

SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE SCRUTINY OF NEW TAXES

Inquiry into compulsory student fees

Submission from The Group of Eight Ltd

The Group of Eight (Go8) universities unequivocally support the proposed amendment to the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*, recently reintroduced to the House of Representatives, to allow universities to charge their students a Student Services Fee. The Go8 has previously expressed its support publicly. The Chair of the Go8, Professor Alan Robson, made a public statement calling on the Senate to pass the bill in 2009. The Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University, Professor Ian Chubb, stated his support for the proposed amendment at a joint press conference with the Minister for Tertiary Education, Senator Chris Evans, and the President of the National Union of Students, Ms Carla Drakeford, on 29 September 2010. Professor Chubb participated in a similar joint press conference with Senator Kate Lundy last year, when the bill was last before Parliament.

All Go8 Vice-Chancellors, along with Vice-Chancellors of all other Australian universities, signed a letter (dated 28 September 2010) to all Members of Parliament and Senators urging them to support the bill.

The introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) under the previous government in 2005 made it very difficult for universities to fund student services, with a serious adverse impact on the delivery of childcare, sporting, health, counselling and other services, and on campus life and student representation more broadly.

Despite the resulting revenue gap, all Go8 universities have continued to provide these services to their students at a high level of quality. However, this has necessitated some cross-subsidy of student services from teaching and research funding. This is clearly neither an ideal nor a long-term solution.

As well as making it harder for universities to provide services for students, VSU has had a major negative effect on legitimate student advocacy. Quite separately from student politics, student organisations have an important role in representing the interests of students as consumers, and to advocate for fair provision and due process for their members, in academic, administrative and other areas. VSU has greatly weakened this advocacy function, with undesirable effects on students' rights both as consumers and as citizens.

It should be noted that negative impacts of VSU have been felt especially at regional universities and campuses, where there are often fewer alternatives for students to services provided by the university.

The Go8 notes that the proposal which is now again before the House would not allow compulsory student unionism. It would do no more than allow universities to collect modest charges from students in order to fund a specified group of services in the interests of all students. The Go8 believes that these services are an important aspect of a high quality student experience, and that the kind of sporting, social and cultural opportunities funded by a student services fee add to a broad and rich experience of university.

The Go8 supports the introduction of an income-contingent loan to help student pay their student services fee. This will mean that the new fee will not present an up-front barrier to any student.

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