



August 21, 2023

Submission to the

2023 Australian Universities Accord Review Panel
in response to the Interim Report published in July 2023

on behalf of

the Council of Sydney University International House

The interim report is remarkable in its breadth of vision and its insights into the difficulties faced by the Tertiary Education sector in Australia. In general we find much to agree with and little to criticize in what the report has to say about where the sector should be heading. However, we make this submission to draw more attention to the problems faced by foreign students in Australian universities in the light of what is said in Section 2.5 of the Interim Report, which addresses the issue of Fostering International Engagement.

It is probably not an understatement to say that today too many foreign students in the Australian higher education system feel exploited and unsupported. In too many cases, foreign students are isolated from their Australian peers by the circumstances of their class enrollment and their accommodation experience. Student accommodation is a key issue for both foreign and domestic students – it can make or break the university experience. This year, in NSW at least, a shortage of rental accommodation has put some students into very difficult situations. What should be an enjoyable period in which foreign students get to meet, interact with, and learn from their Australian peers as well as their university instructors, is turned into a stressful struggle with accommodation and commuting issues which can leave them isolated and unsupported.

It is clear that the question of how best to support the student experience in Australian universities requires a range of accommodation options. In recent years student accommodation options typically have been developed by universities in conjunction with private developers, with an emphasis on minimizing cost. Such options provide essential physical infrastructure, but often neglect the social dimension of the student experience. In any case, many students are forced to resort to the private rental market for lack of reasonable alternative. For some students, the traditional university model of a residential college where a diverse group of students share meals has proven to be one of the most effective models for supporting the student experience, including the social dimension. However, residential colleges on or near a university campus have become a less influential part of the modern Australian University scene as university enrollments grew larger and more students had to opt for the suburban commute to campus. The commute option can make sense for local students trying to economize, but it hardly seems optimum for foreign students who pay very large fees for the benefit of being at an Australian university.

Better options are needed for such students. The International House model of student accommodation, originally developed in New York in 1924, and translated to a number of Australian Universities in the post-war years, has proved to be an outstanding example of how best to support the student experience. The International House model is not just another option for accommodating a large foreign student group. It aims to house international and local students together in roughly equal numbers, and preferably a mix of graduate and undergraduate students from a diverse range of studies. Shared meals in a dining hall enable students to interact daily and learn from their peers who have grown up in a range of diverse and sometimes difficult environments. The diversity of the student group and shared meals experienced in the International House model provides opportunities for students to learn from and support each other unequaled by any other accommodation model.

The benefits of such an accommodation model are shared between both local and foreign residents who gain more insight into and understanding of each other's culture and background. Such benefits are said by some to provide a more important element of their education than that gained in the classroom. Providing the accommodation environment in which the best students from foreign countries can interact with and learn from their local peers is probably as important as the formal teaching environment in molding the student experience. Such interaction provides an important antidote to a kind of narrow nationalism that is too readily cultivated in a world saturated with social media, because it becomes immediately obvious that people the world over are essentially motivated by the same desires to live peacefully, learn and succeed. By building communities of international and domestic students we forge long-lived connections that can contribute in the long term to economic prosperity and reduced international conflict.

The International House model may not be for everyone, but we suggest that Universities with large foreign enrollments should look closely at the International House model and take a lead in the development of high-end student accommodation that provides the best quality student experience. A thriving International House can serve as a hub and a venue for cultural activities involving the wider international and local student cohort. The International House in New York, the oldest and best established of a large group of International Houses around the world provides a shining example of a successful non-profit operation that meets these goals. Its website (ihouse-nyc.org) is easily found. Several of the Australian universities have experience with the International House model of student accommodation: A search on *youtube* for "sydney university international house" will provide for example a number of student witness statements of their experiences in that environment.

On behalf of the Council of
Sydney University International House



Chair, Emeritus Professor Gregory Houseman FRS

