National Student Action Plan on COVID-19

August 2021

OVERVIEW

The students' associations and councils party to this plan are supportive of the Government's efforts to eliminate the spread of COVID-19 in the community. However, we believe that there has to be continual focus on the needs of tertiary students during this latest outbreak. Across Aotearoa, students at universities, polytechnics, wānanga work-based providers and private training establishments, are finishing their academic year in the worst possible way, with Alert Level rises causing significant disruption to their education and lives.

The Government and tertiary providers cannot let recent lockdown impact the rest of our learners' journey through the tertiary education system.

There are currently over 400,000 students in New Zealand. Their study is crucial for the continued progress of New Zealand's economy, research and design, health care and environment.

This Action Plan is intended to assist in decision-making for student support. It contains simple requests of the Government and our tertiary institutions to ensure that students can continue studying during a time of great uncertainty. The appeals in this plan are not radical, they are simply pragmatic and necessary. They need to be met so that our tauira can survive and thrive in a time of crisis.

The urgency of this request arises from the difficult and often harrowing experiences of tertiary students during lockdown. New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA), Te Mana Ākonga (TMĀ), Tauira Pasifika (TP) and the National Disabled Students' Association (NDSA) want to partner with Government and tertiary providers to ensure that the experiences of 2020 are never repeated for our tauira.

The National Student Action Plan on COVID-19 has been designed by students for students. It is supported by 48 students' associations, councils, and groups across Aotearoa.

The purpose of this National Student Action Plan on COVID-19 is to:
- Outline the key issues that tertiary students face in light of COVID-19, and
- Identify the assistance that tertiary students need from the Government and tertiary institutions during this public health crisis

**The Action Plan is divided into four areas:**
1. **F**inancial support (provided by Government)
2. Non-financial support (provided by Government)
3. Financial support (provided by tertiary institutions)
4. Non-financial support (provided by tertiary institutions

GENERAL PRINCIPLES
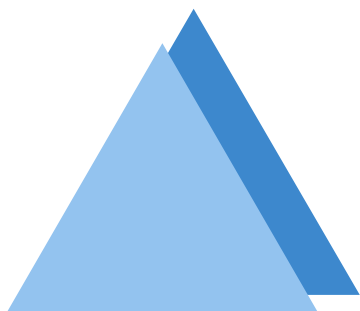
Consistent, clear, and accessible communication

- We support a consistent and united approach to communication being taken by tertiary institutions across New Zealand to avoid confusion among students.
- We support the Government working with tertiary institutes ensuring there are clear and accessible communication channels to students.
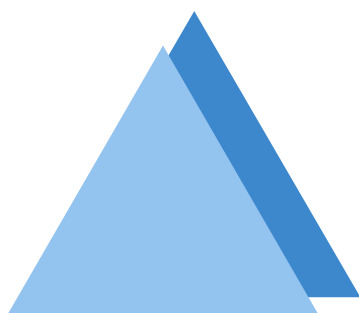
Collaboration and partnership

- We support the Government working with tertiary institutions to deliver tertiary institution specific requests.
- We support tertiary institutes and the Government working with local and national student representatives. This ensures the needs and experiences of students are effectively heard and actioned at all levels of decision making.

Equity

- We acknowledge there are students, especially tauira Māori, Pasifika, international and disabled tauira, who will be disproportionately affected by COVID-19. We support models of response and delivery that are equitable.
- We also support a forward-looking approach which acknowledges long term issues the delta outbreak will cause for students. This is especially important for disabled tauira who are less likely to return to campus in lower alert levels.

1

Financial Support
(provided by Government)

FINANCIAL SUPPORT (PROVIDED BY GOVERNMENT)

All financial support provided by Government should be available to these domestic tertiary students:

- Full time and part time students;
- Undergraduate and postgraduate students;
- Students who currently receive StudyLink payments, and should include a grace period for students, not currently receiving StudyLink payments, to register for StudyLink.

1. Temporary Universal Education Income

a. The Government should implement a Universal Education Income (UEI), to ensure that students, regardless of background, age or level of study, have the support they need to succeed.

2. COVID-19 Hardship Fund

a. The Government should increase funding to the COVID-19 Hardship Fund for Learners (HAFL) to recognise increased need due to the lockdown.
b. HAFL should provide relief for tertiary students seeking cover for emergency COVID-19-related costs, including but not limited to:

    i. Emergency transport costs;
    ii. Bereavement costs;

    iii. Basic living costs;

    iv. Rental relief for private rental accommodation and tertiary provider accommodation (e.g. halls of residence);

    v. Health services costs.

c. The specific criteria for receiving this Hardship Fund should be developed in partnership with student leaders and must be built with equity at the fore.

    i. Providers should collaborate with student organisations on the administration of the fund.

d. The criteria for the Technology Access Purpose portion of the HAFL must be flexible to allow for novel solutions to access and connectivity issues.

e. There must be a dedicated hardship fund for international students to ensure that they have access to financial support and this fund must be equitable with the HAFL.

