Innovation across the board

Modern school residence programs are much more flexible to families’ needs, writes Owen Thomson.

THROW out any preconception you may have about boarding schools. While in the past some institutions treated boarders more like inmates than residents, today’s incarnations offer an adaptive environment catering to the different needs of students and their families, the headmaster of The King’s School, Dr Tim Hawkes, says. “The boarding experience today is a very different one to even 10 years ago,” he says.

“Gone are the days when boarding suffered the Dickensian excesses of several decades ago.” With King’s itself home to about 400 boarders, Hawkes says flexibility is the central feature of modern boarding systems. “Once, the only real definition of boarding was the student who stayed at school 24/7 during term time,” he says. “Now we have weekly boarding, whereby a student is a boarder during the school week but goes home on the weekend, with all the customary battles relating to homework already fought.”

King’s also offers extended days, whereby students can have their evening meal and complete their homework at a boarding house before going home. That is attractive to some parents who arrive back from work late and want proper supervision for their children,” Hawkes says. He says many schools now consider boarding an integral part of the academic program.

“Some schools offer casual boarding for students if there are family problems, or simply noise from home renovations. Accommodation can also be provided if parents are travelling overseas. The co-ordinator of boarding enrolments at Knox Grammar School, Martin Gooding, says: “Modern boarding, at least at our school, is a whole lot more responsive to the parents as well as the kids’ situations than in the past.”

He agrees that there are many advantages. “It’s a whole lot more flexible, not just in when the boys can come and go home and so on but also in terms of communication with parents and dealing with issues like settling in and dealing with academic and personal progress,” he says. “Their study is supervised and one of the most important advantages is that they’re working with boys of like mind. They have access to academic tutors every week and to school facilities at night and on weekends, so there’s always support.”