

The college experience that ‘might seem a bit weird’

Christopher Harris
Education reporter

It’s an early autumn evening in the quadrangle at St Paul’s residential college at Sydney University. In the seniors’ common room, the fire is crackling, wine is being drunk and a three-course dinner is about to be served.

Outside, students in formal dress cloaked in academic gowns mill about, waiting to take their seats inside the dining room, with its gothic windows and sandstone walls.

For students in their older teenage years or early 20s, dressing for dinner is more *Downton Abbey* or *Harry Potter*, but it happens four times a week. “In one sense, it might seem a bit weird and a relic of the past, but having a formal dinner four nights a week builds community,” says college warden Ed Loane.

Applications to Sydney University’s residential colleges have surged over the past five years – including a five-fold increase at St Paul’s since the pandemic. It also went fully co-ed in 2023.

“We hardly do any marketing; it is word of mouth,” Loane said. “Students are loving their time here and telling their family, siblings and their school networks.”

Amid a decades-long decline in the vitality of campus life, residential college heads say parents and students are searching for a traditional university experience they are unlikely to get in an online lecture.

Loane says most applicants are from Sydney and private schools who want to have an immersive on-campus experience.

“I would love to get in with schools in the western suburbs. If you’re commuting, that’s not a good experience of university. We have an extensive scholarship and bursary program.”

Among the broader student population at Sydney University, those who say they live in a residential college might get mixed reactions or even criticism due to perceptions of elitism, while the student union often calls to have them abolished.



St John’s College students Issy Edmonstone, Jemima Carmody and Matt Colgan. Photo: Steven Siewert

St Andrew’s College principal Dr Daniel Tyler said the colleges had been “evolving rapidly and for some time”. They now offered \$2 million in scholarships each year and were recruiting more students from public schools.

St Andrew’s offering, like other colleges, includes three meals a

day, sport, music, debating and an extensive tutoring program.

“We’ve got good programs in place to make sure that our students understand the expectations and how to behave well in the community,” Tyler said.

In 2017, a review of residential colleges by Elizabeth Broderick

found 19 per cent of students reported bullying or intimidation, pressure to participate in activities humiliating or intimidating to them or another student, or hazing.

At St John’s College, applications have tripled since 2019, shooting up to 1000 last year

– something its head, rector Dr Mark Schembri, said was because the colleges had worked hard to improve their cultures.

“It continues to grow because people are seeing the good work of colleges in the post-Broderick era,” he said.

Jemima Carmody, 19, is in her second year at St John’s College. “For me, I think it has been such a transformative experience,” she said. “Socially, I’ve met so many amazing and like-minded people.”

She said certain “traditions” had been phased out – but formal dinners twice a week remained, alongside a Sunday chapel service.

“It is a very down-to-earth atmosphere,” Carmody said. “The people really set the tone. At the end of the day, it is just four walls. The students set the culture; we’re here, we’re accepting of everyone, you get around your friends.”

The cost of board at a college varies between \$13,000 and about \$18,000 a semester. While not cheap, it starts at the equivalent of about \$668 a week at Sancta Sophia – less than the cost of other accommodation aimed at university students.

Applications to Sancta Sophia College have risen by 270 per cent since the pandemic. Principal Fiona Hastings said the rise could be attributed to the richness of the college experience, and added that the rental market had made college a more attractive option.

“Affordability is also likely to be a factor at Sancta, given the high charges of commercial providers now,” she said.

Wesley College had also recorded a 62 per cent rise in enrolment applications over that time. Its head, Lisa Sutherland, said one of the best things about college was the support for students who were moving out of home for the first time.

“It is also a sense of belonging and a sense of connectedness that you’re not getting on social media,” she said. “We notice a huge difference from when they join us and when they leave. The difference is they’re independent for the first time.”

Ministry pairing ‘conflict of interest’

Calum Jaspan
Media writer

The task of reducing gambling ads should sit with Health Minister Mark Butler rather than Sports and Communications Minister Anika Wells, says top anti-gambling advocate Tim Costello, who argues pairing the two portfolios creates a conflict of interest.

The structural and commercial links between sport, gambling and media mean the issue must be approached as a health issue, said Costello, the Gambling Reform Alliance’s chief advocate, who described Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s decision to pair the portfolios together as a slap in the face of recommendations put forward by the late-Peta Murphy’s inquiry.

Progress fixing the harm from gambling has been stifled by its

long-term link to sport and the way gambling reform would impact the nation’s top codes, said Costello. He believes it must be viewed as a health issue.

“Unhinge those two, that’s why we never get reform,” Costello said. “You might as well have alcohol and tobacco placed with sport in the same ministry and same minister.”

Wells picked up the communications portfolio alongside her existing brief as sport minister in the cabinet reshuffle on Monday, replacing Michelle Rowland, who worked on gambling reform policy for 18 months and has now been appointed attorney-general.

Gambling advertising reform became a vexed issue for the Albanese government in its first term and was ultimately shelved in January after pressure from the top sporting codes, media compan-

ies and wagering firms. The major sporting codes, television broadcasters, wagering firms and other key stakeholders had met Rowland’s team and were briefed on the policy proposals in August, and signed non-disclosure agreements to keep those briefings private.

This included plans for a blanket ban on social media advertising, more than a year after the Murphy-chaired bipartisan inquiry recommended a full ban for ads promoting online gambling.

Costello has accused the AFL and NRL of directly leaking those plans to “destroy any reform” of the sector, which would have had commercial implications for the codes and media companies.

“They leaked it because they wanted to weaken it, to fight it,” Costello said.

Wells said that the Albanese gov-

ernment had already undertaken some of the most significant harm reduction measures in relation to gambling in Australian history, but would continue to assess and work on a response to the inquiry.

Wells, who took on the communications role three days ago, said that measures already in place included implementing mandatory customer ID verification for online betting, banning the use of credit cards, introducing new evidence-based tag lines in advertising and launching Bet-Stop, the national self-exclusion register, among others.

“We know there is more to do, and we will continue with this work,” Wells said in a statement. The overall responsibility for the regulation of gambling services is shared between the federal government and state and territory governments.

The AFL and NRL, as well as the prime minister’s office, were approached for comment.

The commercial models of sports, media and gambling companies are intertwined, complicating Wells’ oversight of all these sectors as the government seeks to tackle the harm caused by gambling.

Both of the dominant winter sports codes – AFL and NRL – get a cut of each bet placed on their competitions and have advertising deals with Sportsbet.

The media companies, in particular the major sports broadcasters – Seven, Nine and Foxtel – also benefit from the main wagering firms buying advertising space, with the revenue helping them pay for increasingly expensive broadcast rights. Nine Entertainment owns this masthead.