

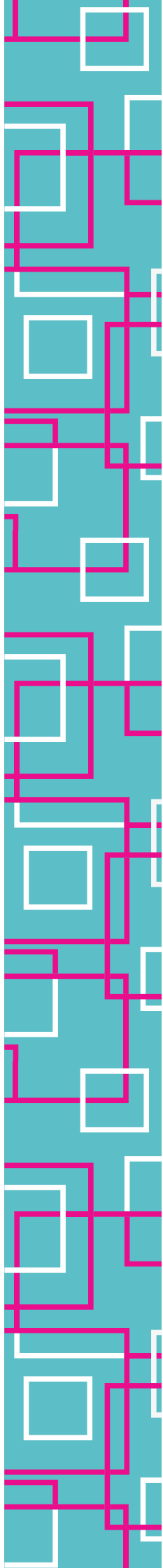


PARSA
ANU postgraduate &
research students'
association

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

**The challenges of seeking
postgraduate accommodation at
Australian National University**

□ ■ HOME AWAY
■ □ FROM HOME



Foreword

Each year students flock to Canberra to attend the Australian National University. Coming from all corners of the globe they face one common challenge: finding a safe and secure place to call their home away from home.

In late 2017 and early 2018, the ANU Postgraduate and Research Students' Association (PARSA) conducted a survey of its 11,000 members to investigate their experiences in attempting to secure accommodation in Canberra. In total there were 733 respondents.

In recent years, postgraduate students have regularly spoken to PARSAs representatives and student assistance staff of the significant difficulties they face with accommodation while attending the ANU.

Students have contacted PARSAs about issues involving discrimination, difficulties navigating tenancy and occupancy law, bond affordability, and sourcing family-friendly accommodation.

There have also been frequent reports from students who are forced to spend nights sleeping in the University libraries, a situation that is clearly unacceptable as it jeopardises their safety - as are the testimonials from students who have been forced to live interstate and study online because they are not able to afford accommodation in Canberra.

Our Home Away from Home report, based on evidence gathered in our 2017-2018 accommodation survey, demonstrates that these concerns are not isolated occurrences, but are in fact widely and deeply felt by a broad spectrum of our members.

PARSA believes that the current period of redevelopment and reassessment of on-campus accommodation presents a unique opportunity for the ANU to address genuine concerns from its students.

One of the critical issues raised in the report is the disparity between postgraduate and undergraduate students when it comes to guaranteed housing in their first year of enrolment.

Undergraduate students are guaranteed accommodation upon arrival in Canberra, and rightfully so. However, postgraduate students, a much higher percentage of whom are international students, have no such guarantee, and must face the challenging ACT housing market alone.

This report also highlights the added difficulties faced by students who are parents or carers for their family, particularly as there are no on-campus options for students who wish to live with their children. Although the University has committed to making efforts to address this issue, the urgency has not as yet translated into action, and effective consultation is needed to make sure that results are not tokenistic.

This report provides recommendations of how these issues can be adequately addressed. We are calling on the ANU to commit to providing an adequate level of accommodation provision for incoming postgraduate students and aligning offer timelines with accommodation deadlines. We also want to see plans for family-friendly accommodation come to fruition, and the ANU tackling the issue of unfair occupancy terms.

Postgraduate students' experiences at the ANU are not just affected by what happens in the classroom or the lab. The University should provide students the opportunity to secure quality and affordable accommodation at the start, and throughout their years in Canberra.

We should expect nothing less.

Zyl Hovenga-Wauchope
Vice President
PARSA

Executive Summary

Methodology

A representative sample of 733 responses was gathered from ANU postgraduate and research students through PARSA emailing list to all Postgraduate students, social media, and word of mouth. These respondents answered 29 questions which required a mixture of qualitative and quantitative answers.

All percentages throughout the report reflect the actual number of respondents who answered the question.

Initial accommodation experiences

When first arriving in Canberra, many students struggled to find secure accommodation.

- 2.5% were homeless
- 57% of students did not have accommodation before arriving in Canberra of which:
 - 31% took between one month and two months to find secure accommodation
 - 13% took longer than two months to find secure accommodation

Accommodation status

The struggles are not confined to the time period just prior to and after arrival. Many students expressed grave concerns about their current situation.

- 9% are currently homeless or at risk of homelessness
- 21% live in on-campus accommodation
- 59% live in private rental properties
- 5% live in their own homes

On-campus living

Once students found space in on-campus accommodation their experiences were significantly more positive.

