

A Case for the Value of Residence in Australian University Education

by Damian Powell

Trinity Papers Number 1



Trinity College
University of Melbourne

Dr Damian Powell is Director of Studies at Trinity College and an associate of Victoria University and the University of Melbourne. He prepared 'A Case for the Value of Residence in Australian University Education' in response to the request of Mr Roderick West, Chairman of the Federal Government's 1997 Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy. At a time when the University is placing emphasis on the pedagogical benefits of new technologies, the paper makes a strong case for the ongoing importance of traditional models of education implicit in residential life.

This paper represents the first in a series prepared by Trinity College which focus upon broad issues facing the community in such areas as education, ethics, history, politics, and science. Copies are available upon request from the Tutorial Office, Trinity College, Parkville, Victoria 3052 Australia.

The Value of Residence in Tertiary Education

Introduction

At the time of writing (April 1997), Australian universities house approximately thirty thousand students in one hundred and fifty colleges, halls and hostels. The spectrum of university residential accommodation is broad. It ranges from nineteenth-century colleges associated with our oldest universities and self-consciously modeled upon the traditions of Oxford, Cambridge and Dublin, to newer colleges embracing some facets of this collegiate model, to halls of residence and student 'villages' created for our newest universities. It is interesting to note that in their diversity, these institutions offer facilities and models of academic community which are in many ways comparable, and may be placed at the heart of residential life. Generally, they seek to offer some degree of teaching and pastoral support to resident students, typically employing postgraduate and postdoctoral candidates and recent graduates into the professions. They offer communal dining facilities and some shared social and study space such as halls, libraries and discussion rooms. They offer the opportunity for individual students to engage with the larger residential community in a range of extra-curricular cultural and sporting activities. Australia's residential colleges constitute an academic community with particular strengths, including highly personal teaching arrangements and the opportunity for communal life within a community of scholars, both of which serve to impart values and attitudes which can serve the wider community. The value of residence can be considered in terms of accommodation, personal tutorial attention, communal life, and values and friendship.

i Accommodation for country, interstate and international students

As Australia moves to compete in the international tertiary arena, colleges are appropriately placed to advance Australia's role in a changing national and international university culture. Many students, of course, especially from country areas, have to live away from home to go to university. In their provision of accommodation for rural and interstate students, colleges help to house the increasing numbers of Australian students who are moving in search of educational opportunity under the National Unified Scheme. Furthermore, as Australia continues to attract increasing numbers of international students, strenuous efforts have been made to establish an infrastructure comparable with the 'great' universities of America and Britain. Such infrastructure typically includes undergraduate and often postgraduate college residence. But, beyond accommodation, colleges offer something more. In the leading colleges of the leading Australian universities, there is the potential, which is being seized, to offer Australian and international students an all-round educational experience comparable to that offered by the best universities in the world.

ii Australian university colleges can promote a world class learning environment

The promotion of educational excellence has always been central to Australia's university colleges. Speaking at the foundation of Trinity College Melbourne in 1870, William Wilson, foundation professor of Mathematics at the University, noted that college's chance to correct what he termed an 'incomplete university'. It is notable that college residence is not only encouraged, but mandatory for at least part of the undergraduate years in many of the world's outstanding universities, such as Oxford, Harvard, Princeton, Yale and Cambridge. The assumption of these universities is that residence *is essential* to the kind of educational experience that they offer. Students are attracted to these institutions, in part, by the educational world they will inhabit while undertaking study towards their degree. The Harvard prospectus, for example, notes that their residential plan embodies 'more than simply places to live' - 'by design, residential living among students and faculty is an essential part of the Harvard experience' and 'creates collegiate communities within the larger University community'. Trinity College Toronto aims 'to foster the highest possible intellectual achievement while developing leadership talent and a sense of social responsibility in its students' who 'benefit from belonging both to the College and to the University'. Australian universities will only become truly competitive in the international arena when the value of residence is recognized and promoted.

iii Personal tutorial contact

Australia's residential colleges and halls employ a system of teaching that draws upon the oldest and most successful teaching traditions of the West. Seneca, for example, outlined a model of education in which a student lived with his Master and learned through observation of thought and action. This is the educational model available (as is nowhere else the case at tertiary level) in residential teaching, where the tutor lives among students as a teacher and role model. At its best, the residential experience provides a chance for students to mix at close quarters with teachers drawn from among the most capable university graduates, some who have chosen to continue in academic life and some who have graduated to the professions but wish to continue in an educational role. The importance of residential tutors' scholarly and personal assistance during the formation of undergraduates has been cited by many of the greatest and most creative minds of our own age as an essential conduit to effective learning. Speaking of the educational path taken by Britain's most famous legal historian, F.W. Maitland, Sir Geoffrey Elton noted that even the brightest students require 'a truly admired teacher' of a kind afforded by a residential teaching programme.

