

To whom it may concern,

As a student who had three years of experience in the University of Western Sydney's Students' Association (UWSSA) and is currently involved in the process of developing and implementing the University of Western Sydney's New Student Organisation (NSO), I have seen first-hand the dramatically negative effects that VSU has had on the provision of student services at the University of Western Sydney (UWS).

Putting aside the detrimental and damaging effects that VSU has had on student unions, students at UWS have still felt the bite of a decrease in the quality and quantity of student services. With the increased financial pressure that has been placed on UWS, we have seen student centres closed for whole semesters, parking fees increased, less face-to-face time allocated to teaching staff, an increase in tutorial class sizes and the loss of a number of senior lecturers and administrative staff across the board, to list just a few of the more obvious changes that have occurred. We've also seen an increased commercialisation of our university environment, with students feeling more like numbers than the upcoming foundation of this country's future.

While the *Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009* will not reverse the damage that has been done by VSU, it will certainly help universities such as UWS to begin repairing the damage. The option of assistance in the form of SA-HELP will also allow students, who are often under great financial stress, to contribute to the improvement of their university environment without putting them under immediate financial pressure. This can only be seen as a positive initiative by the government.

That being said, there is obviously a great need for student unions to be able to receive at least a small portion of the funding collected by universities if this Bill is passed. UWSSA, like many other student unions, has given into the mounting pressures of a post-VSU environment and is currently in the process of winding up. The NSO that is being set up to replace UWSSA will be running on limited funds, unable to provide the depth and breadth of services that student unions are typically responsible for. Its ability to continue its role in the protection of students' rights and their access to a high quality of education will also be effectively reduced. It is possible that, without access to funding, the NSO will be unable to provide anything more than a stable infrastructure for a body of students whose concerns and need for support will far outweigh its ability to respond to these issues. In effect, it is possible that a lack of funding could leave UWS without any direct representation being available for its student body – an issue that, as has been mentioned, many universities are currently facing.

Post-VSU, UWS made a decision to put most of its funding into its commercial enterprise, UWSSConnect. As a result, money has been pumped into a business

that has done little if anything to increase the quality of life for this university's students, focussed as it is on increasing its surplus rather than on providing useful and fairly priced services and products to the student body. While students have seen UWSSConnect increasing its monopolised hold on the provision of both activities and commercial outlets at UWS – culminating last year in the replacement of Co-Op Bookshop outlets with UWSSConnect-run bookshops – they have found themselves paying for this change out of their own wallets, as prices have continued to rise. In its attempt to take over the provision of what used to be UWSSA's services, UWSSConnect has had its own effect on the decrease of student activities and involvement in university life, by asking for too much in return for very little. While UWSSA received nominal support from UWS and struggled to keep its head above water, UWSSConnect did what many businesses end up doing: it failed to view the students of UWS as anything more than a source of income. This is one of the inevitable prices of unions such as UWSSA no longer being able to do their job properly and is only going to become worse if something is not changed – and soon.

There is also a tendency for the staff members of unions to be ignored or forgotten in the debates about the funding of student unions. As a member of UWSSA's Board of Directors, it was my unfortunate duty to take part in decisions that led to more than ten staff being made redundant and four staff members' employment being handed over to UWS, putting them in constant danger of breaching the ethical basis of their employment. These are staff members whose involvement in student unions would have spanned more years than most students have been alive, let alone involved in student activism. The infrastructure that they sustained, as well as the experience and knowledge that they held have been lost for good now – and this has had a visibly negative effect on the ability of unions such as UWSSA to function properly. Not only that, but these staff members were forced into giving up jobs that they were passionate about and which helped them to actively engage not only with UWS's student body, but the community at large. Their loss is something that should be recognised as one of the most damaging effects that VSU has had. A continued lack of funding to student unions will merely perpetuate this problem down the line and must be addressed.

It is imperative that the government recognises the need for the funding of student unions and does something to keep these student bodies alive. The *Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009* is one step in many that must be taken to help universities recover from the effects of VSU and make sure that students are able to experience the fullest potential of their time at university.

Regards,
David Lenton