3. Mental Health

a. The Government must increase the mental health support for tertiary students and young people. We know from the 2020 lockdown that social isolation and uncertainty exacerbates poor mental health. Greater and more diverse forms of mental health support should be implemented to meet this need now and after the heightened COVID-19 response subsides.

b. The Government must make proper provisions in mental health services for tauira Māori, with special consideration for the cultural practices that enhance the mana of our tauira.

c. Mental health support funded by Government must be culturally competent and be accessible for all diverse learner groups.

4. Transition to Online Learning

a. The Government should fund tertiary institutions to properly transition teaching to quality online provision rather than simply adapt content to emergency delivery.

b. This funding must have real focus on making online content accessible and meaningful to all learners, especially those with disabilities or a lack of digital literacy.

5. Increased Funding for Student Support Services

a. Many tertiary institutions have faced a significant financial impact due to COVID-19 and this has adversely impacted the support services they can provide to students. The Government should resource institutions so that students receive the support they need, and are not impacted by their provider's poor financial position,

    i. The funding for these services must be designed in conjunction with student communities, to ensure that it meets their needs.

b. We know from 2020 that online learning raises new and unique issues for students, especially disabled students. In conjunction with this, disability support services around the country have recently seen a massive increase in student enrolment. The Government should meet this need with extra funding to ensure disabled students are not underserved.

    i. The design and utilisation of this extra funding must be designed in conjunction with student communities, especially disabled student communities.

2

Non-Financial Support

(provided by Government)

NON-FINANCIAL SUPPORT (PROVIDED BY GOVERNMENT)

1. Employment Information

    a. The Government should create targeted employment rights information for tertiary students and disseminate this information through Employment NZ channels, including social media, websites and phone lines.

2. StudyLink Eligibility

    a. The Government should relax the eligibility for StudyLink payments. This will allow tertiary students to continue studying if they face an unexpected drop in academic performance as a result of COVID-19

3. COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign

    a. The Government should engage with students on plans to roll-out the COVID-19 vaccination campaign into student communities.
        i. There should be a strong focus on how the campaign engages with immunocompromised students.

4. COVID-19 Testing

    a. Ensure there is adequate and accessible transport to and from testing stations, so that students are able to access this service.
    b. There should be a strong focus on safe and accessible transport to testing stations for at-risk communities, including the disabled community.

5 Communication

    a. Ensure communication and updates about the outbreak and alert levels are timely, accessible, and clear.
    b. Ensure communication about extra financial support offered in light of the COVID outbreak is also timely, accessible, and clear.
    c. All communication should be available in Te Reo Māori, New Zealand Sign Language, and EasyRead formats.

3

Financial Support
(provided by tertiary institutions)

FINANCIAL SUPPORT (PROVIDED BY TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS)

1. Employment

a. Tertiary institutions should keep paying all students employed as staff, including lab assistants, tutors, research assistants, and residential assistants, even if they are unable to continue working during this period.

b. The remuneration of Residential Assistants (employed by a tertiary institution) should reflect the extra hours that they work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Flu Vaccinations

a. Tertiary institutions should work with the Government, to ensure that all immuno-compromised tertiary students receive free flu vaccinations.

3. Scholarships

a. Tertiary institutions should allow flexible extensions to research time for postgraduate students and for scholarships.

b. This includes reinstatement of university scholarships to those whose scholarships have recently lapsed.

4. Hardship Funds

a. Tertiary institutions should increase the availability of hardship funding for their students. Increased information about the Hardship Funds should be made available. Applications and inquiries to the Hardship Fund should be moved online.
b. Tertiary institutions should set aside additional pūtea for tauira Māori in accordance with Te Tiriti obligations to tangata whenua. Autonomy should be given to Māori student bodies so that Hardship Funds intended for Māori are handled by Māori.
c. Tertiary institutions must recognise that many students are parents or caregivers, and hardship grants should reflect this in the support provided.
d. Tertiary institutions must have funding in place to ensure that international students have equitable access to hardship support and must ensure that international students do not suffer financial hardship because they are not eligible for the HAFL.

5. Course Withdrawals

a. Late withdrawal fees should be waived for all students, especially students who are disproportionately affected by the sudden switch to online learning. This includes neurodiverse students, students with family commitments, essential workers, and students with inadequate digital literacy.

4

Non-Financial Support
(provided by tertiary institutions)

NON-FINANCIAL SUPPORT (PROVIDED BY TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS)

1. Online and Recoded Courses

a. As an urgent and temporary measure, all tertiary courses (lectures, classes, tutorials, workshops, seminars) should be recorded and made available online. Where this is not possible, tertiary institutions should make urgent alternative arrangements.
b. All online teaching should be accessible to students with disabilities. This includes, but is not limited to, adequate captioning of lectures, requirements on academics for lectures to include PowerPoints or notes, and the availability of shared note taking.

