



Education Report: Talking points for special debate on the inquiry into student accommodation

To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education		
Date:	17 June 2021	Priority:	Medium
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Messaging seen by Communications team:	N/A	Round Robin:	N/A

Purpose

This report:

- Includes high-level background material on the Education and Workforce Committee's (the Committee) Inquiry into Student Accommodation (the inquiry).
- Provides talking points, attached in **Annex 1**, to support a 5-minute call in the 24 June special debate on the Committee's report on its inquiry. These talking points focus on the alignment between the Committee's findings and your priorities for tertiary education, as well as other linked issues that were raised through the inquiry (including student wellbeing and financing, and the upcoming decisions on the code and dispute resolution scheme recommendations from the Committee).
- Outlines next steps regarding the Government response due on 6 August.

Proactive Release

We recommend you release this report once final policy decisions have been made, with redactions made in line with the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982.

Release / Not release

Recommendations

We recommend you:

1. **note** the talking points provided in **Annex 1** to support a 5-minute call in the 1-hour special debate on the Education and Workforce Committee's findings from its student accommodation inquiry.
2. **agree** to forward this report to Hon Minister Poto Williams, Associate Minister of Housing (Public Housing).

Agree / Disagree

3. **note** that the official Government response to the inquiry is due 6 August. We propose the response agrees with the Committee's recommendations, noting any changes made to the proposed code and dispute resolution scheme following consultation.



Julie Keenan
Policy Director
Te Ara Kaimanawa

17/06/2021

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education

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Proactively Released

Background on the inquiry into student accommodation and the Committee's report

1. The Education and Workforce Committee (the Committee) undertook an inquiry into Student Accommodation (the inquiry) from June 2020 to April 2021. It was launched amidst concerns about the nature, ownership, governance, regulation, and wellbeing and safety provisions of student accommodation in New Zealand.
2. The inquiry's purpose was broad and included investigating the above concerns regarding student accommodation. In addition, the purpose included informing the development of the new code of practice for the pastoral care of tertiary and international learners.
3. On 13 May, the Committee presented its report¹ on the inquiry's findings, including recommendations. The Committee found that improvements were required in four areas:
 - a. Transparency and accountability in governance
 - b. Disputes resolution and complaints
 - c. Wellbeing and safety in student accommodation
 - d. Emergency planning and response.
4. The Committee's view was unanimous across all areas, except for a Green Party minority view that student accommodation should be not-for-profit.
5. In making its recommendations, the Committee considered how the government's proposed new code for tertiary and international learners (the code), and dispute resolution scheme (DRS) for domestic tertiary learners, might make improvements in the four areas above. The Committee made seven recommendations based on these findings, which focused on the code and DRS, including:
 - incorporating the proposed outcomes 1-4, 9, and 11 into the new code with providers required to meet the standards they set out
 - strengthening the connection between providers' internal complaints processes, the NZQA complaints process, and the proposed DRS
 - combining the DRS for domestic tertiary students (after it is enacted), with the existing DRS for international students.
6. The Committee focused its recommendations around the code and DRS. It is important to acknowledge that although many submitters viewed the code and DRS as a positive step forward, many noted that these tools are not the solution to all concerns raised through the inquiry. Instead, many viewed the code and DRS as adding to and enhancing the existing wider framework for supporting the wellbeing and safety of tertiary education learners in student accommodation.

Special debate on findings of the inquiry

7. The Business Committee has set aside an hour for special debate on the inquiry findings on 24 June, after Question Time.²

¹ The Committee's report can be viewed here: https://www.parliament.nz/resource/en-NZ/SCR_111297/19a7a68cb99a7e85902e78a30ea471096943b29e

² The Business Committee's determination regarding the special debate can be viewed here: [Determinations of the Business Committee for Wednesday, 19 May 2021 - New Zealand Parliament \(www.parliament.nz\)](https://www.parliament.nz/resource/en-NZ/SCR_111297/19a7a68cb99a7e85902e78a30ea471096943b29e)

8. We have prepared talking points for you (attached in **Annex 1**) to take a 5-minute call in that debate. These points focus on:
 - Support for the Committee's work and its recommendations, which endorse your *te oranga me te haumaru ākonga* proposals for a new code, DRS, and supporting law changes
 - Alignment with the Tertiary Education Strategy objective: "learners at the centre"
 - The importance of student voice and clear expectations in student accommodation, and the high level of professionalism of many accommodation staff
 - Links between the inquiry and wider issues including student wellbeing and mental health, Budget 2021 increases to financial support for living costs and housing costs, and changes in enrolment numbers.
9. Officials are happy to provide you and your office with any further assistance in the lead-up to the special debate.

Next Steps

10. The official government response to the Committee's report on the inquiry is due 6 August. Given that the Committee's recommendations support the learner wellbeing and safety proposals we consulted on, we propose to include the Government response with Cabinet decisions on these proposals, expected in July.
11. We propose as a starting point that the Government response agree with the Committee's recommendations, noting any changes made to the proposed code and DRS following consultation.

Annex 1 – talking points for special debate on student accommodation inquiry

Below are talking points to assist a 5-minute call in the 1-hour special debate on the inquiry into student accommodation.

Support for the Committee's work and recommendations

- Firstly, I would like to thank the Chair and members of the Education and Workforce Committee for their great work on progressing the inquiry and in developing recommendations for the government.
- The report produced by the Committee represents a valuable contribution to the government's consultation on the package of proposals on *te oranga me te haumaru ākonga* | learner wellbeing and safety which ran for 6 weeks from 7 April to 21 May. This package included proposals for a new code of practice for tertiary and international learners, a new dispute resolution scheme for domestic tertiary learners, and supporting law changes.
- The seven recommendations put forward by the Committee focus around the code and dispute resolution scheme, and endorse the proposals overall.
- Following the consultation on the code and dispute resolution scheme, I am considering changes based on the wide range of high-level and complex feedback we received from the sector, as well as the Committee's report and its recommendations. This means the proposed code and dispute resolution scheme that the Committee endorsed are likely to differ slightly from the final versions that are implemented from 1 January 2022. That being said, I expect the intent of the code will largely remain the same.

