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## is where the heart is

Student accommodation developments on Australian campuses are booming, with demand massively outstripping supply. By **Julie Hare**.



**T**he children of the baby boomers demand quality – and they are getting it. Generation Y don't just want a roof over their heads and a bed to sleep in: they expect – and get – a whole lot more.

Across the nation, bulldozers are at work. At the heart of the massive investment in student accommodation infrastructure are public private partnerships which have dramatically changed – and improved – universities' capacity to provide students with high quality accommodation. Today's student will not only be likely to bed down for the night in a luxury townhouse, they will receive a shopping list of added extras including faculty visits, celebrity speakers and a rigorous social calendar.

"There is enormous growth in the sector because many universities are seeing that providing high-quality accommodation is part of their commitment to improving the student experience for both domestic and international students," says Marion Moore, marketing manager with UniLodge.

"Today's students have higher expectations and are more sophisticated in what they want from on-campus accommodation, and are therefore more discerning in what they are looking for."

Dr Alec Cameron, deputy vice-chancellor (resources) at the University of New South Wales, agrees.

"Societal expectations continue to increase," he says.

"Whilst in the past, having air-conditioning in classrooms or single accommodation may have been optional extras, now they're part of the standard service.

"A lot of universities are also interested in developing accommodation that will have a demand outside term time. That may mean making it available to the conference market and that sets a certain standard that also needs to be met.

At the end of last year, the UNSW's

**Universities are outsourcing accommodation not only due to budgetary pressures, but because they like to stick to their core competencies – teaching and scholarship. But they also wish to influence the total academic experience of their students.**

substantial new accommodation development which may provide up to an additional 1000 beds," says Cameron.

"It's a university's objective to make sure that appropriate quality accommodation is available for students in a safe environment at an affordable cost," says Cameron.

Over at Campus Living, a relatively new player in the student accommodation market, "holistic

commercial arm NewSouth Global, in partnership with UniLodge, opened the doors to a foundation-year-specific accommodation block. The university is also developing an extension to an existing self-catering accommodation complex to provide an additional 85 beds and is working on a proposal for "a

experience" is the catchcry. Campus Living was born out of the construction and development of the innovative Sydney University Village (SUV) and RMIT Village using a model of student accommodation that broke new ground in public-private partnerships.

"SUV was a very courageous glint in the eye of Sydney vice-chancellor Gavin Brown which succeeded," says Campus Living CEO Patrice Derrington. "It was a very exciting concept that needed to be abstracted to the point it could be replicated. What made SUV different was that it was a private capital source and a private operator but on university land. It was new for Australia."

The model has indeed been replicated with Campus Living now in talks with a number of universities both in Australia and in New Zealand.

Macquarie University has signed up to what it's commercial manager Adrian Briggs calls a BOOT scheme (a Build, Own, Operate then Transfer back). While Campus Living took over the management of Macquarie University Village 1 with 376 beds on 1 January –

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which had until recently been managed by the student association SAM (Student Association of Macquarie) – it has also begun construction on MUV 2, an on-campus accommodation development consisting of 516 beds in 100, five-bedroom townhouses. It will manage the facility for 30 years, at the end of which it will be transferred back to the university.

Briggs says at the present time the university does not have enough

accommodation on campus and has a great number of students placed in private accommodation in neighbouring suburbs. However, unlike its inner-city counterparts, shortage of available sites does not worry the sprawling Macquarie University. MUV2 will be constructed on a prime site within the confines of the main campus.

In fact, demand is so high Briggs says that, in theory, Macquarie could simultaneously build another village of equivalent size and still have unmet

demand. Indeed, unmet demand is a common theme in all states and territories. In addition, future demand, based on demographic projections, is also driving the building boom.

Professor Phillip Steele is pro vice-chancellor (campus co-ordination) at Monash University and academic director of the Berwick and Peninsula campuses.

Campuses such as Berwick, which is 40 kilometres from Melbourne's CBD and located in the third fastest growing residential area in the country, is on the fringes of mainstream suburbia (but won't remain so for much longer) with a subsequent lack of infrastructure such as public transport and entertainment. With predictions that within the next two decades the area's population will be an equivalent size to Canberra, planning is already under way for another accommodation facility with 120 beds – four times the size of its current accommodation site.

"Monash Residential Services is a group within the university that specifies requirements for student accommodation. It also provides a support service for on-campus



Felice Derrington

students. For example, international students may, or may not, have friends in the uni context, so MRS go to a lot of trouble to nurture and support them – to try to connect them and create a community," says Steele.

Derrington points out that in the US, where students traditionally travel far and wide to attend college, often interstate, even private ivy league universities such as Cornell, are now outsourcing student accommodation

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to private operators. She says there is a similar wave of activity in the UK.

"Universities are outsourcing accommodation not only due to budgetary pressures, but because they like to stick to their core competencies – teaching and scholarship. But they also wish to influence the total academic experience of their students."

This, says Derrington, is what provides the successful model for the new age of student accommodation.

"The model is to have a partnership with universities that is bound up financially and through a relationship based on a lot of consultation as to the mode of nurturing students during the non-academic parts of their life. We try to develop a whole community.

"We do things in addition to housing them and feeding them and providing security and surveillance. We also provide enriching experiences, such as meet and greet with their faculties; we teach them life skills, such as getting on with other people; we involve them in philanthropic activities with their local community and we have some

professional development, such as a speakers forum (which recently featured award-winning journalist Paul McGeogh).

"These are young people at a vulnerable age in a sometimes confusing environment. Student accommodation needs to provide safety, security, continuity and convenience."

Safety, security, continuity and convenience are not generally

recognised as consistent in the private rental market. For universities with campuses in inner-city areas, especially in Sydney and Melbourne, the problems are compounded by high rents.

"Universities generally try to make sure they meet the financial constraints of students," says Cameron. "If a university is located in a high-rent part of the city, such as UNSW, we need to ensure accommodation prices aren't a

barrier to students coming to study."

Growth in the market, present and future, is not confined to Australia. Developments in New Zealand universities are also booming and UniLodge, for one, is currently looking at opportunities in Asia.

"We are looking at Singapore because of the Government's commitment to expand higher education offerings there and to attract more international students to Singapore as a study destination," says Moore.

The boom in student accommodation is a logical extension of the reform policies affecting the higher education sector of the past five or so years, says Derrington.

"Universities need the amenities and public-private partnerships are a way of providing them without having to provide the capital.

"As Brendan Nelson requires universities to streamline their programs – that is, not be all things to all people – you will find that Australian students, like their American counterparts, will travel further away from home to different regions to study." ●



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