



**Student Guild** | University of Western Australia

Submission to the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace  
Relations Committee Inquiry into

***Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services  
and Amenities, and Other Measures Bill 2009)***

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## Executive Summary

The UWA Student Guild is the foremost representative student representative and service organisation at the University of Western Australia. Established in 1913, we have a proud history of being run by students for students.

With over 90 affiliated clubs and societies, a full calendar of academic, social and cultural events, and extensive commercial operations, the UWA Student Guild is a prime example of the importance of student organisations and the positive impact that they can have on a University Community and wider society.

Under the Previous Government's legislation, the UWA Student Guild has been set back years in terms of its forward planning and service operation. We have been forced to 'tread water' as an organisation – unable to move forward on projects such as the development of new services and capital works.

We have not seen the devastation that other student organisations have faced. We believe this to be a result of the hard work of previous Student Representatives and Staff. Our structure fosters a strong student community on campus, as evidenced by our wide variety of clubs, our charitable ventures and the support we receive from the student body.

However, UWA Student Guild, as much as any other student organisation in Australia, strongly supports the reform of the Previous Government's legislation. We believe that this legislation was never about offering 'choice', rather it was to silence opposition and facilitate a transformation of the Higher Education system.

We welcome moves by the Government to reform this legislation and support a number of the key features already announced. We support a ceiling on how much students can be charged and also the ability to defer payment.

With the proposed legislation and guidelines to be examined by this Inquiry, there are a number of issues we wish to draw to the Inquiry's attention:

### *1. The importance of Student Control of Student Affairs*

It is important that Student's have direct control and say in how the new funds are going to be used. The logical conclusion is that there should be well resourced independent student organisations, run by students for students.

This also will ensure proper service delivery as students are best placed to meet the needs of students.

### *2. Defining what is 'Political'*

The definition of 'political purposes' is crucial. The UWA Guild supports a ban on money going to political parties or candidates – for us this is a clear cut example of

improper use of funds.

However it is important that campaigns on important student issues such as student poverty and proposed HECS increases are seen for what they are. Running campaigns on these issues are clearly in student interests and are the 'core business' of student organisations.

### *3. Promoting Capital Expenditure*

Student organisations, like the University sector as a whole, are in dire need of extensive infrastructure. The effect of VSU has meant that Student organisations are more focused on surviving rather than expanding.

It is important that the legislation allow for student organisations to upgrade existing facilities and build new ones, without having to rely on University handouts.

### *4. Funding for Clubs and Societies*

Clubs and societies are a crucial part of University life and contribute heavily to student life on campus. They encourage student interaction on campus, providing networking activities and an education experience that compliments their academic studies.

While funding for political clubs may be restricted, the Guild believes it is important to ensure that all views are represented on campus and that the majority of clubs which are not political shouldn't be 'punished' for the minority of clubs which are.

The UWA Student Guild also believes that there is a strong economic argument to introduce this levy and to ensure that there is direct student control of it.

#### *1. Stimulate the economy*

Most student organisations are starved for money and will spend it given the chance, especially on capital works if this is allowable under the legislation.

#### *2. Maintain International Competitiveness*

Student organisations foster fantastic communities on campus, UWA is evidence of this. Community and a sense of belonging will help Universities attract and retain International students.

The UWA Student Guild has survived the devastation of VSU, but at the expense of moving forward as an organisation. We are an example of a strong advocate for students, a valuable contributor to the University and Western Australian community and responsible and accountable organisation.

We urge the Inquiry to support this legislation as it is in the best interests of students.

## **Introduction**

The UWA Student Guild is the foremost student representative organisation at the University of Western Australia. Employing over 100 staff, alongside student volunteers, it is an organisation run by student for students. We are a single structure organisation – Guild Council fulfils the functions of both a Student Representative Council and Union Board (as is the Eastern States model).

UWA Student Guild has been and always will be a prominent part of the University community. We have a proud history of being standing up for the interests of students and the University, a role that we continue to take very seriously to this day.

The legislation of the previous Government has diminished our ability to do this effectively. While we have survived, it has as been as a result of expansion and innovation. We still continue to effectively do our job – this is evidenced by our strong membership take up – but as an organisation we have had to delay and abandon new and exciting services, activities or capital works.

We, in short, believe that all students should contribute to their student organisation. Whether or not they choose to be members of this organisation is their decision, but their decision should not allow them to dodge their responsibilities.

## **History of the UWA Student Guild**

In order to understand the effect that VSU has had on the UWA Student Guild, it is important to understand where we have come from as an organisation.

### **Formation and Early History**

The UWA Student Guild was formed as a result of an Act of the West Australian Parliament, *The University of WA Act 1911*. Under s 28 we were created as,

*‘... an organized association of students for the furthering of their common interests, and shall be the recognised means of communication between students and the governing authority of the University in accordance with such Statutes as the governing authority may prescribe.’*

As such as long as the University has operated the Guild has existed. The legislation also provided for all students to be charged by the University an Amenities and Services Fee, which then had to be passed on to the relevant Student Organisation.

