

**Senate Select Committee on the Scrutiny of New Taxes
Parliament House
Canberra**

Dear Senators,

RE: HIGHER EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (STUDENT SERVICES AND AMENITIES) BILL 2010

I write to you as a concerned student, concerned by the Government's plans to reintroduce compulsory student unionism on campus, under the guise of a \$250 student amenities fee.

In this submission I will address the following points:

- Voluntary student unionism and some of the misconceptions associated with it
- The work of student unions on campus in Australia
- The fallacy behind the need for a student amenities fee on campus and why it is as good as a poll tax

The introduction by the Howard Government of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Up-Front Compulsory Student Union Fees) Act 2005* relieved students of a financial burden of up to \$600 year. It relieved them of having their enrolment revoked in the course of their choosing as well; in the scenario they did not pay this exorbitant fee to a student union before the start of the academic year. It has also freed up the pockets of thousands of students on campus, allowing them to spend their money, as they choose.

Opponents of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) have argued that its introduction has made student organisations lose money.

I believe this to be simply not true. Student unions who offer services that students find useful and popular will not have this problem. Sadly however, the student unions who are crying foul over VSU are not offering services students want or need. For instance, the student union at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) for most of its time during VSU has broadcasted an anti-capitalist media program on a radio every Saturday morning on a station called 3CR. I simply do not see how this is a service a student at RMIT would want or need. However, I do understand how the RMIT student union is losing money.

Opponents of VSU have also argued that VSU has stripped money from clubs and societies on campus. This is far from the truth. It is student unions who have stripped money from clubs and societies on campus. A recent example of this was in 2009 when the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) slashed the budget of the clubs and societies on campus by \$18,000 in order to fund an increase in its donation to the National Union of Students.

What these two instances demonstrate is that VSU is not to blame if there has been a decline on campus in the quality of student services being offered. Instead, it is student unions themselves who are responsible.

The Government has argued that a student amenities fee on campus is needed because VSU destroyed many of the services that were once offered on campus. However, I personally reject the notion that a compulsory fee is required to provide a service. In society, child care centres or sporting clubs do not rely on compulsory acquired fees to survive. Instead, they run prudent and balanced budgets, and are receptive to the needs of their market, and as a result, offer financially sustainable and desirable services. I believe that this is a culture that should be extended on campus, a culture that should be cultivated amongst our student unions.

Unfortunately, it appears the government does not support my views. Instead, what they are proposing is essentially a regressive tax on students. Students will be required to pay \$250 a year, regardless of their income, their ability to pay the fee or their willingness to use the services that their fee will contribute to. At the heart of the issue, is simply spin. This is not a student amenities fee; it is the reintroduction of compulsory student unionism. The government would note that I still don't have to join a union under their proposed model. If that is so, why should I still have to contribute money to them if I am not a member of that union or if I choose not to use their services? Ultimately, my money still ends up in the hands of a student union.

Quite simply, I do not want to give money to a student union if they partake in behaviour like the student union at Monash University. In 2007, the Monash Student Association contributed \$1500 towards the defence of a convicted and jailed G20 rioter. This same organisation produced stickers in 2003 that read 'Bomb the White House'. What is of further concern to me is that currently I am considering undertaking a post-graduate degree at Monash University once my current degree finishes at the end of 2011.

In conclusion, I urge both houses to reconsider the passage of this bill. The three examples in my submission on the activities of student unions on their respective campuses highlight why student unions are currently failing. It is because these organisations are out of touch, and are not receptive to the needs of students. Furthermore, these organisations still have had access to substantial amounts of money to do considerable good on campus. Instead, they have stripped money from clubs and societies, and defended extreme political activists.

VSU is not to blame for the current circumstances. VSU is the only thing that will save student unions from themselves. Eventually, student unions will have a choice. That choice is whether they continue to offer services no body on campus want or need, or whether they will listen, be receptive, restructure themselves, and offer services on campus that students do want, and that students would pay for, voluntarily. The proposed student amenities fee will prevent this, and in the process, it will further reinforce the contempt student unions have for students.

There is no need for this bill, because VSU has done no wrong.

I thank the committee for its time.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Langdon
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