



Students' Representative Council  
The University of Sydney

Elly Howse, President, 82nd SRC  
m: 0438 438 844 e: president@src.usyd.edu.au

Level 1 Wentworth building (G01)  
University of Sydney NSW 2006  
PO Box 794 Broadway NSW 2007  
t: (02) 9660 5222 f: (02) 9660 4260  
int: 12871 www.src.usyd.edu.au  
ABN: 597 391 306 68

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# **Submission to the Senate Inquiry into New Student Fees**

**Senate Select Committee on the Scrutiny of New Taxes**

by

**Students' Representative Council  
The University of Sydney**

**Submitted by  
Ms Elly Howse, SRC President  
29<sup>th</sup> October 2010**



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The Students' Representative Council (SRC) represents over 32,000 undergraduate students at the University of Sydney. These students include local students, international students, full-time and part-time students. The SRC has been supporting and representing the undergraduate student population at the University since 1928. Since Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU), the SRC has been able to continue service provision and representation through a financial agreement, renegotiated annually, between the University management and the SRC.

The SRC supports a student fee for student services in some way, shape or form. Whilst the SRC is supportive of universal student unionism, there is some acknowledgement that the level of previous fees at campuses such as the University of Sydney was quite high for students who could not necessarily afford it. The SRC supports a fair and equitable system of service provision and independent representation for all students.

It is unclear to the SRC why this Bill is being considered by the Committee.

The Bill proposes a fee or charge, not a general tax. It is clear from the Bill that the focus is on extending the HECS scheme to cover such a charge, which the SRC supports for equity purposes. It is designed to raise funds to spend on a specific set of purposes for a specific category of people.

The SRC would support the Government providing funds directly out of general revenue (tax) for certain student amenities, and this was considered in the Government's earlier discussion paper. Taxation is a necessary function of Government and expenditure on public education is an entirely appropriate and efficient use of that revenue. But general taxation is not what is being considered in this Bill.

## ***Funding Alternatives***

Students organisations which are representative and welfare service providers in nature, such as the SRC, have no capacity to generate their own revenue at adequate levels, and cannot feasibly raise funds on a fee for service basis. Experience in the sector across time and different States clearly supports this claim. The SRC is thus reliant on the University of Sydney budget in a post-VSU environment. There are no alternate sources of funding and income for the SRC outside of interest accrued on savings. Services such as second-hand bookshops rarely generate a surplus or profit, and any accompanying monies are put back into service programs and provision.

## ***Compulsory Membership***

The Bill makes no requirements for compulsory membership to any student organisation. The fee is related to enrolment in the institution and the requirement to equally contribute to the services provided under the Bill. Compulsory membership was not a feature in the past (as opt out



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conscientious objection clauses applied), currently, or in this new proposal. The SRC provides representation in the interests of, and for, all undergraduate students within a democratic and student-controlled framework that is in nature independent of the greater University structure.

### ***The Nature of the Fee***

The Bill creates the prospect of a viable financial future for student organisations. It does so in an equitable way where all share equally in the benefits provided by student organisations. Some of those benefits are not 'fee for service' benefits but more in the nature of a wholistic university experience, can be readily accessed when the need arises. It is a collective arrangement as is collective representation.

It is important to recognise the Bill does so at a modest scale (\$250). This Bill also suggests a deferred income contingent payment mechanism that minimises its impact on some students, which the SRC supports.

### ***Financial Viability***

Funds are needed for student organisations. The University currently recognises that the work that the SRC does is important and has made considerable effort and expenditure to support this and other student organisations on campus. It should be recognised that the University of Sydney is one of the few in the country with the capacity and the will to provide that support. Even so we have been providing services and representation to increasing numbers of students with significantly reduced funding. At the University of Sydney the SRC is providing services and representation to students through an annual arrangement with the University under the equivalent of a contract. The University have indicated that this is a short-term arrangement, not a long term or necessarily sustainable position.

### ***Independence***

A key feature of the work student organisations such as ours do is providing advice and advocacy to students. This is done by professional and experienced staff, employed by the SRC, who are independent from the University. This ensures there are not conflicts of interest where a student is challenging a decision by University staff, management, policy or administration.

The SRC also provides representation in the interest of, and from the perspective of, students in University policy, directly drawing on that advocacy work. Similarly we provide representation to the Government and others through membership of the National Union of Students and through our own lobbying and submission work. This may be in the area of quality of education or income support or any of the range of areas covered by the recent Bradley Report into Higher Education.



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This is not work the University can always do without an inherent potential for a conflict of interest, given differences of perspective and position of the University and its students. Students are a key stakeholder in universities and need an independent voice.

The current arrangement of a contract between the SRC and the University, and the culture of the University that recognises the need for independence, provides significant assurance that conflicts of interest do not arise, but this is inherently less satisfactory than the previous arrangement where student organisations had control over their own fee income from their members and did not have this more complicated relationship with the University which currently exists now that they 'fund' us.

The proposal in the Bill has a mechanism that continues to tie student organisations to the financial control of the University (who will be charging the fee), but provides the resources and the implied obligations on universities to fund that independent advice, advocacy and representation. It ties the University into an obligation to students to make arrangements that provide for this independence.

