

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009

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Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Background

The most exciting element to come out in discussions about the results of the review into the impact of VSU has been the idea of national benchmarks in service provision to students in the higher education sector. This in part was due to the absence of qualifying statements, thereby suggesting students at regional universities, such as Charles Sturt University, have the right to expect the same minimum level of support services as those at a university within the Group of Eight.

It is essential that this core value survives the legislation process, and is cemented as one result of any accepted amendment.

For this to become a reality the legislation must be clear; **services should not be offered in a substandard way in order to meet a set of benchmarks, but rather should be effective, student focussed and relevant.**

As students will be forced to pay for these services, it would only be fair to expect that service delivery would be conducted in a way that generated confidence in what is offered. The evidence is clear that there are optimum ways in student support service delivery, and that examples were presented to the original review.

Academic Advocacy

The Student Senate discussion paper on the impact of VSU at Charles Sturt University revealed that student take-up of the university run "advocacy" service has fallen to 17% of the numbers previously making use of the equivalent Students' Association offered service, over a comparable time period just two years apart. This figure is not disputed and no reasonable explanation has been offered for such a dramatic snubbing of the service other than a complete loss of confidence in the advocacy offered. Figures will also show higher student attrition rates since the loss of the Students' Associations.

Two crucial points must be drawn from clear evidence such as this:

- *Students must not be forced to pay for substandard service provision; and*
- *Services designed to reduce student attrition, such as welfare and advocacy, must be prioritised for inclusion within the national benchmarks. These services should support student capacity to continue studying.*

Students at CSU are all too familiar with inadequate support services that fail to meet their expectations and needs, and **urge the Senate to require an independent academic advocacy service to be a conditional component for the collection of any amenities fee.**

Further, that the independent academic advocacy service should be under the supervision of students, so as to maintain the effectiveness and quality of the service, resulting in an optimal level of student confidence in the support service. This position has not changed through the VSU experiment- prior to its' introduction a student survey showed over 90% of Bathurst students felt an independent academic advocacy service was "very important".

Following on from the academic advocacy example offered, students would not be happy, nor accept the introduction of an amenities fee if it is used solely to prop up unsustainable and unpopular university departments and services. Simply put, if this is the case, we don't want the legislation changed, and would view this as a failure to address the problems the reality of VSU has placed on campuses across the country.

If this were the outcome, then students at Bathurst would politely say thankyou, but no thankyou.

Students are, and always have been, the best people to determine the services they need and those they desire. They are in the best position to prioritise what is most important to the broader student body. The simple fact is that, as hard as they try, no university will ever truly understand the needs of students. And more importantly, even if students have a hand in guiding university service provision, no student will ever feel as comfortable utilising a university operated service compared with a service over which they feel a sense of ownership, as is the case with their Students' Association. And certainly students will never choose a university run service over a student run service when run in competition.

And returning to the original point of equity across all universities, the result of this latest VSU experiment has been stark; students and Student's Associations, on the whole, have faired much better at metropolitan and sandstone universities. The fact is only half of all regional universities still have an independent Students' Association, and this result is not a reflection on students desire or support for their Association; it is simply a geopolitical reality.

If the Senate is serious about equity in student support across institutions of higher education, the national benchmarks must not be set too low. This would simply lead to marginal compliance by regional and small universities, incomparable to the quality support offered at the more established universities. **The Senate should challenge universities across the sector to ensure the provision of a strong safety net for students, controlled and directed by students.** If the Senate fails to require independent student advocacy and welfare service provision from (and the existence of) an independent students' association, then the stark differences between student support at the more established universities, compared to their small and regional counterparts, will only grow.

Broad Inclusions

Below is a simple example of the sorts of services that should be allowed under the amenities fee. Categories A through C represent a base level of services Bathurst students would expect to come from the amenities fee, further ranked in importance down the points within the individual categories.

Category A, B and C each represents important services that should be funded under the proposed amenities fee. It is hard to split them in terms of importance, however category A could be seen as the most important, with B and C just behind.

Survey results from pre-VSU at Bathurst show that both category A and B have at least one service that more than 90% of the student body deemed to be “very important”.

