

28 August 2023

Submission to the 2023 Australian Universities Accord Review Panel in response to the Interim Report sent 28 August 2023

This is a joint submission by Birute Don and Harry Bergsteiner who will be referred to as “we” in this submission. We both support the submissions of the Council of Sydney University International House and the Sydney University Alumni Association. We urge the University of Sydney not to demolish the existing International House buildings since they could be renovated or updated at a far less cost and delay than building a new 200 bed student facility.

On 21 August 2023, the Council of Sydney University International House submitted a response to the Accord Review Panel’s Interim Report. The response emphasized that the International House model of student accommodation has proved to be an outstanding example of how best to support the student experience for both international and Australian students.

On 23 August 2023, the Sydney University Alumni Association which has at least 4,000 former International House residents on its mailing list also attested to the value of the International House experience. SUIHAA’s official position has been and remains to re-establish International House at the earliest possible date, giving due consideration to all relevant economic, environmental, social, heritage and other factors.

As former residents of Sydney University International House for three years each in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, we can attest to the value of the experiences we had and the understanding we gained by being part of a supportive living arrangement on campus that put us in daily contact with people from many cultures. The following brief youtube video highlights the advantages of living in International House from the perspective of students in 2009 (the building and interior was very similar in 2020). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9T9_528eE0.

The International Houses at the University of Sydney and the University of NSW were primarily funded in the 1960s by Sydney Rotary Clubs, which still have members on the Council of Sydney University International House (see Appendix for 1964 and 2023 photos of Sydney University’s International House). Emeritus Professor John Gascoigne edited a book about the history of the University of Sydney’s International House for its 40th anniversary in 2007. The book is titled “The Passing of the Light: A history of the University of Sydney’s International House”.

It is not clear why the University of Sydney closed International House in 2020 despite the residents still wanting to live there and it was not running at a loss. There is a reference to a Business Case to increase student accommodation at International House from 200 to 600 beds (Rotary News Issue 591 February 2017 page 18). Others have alleged that the buildings had reached their “use by” date so they should be demolished. We are not persuaded by this argument since many people live in much older houses. Harry Bergsteiner specialised in the adaptive reuse of historic buildings (200 and 800 years old) from 1984 to 1996.

Other International Houses around the world and in Australia, such as at the University of NSW and at the University of Melbourne have not closed and they are thriving and making millions in revenue. These International Houses continue to provide a supportive residential community that builds life-long qualities of leadership, respect, empathy, and moral courage among individuals of all nations and backgrounds. We want to see future students enjoy the same benefits of living in a wonderful supportive environment whilst studying at university.

Melbourne University’s International House is charging about \$30,000 for a year’s full board. Its 300 students are also paying university education fees. This highlights how much revenue is being lost by keeping the Sydney University’s 200 bed International House closed. Students who cannot find affordable accommodation near a university may choose to study elsewhere or not at all.

Now you may be wondering why we have decided to make this submission to the Panel on the University Accord's excellent Interim Report. We were both inspired by Jason Clare's launch of the Interim Report at the National Press Club on 19 July when he explained his background and how much going to university had changed his life. Hence, the next part of this submission relates to our background. Despite the challenges of our disadvantaged backgrounds, we were both able to complete various university degrees at the highest ranked universities in Australia.

Birute comes from a refugee family that fled the Soviet Union's invasion of Lithuania during World War 2. She also had the challenges of growing up in St Marys, NSW, one of the most socially disadvantaged suburbs in Australia. She was one of only 3 students from St Marys High School to go to university and receive a Commonwealth University Scholarship. Harry (the first applicant to apply to live at International House) came from a disadvantaged migrant background and was only able to attend university due to being the only student from Liverpool Boys High School to win a Commonwealth University Scholarship in his year.


Having the safety and support provided by International House helped us both to complete our degrees. These degrees were crucial to our success and happiness in life. We understand the tough housing issues being faced by current students and how living in a residence on campus can make it so much easier to complete university studies and to excel in our careers.

Unfortunately, International House at the University of Sydney closed at the end of 2020 in the middle of the Covid crisis and now it is still closed in the middle of a student housing crisis. According to Sydney University's web site, the current building is marked for redevelopment. Below is a quote from the university's web site regarding International House:

The University of Sydney has reaffirmed its intent to redevelop the site of Sydney University International House on the corner of City Road and Cleveland Site. By establishing a Project Control group, it is making preliminary investigations on how the site could be redeveloped to the best advantage of the University, while preserving the spirit of the Trust Deed on which the original development of International House was based. The anticipated time scale of the redevelopment is at least 5 years.

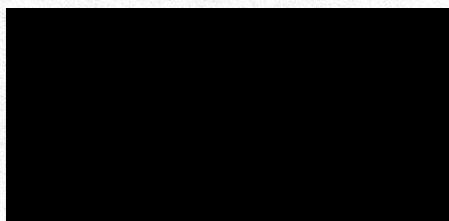
We encourage the University of Sydney to review its Business Plan for International House and consider the option of renovating existing buildings rather than demolishing them and re-opening it prior to 2028. If the University of Sydney does not re-establish International House soon, it will continue to lose millions in accommodation fees and some students may not be able to complete a university degree due to the lack of affordable social housing. Also, the reputation of universities will be tarnished in the eyes of donors, students and the general community if they waste existing housing resources in such a prime location when there is such a housing need.

Yours sincerely



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- Diploma in Town and Regional Planning, University of Melbourne, 1978
- Planning Institute of Australia Committee Member for Victoria 1980s



Dr Harry Bergsteiner

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- Diploma in Town and Country Planning, University of Sydney
- PhD, Macquarie University
- Member Australian Institute of Architects & Member Planning Institute of Australia

APPENDIX Photos of University of Sydney's International House

**International House from City Road Darlinghurst NSW
(August 2023 - vacant and fenced off to the public)**



International House Construction Board showing it was sponsored by Rotary (1964)

