

Greater Wellington Oral Submission

**Jonathan Gee**

Kia ora koutou Regional Councillors,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on your Annual Plan on behalf of Victoria University's 22,000 students. My name is Jonathan Gee, President of the Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association, or VUWSA. Today I have with me Rory Lenihan-Ikin, VUWSA's Welfare Vice President, and Byron Oosthuizen, a Victoria University commerce student.

Our submission proposes a number of recommendation (as you can see on page 2), but today, we want to focus on the recommendation that will make very significant change in the lives of cash-strapped, debt-ridden students - that is a tertiary discount on public transport.

For several years now we have pushed for Fairer Fares. We have pushed for this because we think it's unfair that students spend tens of thousands of dollars to become skilled graduates for the benefit of the New Zealand economy and society, yet we can barely afford the bus to get to class.

Our original recommendation (as stated in the submission) is to extend the 50% Youth Fare to tertiary students and that remains our long-term goal. We're pleased to see some political will around this goal, with Justin Lester and Daran Ponter making a commitment towards this.

However, we acknowledge that the Regional Council has committed to a 25% discount for tertiary students in the Regional Public Transport Plan, as well as a universal 25% discount for off-peak travel in 2018. Recognising this work, we want to amend our recommendation today. We now recommend an extension of the 25% discount (both on-peak and off-peak) for tertiary students, to be included in the 2016/2017 Annual Plan. While we still support a 50% tertiary discount by 2019, we believe a 25% discount now is a reasonable and realistic first step towards achieving a more student-friendly Wellington in the current proposed Annual Plan.

The story so far goes something like this: following VUWSA's Fairer Fares campaign in 2013, Greater Wellington voted for a 25% tertiary discount in 2014, provided that the City Council and tertiary institutions also made a financial contribution. The City Council pledged \$75,000, and sent a letter to Wellington's tertiary institutions requesting that they also make a financial contribution. In 2015, Victoria responded expressing some support and interest, but keen to work with Greater Wellington, the City Council and other tertiary institutions to develop the detail. Since then, some meetings have taken place but there have been roadblocks. Fairer fares are still not a reality. Our cash-strapped, debt-ridden students can still barely afford the bus to get to class.

We're looking for some regional leadership and we're seeking that from you today. Rory will now present the case for fairer fares, and following this Byron will be telling his story and will present his petition.

**Rory Lenihan-Ikin**

Morena Councillors, ko Rory toku ingoa. We appreciate being able to speak to you today.

Life as a student in 2016 is tough. The \$176 that can be borrowed from the Government each week gets sucked up straight away by the cost of rent, the number of people receiving student allowance has dropped by a quarter since 2010, and only 15% of students getting money from their parents that they can keep. The hours students are working have increased, and the use of credit cards and loan sharks is on the rise in order to make ends meet.

All these factors are having a detrimental impact on study, and mental health is declining, with counselling sessions rising by almost a quarter in 6 years. For many, the best years of their lives have become the most miserable, with a \$50,000 student loan to top it off.

I'm sure you have heard these stats before, but the dire reality of the situation calls for them to be reiterated. Each year that we come and speak to you, living costs go up, and the situation gets worse.

Council has an opportunity to make a real difference, as one of the major weekly costs for students is transport. We see students frequently who are paying thousands of dollars for their degree, but can't afford the weekly cost of getting to class.

These students are a significant contributor to the rating base in the region, and they make up the almost \$2b that the student body injects into the Wellington economy each year. A small boost by Council could get help to get them over the line, which would be a huge win for everyone.

It is often students living in the city who are front and centre in discussions around a discount, and absolutely these students will benefit. However, it is those who live further abroad in order to save on rent, that will be the real benefactors of this student fare. Those who live in the Wairarapa and pay upwards of \$130 per week even with a monthly train pass, or those in Porirua who pay \$85. A 25% discount for them could mean a week's worth of groceries.

We applaud Council for the decision to reduce the cost of off-peak travel. Students travel at a range of times during the day, and this change will help some students get to class while improving the efficiency of the network. However, students have no control over their timetables, restricting the discount to off peak would disadvantage all those who have morning classes and need the time to study.

Wellington is on its own as a capital city that does not offer a student discount on public transport. A student fare would align Wellington with other capital cities around the world. It would make the region a far more livable place for students, and more appealing for prospective ones, both domestic and international. It would help to retain graduates after they have had a positive study experience in the region, and it would strengthen ties between Local Government and tertiary institutions.

The benefits are immense, and the costs not. In addition to what has already been set aside for the off-peak reduction, bringing in a student fare in 2016/17 would only cost an estimated \$500,000. We think it is worth it, and with the backing of the University and a number of other groups, we hope you do to.

Thank you, Byron is now going to present to you the 3,587 names who have backed our call for a student fare.

Byron (to present the petition and tell story about why you decided to start the petition)

Jono (conclusion/summary)