Kia ora Minister Robertson,

Congratulations on your hard work as Deputy Prime Minister over the last 5 ½ years. I have no doubt that these were some of the most rewarding, and challenging years of your life, and I commend your hard work to make Aotearoa a better place. I hope that you enjoy having the ability to step back from this role, and focus on your portfolios.

I am writing to you today as the President of the Otago University Students Association, in your capacity as the Minister for Finance, former OUSA President, and OUSA Life Member, 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 there been any consideration given, regarding extending the winter energy payment to students who are receiving the living loan as a part of their student loan, in Budget 2023?
* More broadly, what consideration has been made in Budget 2023 for additional financial support for students that will not increase their student loan?
* What work has the ministry of finance done to understand the impact of rising student loans on the material conditions of recent graduates? How do you think providing financial support for students that they don’t have to repay would impact this?
* What work has the Ministry of Finance done to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on the budgets of students?
* How cold was your flat as a student? - I’m writing this from my office with the knob from your flats bannister sitting on the shelf by my desk, I can only assume your flat wouldn’t have met the modern healthy homes standards!

The cost of living crisis that Aotearoa is facing is only going to continue to stretch student budgets that are already at breaking point. As you will know all too well, the factors driving inflation are those that comprise the largest part of student budgets. 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.

In particular student accommodation, especially in Dunedin as I’m sure you remember, 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 ask that going into the budget this year you reflect upon your time as a student, your time as OUSA president, and think back about what would’ve improved your student experience. As I’m sure you’re aware, the OUSA motto ‘Audeamus’ translates to ‘We Dare!’. I ask that with this you dare, take that step, and extend the winter energy payment to students.

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. I note we are in the 30th anniversary of your presidency, and we’d love to host you here to celebrate 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, by phone at 029 779 3707, or just reach out to Donna Jones, she always knows how to find me.

Ngā mihi,

Quintin Jane – 2023 OUSA President.