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Secretary, The Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs
Legislative Assembly of the ACT,
GPO Box 1020,
Canberra, ACT, 2601

30 June 2011

To the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs;

On behalf of the Youth Coalition of the ACT (the Youth Coalition), I would like to thank the Standing Committee (the Committee) for the opportunity to input into the Inquiry into the Accommodation Needs of Tertiary Education Students in the ACT (the Inquiry).

About the Youth Coalition of the ACT

The Youth Coalition is the peak youth affairs body in the ACT. Comprised of 100 members, programs, and individuals the Youth Coalition is responsible for representing and promoting the interests and wellbeing of young people aged 12 to 25 years and those who work with them.

The Youth Coalition is represented on many ACT Government advisory structures and provides advice to the ACT Government on youth issues, along with providing information to youth services about policy and program matters.

A key role of the Youth Coalition is the development and analysis of ACT social policy and program decisions for young people and youth services. The Youth Coalition facilitates the development of strong linkages and promotes collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people in the ACT.

Response to the Inquiry

The Youth Coalition commends the Committee for seeking discussion regarding the very important issue of the accommodation needs of tertiary students in the ACT, particularly in light of both the State and Commonwealth Government's commitment to continuing education for young people.

The Youth Coalition, in formulating our response to the Paper, consulted with some key stakeholders in the tertiary student accommodation arena. The Youth Coalition participated in consultation with individuals, including university students, and this process was augmented by feedback from other youth support services, as well as some research completed by the author of this response.

This response was prepared by Youth Coalition Policy and Development Officer Jenn Dunkley jenn@youthcoalition.net, with support from the Youth Coalition staff team.

The Youth Coalition has chosen to respond to each of the items for discussion as outlined in the terms of reference for the inquiry.

1. Current accommodation options for students enrolled in ACT tertiary education institutions providing higher education and VET programs

The Australian National University (ANU) and the University of Canberra (UC) both have dedicated on-campus accommodation available. This type of accommodation though, is usually at capacity and faces sizeable waiting lists. Students who require accommodation, and who are coming from interstate or overseas, experience difficulties with the short amount of time they have after accepting a place and before classes begin to seek and secure private rentals, whether they are group houses or individual.

The Australian Catholic University (ACU) provides support to people requiring accommodation through hosting an up-to-date listing of rentals available in the ACT for their students but does not provide any on-campus accommodation. The options seem to mainly consist of sourcing group rental properties.

For international students, all 3 major tertiary education institutions in the ACT offer support to participate in a home stay program where a Canberra family agrees to accommodate students in return for affordable boarding payments. They are also eligible to apply for on-campus accommodation and to seek group rental in the same way as other students.

For many young people studying under a VET program, or who are engaged in an apprenticeship, there is a lack of affordable accommodation options and this group of people can be vulnerable to oversight. People in this group can become homeless, often living in their cars or 'couch surfing'; both of which are accepted definitions of homelessness that should be addressed to increase their health and wellbeing along with their chances of successfully completing VET courses and apprenticeships.

Anecdotally 'couch surfing' is also common at the beginning of the academic year, for the many university students who have yet to secure a lease or other accommodation.

Students who are a member of the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) can be accommodated at and study at UNSW@ADFA which provides enough accommodation for their students. Recent reports have revealed incidents and other information indicating a need for further review into the safety of cadets. This is currently being undertaken.

2. Models used in other jurisdictions to meet the accommodation needs of tertiary education students

The South Australian State Government has a program connected to HousingSA (public housing) specifically designed to support students who have not been able to access on-campus housing and who cannot afford to rent if they wish to fully engage in study and not work. This would be easily adaptable for the ACT as previous programs through Housing ACT have shown; the ACT also has excellent community housing providers.

3. Student experiences of current accommodation options in the ACT, including the experiences of local, interstate and international students

3.1 On Campus

Student's experiences should be viewed in terms of cultural and systemic issues as their individual stories can show systemic problems to be addressed and also reveal cultural 'norms' within educational institutions. For instance, recent reports around the lack of safety for young women in various tertiary education institutions reflects not the behaviour of the young women concerned, but rather it reflects that for some institutions it is still a cultural or systemic 'norm' for young people, especially women and gender diverse young people, to be subjected to harassment or violence. While many young people do not experience sexual or other forms of violence and have not feared for their safety while residing away from home to study, it cannot be said that safety, and particularly that of young women and gender diverse young people, is guaranteed as it should be.