Category D should not be considered essential, or necessarily allowed to be allocated from takings under a compulsory amenities fee. It is important to maintain equity, and as such the negative impact of directing significant percentages of the pool drawn from the compulsory fee toward an external body needs to be considered. The question must be asked, whether students at campuses choosing to hand over large sums of money deserve to encounter the result of having other services scaled back? Particularly when, due to the unrepresentative nature of the organisation, participation in the Union is often decided at a whim.

It seems appropriate that, in this case, funding the NUS should not come at the expense of campus student services, and indeed should be drawn from other revenue streams. An amenities fee should fund the baseline services, maintaining equity across universities, whilst optional expenses such as NUS should be drawn from elsewhere.

Category A: Student Attrition Focussed

- independent academic advocacy staffing
- health services (nurse, doctor and counselling)
- welfare food support and nutrition programs
- Students' Association research support staffing
- legal support

Category B: Academic and Broader Educational Experience

- student voice
- student publication/newspaper
- academic support programs and introductions
- representation and training

Category C: Financial Support Based Services

- 2nd hand book service
- emergency loans program
- student employment service and support

Category D: Voluntary

- national representation (NUS)

Student Publication

Student publications offer an example of a service that, whilst not necessarily seen as supportive, is seen as an important element of campus life. Retaining the student publication was seen as “very important” by more than 90% of the student body, based on previous surveys, and this is probably due to the way the service combines practical education with broader relevance to the student body.

At a campus like Bathurst, otherwise known as the home of the Mitchell Mafia of journalism, it would be disappointing if such an important service were excluded from funding out of the proposed amenities. At a campus like ours, few services are seen as more important than this one.

Research Support

A valuable service lost across many universities under VSU was access to research support. **Research Officers within students’ associations represented the best method to improve conditions on campus, particularly in terms of academic regulations, campus safety and emphasising the use of best practice.**

Whilst research and the drafting of consultation papers have continued, it has certainly slowed, and the burden of pressure has been placed directly onto student representatives. The situation is not tenable, particularly as the same students also have to study full time and undertake paid employment. The value of a research officer facilitating students in this area would represent welcome relief, if this service falls within the scope of the amenities fee.

Previous advancements on the Bathurst campus, made with the support of a research officer, include the placement of emergency phones around campus, improved lighting surrounding the 24 hour computer lab, the development of a secure electronic submission system for external students and other such valuable initiatives driven by the Students’ Association, in partnership with the university.

Compliance

Consideration must further be given to the government response to a university failing to comply with the national benchmarks. The recommendations below were drawn from the Student Senates submission to the Bradley review. They once again seem appropriate.

Recommendation: The Student Senate further recommends that the Commonwealth response to a university failing to meet the proposed minimum standards should be to withhold any public funding beyond that provided for Commonwealth supported places and in research grants.

Therefore this includes any regional loading grants, priority placement grants and all

other aspects outlined in the Commonwealth Grant Scheme Guidelines No. 1.

Conclusion

In summary, the students of Bathurst want to see positive changes come from the proposed legislation, and certainly there is room for improvement on the campuses of Charles Sturt University, however there is a great deal of concern as to whether positive change will be delivered.

We urge the Senate to make bold inclusions within a national framework designed to appropriately support students. There is great potential to restore some of what we have lost on campuses across the country, but this will not be achieved without the Senate taking brave steps.

Independent academic advocacy is not negotiable in the eyes of students, but we fear the potential for the Senate to accept sub par, university operated academic appeals advice as fulfilling student need. This is not the case, and this can't be allowed to happen.

This is student money that will make up the amenities fee. An expectation of quality and appropriate service provision must come with taking this money from the hands of poor students, or when placing them further into debt.

It is amusing how often a simple phrase can sum up a situation, but it once again comes down to "student control of student affairs."

If an individual contributed funding to an operation in the market, they would expect oversight. With taxation also comes the right to vote for your representatives. Why then is this even a question?

Independent student organisations must be a requirement under the minimum benchmarks, offering a minimum level of services including welfare, academic advocacy and representation.