### **State Based VSU**

While it is important to look at the effect that VSU has had on the Guild this time, it is

necessary to understand our previous history and contact with VSU.

In the late 1990's the Court Government introduced state based VSU which affected all the WA Universities. This legislation had a devastating effect on the Guild and its services – which are detailed over the page:

| <b>Service and Staff Losses</b> |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| 1                               | <b>Sexual Assault Referral Centre closed:</b> student welfare service including a trained staff member   |
| 2                               | <b>28 Jobs including:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Education officers providing counselling, academic appeals and financial advice</li> <li>§ Finance and Administrative support staff</li> <li>§ IT personnel</li> <li>§ Retail staff</li> <li>§ Childcare providers</li> <li>§ Sports centre management</li> <li>§ <b>Funding to clubs and societies:</b> a 45% reduction in funds resulted in a decreased student experience</li> <li>§ <b>Representation Budget</b> cut from \$135 000 to \$25 000: reducing the funding available for campaigns to improve the quality of education and campus conditions</li> <li>§ <b>Student welfare budget</b> cut from \$70 000 to \$45 000</li> <li>§ Severe cutting of the <b>text book subsidy scheme</b></li> <li>§ <b>Computer lounge</b> closed down: removing 24 hour access to free internet</li> <li>§ <b>Funding of property fell from \$320 000 to \$120 000:</b> The Guild is now reliant on the University for handouts to develop any new infrastructure for services as well as finding it difficult to maintain current assets</li> <li>§ <b>24 hour/365 day personal accident insurance</b> for students cancelled</li> </ul> |
| <b>Long Term Losses</b>         |  |
| 1                               | <b>Guild Sports and Recreation Division:</b> became a separate for profit organisation in order to pay a \$3.3 Million debt incurred prior to VSU. Students now have to pay for access to facilities   |
| 2                               | <b>Sale of Property</b> including the South Wing of the Guild Building and several Guild businesses.   |
| 3                               | <b>Cash Reserves:</b> were used to fund operations during this time period.  |

The legislation brought most Student organisation in WA to their knees, with UWA Student Guild the only not to be on the brink of bankruptcy.

## **Recovery Period**

In 2002, the Gallop Government repealed the legislation with a few key differences to the pre-VSU environment.

Every student had to pay the Amenities and Services Fee but it was optional as to whether or not the student chose to be a Guild member. Of the money collected, the Guild had to receive a proportion no less than the percentage of students who chose to be Guild members but more than 50%. This provided an incentive for Guild's to innovate and improve.

There was also a requirement in the legislation that no money was to be spent on political purposes, similar to those detailed in the legislation currently before the Inquiry.

During this period the Guild worked hard to re-establish itself and its services; however services like the Sexual Assault Referral Centre were never restarted.

## **Federal VSU**

With the implementation of Federal VSU, UWA Student Guild adopted a growth based plan rather than one focussed on cutting back the organisation.

Money was directed into commercial ventures such as Catering to ensure that we had viable income streams in the instance our membership levels dropped to those under the State based experience. There was also a large focus on service delivery and availability.

Thankfully, due to this approach and a supportive University, we have seen our financial membership remain incredibly strong. In the first year of VSU we saw those students electing to be financial members hit 57%. Currently, despite still being in the early weeks of the New Year, we have financial membership of roughly 53%.

We believe that this is the highest take-up in the country and we have been awarded by ACUMA as 'Best Practice' in attraction of Voluntary Membership. It is important to note that our membership fee is exactly what it was pre-legislation - \$120.

While our financial system has taken a minimal hit in comparison to other Student Organisations, a large income stream for us has been Investments. While this has provided a strong and stable source of income previous, with the current Financial Crisis we have seen a significant reduction in Income from this source. Our Catering and Property incomes have stayed strong and only seen minor declines.

## **Future Plans**

The Guild is continuing in its Growth based approach. We have plans for building and establishing three new catering outlets and our Function Catering business has a steady flow of business.

Our Investments have been restructured to maximise revenue and our Property division has been cleaned up and we are undergoing a Master Planning process for the Guild Precinct.

In terms of organisation and service delivery, we are committed to maintaining current levels of funding for clubs and societies and developing more support structures for these organisations.

However like any organisation we are facing a slowing economy and cash flow problems. These will temper any of our plans and mean that the Guild can be less responsive to Student needs.

## ***UWA Student Guild's view of the new Legislation/Guidelines***

From the UWA Student Guild's perspective there are four key areas that this Legislation needs to address to truly act in the interests of students.

### **Importance of Student Control of Student Affairs**

In order to ensure that students have effective and independent representation, it is crucial that the money to be collected by this proposed fee go to democratically elected student organisations.

Universities can not always be relied upon to act in the best interests of students. While our views and interests will often align, the University fundamentally has a different objective to that of students. By allowing Universities to be the sole collectors of this fee, the legislation is sanctioning a fundamental conflict of interest.

It is also very important that the independent representation that the legislation and guidelines mandates must be provided is not simply having an elected student on a university board. This is not an effective means of operation or service delivery. A situation like this lends itself to merely allowing students, who have no independent backing and support basis, to be used as a tool in the validation of University processes.