The National Union of Students, in their report "*Safe Universities Blueprint – Talk About It Survey; Results and Recommendations*", have developed up-to-date statistics around the commonality of unwanted sexual activity within universities and have found that 1 in 10 female students have experienced sexual violence at an Australian University. There is also good evidence for this happening in Canberra as shown in March 2011 through the ABC and Crikey.com news reports. (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/video/2011/03/18/3168199.htm> and <http://www.crikey.com.au/2011/03/24/s-xual-assault-harassment-plague-female-university-students/>)

There are also the recent revelations of cultural and systemic issues at ADFA, creating another unsafe environment for young women to learn in. An article titled 'Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Group – Women in the Armed Forces: the role of women in the Australian Defence Force', from the Parliamentary Library website, shows that sexual harassment of women is a cultural and systemic issue and has been for a long time now, as this article was last reviewed in 2000 and in 2011 we have had still more revelations of continuing harassment of women. This kind of environment does not allow for young women or young men who may also be exposed to sexual harassment, to properly engage in their course of study. The Youth Coalition of the ACT would advocate for, in any residential setting, appropriate and useful security devices along with development of systems and culture, to allow for young people to feel safe to come forward and tell their story, along with discouraging young people from committing assaults and to stop harassment throughout education.

3.2 Off Campus

For some young people who come to Canberra to study and find they cannot access on-campus accommodation, they then often have to struggle with balancing work and study so they can afford to rent in a group house. This situation can impact negatively on their health and wellbeing and where they are sharing in a group house and people leave, they cannot afford rent and utilities and can then be faced with having to live in crisis or transitional accommodation within a specialist homelessness service rather than giving up their study and, as they see it, their future.

3.3 Young Apprentices

Young people engaged in apprenticeships are of particular concern when considering the experiences of students engaged in tertiary education, around access to affordable and safe accommodation or housing. They often do not receive enough income to manage group houses or private rental in the highly expensive Canberra rental market without sacrificing other needs like maintenance of their vehicle, clothing, nutritional food and utilities. These young people will prioritise their employment, which usually requires a vehicle, and sometimes choose their vehicle over accommodation - and so use their vehicle as accommodation. This is considered homelessness.

3.4 Multicultural Young People

Multicultural Youth Services in the ACT have also prepared a submission to this enquiry and the Youth Coalition of the act strongly advocates for particular attention to the issue of migrant and refugee experiences.

International students experience a longer process to securing accommodation options. The largest institutions have good supports in place to support international students to negotiate some accommodation and to ensure they are aware of their rights and responsibilities, and the smaller institutions also ensure there are specific and appropriate supports available.

3.5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People

There are some very positive success stories from some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have been able to successfully engage in and complete tertiary education. There are also complex socio-economic issues surrounding the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; direct consultation and engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community around their experiences and recommendations should happen, to ensure the ACT is working towards closing the gap.

4. Strategies adopted by ACT tertiary education institutions to meet student accommodation and welfare needs

Institutions that provide on-campus accommodation have recently increased the number of places available and usually have linkages to other services provided by the institutions to meet welfare needs through advice, referral and case management if appropriate. Institutions that do not provide accommodation do provide support around sourcing and securing other accommodation options, these supports include information, recommendations and some tenancy support around providing tenants with information about their rights, if not providing direct advocacy with accommodation providers and landlords.

5. Anticipated demand for student accommodation in the ACT in light of Commonwealth and Territory Governments' priorities for the tertiary education sector

In 2010 the report from the ACT Tertiary education Taskforce, "*Learning Capital: an integrated tertiary education system for the ACT*", was released, describing the taskforce's vision for Canberra to become the 'learning capital' of Australia and that in order for this to occur there is a need for greater integration across education providers. This report does not show any in-depth investigation of the

accommodation needs of interstate and international students, along with local students who have experienced homelessness or other situations where they require accommodation outside of any natural supports. If, as this report recommends, the A.C.T is to model itself as the 'learning capital' there is a strong need to ensure there is not only an appropriate number of student accommodation places but also that those places are supported by linkages to social and economic assistance – partnerships with government and community organisations would provide this.

It is difficult to precisely anticipate how much demand for accommodation would increase in light of the ACT Government's learn or earn guarantee and the Commonwealth Government's stated commitment to have tertiary level education available for all Australians. It can be said that demand could increase exponentially – particularly if the ACT models itself as the 'learning capital'.

On-campus accommodation is not the only answer to this issue, much work can be done to forge partnerships between Housing ACT and real estate agencies to produce programs to support students living in private rentals in the ACT; for students who do not meet the requirements for public housing in the ACT, requirements could be adjusted on the basis that the student continues to participate in education. There is a risk, in the scenario of demand increasing by even 5-10%, that young people coming to the ACT to study may end up facing tertiary or secondary homelessness; putting supports in place independent of accommodation that provide tenancy support and advice along with other living skills learning as necessary would work to minimise this risk.