Alignment with the Tertiary Education Strategy objective "learners at the centre"

- With the code, we have been developing a system of supports for the wellbeing and safety of domestic and international learners, through one set of clear rules and expectations that providers can tailor to their learners' needs.
- This is central to a genuinely learner-centred education system, and to delivering high-value international education, as signalled in the new Tertiary Education Strategy and National Education Learning Priorities (TES/NELP), the International Education Strategy 2018-2030, and the Strategic Recovery Plan for International Education (the recovery plan).

The importance of clear expectations and student voice in student accommodation

- Through the inquiry, many submitters, especially students, highlighted the importance and need for clear and easily accessible expectations to be set out regarding student accommodation. Making clear what expectations students should have from their providers can help strengthen student voice and influence in student accommodation, enabling students to hold providers accountable if standards aren't met. This is important as we know that student voice is a powerful means for learners to convey their needs, experiences, and concerns – enabling learners to have real influence on

providers (including student accommodation) and how they operate in a learner-centric manner.

High level of professionalism amongst student accommodation staff

- We know that accommodation staff across the board work hard and are dedicated to meeting residents' needs and ensuring residents in student accommodation have a positive experience.
- Student accommodation is increasingly becoming a professional career path. Through the inquiry the Committee heard from current and former staff who have been working in the sector for a long time and have a wealth of experience.
- In addition to the long-term accommodation staff are Residential Assistants. These roles are filled year-on-year by senior students and play a key part in the wider student accommodation staff support provided to residents, including, for example, initial residential support and response, and identifying situations for follow-up or escalation.
- Although accommodation staff play a vital role in supporting residents' wellbeing and safety in student accommodation, it is important to remember that they are not the silver bullet. Accommodation staff sit amongst the wider support network available to residents (including support provided through the tertiary education provider).

Links between the inquiry and wider issues: student wellbeing and mental health, Budget 2021 increases to financial support for living costs, housing costs, and changes in enrolment numbers

Student wellbeing and mental health

- Over recent years there has been growing awareness and concern about mental health and wellbeing, with increasing levels of distress among students in tertiary education. Many tertiary students are in a transitional period of their lives, in new environments, distanced from their whānau, and rebuilding their support networks – all while facing new pressures and expectations.
- We know that wellbeing is essential for students to be able to achieve their aspirations in tertiary education and beyond. This has driven a strengthened focus from education agencies on supporting the mental and physical wellbeing of students, and making the system more student-centred.
- In response to this, the Government is expanding and accelerating frontline mental health and wellbeing services at tertiary education institutions to help students manage ongoing stresses related to COVID-19 by investing \$25 million to boost mental health support for tertiary students.
- The funding builds on the existing roll out of free primary mental health and wellbeing services for 18-25 year olds including the Piki programme in Wellington (including at Victoria University) and programmes at Auckland University, as well as other mental health services that are already provided by tertiary education institutions.
- Initial funding has now been allocated to Te Pūkenga, which will distribute funding across their subsidiaries in a way that targets services to needs and gaps. The Ministries of Health and Education will work with wānanga and the university sector to determine how best to target the funding over the coming years.

Student support and housing costs

- The Government recognises that wide access to tertiary education is vital to the economic and social wellbeing of New Zealanders, and that the costs of study are a real issue for many students. This is why, through Budget 2021, we announced additional living support for full-time tertiary students through a \$25 per week boost to student allowances and the student loan living cost maximum from 1 April 2022. This builds on earlier support announced in 2018 through the Fees Free policy and an increase to student living support by \$50 per week.
- Last year, the Government also introduced the Targeted Training and Apprenticeship Fund (TTAF). This makes all apprenticeships and a range of training programmes at sub-degree level free for learners until 31 December 2022. It is targeted towards industry skill needs where demand from employers for these skills will continue to be strong, or is expected to grow, during New Zealand's recovery period from the impacts of COVID-19. This includes industry areas of construction, primary industries, community support, and information technology.
- In engagements during COVID-19 and the Education Conversation | Kōrero Mātauranga, as well as through feedback on the inquiry, we have heard that students, like other New Zealanders face increasing housing costs. Te Tūāpapa Kura Kāinga – Ministry of Housing and Urban Development is monitoring the rental market closely, including rent increases and the availability of rental stock. Increasing student living support will help address some of the affordability challenges faced by students.
- The Government contributes to supporting students as there are positive outcomes from tertiary education for both students and the country. However, the costs of study also need to be shared between students and the government for as many people to benefit from these supports as possible. We will continue to look at ways of improving student affordability alongside other spending priorities.

Changes in enrolment numbers

- There has been an increase in domestic student enrolments in tertiary education in 2021. The data shows that the increase was 12% in 2021, compared with increases of less than 1% in each of the previous four years. The number of students in all age groups increased significantly in 2021, but the largest rates of growth were seen in older age groups.
- These changes in enrolment numbers will likely lead to increased demand from domestic students for student accommodation, further highlighting the need to ensure wellbeing and safety practices in tertiary education (and within accommodation) are robust.
- In contrast, the number of international students decreased by 31% in 2021 compared with the same time in the previous year. A higher share of international students will be undertaking their study while offshore given the border restrictions, and will not seek accommodation in New Zealand.