

Submission to the inquiry into Higher Education Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010

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Recommendations

1. That there be guaranteed, independent, and student-run student representation and advocacy at each university.
 - a. That this be facilitated through democratically-elected student organisation representatives, elected from and by current students
 - b. That these organisations have access to funds partially sourced through (but not restricted to) the *Student Services and Amenities Fee*
 - c. That this is enshrined within the current legislation
2. That there be guaranteed funding for postgraduate representation by a postgraduate student organisation or independent organisation with similar purpose, using fees partially, but not exclusively, sourced from postgraduate students from the *Student Services and Amenities Fee*, and that this be enshrined within the current legislation
3. That section 19-67 (3) be struck
4. That there be increased transparency and reporting on the process of sector consultation for the establishment of Guidelines, Benchmarks, and Protocols for the Bill, and an assurance that democratically-elected student representatives will be engaged in the consultation process at all levels and stages of planning and implementation

Student Services and Amenities Fee

“The abolition of compulsory non-academic fees in universities in 2005 has led to a reduction in the range of support services provided to students in some universities.”

Bradley Review, 2008¹

The above words underscore what was the beginning of a downward trend in the delivery of fundamental services and amenities to undergraduate and postgraduate students across Australia. Without a doubt, not only have many students suffered because of the absence or diminution of such services and amenities, it has also had a detrimental impact on the quality of education provided at our universities and on the broader concept of ‘university life’.

Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA) has existed as the peak representative body of postgraduate students at the University of Sydney since 1974. In 2010, it represents more than 16,500 postgraduate students through several channels:

- advice and advocacy on a case-by-case basis, as well as for systemic issues within courses/degrees;
- representation on University of Sydney committees and to all levels of University management;
- outreach and activities for the membership including those studying on satellite campuses;
- information sessions on study and changes to rules, regulations, and the laws covering study and post-completion (including migration);
- and publications to educate, assist, and inform on the above.

SUPRA has recently been noted for our contributions on the fight for international student concessions; our work with the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations on the Australian Qualifications Framework; and for continuing productive work with the University of Sydney on policy, rules, course development, and equity access - particularly people from for low socio-economic and Indigenous backgrounds.

¹ Bradley, D, et al (2008) Review of Australian Higher Education, Final Report, December 2008 (p72)

Without the contributions of an organisation such as SUPRA, many students would suffer from the inability to raise concerns within their courses, or systemic issues within their degrees or across multiple degrees. We play a critical role in assisting students to successfully engage with the complex, bureaucratic governance structures of the University, as well as addressing serious issues such as bullying, harassment, and discrimination both between students and between supervisors and students. Ultimately, this works as a “degree insurance”, helping keep students actively enrolled in study, actively supporting them, and achieving higher completion rates.

SUPRA welcomes this opportunity to present these issues to the Committee, and would like to remind the Committee of two key issues SUPRA has previously raised concerning the Bill:

- There are no provisions in the Bill for the establishment of and ongoing support of student-focused, student-run, independent student associations to provide services such as SUPRA is able to offer (albeit in a limited capacity). Without these provisions, students’ access to welfare and representation is severely limited. The core of student services and amenities is that services are offered *for* the students *by* the students, and this bill fails to address this issue.
- The Bill has the potential to create unnecessary tensions between student-managed services on campuses, particularly on campuses with discrete student-managed representation (advocacy, information, and support), social and cultural, and sporting services co-exist. This is problematic for delivery of advocacy, information, and support services to postgraduate students. There are no assurances contained within the Bill to direct that any fees collected by means of a student amenity fee from postgraduate students would be directed toward the provision of postgraduate specific representation services.
- The issues faced by postgraduate students differs from undergraduates across a number of areas. For example, and as a matter of course, postgraduates students are usually older (largest enrolment is in the 30-39 range); they are often confronted by more intractable problems due to complicated structure and processes of their degree programs; and their external caring and other commitments are typically more burdensome. Without dedicated postgraduate funding, there is the likelihood of escalating failure and drop-out rates, a devaluing of the higher education sector and, ultimately, damage to Australia’s reputation on the international Higher Education Market.

