral care, particularly in terms of relaxed social events, and the ability to participate in a resident's association. As the potential for social isolation in self-contained units is high, some form of pastoral care for postgraduate students is recommended.

Our recommendations:

1. Significantly increase the present number of accommodations *specifically* allocated to postgraduate students
2. A variety of postgraduate accommodations including:
 - a. Larger bedrooms in student residences so that two uncoupled students may share a room at a reduced cost to them
 - b. Units in a student residence (with access to common facilities)
 - c. Self-contained apartments
 - d. Both studio and one/two bedrooms apartments for couples and families (no additional facilities required)
 - e. Share-house accommodations.
3. Off-campus accommodations within 10 kilometres distance from the ANU.
4. Separate residential blocks for families with children.
5. The majority of accommodations should be furnished.
6. 'Furnished' is seen to include: a bed, a heater, a desk, an office chair, wardrobe and drawers, a mirror, book shelves, and a reading chair; with aerial television outlets and internet access in every private room.
7. In all accommodations that include a private kitchen and bathroom, the kitchen/kitchenette should include an oven or microwave oven, a stove, a refrigerator and freezer, a table or counter space, and a kitchen sink; the bathroom should contain a shower, shower curtain, toilet, hand-sink and medicine cabinet.

8. In all cases laundry facilities (including washer, dryer and clothes line) should be available, though these may be for communal use. A *secure* area for bicycle lockup is also highly recommended.
9. Several *sound-proofed* communal-use multi-purpose rooms in each residential block.
10. 6 or 12-month leases, with postgraduate students undertaking fieldwork having the opportunity to sub-let their accommodations to pre-approved “Temporary Accommodation” applicants. Postgraduate research students only being asked to leave ANU residences upon acceptance of their thesis.
11. Full transparency in the allocation of postgraduate accommodations.
12. Accommodation should be constructed from high-quality materials that will prevent the need of frequent repairs and be sustainable. It should ideally be environmentally-friendly architecture that will curtail carbon-emissions from electrical heating, cooling, and light use.

Conclusion

The demands of the private market mean that on-campus (or University-controlled) accommodation is a much more highly sought after commodity in Canberra as opposed to other cities such as Melbourne or Sydney. We therefore recommend that the ACT government help ACT tertiary institutions such as the ANU to develop more on-campus, or University-controlled accommodation, and specifically allocate a greater percentage of space to postgraduate students.

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