It must be stated, if demand were to increase as a result of government recommendations and legislation, that the number of students with particular support needs will increase; those living with disability would require supports, including accessible accommodation, provided particular to their needs.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, due to the complex socio-economic factors affecting them as a unique group, would benefit from support specific to their needs, whether it is amounts of funding to assist the financial burden on families hosting people from interstate or friendly accommodation that is culturally appropriate and safe.

The amount of international students will certainly rise and programs and supports that are currently in place would need to be reviewed and expanded.

6. Coordination and planning measures adopted by the ACT Government to meet anticipated need in student accommodation

Housing affordability measures adopted by the ACT Government need to take in to account the needs, and likely low incomes, of students. Current initiatives looking at a percentage of market rent are unlikely to result in 'student affordable housing' in the central locations where our tertiary institutions are. It is particularly important to consider that other costs associated with access to education as a result of where a student might be living (such as public transport) need to be considered in a planning sense.

7. General factors influencing availability and access to appropriate accommodation for the core demographic group (18-25 year olds)

- **Access to the private rental market in Canberra:** A complex issue touching on the issue of housing affordability and the issue of young people's access to private rentals, due to stigma about the level of young people's living skills and responsibility. A scan at any time of the rentals advertised through the Canberra Times shows many available properties that specify 'no groups' - and often forming a household group is the only way students can afford to rent in the private rental market. A proportion of the rentals available to young people and/or groups are not healthy and safe places to live, with a number of students living in houses that are in disrepair and sometimes overcrowded. Often in a situation where the property is sub-standard, students are unwilling to assert their rights to their landlord, as there is a fear, whether real or perceived, that they may lose their property if they 'cause issues'.
- **ANU offering guaranteed accommodation:** This guarantee encourages people to come and study in the ACT which is positive in many ways for the Canberra culture and economy - but in giving the guarantee they have not, in the past, been able to meet the demand in their accommodations, meaning they have reached out and placed their students in cheap accommodation options which may have been suitable for other tertiary students, particularly those studying VET or engaged in apprenticeships. The guarantee also does not apply after the first 12 months of study.
- **Transport:** While the public transport network in Canberra is consistently working to improve, it does not address the needs of many tertiary students in the ACT. Those who need to work alongside studying require safe and regular public transport between their educational institution, accommodation and work place. Safety is of concern particularly late at night and regularity is a big issue for students especially at night times and on the weekends. A good example is Sunday evenings where if a student works past the hours of 6-7pm they are not likely to be able to catch a bus back to their accommodation and so face either an unsafe walk, an expensive taxi or to not work at those times which cuts down on their availability to earn an income at times when there are no clashes with class or assignments.
- **Access to facilities:** As many tertiary students either do not have or cannot afford to maintain a personal vehicle it is reasonable that students seek accommodations near to public transport, shops and other facilities they may need. This reduces the number of accommodation options available if public transport is not expanded.
- **Seasonal context:** Many students who come to the ACT for tertiary education return home or leave Canberra temporarily for paid work in the semester and term breaks. While they are not here they may not be able to afford to continue to pay their rent and remain in a tenancy agreement, lose their accommodation and struggle to find new accommodation when they need to return. This is particularly an issue when it comes to private rentals.

8. Any other relevant matter

- **Supported living:** linking in people or organisations to provide 'sustaining tenancy' type programs to support students who may not be experienced in living away from home would address some needs around ensuring students have good living skills. A good sustaining tenancy program is one that can provide not only information and referral but can educate about rights and responsibilities, financial management and work to reduce the risk of people entering the debt-eviction cycle. Woden Community Services currently has an excellent program in this model.
- **Good for the Canberra economy:** While students don't have high incomes, they do spend their money here in Canberra on utilities, groceries and social occasions. This should be viewed as a cycle, with their dollars coming in and ensuring it is going back to provide the tertiary institutions they are studying at with further support around housing and accommodation, including sustaining tenancy programs. Along with economic benefits, there are great social benefits in having young people engaged in tertiary education being able access safe, stable and secure housing or accommodation. Those benefits could include not only having an energising 'youth culture' in the ACT but also the number of students completing their study and going on to use their skills and knowledge to benefit the community would increase.
- **An investment in the future:** Ensuring tertiary students are not only able to attend institutions and earn knowledge and skills to take into workplaces but that they are also safe and stable in their living environment would impact positively on their success level. Our community would continue to reap the benefits of people who are well educated and motivated to create a career, entering the workforce. Ensuring students needs are met, not only accommodation, would increase their chances of success in education.

The Youth Coalition would welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee to support the youth sector to have input into any further consultation or policy development around the accommodation needs of tertiary students in the ACT. Please do not hesitate to contact me on (02) 6247 3540 or at director@youthcoalition.net if you wish to discuss this letter further.

Sincerely,



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