- 34% of students rated their experience on-campus as excellent
- 54% as good
- 12% as neutral

Overall experiences

Other sections of the survey supported organisational anecdotal evidence of homelessness, and more general concerns about accommodation in Canberra.

In qualitative responses students indicated problems with:

- Eviction;
- Unreasonable pricing;
- Multiple rejections;
- Inadequate public transport services;
- Homelessness due to relationship breakdown;
- Short-term leases;
- Lack of communication from ANU Accommodation Services;
- Competing with public servants; and
- Feeling unprepared for the competitive Canberra housing market.

Summary of recommendations

On-campus accommodation

- A guarantee of accommodation for postgraduate students in their first year of study
- A commitment from the ANU to work with the ACT Government to develop fair and reasonable occupancy terms, and strong enforcement of these occupancy terms
- For the ANU to commit to increase the provision of family-friendly accommodation
- A commitment from the ANU to align offer timelines with accommodation deadlines

Off-campus accommodation

- A commitment from the ANU to build relationships with trusted realtors to provide a dedicated amount of student off-campus accommodation

Survey Results

Demographics

According to the 2016 ANU student statistics, the accommodation survey respondents are generally representative of the demographics of the ANU postgraduate and research student population.

Students also indicated groups of which they identify as a member. We are therefore able to explore whether having a disability, being a parent, identifying as LGBTIQQA, or ethnically or culturally diverse affects the student accommodation experience.

Fig. 1: Survey Respondent Demography

Demographic Group	%
International student	55.2%
Person with a disability	4.6%
Mature aged student	28.7%
Parent or carer	12.5%
Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander	1.2%
English as a second language student	38.5%
Ethnically or culturally divers	25.2%
LGBTIQQA	11.0%
Other	7.9%

Notable variances from 2016 student statistics involved PhD students, which made up 24% of the student population in 2016 but 47% of survey respondents. Full-time students are also overrepresented, making up 59% of the student population but 84% of respondents to this survey. International students and women are slightly overrepresented by about 4% respectively.

Initial accommodation experiences

Survey data revealed that 57% of respondents did not have secure accommodation before their arrival in Canberra. 31% of these students took between one and two months to find secure accommodation, with 13% taking longer than two months.

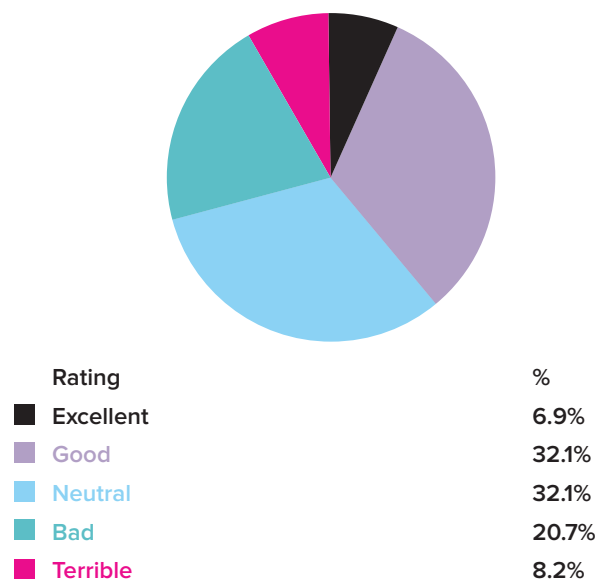
When students arrived in Canberra, they experienced a wide range of accommodation outcomes.

34% found rental accommodation immediately, 22% lived in on-campus accommodation, 18% lived with friends or family and 2.5% were homeless.

Another 14% indicated other experiences such as hotels or Airbnb, out of Canberra, on-campus at the University of Canberra or other insecure accommodation situations.

10% of students already lived in Canberra before commencing study.

Fig. 2: Ratings of experiences finding accommodation in Canberra



Homelessness

9% of respondents indicated that they did not have secure accommodation, (defined as they are homeless or at risk of homelessness) at the time of the survey.

However, it is not just important that students have a bed or couch to sleep on at night, they need long-term, reasonably-priced, secure accommodation.

Qualitative answers indicated that respondents struggle with punitive eviction, adequate warmth during winter, short-term leases or sublets, difficult landlords, and short-term homelessness. One student even spoke of only finding secure accommodation on campus during the exam period of their first semester – a situation which has impacted their studies.