**However, the SRC would ask that the Bill be amended so that the section 19-38 explicitly includes expenditure on independent democratic student controlled representation as allowable expenditure, and further that the Bill be amended to 'require' this expenditure so that independence and the removal of any perceived conflict of interest is assured.**

## ***Social and Economic Benefits of Higher Education and the role of Student Organisations***

The Bradley Report into Higher Education highlights the vital role Higher Education plays in creating a productive economy for Australia, in opening up opportunities for increased participation for people from many backgrounds and as Australia's third biggest export industry.

The SRC works hard to support international students who are vulnerable to being treated purely for economic reasons, and whose particular needs are not always recognised. Organisational independence in advocacy and representation for these students is recognised with the ESOS Act.

The commitment of organisations such as the SRC also creates a framework to support students (at a policy and casework level) within the University who are under-represented or subject to particular life events or situations that disadvantage them. This improves the quality of their experience, the retention rates of students and the productivity of the system. The SRC also works to broaden the experience and access to Higher Education for under-represented groups.

Student organisations such as ours have a significant role to play in governance at universities and in that process improving the quality of education. This is important in creating a democratic voice and participation in what is a significant set of public institutions. A democratic education is vital for a democratic society more broadly.



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The services and other work of the SRC improves the overall quality of the student experience. Universities such as Sydney recognise that students (and the University through its enhanced reputation) get a better education through a broad student experience. The University, in its recent Strategic Plan and White Paper, has begun focusing on improving the student experience for all students at Sydney. Part of this focus acknowledges and supports the work the SRC does.

The SRC is valuable not just for encouraging students to be involved in a diversity of activities in their university community, but also in the huge amount of assistance we provide to students at risk of non-progression, attrition and failing. It is significant that the universities which have the highest retention rates of students, particularly students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, are those which have strong, stable and independent student organisations. It is well known at the University of Sydney that strong retention rates are in part due to the amount of support and socially-enriched programs students can access whilst studying.

### ***Activities – Contribution of organisations***

Section 19-38(4) identifies a number of activities that the SRC and other student organisations currently do that bring significant benefits to individual students and the University. The SRC as a representation organisation does this within a framework of securing their rights as a student and an individual member of a wider community.

The SRC seeks clearer recognition in the Bill that the activities and services funded by the fee outlined in the Bill are best done through student-controlled and student-run organisations.

The SRC offers the following services for the undergraduate students at the University of Sydney:

- Legal services for students through the solicitor of the SRC Branch of the Redfern Legal Service (soon to become an independent, incorporated SRC Legal Service Pty Ltd owned and run by the SRC, not a contracted provision of service)
- Referrals to health and welfare practitioners in the process of caseworkers providing support and advice to students in their studies. Often students come to us to assist in a particular problem and this opens up the prospect of dealing with a range of larger issues.
- Help for problems in accommodation; the SRC is also the campus provider of independent advice and advocacy in relation to Tenancy rights for undergraduate students.
- Help for students in relation to financial problems; in particular the SRC is the campus provider of independent advice and advocacy in relation to Centrelink matters.
- The Council of the SRC is a democratic body of 33 students allowing for a broad scope of robust debate on educational policy, University policy and the policy of the SRC.
- The SRC publishes a weekly newspaper (*Honi Soit*) that now includes an online service. It is edited and written by students and provides them with information and perspectives for all students. We also publish and distribute many other annual publications that contribute to



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the needs, welfare and orientation of students such as Orientation Handbooks and Course Handbooks.

- Help for students negotiating 'progression' procedures.
- Extensive work helping and advocating for individual students under the University's rules relating to progress matters, appeals, misconduct allegations, discontinuation, special consideration and fees.
- Our representatives, particularly the President, do extensive work advocating for students rights and interests where matters of the University's rules are discussed, particularly at a management level. For example, in the Academic Board and its Committees; in groups such as the Senior Executive Group meetings, as well as many ad hoc discussions and sub-groups. This work is supported by the professional Casework & Policy staff of the SRC, and can sometimes include legal advice and assistance.
- Orientation information through our publication and web site, in our welfare leaflets and information in *Honi Soit* by representatives and staff.
- Extensive experience dealing with international students, who are sometime quite vulnerable to isolation, cultural dislocation and problems associated with separation from family. We work closely with the university counselling and other services to meet their particular needs.

## **Conclusion**

The SRC provides services and representation for the undergraduate student body at the University of Sydney, which requires ongoing funding, recognition and independence.

The sector routinely provided these services through student organisations before the introduction of the 2005 Act of VSU. The sector, and the student sector in particular, is now much poorer for the losses, as is recognised in the Impact Discussion Paper put out by Minister Ellis in Feb 2008. This paper referred to 25 out of 30 student organisations reporting job losses and reduced services. In some instances University takeovers occurred with resulting conflict of interest problems and massive cuts to portfolios and services directed at student concerns.

Students enrolled in Universities deserve more from their education. Representative organisations give them more. Sustainable funding is required to ensure ready access to effective representative organisations. This Bill presents such a funding model.

**The University of Sydney Students' Representative Council commends the Bill and seeks amendments as outlined:**

- **that the Bill be amended so that the section 19-38 explicitly includes expenditure on independent democratic student controlled representation as allowable expenditure, and**
- **that the Bill be amended to 'require' this expenditure so that independence and the removal of any perceived conflict of interest is assured.**