

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into student income support

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NSW TAFE Students Network

NOT BLING, JUST A LIVEABLE INCOME

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Student Income Support, 2004

The NSW TAFE Students Network is delighted that the Senate feels student income support to be an area requiring investigation. We believe it to require urgent attention for two main reasons. The first reason is to give students the real financial ability to commence and continue study. The second is to give students a workaround solution to the massively increased NSW TAFE fees.

Students are all too familiar with the experience of receiving less money on Austudy than they did on the dole, and consequently wondering how this is supposed to encourage them to improve themselves. Students are conscious of the fact that current governments do not want students to study, and of the measures undertaken by governments to discourage study. A bare-faced cynicism of governments toward students exists, especially in TAFE NSW which has increased fees in an attempt to exclude students from their education based on their inability to pay, reduce enrolments, and lower the overall cost to the NSW Government, and justified with reference to the unmet demand for university education due to prohibitive costs. Attempts by NSW TAFE students to seek exemptions to these fees based on hardship have resulted in refusal, threats of arrest during enrolment, and systemic refusal to reply to correspondence from students. The exclusion from NSW TAFE due to inability to pay is tied to the inability to receive an exemption based on being a recipient of government income support. The granting of any form of income support to NSW TAFE students would currently also give them exemptions from paying the increased fees. This is a sign that the situation for students is dire indeed. The rules granting access are ridiculous and have no basis in demand for education or betterment of social outcomes which the public provision of education once sought to achieve. Students are a pestilence on the balance sheet of governments only interested in funding private enterprise for the polarisation of existing social conditions. Student income support, even if only to provide direct funding to industry to facilitate the training of their workers would be better than the current situation.

WORKING THEIR WAY THROUGH COLLEGE.

Australians can take no pride in the fact that the country's brothels and massage parlors are staffed with students working their way through college. It is no secret that the girls of Sydney's Kings Court and Black Cat establishments are Sydney University students. The federal government needs to take a good look at assumptions regarding the availability of employment for students, and whether submitting to the imposition of work while performing an entirely different, time consuming, draining and demanding social function - that of student, is worthwhile. These students are not hungry for cock, but food, housing and textbooks. They can't get income support so are forced into, er, employment! Yes, that's what we'll call it.

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Some would like students and the general public to believe that a strong economy and low unemployment are sufficient to give a society all it needs to operate successfully. But this gives no consideration to what it is to work, how much a person can expect to be paid, whether they will be able to live off this amount and whether they will be penalised for working, including the risks of losing employment.

Students know full well the misery that awaits them when they leave study, and the fact that their qualifications will often be worth little to them. Many students do not change industries at all upon graduating, preferring to stay with the company which employed them while they were studying. Students who are forced out of study through pure economic reasons or due to failing because they were working are in a similar predicament. Either way there is still the issue of paying off HECS. Students are not fooled that increasing the HECS repayment threshold to \$35,000 is a great Liberal party initiative. We still remember when these same people lowered it to \$21,000 and cut either us or many of our friends off income support. Many TAFE students have university qualifications and a HECS debt, and a short course at TAFE for a statement or certificate can turn an arts degree into a well rounded and employable education. Unfortunately, many of the courses which would serve this purpose are being privatised or cut, and what is left is designed to slot graduates into employment roles far below the potential of many students. TAFE students reject the deferring or payment of fees, as covered in the submission by ourselves to the previous Senate inquiry.

Income support is the missing link for TAFE students. Many TAFE courses are only offered full time, making working while studying impossible. These courses are only available to students with rich parents or income support and both today are critically lacking. Many of the courses only offered full time are the pre-requisites for the rest of a diploma. One example of this is Computer Networking at Ultimo, Sydney Institute TAFE. Almost every computer subject can be taken at night except the 1

year full time on campus subject required before doing the rest. If income support was available, even for a maximum of 1 year at a liveable income level not just as a supplement, it would enable students to get their first qualification, get a job on a help-desk and continue the rest of a diploma course after hours.

The basic problem with the assumptions involved in leaving students to fend for themselves in the marketplace, is the same problems facing the rest of the population. Wages are extremely low, Australia is a country which lives mainly in poverty struggling from paycheck to paycheck, and study commitments cripple the flexibility students can offer employers as students can often not offer availability. Often our flexibility is in the type of work undertaken, like when students are forced into sex work.

