

# TOP PROFESSIONAL VOICES IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT



## **General Manager, Student Accommodation Australian Catholic University**

Matt Ma is General Manager of ACU Sydney Student Accommodation, leading national operations, strategy, and residential life programs. He combines operational excellence with a passion for student wellbeing, creating supportive communities that help students thrive academically and personally.



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Photo from the Pro-Vice Chancellor Outstanding Serviced Awards

## How did your personal and professional journey lead you to your current role in student engagement?

When I arrived in Australia as an international student in 2017, I lived in student residence and experienced firsthand how much a supportive community can shape your university journey. My Residential Advisor helped me adjust to life in a new country, and that experience sparked my interest in student engagement and residential life.

I began as a casual student leader, running events and offering peer support, before moving into a part-time Residential Life Coordinator role while still studying. After graduating, I progressed into positions such as Residential Life Supervisor and Manager, taking on greater responsibility for community development and student wellbeing. Along the way, I also led national accommodation projects, including the development of ACU's accommodation scholarship suites, designed to improve access for students from low socio-economic and regional, rural, and remote backgrounds.

Today, as General Manager of ACU Student Accommodation, I draw on both my lived experience and professional journey to create inclusive, supportive environments that help students succeed academically, socially, and personally.

## What achievement in your role related to student engagement and retention are you most proud of?

One of the achievements I'm most proud of is securing **\$230,000–\$280,000 in HEPPP funding from 2022–2026** to support our regional accommodation outreach program and scholarships, as well as strengthen our operational capacity. This funding has allowed us to provide meaningful access and support to students who might otherwise face significant barriers to attending university or living on campus.

As a result, **30% of our residential students now hold an accommodation scholarship**, with **95% of those students coming from regional, rural, and remote areas**. Knowing that these initiatives create real opportunities for students from low socio-economic backgrounds—helping them access higher education and live in a supportive, engaging community—is incredibly rewarding. It's a reminder that student accommodation isn't just about providing a place to live; it's about building pathways for success and delivering equitable outcomes for all students.

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### A Note from the Founder



Matt's residential expertise is part of the secret sauce that makes life on campus work. He connects with a friendly and professional balance that set his leaders up for success.

## What advice would you give to someone new to this field?

For students starting out, I can't stress enough the value of mentorship. When I was a first-year business school student, I signed up for a mentorship program, and it became my "shortcut" to resources, advice, and guidance. That support helped me navigate challenges and make the most of my university experience. By my third year, I was a student mentor myself, giving back to the community and supporting others in the same way I had been supported.

In professional life, mentorship is just as important. Early in my career, I connected with someone in the student accommodation industry who provided invaluable guidance. That relationship helped me navigate complex projects, understand best practices, and overcome obstacles—from university change plans to operational challenges at work.

My advice to anyone new to this field is simple: seek out mentors, build your network, and stay open to learning from others. The right guidance can accelerate your growth, help you avoid pitfalls, and give you confidence in your decisions. And just as importantly, look for ways to give back—supporting others is one of the most rewarding parts of working in student engagement.

**“MY ADVICE TO ANYONE NEW TO THIS FIELD IS SIMPLE: SEEK OUT MENTORS, BUILD YOUR NETWORK, AND STAY OPEN TO LEARNING FROM OTHERS.”**



*Won the 2023 APSAA Excellence in Marketing and Communication Award.*



*Working as the Student Life Manager at the University of Sydney student accommodation.*



*Matt Presenting at the Pro-Vice Chancellor Outstanding Serviced Awards Night.*



*Working as Residential Life Coordinator at the University of Sydney student accommodation.*

### **Can you share some examples of how your work has positively influenced students' lives and enhanced their overall university experience?**

One of the most rewarding aspects of working in student accommodation is seeing the direct impact on students' lives. Early in my career, I supported first-year international students adjusting to life in Australia—helping them navigate cultural differences, settle into residence, and connect with peers. Many later told me those early experiences shaped their entire university journey.

I now lead the design and delivery of our co-curricular Residential Life program, which brings together services from across the university to provide holistic support through mentoring, leadership development, and social initiatives that foster belonging and resilience. Our Residential Satisfaction Survey consistently shows strong results: 96% of residents feel supported by Residential Advisors and staff, and 91% say living in student accommodation helped them develop independent living skills.

Beyond this, I also led ACU's national accommodation scholarship suites, providing equitable access for students from low socio-economic and regional, rural, and remote backgrounds. Together, these initiatives create inclusive, supportive communities that help students thrive academically, socially, and personally—which is what makes this work so meaningful.

### **In your opinion, what are the essential skills or qualities for someone to excel in the field?**

Student engagement is fundamentally about people, so strong communication skills are essential. You need to listen actively, understand students' needs, and convey information clearly—whether supporting international students, mentoring Residential Advisors, or collaborating on major projects. It's equally important to engage senior stakeholders, champion your team, and highlight the impact of student accommodation across the university.

Integrity is another cornerstone. Leading ACU's national accommodation scholarship suites required principled decision-making to ensure equitable access for students from low socio-economic and regional, rural, and remote backgrounds.

Finally, a can-do attitude and adaptability are critical. Student engagement is dynamic—from unexpected residence crises to launching new initiatives—and a positive, proactive approach ensures success. Combining communication, integrity, and attitude enables us to support students effectively, lead our teams, and drive meaningful outcomes across the university.