The vibrancy and efficiency of the college tutorial (which in the present academic climate provide the only teaching opportunity for many of our most gifted young academics and professionals) bears careful consideration. Colleges and university halls of residence throughout Australia employ many people as teachers who will progress, in due course, to outstanding academic and professional careers. Residence offers more senior and formally recognized teachers with the opportunity to work with individual students and small classes. A degree of personal contact and attention is possible, and strongly encouraged, in colleges which increasingly is increasingly hard to provide in our 'mass' universities. Tutors in the best colleges are encouraged to be creative and dynamic in their approach to learning, and may provide the educational spark that can be undermined by a formal syllabus that increasingly stresses diligence rather than pure intelligence or independent thought. In order to inform and inspire students, colleges must create an environment in which the pursuit of learning and excellence is essential to the residential experience. The college tutorial is a component of Australia's educational potential that will increase in importance as wider university teaching becomes even more impersonal.

iv Communal life

Not only do our leading colleges offer personal tutorial attention to students, they offer the educational benefits of living in a residential academic community. In residence, shared daily

meals are the most visible and powerful expression of communal identity, and they serve a serious educational function. The college dining hall provides a significant point of contact between junior and senior members of the university from across the academic spectrum. Dinnertime conversation provides a daily forum in which the life of the mind can be tested and expanded. While enlarged universities offer diminishing spatial coherence, true university colleges offer a communal space which promotes a broad education through the educational intimacy of teacher and student. As a result of their close relations, students and tutors have the opportunity to engage in a communal scholarly effort. Junior students will often turn to older students for help with explanations of core concepts, and students may form informal tutorial groups to work towards a collective understanding of the syllabus.

By encouraging students to discuss the learning process between themselves, tutors contribute to an environment in which students can become teachers, providing a vital aid to their own learning process. Furthermore, as residential tutors are not tied to the demands of the formal syllabus and do not have to mark their students' work, college provides a space in which students can explore general educational philosophy, great texts, essential research skills and specialist knowledge. By allowing students to mix at close quarters with educators and with other students drawn from a variety of disciplines, a proper awareness of the educational assumptions and methods of the whole university is encouraged, rather than that of a particular faculty or department. Such an educational arrangement must be beneficial to the creation of new knowledge, which often flows from an interdisciplinary base. It is certainly of benefit in producing graduates who are 'well-rounded' and whose mastery of their own subjects is deepened by dinnertime and other 'out of classroom' discussion.

v Values and friendship

If Australia is to produce graduates of vision and leadership, universities must help to foster qualities that transcend knowledge alone. It is arguable that our universities, as much as our schools, must uphold clear values within their educational arrangements, promoting citizenship as well as excellence. Residential colleges are, by their very nature, explicit in their promotion of communal values, and at its best the residential experience offers a model of community that emphasizes tolerance and respect for others, cooperation and public accountability. Students' sense of belonging and of community is in stark contrast with the lack of attachment to, or even alienation from, large and impersonal institutions. Through extra-curricular activities such as debating, drama, music and sport, students have an opportunity to refine skills placed at the heart of the humanist curriculum: public speaking, musical, artistic and athletic expression. Public performance of this helps to produce well-rounded graduates, gives valuable opportunities for participation and leadership, and tends to build up friendships between residents which are, in many cases, lifelong. These friendships often arise between students in very different subjects - students who in the 'mass' or 'commuter' university would probably not even meet because they would be in different worlds. In residence, to quote from J.R. Darling, friends can 'come together from a real community of intellectual and spiritual interests, not as in after life because they are thrown together by their jobs, but because they find that they stimulate and do not bore each other'. In such an environment students may be encouraged to transcend the narrower disciplinary boundaries of the university, carrying with them a vision of a model of community that has produced and will continue to produce leaders of vision and distinction.