The demands of students and workers are clear - a liveable income for all, regardless of circumstance.

MEN ARE PEOPLE TOO.

The whole concept of an equity group has become meaningless due to the dismantling of the public sphere due to neo-liberal agendas followed by state and federal governments. If there were a group of people who were not disadvantaged and could access free education and proceed to study during their years as a student, instead of taking a gamble of up to \$100,000 of money that they do not have in an attempt to leverage their total lifetime income, to essentially buy their way into doing more difficult work, who would it be?. Would this group be identifiable by race or gender, or by class?

Of course there is, and always be a group which can do this, the rich. And this is the point of socialised education, that just leaving education to the rich who can afford it reproduces social inequalities which is bad for society because what this does not do is produce outcomes where the smartest people get access to education, and where a society makes most efficient use of its intellectual resources. The arguments for making students pay for their education ignore the irrelevance of the fact that some people can pay to the whole purpose of education in the first place.

Federal education policies, including student income support, should address the issue of whether class distinctions are reproduced by government policy. When students are excluded from education by fees and have no way to support themselves while studying full time, the government has impoverished us all.

NOWHERE TO LIVE

One of the most hard-fought student housing complexes was recently lost. In the 70s, students at Macquarie University camped out on the lawn in protest at the lack of affordable housing for students. It was affordable too, about \$75 a week. Long story short, students lost the last non-collegiate housing last year. But it was not torn

down as we had expected, but rather simply made unavailable to domestic undergraduates. It is now exchange student housing.

There is no housing for TAFE students, as far as we are aware, anywhere. This situation is outrageous. TAFE offers a chance at education to the most disadvantaged in society. Austudy recipients do not receive rent assistance. Without student housing, the amount offered by rent assistance would not cover the rent anyway. Those with the most unstable life and housing situations often pay the most for the least suitable accommodation.

Cooperative housing is something that could be easily undertaken by the student associations of NSW TAFE, but for the fact that NSW TAFE students do not have control of student funds. Last year for example, Ultimo TAFE Student Association spent \$390,000 on "plant and equipment" which translated into the fact that Sydney Institute is building a new building. For this money to be spent on general expenses of the government instead of student services and representation defrauds students.

The NSW TAFE Students Network would like this Senate inquiry to be aware that complaints to ANTA and the NSW Government have not been answered – complaints are simply not being acknowledged. The complaints handling procedure for TAFE is non-existent and accountability in the system is entirely lacking. The fact that NSW TAFE students do not have autonomous student associations with student control of student affairs has led directly to the breakdown of accountability. Make no mistake, the voluntary student unionism in effect in NSW TAFE is hurting students and TAFE as a whole.

So we have nowhere to live. Lucky us.

THE CONCEPT OF EQUITY.

Why should students look at equity any differently from the way in which capitalists look at equity? Students should have equity in society the way one has equity in a home. For a person to undertake the role of student, study, pass exams, become qualified and work in and for the betterment of society, they should be considered to be *part owners* of that society.

For that reason students should be able to draw on their equity and receive free education, a liveable income from the government, student housing, and the right to organise collectively.

WHAT IS LEFT TO STUDY ANYWAY?

TAFE NSW is undergoing yet another round of budget cuts. This comes on top of the cuts to courses coinciding with the massive fee increase at the start of this year, and the demolition of TAFE as a public education service over the last decade. The conversion of TAFE from its role in the education of the whole person to a pre-

Kangan industrial sausage factory has been disastrous. Even if TAFE students gain access to income support, what will be left for us to study? While the Federal government feels it has a spare \$35 billion to throw in the direction of tax cuts for the rich, TAFE misses out on the \$250 million asked for in 2001. And for \$1.7 billion, Australia could have both free university education, and repay all outstanding HECS. Meanwhile, to cover up the bleeding in public education, courses are privatised to give the impression that education is still occurring, despite the cost to students, quality and access. The NSW TAFE Students Network recommends that the Senate hold its next education inquiry into privatisation.

TAFE students are not asking the government for the bling bling, just a liveable income.

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