



**Macquarie University Postgraduate
Representative Association**

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Mr John Carter, Committee Secretary

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

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

The Macquarie University Postgraduate Representative Association (MUPRA) supports the submission made nationally by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) on behalf of postgraduate students. In addition to the CAPA submission, we wish to reinforce the importance of independence through discussion of student representation at Macquarie University.

MUPRA believes autonomy is central to effective representation, and argues for direct student control of some of the revenue raised through the proposed legislation. We recommend that universities be compelled by legislation to financially support independent student representation, through funding via a portion of student activity fees collected. This releases universities from the conflict of interest they would otherwise face in negotiating funding with student associations. MUPRA has real concerns that fees raised through the proposed legislation as it currently stands will merely substitute funding provided by the University to U@MQ, its wholly-owned commercial entity created to replace the services of the student union (SAM) and the sports association (MUSR). This will effectively charge students for what they're already receiving, without any guaranteed increase in service provision or formal mechanisms for students to determine how their money is spent.

Since the introduction of the VSU legislation in 2006, Macquarie University has not provided any funding to postgraduate or undergraduate student representative groups. Despite this, MUPRA has continued to operate as an independent and autonomous representative association, representing the needs of over 10,000 postgraduate students by drawing from reserves set aside before the introduction of VSU. We

cannot continue operating indefinitely without a revenue stream. The University has previously suggested MUPRA amalgamate with U@MQ to receive funding, a move that would raise serious concerns regarding our ability to represent independently. This ability is threatened by the inevitably competing interests that arise between universities and their student bodies.

Past experiences demonstrate the extreme challenge in maintaining independence when funding relies on negotiations between the University and student groups. By way of example, there has been no undergraduate representative association since the collapse of the Macquarie University Students Council (MUSC) just prior to the introduction of the legislation in 2006. Repeated attempts to establish a new undergraduate group under the structure of U@MQ have continually met with delays and setbacks, at one stage completely restarting due to disagreements between student volunteers and U@MQ management about the shape and structure of student representation.

In 2008 the entire editorial team of the student paper *Speculum*, published by U@MQ, resigned from their positions, citing repeated interference by U@MQ management through censorship and control of content as untenable. Recently, U@MQ attempted to influence control over MUPRA's annual publication of its annual *Survival Guide*, free to all postgraduates, where the *Guide* contained content that U@MQ felt was not in its commercial interests.

In respecting the competing interests and challenges faced by universities, we acknowledge that student interests are one of many that may be overshadowed by other demands. It is the responsibility of student associations to advocate on behalf the student body. MUPRA is concerned that the legislation as currently stated does not adequately provide for real and effective independent student representation, nor compel the University to do so. We are deeply concerned that by making funding contingent on negotiations between universities and student associations, it positions the bodies in adversarial positions from the outset, limiting the effectiveness of student representation by making it dependent on an the same institution it may be required to criticise. Again, we feel that removing negotiations from individual universities by legislating a national minimum funding model would resolve our concerns.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed legislation, and look forward to strong and vibrant student representation that ultimately strengthens higher education in Australia.

Yours sincerely,

Phil Betts

President

Macquarie University Postgraduate Representative Association