

April 2nd, 2011

Dear ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs,

RE: Comment on Terms of Reference relating to the accommodation needs of tertiary education students

I am writing to you as I would like to specifically comment on two of the terms of reference for your enquiry. I comment on these terms of reference based on my personal experience of relocating to Canberra, ACT from Adelaide, South Australia at the age of 23 years to commence postgraduate education (which I am currently completing). I hope that my experience may be informative for the enquiry.

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

In July 2008, I was accepted into a postgraduate Psychology degree at the University of Canberra. At the time of the offer, I had two weeks notice between my acceptance to and the commencement of the course, which proved problematic for obtaining accommodation. Initially, I investigated on campus accommodation, however, due to the lengthy waiting list I could not be offered accommodation until January 2009. I was fortunate to have a cousin already living in Canberra as a graduate for the public service who suggested I investigate a share housing arrangement through the allhomes.com.au website. Upon further investigation I also found that the weekly rental rate was cheaper for a share housing arrangement than for living on campus which led me to further investigate this option.

Initially I attempted to arrange my accommodation whilst I was still living in Adelaide, however, I found this problematic as (understandably) many of the tenants were reluctant to let a room to someone they had never met before. This meant that when I relocated to Canberra the most affordable transitional accommodation option was to stay with my cousin, however, as she was in a share house arrangement herself I could only stay with her for a week whilst I sourced my own accommodation. Consequently, I accepted the first accommodation offer made to me of a three bedroom unit located close to the university sharing with two other girls a few years younger than myself. I have resided in this accommodation for the last three years.

My experience of share housing in Canberra has been a challenging one. Firstly, I have found it difficult to adjust to the decline in living standards from living at home with my parents in South Australia, to living independently. As a student living within a strict budget, this has meant living in an older property which has not been well maintained by the owners or the rental agent. The property has mould, cracked walls, broken fly screens and appliances that have failed or had problems. Initially, I found it difficult to pursue complaints regarding faults with the property due to my own lack of knowledge regarding the rights and responsibilities of tenants and rental agents (and I've found this to be the case amongst my peers also) as well as a fear to pursue complaints that have not been addressed through the rental agent because of the

concern over the possibility (whether believed rightly or wrongly) of not having the lease renewed and having to find another property that is just as affordable.

Secondly, living with strangers in share housing arrangements poses another challenge for students in accommodation in Canberra. Whilst I have generally found the experience of living with other young people positive in that it provided me with social support, navigating the dynamics of living with other young people has been admittedly difficult. Share housing arrangements tend to be unpredictable as tenants tend to move on whether it be because of completion of study, moving in with partners or moving back home. At one point in time, both of my housemates moved out of the property we shared at the same time. This left me alone to recruit two new housemates as quickly as possible, because I could not cover the rent and expenses myself. I found this particularly stressful and that it impacted negatively on my ability to study as I had to purchase and move furniture, advertise and interview new housemates whilst studying full time, completing a university placement and working 19 hours a week in paid employment. Additionally, moving into a share house where I did not previously know the occupants meant that I was not always aware upfront of the life circumstances of the other tenants. Consequently, I have experienced living with a person with mental illness, who had limited support from family and came to rely on her fellow tenants for support. Finally, living with students between the ages of 18 – 22 years who engage in binge drinking and risky behaviours (as statistics show is common in this age group) in a share housing arrangement has often proved difficult. Whilst this sort of behaviour would be monitored and not tolerated in university accommodation, in a share housing arrangement you are required to develop a tolerance to behaviours that you would not ordinarily tolerate, because you do not have the financial means to move to other accommodation or live on your own. Additionally, I have known friends who were studying full time who remained in unhealthy relationships because they lacked the financial support to move out and start all over again. The negative impact this has had on the mental and physical health of students I have known that experienced this and their ability to study is great.

Finally, I have found the financial strain experienced by tertiary students because of the high cost of accommodation in Canberra a prominent issue as a student living in a share housing arrangement. Whilst some students rely totally on Centrelink assistance to live, other students like myself are not eligible for Centrelink and must work in casual or permanent part time employment to support our study. This has created tension with some of my course conveners and university lecturers as they expected me to devote 15 hours per unit, per week to study and I could not realistically commit to this due to my paid employment commitments (which have enabled me to support myself through my study). Similarly, I have found that many of my housemates supported themselves through their education by engaging in casual employment. However, it is this group of young people who have struggled to pay rent or bills when experiencing an illness or injury which has prevented them from being able to work. In conclusion, I hope that details of my personal experience as a tertiary student have assisted to highlight the challenges faced by students in accessing and most importantly maintaining stable, affordable accommodation whilst completing higher education.

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

The main factors that influence availability and access to appropriate accommodation that I have found are:

- Limited knowledge of accommodation options in Canberra before relocation
- Limited knowledge and awareness of tenants rights and responsibilities
- Limited capacity to earn a sufficient wage to support accommodation experienced by students, particularly those studying full time
- Financial management skills (younger students seem to have more difficulty managing budgets to balance living expenses and recreational expenses)
- Transport issues (accessing public transport to get from home to university and employment)
- Reluctance of rental agents to accept applications for groups of students (commonly advertisements state that the rental agent or owner will not take applications from groups)