Kia ora Minister Sepuloni,

Congratulations on your new role as Deputy Prime Minister of Aotearoa. Hearing your story of the way you’ve worked your way up to this role, overcoming so many challenges highlights your hard work and dedication, is an inspiration to thousands of young people across the country.

I am writing to you today as the President of the Otago University Students Association, in your capacity as the Minister for Social Development, to urge you to consider extending the winter energy payment to students receiving financial assistance in the form of the student living loan.

I was hoping you’d be able to answer a few questions for me today too:

* Has the Ministry of Social Development done any work to understand how the winter energy payment would improve the living conditions of those living off of the student living loan?
* What work has the Ministry for Social Development done to understand the power consumption habits of students?
* What work has the Ministry of Social Development done to understand the impacts of rising rents, particularly in Dunedin, on the increases in the student living loan in 2018 and 2022, and student budgets as a result?
* Has the Ministry of Social development carried out any work on the impacts of cold houses and mould on students studying?
* How cold was your flat as a student?

The cost of living crisis that Aotearoa is facing is only going to continue to stretch student budgets that are already at breaking point. The factors driving inflation are those that comprise the largest part of student budgets, and students will be forced to continue to reduce their power consumption, and forego heating their houses to ensure that rents are paid, and food can be purchased.

The winter energy payment would drastically improve the material conditions of students. We appreciate that the healthy homes standard has helped to ensure that students have the physical requirements to heat their homes, many are unable to do so due to the financial costs of running such equipment.

In particular student accommodation, especially in Dunedin, is often of poor quality and thus is harder to heat, meaning the cost of running heating, dryers, and dehumidifiers is more than students can manage. An additional $20 per week from the winter energy payment would make a drastic difference.

COVID-19 isolation requirements also mean that during winter, students are often confined to their cold, damp flats, where previously they would’ve been able to leave to find warmth at the university library, in lecture theatres, or other communal university spaces. I’m sure you’ll agree with me that the last thing that someone with COVID-19 needs is to try and recover in an environment that is cold and mouldy.

On a personal note, as a student I would regularly wake up to a flat that was cold enough to see my breath. In the winter, my flatmates and I would battle over who got to use the dryer in the ‘hour of power’ so that we could keep the power bill down to affordable levels. The winter energy payment would’ve allowed myself and my flatmates to increase our weekly power bill by nearly 200%.

Student simply cannot afford to heat their homes. Extending the winter energy payment to students who are receiving the living loan as a part of their student loan would improve the living conditions of nearly 400,000 students across Aotearoa. This policy would save lives, and transform the student experience overnight.

I’d also like to take this opportunity to extend an invitation for you to come and visit myself and the rest of the executive here at OUSA in Ōtepoti. Please do reach out if ever you find yourself down this way, we’d love to host you here at OUSA and the University of Otago.

I look forward to hearing from you. I can be contacted anytime at president@ousa.org.nz or by phone at 029 779 3707.

Ngā mihi,

Quintin Jane – 2023 OUSA President.