

# TOP PROFESSIONAL VOICES IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT



# MONIQUE WATTS

## **Accommodation Coordinator Australian Catholic University**

Monique Watts is the Accommodation Coordinator at Australian Catholic University, where she leads residential teams, manages the Canberra accommodation budget, and drives initiatives to support student wellbeing and engagement. With experience across higher education, government, and business, she is passionate about creating safe, inclusive environments that empower students to thrive. Monique has led programs tackling food inequality and placement poverty and contributes to initiatives on student safety, mental health, and harm minimisation.



[www.linkedin.com/in/monique-watts-a036b57b](https://www.linkedin.com/in/monique-watts-a036b57b)

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

My pathway into student engagement has been anything but conventional. I studied Human Nutrition and worked as a student ambassador, where my passion for student engagement was first ignited. Growing up in regional NSW, I knew the barriers regional students often face and wanted to show that university is both possible and attainable.

I went on to hold roles in government, contributing to youth and student reforms, before returning to higher education in HR and Admissions. Along the way, I completed an MBA, which strengthened my leadership, strategic thinking, and operational skills, and deepened my commitment to supporting students.

Now, as a manager in student accommodation, I support students during a critical stage of their lives—drawing on my nutrition background to deliver cooking classes and build life skills, while using my MBA to oversee operations, budgeting, and team leadership. This combination allows me to engage with students holistically, supporting both their personal growth and academic success.



Monique winning the APSAA award last year (Fran O'Brien Award).

**“BUILDING EARLY CONNECTIONS NOT ONLY HELPS STUDENTS FEEL COMFORTABLE SEEKING SUPPORT BUT ALSO EMPOWERS THEM TO OVERCOME BARRIERS AND THRIVE.”**

## Is there a student success story that stands out as a highlight of your work?

One story that stands out involves a regional student I first met during a school outreach program. Growing up in a regional community myself, I know how powerful it can be for students to see that university is achievable. This student was initially hesitant due to academic results and financial concerns, but with guidance on entry pathways and scholarships, she realised higher education was within reach.

The following year, she became a resident in our accommodation, quickly engaged with the student community, and later joined the student ambassador program—travelling with me to speak to high school students. She has since held executive positions in student associations and continues to excel academically.

What makes this story meaningful is witnessing her transformation from a tentative high school student into a confident, accomplished university leader. Building early connections not only helps students feel comfortable seeking support but also empowers them to overcome barriers and thrive. Seeing these journeys unfold is a highlight of my work and a constant source of motivation.



Monique attending a regional school expo in her hometown of Young, NSW.

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

Excelling in student engagement requires resilience, critical thinking, and strong interpersonal skills.

Resilience is essential because this work brings both rewards and challenges. It's more than "bouncing back"—it's about learning from setbacks and approaching future challenges with greater strength and perspective. Whether facing the disappointment of not securing funding or managing the complexities of a critical incident, resilience enables us to adapt and persevere.

**“AT ITS CORE, STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IS ABOUT PEOPLE—BUILDING TRUST, FOSTERING BELONGING, AND CULTIVATING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS.”**

Critical thinking is also vital, as engagement often means navigating complex and unpredictable situations. We need to analyse information quickly, identify challenges, and weigh possible outcomes. It helps us approach problems logically, recognise biases, and reflect on what's working, ensuring strategies remain informed and responsive in a fast-changing sector.

Finally, strong interpersonal skills are fundamental. At its core, student engagement is about people—building trust, fostering belonging, and cultivating meaningful relationships. Communication, empathy, and collaboration enable us to support students while maintaining strong partnerships with colleagues, faculty, and external stakeholders.

## What achievement in your role related to student engagement and retention are you most proud of, and why does it stand out to you?

One of the achievements I'm most proud of has been addressing the issue of financial hardship during mandatory placements, often referred to as "placement poverty." At ACU, many students are required to complete placements interstate, where they can't work and must cover significant accommodation and travel costs. Recognising this barrier to both engagement and course completion, I led a project reaching out to hospitals, schools, and accommodation providers to secure safe, affordable housing. As a result, students were able to access accommodation for as little as \$20 per night, significantly easing the burden and supporting successful placement completion.

Acknowledging that financial hardship extends beyond placements, I also introduced initiatives to support day-to-day living. These included a \$5 meal program for residential students—nutritious, convenient meals developed with our on-campus café and designed using my nutrition background. With 92% of students choosing to participate week after week, the program proved both valuable and sustainable. We also partnered with a local food co-op to provide affordable groceries, running regular student trips to reduce stigma and boost uptake.

By addressing two fundamental needs—secure housing and nutritious food—we've enabled students to focus more fully on their studies, strengthening both engagement and retention. These initiatives reflect my proactive, student-centred approach to leadership, driven by the belief that removing barriers and providing practical support empowers students to thrive.



### A Note from the Founder

Monique is passionately working with her team at ACU to create a residential life where every student can thrive! We hope to begin working together in 2026 to support Mon's leaders!



*Monique with students within the student accommodation after a cooking class.*



*Monique attending a therapy dog event on campus – a great way to connect with students.*