28/03/2023

Dear Minister Verrall

Congratulations on your role as Minister for Health. It is always exciting to see former OUSA presidents in positions where they are able to make effective change. Our wonderful secretary Donna Jones speaks incredibly highly of you, and I have no doubt you’ll be amazing in the role.

I am writing to you today to urge you to support our push to extend the winter energy payment to students receiving living costs or the student allowance from study link. I’m sure as a doctor, a former Otago student, and former OUSA President, you are well versed in the reasons why this would be beneficial, and I ask that you support this policy at a parliamentary level too.

I’d like to take the opportunity today to ask you some questions, in your capacity as the Minister of Health.

* Does the Ministry of Health have data on the number of people aged 18 – 24 who present with respiratory symptoms consistent with those brought on by mould? If so, how does this compare to the wider population?
* What is the cost per annum of the above to the Ministry of Health?
* How does the Ministry of Health reconcile the quality of student accommodation with their advice that homes should be kept at 18 degrees Celsius? <https://www.southernhealth.nz/living-well/healthy-homes>. Does the ministry have any advice for students regarding keeping their flats warm, beyond the information listed in the above?
* Does the Ministry of Health believe that support for students such as the winter energy payment would help improve health outcomes among students?
* Has the Ministry of Health provided any information regarding the provision of the winter energy payment students and the resulting health outcomes, to cabinet, the ministry of education, and / or the ministry for social development? If so, what information was provided?
* How cold was your flat as a student? What steps did you take to keep warm in the winter? How difficult was heating your Dunedin flat?

In a world that has spent the last 3 years dealing with COVID-19, we’ve seen the rise of hybrid learning, working from home, and COVID isolation. All of this, highlights the need for students to be able to heat their homes. Going to the library to avoid the cold isn’t a solution for students who have to isolate for a week. Cold flats only delay recovery, and increase the risk of more serious COVID side effects.

We need your support, as a minister, as a former OUSA President, and as an OUSA Life Member. Students need the winter energy payment. The cost of living crisis is affecting students and, without further support for students in the form of the winter energy payment, our health will suffer as a result.

The recent increases to the living loan and student allowance are welcome but don’t go far enough. These only lead to increases to student debt and will have already been adsorbed by increases to the cost of living. Targeted support through the winter months given to students for their power would improve mental and physical health outcomes. Heating flats is one of the biggest stresses for students in winter months and providing students with the winter energy payment would be a simple way to relieve this stress.

Extending the winter energy payment to students would transform the lives of hundreds of thousands of young people across the country, and change the material conditions of students overnight. Cold, terrible student accommodation no longer needs to be a ‘rite of passage’.

I’d like to take this opportunity too to invite you down to Ōtepoti at your convenience, to meet the OUSA Executive. We are all very proud to see former OUSA presidents in positions such as yours, and would love to host you down here too.

I can be reached anytime at president@ousa.org.nz, or by phone on 029 779 3707.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Ngā mihi,

Quintin Jane

2023 President – Otago University Students Association.