In 2008, a review completed by the Australian Campus Union Managers' Association (ACUMA) and Australian University Sport projected a net loss of \$200 million in 2009, due to the removal of amenities and services fees, with a net funding reduction of \$2.7 billion over 25 years². Alternate funding sources are only able to make up approximately 50% of pre-2005 funding levels.

Nationally, student associations nationally have had to significantly reduce services; have had to resort to charging fees to support services to which students should have free access; have amalgamated into bodies with reduced representation, particularly for postgraduates; or closed completely. This has negatively affected employment across the sector, resulting in an approximate 30% cut in jobs³. Nationally, less than a half of universities with postgraduate students have active postgraduate representation, and only a handful have appropriate bodies that allow for the aspects of support that should be the right of all students.

In short, so-called "Voluntary Student Unionism" (VSU) has reduced the student experience, caused job loss, cut out \$100 million in revenue, and ultimately disadvantaged students. Student representative bodies provide a form of "degree insurance", a method for students to access services on demand for free. VSU has set back education in this country in a way that could not have been imagined, and nationally, students are suffering daily. SUPRA urges the Committee and the Government to address this matter quickly and ensure that students nationally can truly benefit from the experience of tertiary education.

Recommendation 1

That there be guaranteed, independent, and student-run student representation and advocacy at each university

- a) That this be facilitated through democratically-elected student organisation representatives, elected from and by the current students
- b) That these organisations have access to funds partially sourced through (but not restricted to) the *Student Services and Amenities Fee*

² VSU Impact Study 2007, ACUMA Inc. and Australian University Sport

³ VSU Impact Study 2007, ACUMA Inc. and Australian University Sport

- c) That this is enshrined within the current legislation

Recommendation 2

That there be guaranteed funding for postgraduate representation by a postgraduate student organisation or independent organisation with a similar purpose, using fees partially, but not exclusively, sourced from postgraduate students from the *Student Services and Amenities Fee*, and that this be enshrined within the current legislation.

The noted purpose of the proposed legislation is to “ensure the provision of student representation and advocacy”⁴. However, this is seemingly at odds with proposed changes to the legislation that state that the “Guidelines cannot require a provider to fund an organisation of students, or of students and other persons.”⁵.

It is of great concern that Higher Education Providers are not required to use these funds, wholly or in part, for the establishment and ongoing support of student organisations. Given the proposed collection of the *Student Services and Amenities Fee*, it is critical that this fee goes directly to student organisations; otherwise, universities are at liberty to use the fee to support internal departments which do not, and cannot, provide independent student representation and advocacy.

At the heart of student representative associations is their independence from the university management. Without this separation and ability to operate under the direction of a democratically elected student body, those students seeking advice and advocacy are at risk. Universities cannot offer these services as they would have an inherent conflict of interest that would mean the representation students need is not provided for.

Consequently, without independent student associations directly funded by the *Student Services and Amenities Fee*, students cannot access the very basis of the bill.

Recommendation 3

That Section 19-67 (3) be struck

⁴ Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010 Explanatory Notes

⁵ Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010, p7, lines 13-14

SUPRA wishes to impress upon the Government the need for the *Student Services and Amenities Fee* as a matter of urgency. However, we feel it is also critical that the consultations with those remaining democratically-elected student representative organisations continues, particularly for the planning and implementation of the Guidelines, Benchmarks, and Protocols for the Bill. This process demands input from those whom it shall directly affect, and increased transparency to ensure no failure of Government legislation on the scale of VSU be reinstated.

Recommendation 4

That there be increased transparency and reporting on the process of sector consultation for the establishment of Guidelines, Benchmarks, and Protocols for the Bill, and an assurance that democratically-elected student representatives will be engaged in the consultation process at all levels and stages of planning and implementation.