Mandating the requirement for independent student organisations also means the services will be delivered in the most effective manner. Students are the best placed people to judge the requirements of their fellow students, more so than any external business or university department.

The practical impact of VSU was that it weakened the independence of student representatives and service delivery. Any solution that does not support money being



handed over to student organisations, which are democratically elected, will only help to reinforce this situation.

## **Definition of ‘Political’**

It is incredibly important that the legislation and guidelines have a proper and sensible definition of what ‘political purposes’ are.

From our perspective, ‘political purposes’ should be defined as what they are currently – that no money should be given to candidates for public office or in support of political parties. We believe such acts to be an abuse of power and the trust of the student body, and very sensible actions to prohibit.

It has been floated in the media that this would not be the sole definition of ‘political purposes’. There has been suggestion that campaigns for increases to Youth Allowance and opposing HECS increases for example should be prohibited.

The UWA Student Guild rejects this definition as we do not consider these actions political, but rather what should be considered our ‘core business’, advocating in the interests of students. The above mentioned issues are both that have a very clear and easy link to draw to what is in student’s interests.

By prohibiting such campaigns, the legislation would be silencing Guilds, and in a sense, stopping the Guild’s main function. There is no such legislation stopping business groups criticising Government policy, or groups like Legal Aid or CASE for Refugees criticising Government policy. These groups attract taxpayer support through grants and funding but they are not silenced because it is accepted as their ‘core business’ to advocate for their members.

While loathe to describe students as consumers, shouldn’t consumers of Higher Education expect their representative body to be able to advocate on their behalf?

## **Promoting Capital Expenditure**

Student Organisations, like the rest of the Higher Education Sector, have been starved of capital infrastructure. Many are operating in unsuitable facilities and have long outgrown their infrastructure.

Our Guild has survived because we have taken a growth based approach to our operations. We have invested in capital, both commercial and student space. Despite this we still rely on the University for ‘Handouts’ to complete a number of our projects, because of VSU and cash flow issues.

Improving infrastructure is crucial to ensuring Student organisations can support themselves. Prime Minister of Australia, Sir Robert Menzies described in 1961 the completely Guild funded extension to our previous building as,

*‘a spectacular piece of self help.... I am not unaccustomed to having cases put to me which involve some finding of money from the inexhaustible purse of the*

*Commonwealth. .... but this is I think the first occasion I've been invited to open costly buildings paid for by the personal sacrifice and effort of Undergraduates.'*

Student organisations, in particular our Guild, have a proud history of 'self help' and one that we want to continue.

## **Funding for Clubs and Societies**

Any legislation or guidelines that are passed by Parliament must make adequate allowances for clubs and societies to be supported by the proposed fee.

Clubs and societies form a very important part of the Guild's operations and are a necessary component of the University Community. At UWA we have over 90 affiliated clubs from a diverse range of backgrounds and interests who all play a significant role in creating a vibrant atmosphere on campus.

At UWA these groups are all possible because of the donated time of student volunteers and funding from the Guild. It has been a primary concern of the Guild to ensure that funding under VSU is at the very least maintained.

## ***Benefits of implementing the proposed Fee***

From the Student Guild's perspective, this proposed fee should be considered of benefit to the Australian Economy for two reasons: it will provide stimulus to local areas, in particular rural areas, and it will also improve our international competitiveness.

## **Stimulating the Economy**

If introduced, this fee will act as a stimulus on the economy for two reasons. Firstly, under the devastation of VSU, student organisations are hungry for money and will spend it on a number of projects which have been delayed due to lack of resources. This stimulus will be almost immediate and long lasting.

It will also be more pronounced in rural communities, where student organisations have been in particular affected by VSU.

Secondly, student organisations offer discounted and subsidised services for students. By using these services, students as consumers will have more money in their pocket to use in other industries. For example, the Guild gives out more in discounts than it receives in membership fees, resulting in a net gain for students.

In the economic times we are facing, any means of promoting activity and investment are crucial and something the Inquiry should consider.

## **Improving International Competitiveness**

Education is one of Australia's biggest exports and Universities have often aimed to attract international students. While it is disappointing that International students have been traditionally used as 'cash cows', they do provide a significant source of income for universities.

A key means of attracting and retaining International students is campus culture and community. Coming from overseas, International students are far from home and eager to feel as though they 'belong' at their institution. This sense of belonging is therefore crucial to the attraction and retention of International Students.

At UWA, our community culture and sense of belonging is fostered by our strong student networks, all of which is facilitated by the Guild. Our diverse and welcoming clubs and societies are a key drawcard for the University and are often promoted to the wider community.

Therefore, this proposed fee is crucial to ensuring that university community continues to be fostered by student organisations and volunteers.

## ***Conclusion***

This proposed fee represents the first step on a program of ensuring that student organisations are able to serve the interests of their student bodies and delivering quality and accessible services.

While written from a Western Australian, and UWA, centric perspective, we believe that a lot of these concerns and experiences are common amongst our fellow student organisations.

We urge the Inquiry to fully support legislation and guidelines that fully promote the above points. This is the only way to ensure that the true interests of students are being met.