On-campus living

The survey results indicated that ANU postgraduates have positive experiences living on-campus, with 34% rating their experience as excellent, and 54% rating their experience as good.

Students described their accommodation as comfortable, convenient, and with a great sense of community. However, additional qualitative responses indicated that there are significant systemic problems, including high (and rising) costs, punitive fines and costs, opaque administrative decision-making processes, and inadequate communication.

These communication issues particularly take the form of late notice from ANU Accommodation Services as to whether a student has been successful in securing a place in on-campus accommodation, and a 48-hour window where students must accept an offer before it is rescinded.

Communication issues can be a significant cause of stress for students, who often are moving interstate or internationally to attend the ANU and are unlikely to have the contacts to secure alternatives should they be unsuccessful in their application for on-campus housing.

The domestic vs. international student experience

The survey showed that domestic students were much more likely to have secured accommodation prior to their arrival in Canberra (51% of domestic students as opposed to 33% of international students).

It also found that 94% of domestic students had secure accommodation, compared to 89% of international students.

New arrivals are more vulnerable to being taken advantage of by landlords, denied opportunities to view properties, or dismissed out of hand for their lack of Australian rental history or referees. They are also less likely to have local contacts who can provide accommodation in an emergency situation.

In the survey international students and culturally or linguistically diverse students expressed concerns about overt or subtle discrimination and bigotry in the form of response rates, rejections, punitive fees, and exploitation.

The survey found that international students are also much more likely to live in on-campus accommodation and sharehouses, and are significantly more likely to live in areas like Gungahlin and Belconnen which are further from campus. Almost double the amount of domestic students than international students were able to secure accommodation in Canberra's Inner North, which is significantly more accessible from the university.

International students were also more than twice as likely to rate their experience of finding accommodation in Canberra as terrible.

Overall experiences

Qualitative answers to the survey indicated that students were stressed and distraught by their experience in finding a home away from home in Canberra.

When asked if there was anything else that they would like to tell PARSAs about their experience finding accommodation in Canberra, students detailed distressing experiences with eviction, bug infestations, unreasonable pricing, multiple rejections, a lack of communication from ANU Accommodation Services, discrimination, competing with public servants, and overall being and feeling unprepared for the competitive Canberra housing market.

Recommendations

PARSA provides students with information, advice and support to those relocating to Canberra, and offers emergency accommodation grants to students who require temporary accommodation due to unforeseen circumstances.

However, the association's funds are limited, and should only be relied upon as a last resort for our members.

This report demonstrates the need for the ANU to acknowledge and respond to the concerns raised with prompt and meaningful action.

It is the responsibility of the university to provide primary support as students transition into the ANU.

Based on this report's findings, PARSA calls on the Australian National University to make the following commitments to address the accommodation challenges of incoming postgraduate students at the ANU:

Policy: On-campus accommodation for postgraduate students in their first year of study should be guaranteed

Stakeholder relationships: The University should build relationships with trusted realtors to provide a dedicated amount of student off-campus accommodation

The ANU should work with the ACT Government to develop fair and reasonable occupancy terms, and strong enforcement of these occupancy terms

Infrastructure investment: A commitment to developing family-friendly on-campus accommodation, additional to what is currently planned, ensuring:

Early consultation with PARSA to ensure the views of postgraduate students particularly affected by accommodation issues, such as student parents, are met; and

Reasonable construction timelines.

Administrative reform: A commitment to aligning offer timelines with accommodation deadlines with:

Allocated on-campus accommodation spaces for students receiving late offers; and

Appropriate notice given to postgraduate students about on-campus offers where they are given sufficient time to find alternative accommodation when they are unsuccessful.

Information provision: Inform incoming students about the structures in place to support them when they are struggling such as PARSA's Emergency Accommodation Assistance Program, Graduate Accommodation Bursaries and Emergency Graduate Accommodation Bursaries.

Acknowledgement

This report was prepared by Terese Corkish, PARSA Advocacy & Engagement Officer, Zyl Hovenga-Wauchope, PARSA Vice President, Mike Heffron, PARSA General Manager and Alyssa Shaw, PARSA President.

Design work was performed by Waleed Mushtaq.

We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of all the PARSA staff, and the work of PARSA representatives both past and present who have tirelessly advocated for a better deal for students.

Appendix

Please find the raw data from the PARSA Accommodation Survey, 2018 at:
www.parsa.anu.edu.au/advocacy/campaigns/accommodation/accommodationsurvey/

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