



Committee Secretary  
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

30 January 2009

Dear Committee Secretary,

**Re: Inquiry into the Provision of Childcare**

The Students' Representative Council (SRC) is the representative body for over 35,000 undergraduate students at The University of Sydney. SUPRA represents more than 15,000 postgraduate students. Both of our organisations employ professional casework and advocacy staff who assist students with difficulties they may encounter during their studies. Many of our members are student parents and/or guardians who rely on the provision of childcare to access and progress through University. We therefore are grateful for the opportunity to make a short submission to this important inquiry.

We will not address each of the terms of reference contained in this inquiry but have focused on options and models of childcare and the role of government in funding children and ensuring childcare is accessible. The SRC and SUPRA are in a unique position to speak of the childcare needs of low income student parents and/or guardians as we are both the representative organisations for these students and assist many with their individual situations.

*Recommendation 1: That distinct attention is given to student parents as a group throughout your inquiry and in future policy and decision making.*

**University of Sydney student parents often have identified difficulties accessing childcare**

SRC and SUPRA casework and advocacy services identify that student parents have a real problem accessing childcare. It is common for student parents and/or guardians to face long waiting lists for childcare as students compete with childcare places with other members of the community. In a survey of 382 postgraduate students conducted by the University in 2006, 10% listed being on waiting lists or having spaces unavailable as the reason for not using campus based care. Amongst other reasons for not using campus based care 22% did not use it because it is too expensive, 10% stated that they were still on waiting lists or spaces were unavailable, and 7% stated that long day care did not suit their needs. Currently, at The University of Sydney, student parents and guardians have to compete with staff members and the community in accessing childcare places.

It must be noted that student parents and guardians are likely to be a low-income group and therefore often lack the financial resources to seek childcare from the more expensive providers. The general

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lack of government funds for certain types of affordable and accessible childcare severely disadvantage low income student parents and guardians and those returning to study from paid work. SUPRA and the SRC find this situation unacceptable, particularly given the push over the past several years to encourage lifelong learning and an upgrading of qualifications in order to fill chronic skills shortages.

A multi-pronged approach, involving both government and education providers, could make childcare more accessible to student parents.

*Recommendation 2: That the government encourage universities to ask students about their childcare needs at the point of enrolment, as is the practice at TAFE NSW. TAFE NSW has a system whereby student parents are given priority in accessing childcare by not having to compete for available childcare places provided at TAFE NSW.*

### **Demand for occasional childcare**

The SRC and SUPRA have identified that student parents and guardians have a particular need in accessing occasional childcare. Student parents and guardians' childcare needs are subject to change and the long-term, full-day childcare model is not suitable for many as it does not meet their specific needs. The reality that many student parents and guardians are low-income earners, means student parents and/or guardians are usually looking to place children in childcare only for the hours that are absolutely necessary.

There is currently no occasional childcare at The University of Sydney. Providers on campus have relevant approvals to offer this kind of care but do not do so, partly because it involves higher cost of delivery and the challenge of managing a more inconsistent revenue stream. While occasional childcare on campus may not meet all students' needs (needs will vary and 24% of postgraduates surveyed stated that on campus care was too far away from home, for example), the lack of provision of occasional childcare highlights that student parents and guardians' childcare needs have not been prioritised.

### **Case study**

Chris (not the student's real name) is a single parent. At the start of each semester Chris negotiates a childcare roster with extended family members who also have other commitments. It is impossible however to predict all study commitments throughout semester. For example, exam timetables are not known at the beginning of semester and group meetings with other students cannot always be set in stone. It is also unpredictable when other caregivers may fall ill etc.

Chris' study has been adversely affected by the lack of occasional childcare when unpredictable things have arisen and nobody has been available for childcare. Chris has sometimes missed important meetings and tutorials and has found it hard to always find adequate study time. There are clear instances where the lack of occasional childcare has been the major factor in Chris' failure in a subject, which subsequently placed Chris' academic career at serious risk.

The SRC and SUPRA are concerned that student parents and/or guardians who cannot access appropriate and good quality childcare are likely to have greater difficulty in transitioning into higher education and successfully balancing study with caring responsibilities and work.

The SRC and SUPRA believe every childcare centre needs to have real capabilities of offering occasional childcare. One of the biggest obstacles in providing occasional childcare is the fact that there is no specific funding provision to increase the capacity of childcare providers to offer occasional child care, as most funding is directed towards parents and guardians rather than providers. Funding and regulatory initiatives from government to ensure Occasional Child Care is affordable, available and accessible is long overdue, particularly in relation to supporting on-campus care providers.

*Recommendation 3: That the current funding model be reviewed and changed in a way that encourages childcare providers to offer occasional childcare.*

*Recommendation 4: Government funding models for childcare should be altered so that they provide support for on campus childcare providers.*

## **Child Care Benefit Scheme**

We find anomalies with the Child Care Benefit Scheme. A couple where both partners are working in excess of 15 hours per week are entitled to up to 50 hours of benefit for a dependent child. However, if that same couple decides that either one or both partners will cease work to engage in full time study, the amount of assistance available drops to 24 hours per week.

*Recommendation 5: There be a review of the current Child Care Benefit Scheme with a view to ensuring equitable access to affordable and appropriate childcare, and removing this and any other identified anomalies.*

In conclusion, we list our recommendations in their entirety below.

*Recommendation 1:*

*That distinct attention is given to student parents and guardians as a group throughout your inquiry and in future policy and decision making.*

*Recommendation 2:*

*That the government encourage universities to ask students about their childcare needs at the point of enrolment, as is the practice at TAFE NSW. TAFE NSW has a system whereby student parents and guardians are given priority in accessing childcare by not having to compete for available childcare places provided at TAFE NSW.*

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*Recommendation 5:*

*There be a review of the current Child Care Benefit Scheme with a view to ensuring equitable access to affordable and appropriate childcare, and removing this and any other identified anomalies.*

Yours sincerely,



Noah White  
SRC President



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SUPRA President