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FEATURE ARTICLE

A Timely Advisory for Tertiary Students Entering the Rental Market

Every year, as a new academic year begins, thousands of tertiary students make one of the most important transitions of their lives, moving away from home to pursue further education. For many regional students arriving in Fiji's major cities and towns from different parts of Fiji and other neighbouring Pacific Island countries, this transition also marks their first experience living in rented accommodation.

Recognising this annual movement of students at the beginning of the year, the Consumer Council of Fiji once again issues its yearly advisory to guide students who are entering the rental market. With students now actively searching for rooms, flats, and shared accommodation, this advisory comes at a timely moment, when demand for rental housing is high and certain risks to consumers may increase.

Why Regional Students Are More Vulnerable

Students relocating from rural areas or outer islands often arrive with limited knowledge of rental practices in urban centres. Many are renting for the first time, may be unfamiliar with formal tenancy arrangements, and are eager to secure accommodation quickly before classes begin.

Unfortunately, this urgency can expose students to:

- Rental scams;
- Unfair or unclear tenancy arrangements;
- Overcharging or hidden fees; and
- Unsafe or substandard living conditions.

Scammers and unscrupulous landlords often target students during this period, knowing that accommodation is scarce and that students may feel pressured to secure housing immediately.

Here are 5 essential things every new tenant should know before agreeing to a tenancy term:

1. Stay Alert to Rental Scams

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Rental scams are one of the most common issues reported at the start of the year, particularly through social media and online listings. Scammers often target students who are unfamiliar with the local housing market or under pressure to secure accommodation quickly.

Warning signs include requests for deposits before a viewing, landlords who refuse to provide written agreements, listings with suspiciously low rent, or properties advertised using stolen images. In many cases, the “landlord” disappears as soon as payment is made.

As a rule, students should never send money without seeing the property in person and confirming the identity of the landlord or agent. If something feels rushed or unusually cheap, it’s worth stepping back and reassessing.

2. Always Inspect Before You Commit

Viewing a property is not just about location or room size, it is about making sure the accommodation is safe, liveable, and accurately represented. Before agreeing to any tenancy, students should inspect the property and check that basic services such as water, electricity, and sanitation are functional.

It’s also important to clarify what is included in the rent, whether utilities are shared, and what house rules apply, especially in shared accommodation. For students arriving from regional areas who cannot attend viewings immediately, seeking help from trusted friends, family members, or university support services can reduce the risk of unpleasant surprises.

3. Understand Your Rights and Responsibilities

Many tenancy disputes arise simply because students are unaware of what they are entitled to as tenants. Students have the right to clear information about rent and deposits, a written tenancy agreement, receipts for payments, reasonable notice of changes, and peaceful enjoyment of the property.

At the same time, tenants are responsible for paying rent on time, keeping the premises in reasonable condition, and respecting shared living arrangements. Knowing both sides of the tenancy relationship helps students recognise when something is unfair, or when a problem could be avoided through better communication.

4. Get Everything in Writing

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Verbal agreements can quickly lead to misunderstandings, especially when money and shared spaces are involved. A written tenancy agreement protects both parties and provides clarity if disputes arise later.

Before signing, students should ensure the agreement clearly outlines the rent amount, deposit conditions, length of stay, house rules, and responsibilities for utilities and maintenance. Keeping copies of agreements, receipts, and relevant messages can make a significant difference if issues need to be resolved formally.

5. Don't Let Pressure Dictate Your Decision

The demand for student housing at the start of the year can make it feel like any offer is better than none. However, rushed decisions often result in students accepting unsafe, overpriced, or unfair arrangements.

Taking time to compare options, ask questions, and seek advice can prevent long-term stress. Parents and guardians can also play a key role by discussing tenancy arrangements with students before they relocate, helping them feel more confident and informed when making decisions.

Conclusion

For many regional students, moving into rental accommodation marks their first experience navigating contracts, payments, and shared living arrangements on their own. While the process can feel overwhelming, being informed is one of the strongest forms of protection. By recognising common rental scams, insisting on inspections and written agreements, understanding tenant rights, and resisting pressure to rush into decisions, students can avoid many of the issues that lead to disputes each year. Starting university should be about settling into study and student life, not dealing with preventable housing problems, and a little preparation can make all the difference.

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