

The battle for housing

The new kids on campus have dreams of a waterfront apartment or a snazzy little flat in Toorak, but as DEBORAH FEWSTER discovers, reality comes crashing down all too soon.

Students often start with those ideals, but generally become more realistic as the situation is explained to them, president of Deakin University Student Association (DUSA), Ben Davison says.

Situation? What situation?

Well, let's just say that if you're a student, Deakin or otherwise, you can forget that old real estate mantra 'location, location, location'.

In the current rental market – as housing affordability hits crisis point – it's all about 'compromise, compromise, compromise'.

"Students are definitely bottom of the pile when it comes to housing and that's due mainly to a negative media portrayal of student behavior," Davison says.

"Most students are clean, well mannered and want a quiet, safe place to study and live. Unfortunately agents and landlords often think that the opposite is the case."

Students are also hamstrung by their need for flexible lease terms that fit in with the university or TAFE calendar.

"Most students would prefer their own rental, but most settle for share housing as the only viable option," Davison says.

"It can be very difficult to find an affordable rental property near the Burwood campus ... and it can be very difficult to find any kind of rental property in Warrnambool.

"The cost is much worse than it has been in the past.

"Most students end up having to take what they can get. Compromise is (the) key when looking for a place to live and generally it will come down to taking the first one that accepts the application."

DUSA is contracted by Deakin University to provide an advice and referral service for students looking for off-campus accommodation, and is aware of students who've dropped out or had marks affected because of problems accessing housing.

"Students who don't have a place to live or who are struggling to find affordable housing are generally too stressed and not in an environment where they can study effectively," Davison says.

"We have cases of some students who miss classes to go to open houses, students who are sleeping on friends' couches,



students who are sleeping on the floor of other people's on-campus residences, and up to nine people in a three-bedroom house.

"I have heard reports of rents being increased and it's not a new situation for student accommodation to be in poor repair. Often, unscrupulous landlords will delay repairs for months knowing that student tenants have few, if any, other options.

"I do have to say, however, that DUSA works hard to ensure that landlords and agents we recommend are compliant with industry, legislative and our own standards."

In the inner city, where apartment vacancy rates are less than one per cent, the University of Melbourne owns eight share houses designed to accommodate vulnerable students who may have problems focusing on study because of difficulties accessing and maintaining stable housing.

The "small, but effective" Supported Housing Access

Program has been running for seven years, student housing adviser Barb Pedersen says.

The program is part of the university's commitment to increasing the number of students from educationally, financially or socially disadvantaged backgrounds enrolling in undergraduate programs.

"Not surprisingly, these students are at the lower end of any housing market," Pedersen says.

Students in the program are allocated their own room in a university share house for a period of up to two semesters. It's a "transitional" program that introduces students to the rights and responsibilities of the rental world, and also fosters independent living skills and experience.

The program can accommodate about 30 students at any one time, with two major intakes in January/February and again in July.

Rent is \$105 per week (\$455 per calendar month), bedrooms are offered unfurnished, but white goods such as fridges and

washing machines are provided. Bills for utilities are a shared household responsibility.

Pedersen says demand for supported housing reflects current market trends in Melbourne.

So far this year, the university has had 54 applications that fit the program's criteria. The current rental squeeze means that the university has had to tightly regulate the program to head off a "torrent of inappropriate [applications]" and ensure it targets those students who are in greatest need.

Two semesters is the longest possible time to be a tenant in the program.

"Our philosophy is that a tenant who has experienced affordable and secure share housing for two semesters, in most instances, will know their individual needs and will be well placed ... to secure sustainable and affordable housing for the duration of their studies," Pedersen says.

"To gear students up for this changeover, we offer them advice on housing options, especially

the affordable ones.

"We aim to highlight the importance of accurate and detailed housing applications, especially where prospective tenants should prove their ability to pay the rent, maintain the property and, in general, be good tenants. We know from experience that many student renters do not promote themselves as best as they can, or do not complete their housing application forms accurately."

For students who don't have the back-up of a such a program, rents in the private market can range from \$65 a week to \$500 a week, Davison says, depending on whether it's a room in a share house of nine or that elusive waterfront apartment.

Deakin pro vice-chancellor Dr Irene Irvine estimates the cost of living on-campus in Geelong (along with books, materials and stationery, transport and entertainment) is just over \$13,000, and around \$13,500 if a student is living off-campus.

But if you think that sounds expensive, then do a price comparison with Melbourne.

Irvine says "one advantage of studying at Deakin in Geelong is that we estimate living expenses are ... up to 18 per cent less than in Melbourne."

"We encourage potential students from Melbourne to consider studying in Geelong. Living and other expenses are even lower in Warrnambool than Geelong."

For some students, Commonwealth Rent Assistance offers some respite, although Davison is critical of the level of support.

"The current government policies are overly restrictive and do not reflect the reality of rental prices, cost of living and study costs.

"It is absurd how difficult it is for students to access government support. Students from middle-income families are expected to have their parents pay to support them.

"It's simply not viable." 