

Australia: Fire safety problems in new student accommodation

By Mark Church
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The intense fire in the Bankstown apartment block that killed Connie Zhang and seriously injured Yinuo Jiang on September 6 highlighted some of the dangerous living conditions facing international students in private accommodation. New evidence has emerged revealing that hundreds of flats on Australian university campuses have inadequate fire safety.

The properties, according to industry experts, are substandard and could result in fatalities because of an unclear definition in the Australian building code.

Citing NSW Fire and Rescue officials and building industry experts, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported late last month that new on-campus apartments at several universities in Sydney are being built with only the front door rated as “fireproof” rather than all bedroom doors in the units. This is legally possible because the Building Code of Australia does not clearly define what constitutes a “sole-occupancy unit”.

The current code fails to say whether a “sole-occupancy unit” refers to each single bedroom and living quarters inside an apartment or whether it applies to each individual apartment regardless of the number of bedrooms inside. If the entire apartment is defined as sole-occupancy, then only the front door is required to be fire safe, a clear saving for construction companies, on-campus accommodation providers and the universities, all seeking to boost profits in the lucrative education industry.

Explaining the danger, NSW Fire and Rescue chief superintendent Greg Buckley told the newspaper: “If there was a fire in the common area they [the students] don’t have an exit path available to them. If the bedroom was fire separated they would have protection because they could close the door and stop the fire coming in.” He added that no-one should “fiddle with the definition” of sole occupancy.

Building certifier Vic Lilli told the newspaper that some student apartments were not at the highest safety standard but did not say where these were located because of confidentiality agreements. The article also reported that an unnamed fire safety engineer and a building certifier said that they had been removed from student accommodation projects after they raised concerns over how the “sole-occupancy unit” definition was being used. The fire safety engineer cited an unidentified building at the University of Western Sydney, as an example, and said the fire safety problem was “systemic” in the industry.

Under pressure to increase enrolments—international education is Australia’s third largest export earner—university administrations are competing with each other to attract more overseas students by expanding on-campus accommodation.

The University of Technology, for example, recently completed a 702-apartment building in Sydney’s CBD, University of Western Sydney is building 1,250 new residential dwellings and the University of Sydney plans to expand the number of student beds by over 2,600 in the next two years. The University of Canberra has received \$50 million under the federal Labor government’s National Rental Affordability Scheme to help finance on campus accommodation.

In total, more than 10,000 new student beds will be added nationally in the next couple of years by tertiary institutions on top of the 50,000 presently existing places. The ongoing demand for on-campus accommodation is now providing lucrative earnings for on-campus accommodation providers and operators that entered the market since the 1990s.

Two companies—Campus Living Villages and UniLodge—currently maintain about 8,000 student beds in Australia. Campus Living Villages is a global

corporation owning, managing or developing 35,000 beds in Australia, New Zealand, the US and the UK.

Real estate giant Jones Lang LaSalle recently established a student accommodation branch, telling the *Australian Financial Review* on December 10 that student accommodation was becoming “a more viable, mainstream asset class” with growing return for investors. “There are investors who are looking at student accommodation like they would look at office assets,” a spokesman Jones Lang LaSalle declared.

Building surveyor and fire safety engineer Allan Harriman from BCA Logic spoke to the WSWS about the sole occupancy definition and deregulation of building certification on their impact on fire safety.

Harriman said the current definition meant that developers could place as many rooms as they want into a single apartment: “This issue has been around for quite a while but the problem now is what is the upper limit? What about 20 bedrooms?”

Harriman also pointed to the pressures associated with private building certification—the process whereby new buildings are certified by building inspectors hired by construction companies. “It is quite well known that developers will shop around until they get the answer they want,” he said.

“There is nothing stopping developers from asking five certifiers their opinion and then picking the certifier who requires the least amount of fire rating in the building. If you have certifier A who says every bedroom is a ‘sole occupancy unit’ and certifier B who uses the same definition but says you can have a suite of rooms, the developers will go with the guy who says the suite of rooms every time,” Harriman said.

Four years ago the fire protection industry began raising serious concerns about fire safety, warning that in some parts of Australia, including New South Wales, unlicensed operators could be put in charge of fire protection.

Fire Protection Association of Australia spokesman Matthew Wright recently told the ABC television: “Someone could purchase a van, purchase a copy of the relevant Australian standards or legislation, some tools and go and start soliciting for work to do installation or maintenance of fire protection systems.”

Australian regulatory authorities have been aware of the “sole occupancy” issues raised by building safety experts for some time.

Indeed, questions over the sole occupancy definition and how it is being interpreted by builders and developers has become so widespread that Michael Wynn-Jones, deputy president of New South Wales Building Professionals Board, has begun surveying building certifiers asking how they applied the code. Bill Burns, the state executive officer at the Australian Institute of Building Surveyors has also commissioned a special report into the subject.

Concerns raised by fire safety experts, however, are falling on deaf ears allowing construction companies and developers to exploit obvious loopholes to cut costs and compromise safety.

Ongoing revelations about the inadequate fire safety in student accommodation are graphic examples of how the private profit system—from education providers, developers and property owners—subordinates the right to decent, safe and affordable housing to the interests of the corporate elite.

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