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*Chair:*  
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Our Ref: Q-01-013

20 February 2009

Senator Gavin Marshall  
Chair, Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
[ewwr.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:ewwr.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Senator Marshall,

**Re: Inquiry into the *Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009***

Universities Australia wishes to thank the Committee for the invitation to make a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the *Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009*. Our comments are limited to Schedule 1: Student Services and Amenities, of this Bill.

The Bill allows that the funding collected as Student Services and Amenities Fees will be used by universities for a range of non-academic purposes, as listed in the Fee Guidelines. Universities Australia broadly welcomes the Government's proposed Amendment, which will greatly assist in reinvigorating campus life across Australia.

While the Fee Guidelines list numerous services, Universities Australia identifies a wide range of health services, and welfare services (such as non-academic counselling, child care facilities, and the maintenance of independent legal and advocacy support) as critical to support the learning outcomes of all students. We look forward to further consultation on the Guidelines that will put the legislation into practice.

Universities appreciate the flexibility to choose who is best placed to provide the services, whether that be the institution itself, student organisations, or third party providers.

Universities Australia notes concerns that some students may experience difficulty in paying the proposed fee. This notion is not supported however by the findings of our *Australian University Student Finances Survey*, particularly given that students can elect to defer payment of the proposed fee through a HELP loan.

Evidence in support of our position is provided in the attachment to this letter. Universities Australia would be most willing to discuss any of these matters in detail with the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

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**Chair**

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## Attachment: Submission in relation to Student Services and Amenities

The purpose of the Bill is to ensure the availability of quality student support services and amenities at Australian universities. Universities Australia has advocated for the necessity of this for some years, and is pleased to note that the Bill very closely reflects the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee 2005 recommendation for a services and amenities fee for non-academic purposes<sup>i</sup>.

Universities Australia welcomes the Government's proposed Amendment. It will greatly assist in reinvigorating campus life across Australia, and will help restore essential services which have either operated under greatly reduced funding, or been discontinued completely since the introduction of voluntary student unionism (VSU) in 2006.

Lack of subsidised or free access to these services is considered to be a barrier to successful study for many students, and Universities Australia believes that access to services will support more students of Indigenous; low socio-economic; culturally and linguistically diverse; and/or disability backgrounds through their degree programmes.<sup>ii</sup> Provision of on-campus employment services will even help directly with a student's post-graduation outcomes.

Universities Australia appreciates that not all students may use these services during their study, but is firmly of the view that it is better for all students to contribute to the provision of the services, which are then available to all, than to not have the services available to those who need them. Additionally, such services will provide a safety net for those students who had begun their study with no need for the services, but whose situations change for the worse during the course of their study. The Bill (s19-27(2)) requires universities to provide students with clear information regarding the services being provided through the Student Services and Amenities Fee. This information should encourage more students to utilise services which they may otherwise have not known existed.

According to the provisions of the Bill each university will be held responsible for the use of the funds collected from its students, and will have the option of providing the services directly or contracting the service out. Universities Australia supports this provision. While Student Unions have historically provided most of these services using the previously compulsory union levies, the Unions may not be the most appropriate providers of these services and amenities envisaged by this Amendment, and universities will appreciate the freedom to contract other providers.

It is relevant in the current economic climate to note that the introduction of a Student Services and Amenities Fee will act as a potential economic stimulus and will fund the restoration of jobs lost as a consequence of voluntary student unionism legislation<sup>iii</sup>.

Under the legislations the use of fees for party-political purposes will be strictly forbidden. Universities Australia supports this prohibition. Individual students hold a range of party-political views, and it would be inappropriate for funds collected from the entire student body to be used for partisan purposes.

Universities Australia notes that some stakeholders are campaigning against this Bill on the grounds that students are not able to shoulder the financial burden of the fee. A finding from Universities Australia's *Australian University Student Finances Survey* 2006, undertaken before the VSU legislation came into force, may be pertinent here. Students were asked whether they had difficulty in paying the then compulsory student union fees. 24% of undergraduates and 14.4% of postgraduates agreed that they did.<sup>iv</sup> The conclusion must be that the majority of students did not experience any difficulty in paying the fees (which were in many cases well above the maximum of \$250 proposed in the current Bill) and would not experience difficulty in paying the new fee.

Those students who do face such a difficulty will have the option of utilising a deferred HELP loan, the value of which will be added to other HELP loans taken during study. Given that a maximum HELP debt for a full-time 2007 Bachelor graduate, averaged over all discipline funding clusters, was \$20,579<sup>v</sup> and a maximum amount in Student Services and Amenities Fees charged over a three-year Bachelor degree of \$750, the Fee would add an average of only 3.6% to the total HELP debt of a graduating student. Universities Australia considers that 3.6% is not an excessive premium to provide services and amenities that will ensure that all students are provided with the best opportunities to succeed in their study.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/policy/submissions/AVCC\\_report\\_HESABill-2005.pdf](http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/policy/submissions/AVCC_report_HESABill-2005.pdf), page 13.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/policy/survey/AUSF-Final-Report-2006.pdf>, pages 51, 59.

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.acuma.org.au/Media/downloads/80\\_16200849022522\\_82.pdf](http://www.acuma.org.au/Media/downloads/80_16200849022522_82.pdf), pages 133-134 (an estimated 1,700 jobs have been lost as a result of VSU).

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/policy/survey/AUSF-Final-Report-2006.pdf>, table 6.2, page 46.

<sup>v</sup> Source: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008