2. Digital Literacy

a. Tertiary providers must ensure that students are able to access and engage effectively with digital learning tools (for example, supporting students in improving their digital literacy skills).

3. Assessments

a. Tertiary institutions should implement alternative assessment arrangements (for example, take home tests as an alternative to examinations).
b. Tertiary institutions should adopt assessment tools that respect the privacy and dignity of students and are accessible to students with disabilities.

iii. Tools such as ProctorU, or alternative articifical intelligence that invasively collect students' biodata, have significant equity issues and should not be used.

c. Tertiary institutions should only use aegrotats and pass/fail grades as a last resort.

d. Tertiary institutions should be more flexible with assessment accommodations and extensions to reflect current uncertain and stressful times. This should particularly be considered for students disproportionately impacted by the switch to online learning such as disabled students, students with family commitments, essential workers, and those with poor digital literacy.

4. Student Support Facilities

a. Student support facilities, including health services and student advocacy services should remain available to students online and in person where possible.

b. The modes for the delivery of these services must reflect the needs of students, particularly those with disabilities and accessibility challenges, and tauira Māori.

c. Institutions should increase the visibility of these services by creating targeted messaging, which is clear, accessible, and informs students of the services available.

5. Support for Staff

a. Tertiary staff, both academic and allied, need to be supported and clearly communicated with by providers. Those in flexible working arrangements, such as student tutors are particularly in need of this support.

6. Accommodation

a. Tertiary institutions should ensure that all institution-owned or institution-managed accommodation remains open, with current services (including catering) continuing.

b. Students, staying in tertiary provider owned accommodation, who wish to return home should not be charged for time that would otherwise be spent at the hall of residence.

c. If there is an Alert Level rise, rebates should be provided to those who wish to no longer stay in student accommodation for whatever reason.

d. Students who do stay in student accommodation should be provided adequate pastoral care to recognise the added stress and mental health implications resulting from the restrictions in social interaction during this time.

e. Tertiary institutions should provide adequate pastoral care for Residential Assistants or Leaders, ensuring that they receive a similar level of care to the tauira they are supporting.

7. Health

a. Tertiary institutes should provide up to date information to students of where they can go to get medical attention if they are experiencing flu-like symptoms.

b. They should also provide clear, concise information to students of where they can access health services for existing and new health conditions, outside of COVID-19.

c. Health services must be accessible to all students and offer differing methods of engagement to reflect the diversity of students. This must include non-face-to-face health support options.with family commitments, essential workers, and those with poor digital literacy.

8. Communications

a. Communications to students should be proactive, clear, and accessible. Students should know how changing Alert Levels impact their study, access to campus, and assessments.

b. Students who are nearing the end of their qualification and have handed in their final assignment must still receive communication from their providers.

c. Information about access to online mental health support during lockdowns should be made clear and obvious to students.

SIGNATORIES

New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA)
Te Mana Akonga (TMĀ)
Tauira Pasifika (TP)
National Disabled Students' Association (NDSA)
Albany Students' Association (ASA)
Auckland University Students' Association (AUSA)
Auckland University of Technology Students' Association (AUTSA)
Lincoln University Students' Association (LUSA)
Massey at Distance (M@D)
Massey at Wellington Students' Association (MAWSA)
Massey University Students' Association (MUSA)
Manakaū Institute of Technology Student Council (MITSC)
Otago University Students' Association (OUSA)
Students' Association at the Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (SANITI)
Students' Association at UCOL (SAU)
Students' Association at Wintec (SAWIT)
Younited Students' Association (EIT)
Unitec Student Council (USC)
University of Canterbury Students' Association (UCSA)
Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association (VUWSA)
WelTec and Whitireia Student Connection

Kokiri Ngatahi
Manawatahi
Mātātupu
Ngā Tauira Māori
Ngāi Tauira
Te Akatoki
Te Awhioraki
Te Roopū Māori
Te Roopū Tautoko
Te Tira Akonga
Te Waiora
Titahi ki Tua

SIGNATORIES

Auckland University Pacific Islands Students' Association
Fale Niu AUT Pacific Island Student Association
Lincoln University Pacific Island Students' Association
Massey University Pasifika Students' Association
New Zealand Tongan Tertiary Students Association
Niuean Tertiary Students' Association New Zealand
Pacific EIT (PEIT)
Pacific Island Students of Ara
Tuluma Tokelauan Students' Association
University of Otago Pacific Island Students Association

Auckland University Disabled Students' Association
Otago Disabled Students' Association
Victoria Disabled Students' Association
University of Waikato Disabled Students' Association
University of Canterbury Disabled Students' Association

University of Auckland Postgraduate Students' Association
University of Otago Postgraduate Students' Association
Victoria University of Wellington Postgraduate Students' Association