# New Zealand: Unexplained death at university hall of residence

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The presently unexplained death of a 19-year-old student at a University of Canterbury (UC) hall of residence in Christchurch has highlighted the tragic consequences of systemic cost-cutting and the drive for profits in higher education institutions around the world.

The body of Mason Pendorous was found on the night of September 23 by a hall staff member, but only after fellow students at the Sonoda Christchurch Campus accommodation noticed an odour coming from his room. The facility is run by a private company, Campus Living Villages (CLV), under contract to UC.

Authorities are yet to say how Pendorous died, but reports indicate he had lain undiscovered for nearly eight weeks. The extraordinary length of time before his body was found meant police had to call in a disaster victim identification team (DVI) team, which examines human remains for fingerprints, DNA and dental records to confirm identity.

A Pendorous family spokesperson told Fairfax Media they were "waiting for answers" from the university. A relative said the young man's step-father was dealing with UC and police. She declined to comment further, saying that the whole matter remained "too raw," and declared, "It's not right, it's just not right on any level."

Following a call by Education Minister Chris Hipkins, both CLV and the university issued apologies and promised to carry out investigations. UC vice-chancellor Cheryl de la Rey was tight-lipped during a Radio NZ interview on September 26, refusing to answer most questions on the grounds that a police investigation was underway. She has not commented on whether CLV's contract would be terminated.

CLV has been involved with UC since 2005 and its contract, active for another 27 years, has been renegotiated several times. It manages two-thirds of the university's student accommodation, with about 2,000 beds and 85 staff.

CLV managing director John Schroder claimed he had no knowledge of any concerns about Pendorous in the months leading up to his death. The assertion was promptly contradicted. Staff running the hall had reportedly been warned in May to check on the student. CLV pushed through a restructure earlier this year involving staff redundancies, despite warnings the changes could put pastoral care at UC halls at "significant risk."

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a student who knew Pendorous told the media he was shocked at what had happened, asking: "How can you be that negligent?" He had earlier raised concerns about the pressure students were under and resulting mental health problems, warning UC student services that some engineering students were "nearly suicidal" with stress. "I made it very plain I thought somebody was going to die," he said.

Others have come forward with concerns about the lack of care in CLV accommodation, saying mental health issues often go undetected. One former resident of University Hall in 2017 said she woke up in her room alone after a suicide attempt and no one had noticed.

The many complaints make a mockery of CLV's advertising pitch which proclaims a commitment to "quality" pastoral care. The company's website boasts of a win in a so-called pan-European "Outstanding Mental Wellbeing Initiative" award, purportedly in recognition of the company's "strong track record on supporting students with poor mental health records."

Caroline Moratti, a writer for Otago University's student magazine, *Critic*, told Radio NZ the residential

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halls are often “filled with stress, anxiety and mental health problems.” Joel MacManus, a former editor of the magazine told Fairfax students are “17 or 18 years old, and it’s their first time away from the support of a family unit. They’re homesick, in a highly stressful academic environment, and struggling to make friends.”

Student hardship has worsened with austerity measures imposed by the National Party government following the 2008 financial crisis, and maintained by the present Labour Party-led government. Student living allowances, which are based on parental income and only available to one in five students, have remained stagnant for years. Part-time jobs are few and low-paid, forcing many students to borrow extra for living costs.

Christchurch has seen a spike in broader mental health problems following the catastrophic 2011 earthquake and this year’s March 15 far-right terrorist attack in which 51 people were killed in two mosques. City Missioner Matthew Mark, whose social agency serves more than 40,000 people, told Fairfax recently that a generation is growing up with “post-traumatic effects that have impacted on their lives.” Counselling services in schools and the agency have almost quadrupled since the terrorist attack.

While families pay up to $17,000 a year for a place in university halls, often students’ only lifeline in a crisis are residential assistants (RAs), untrained older students appointed to look after them. The RAs are “pushed to their limits while being chronically underpaid,” MacManus said. A decade ago, Otago University offered free or subsidised rooms for RAs. Now, they are required to pay full rent and are employed by the hall. Despite working 17 hours a week, their pay is not enough to cover rent.

While stresses on students have escalated, hall managements have slashed budgets by cutting RA staff numbers and reducing their support. According to MacManus, a ratio of one RA per 15–20 residents was once considered a good number. Now, Victoria University's Te Puni Village has 33 students per RA while the 2020 UC accommodation guide says Sonoda Village has 54 students per RA, or just two for a hall of 108 residents.

The student unions, which are thoroughly integrated into university structures, have rarely raised any concerns over the quality of care in residential halls. NZ Union of Students’ Associations Acting President Caitlin Barlow-Groome told the media she had “never heard of anything happening like this before” and said “changes” need to be made. She only called for nationwide minimum standards so students and families knew what they were getting and tertiary institutions knew their obligations.

The tragedy at UC is an inevitable outcome of the vast expansion of for-profit outfits in the education sector. Sydney-based CLV is a billion-dollar global corporation, owned by a consortium of Australian pension funds. It runs university accommodation services in the UK, US, Australia and New Zealand. It is responsible for over 45,000 beds in 60 education institutions. CLV’s New Zealand arm made a NZ$4.3 million profit after tax in 2018.

Companies like these feed off the wholesale assault on public education, including privatisations, escalating tuition fees, competition for students, increased dependence on foreign fee-paying students and corporate funding that have been driven by all governments over three decades.

In New Zealand, prime responsibility lies with the 1984–90 Labour government’s “Learning for Life” agenda, which opened the door to a swathe of government funding cuts, the introduction of student fees and loans, forcing universities to run on competitive “business” lines and entrepreneurial activities. Today, under the Ardern Labour government, public funding still provides only half of all tertiary institutions’ income, with students and their families facing escalating social, personal and financial burdens.

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