

Submission for the

Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee

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

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QUT Student Guild submission in response to the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities and Other Measures) Bill 2009

The QUT Student Guild ('Guild') supports a Student Services and Amenities Fee on the condition that it goes directly to student organisations given their integral role in providing services, representation and advocacy at university. The Guild is concerned that the proposed legislation does not address the impact that Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) has had on Australian universities.

Of primary concern is subsection (3) in section 19-67 Special requirements for student services, amenities, representation and advocacy in 2010 and later years. This subsection outlines that '...the Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines cannot require a provider to fund an organisation of students, or of students and other persons.' The Guild believes that this fee **should** go directly to student organisations as we are the best equipped to provide support and representation for students as they are controlled by students themselves. Student control of student organisations is vital for the provision of support for students on campus as we inherently know what is of concern and importance as we are students ourselves.

Prior to VSU the Guild received approximately \$5.6 million per year, post-VSU our funding arrangement with the University is approximately \$1.52 million to be paid over five years. The significant decline in funding has resulted in a reduction of vital services previously available to students.

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Impact on Student Guild Services

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The Guild has a range of student services portfolios that provide specialist assistance to students. These portfolios provide services at no cost for students. Under VSU the services that these portfolios offer have been severely curtailed.

The portfolios which have been affected are:

Academic Advocacy Portfolio

The Academic Rights Portfolio advocates for students who experience difficulties with the University. Some issues that the portfolio seek to address are; grievances with lectures/tutors, appeals against exclusion from the university, disputing unfair grades, exam difficulties, academic dishonesty cases and contributes to the monitoring of the quality of the educational experience at the University. Given that the University has about 40,000 students, there are many

students who use our important service as they value its independence from the University. Adequate independent advocacy and representation provided by our academic advocacy portfolio ensures that student's needs are put first. Our advocates act in the best interests of students without fear of retribution from the university. Students feel comfortable raising concerns as we are not employed by the university, thus we are accountable to the students that we represent not the interests of the university.

Since the introduction of VSU, the portfolio has been affected by way of a severe reduction in staff, from three full time staff members to one staff member managing the high-volume academic advocacy needs of students. If the Student Services and Amenities Fee were to be directed towards our organisation it would benefit us by ensuring that we can cope with the many students using our advocacy services by employing much needed staff members and using the funds to better promote our services to all students on campus. Overall, the fee must be controlled by our organisation as we have had a long history of representing the needs of students on campus.

Welfare Portfolio

The aim of the Portfolio is to offer support, advice and services to all QUT students in areas affecting students' welfare, this includes accommodation and employment, Youth Allowance and Austudy. This portfolio has been immensely impacted by VSU on a number of fronts:

- The Welfare portfolio previously had four staff members covering the areas of employment, accommodation and general welfare and are now also down to one staff member.
- Only able to offer half the amount of food vouchers from \$10,000 worth to now \$5,000 which a significant number of students utilise.
- The legal service has been reduced to less contact hours and only available on one campus out of three. Textbook bursaries for students who cannot afford their textbooks are no longer provided.
- No longer able to provide cheap photocopying services for students
- Unable to provide student accident insurance
- Do not have enough funds for the provision of safe sex consumables and for the needle exchange program

It is evident that the welfare portfolio has been severely impacted by VSU, with the Student Services and Amenities Fee being directed back to our organisation it will enable us to re-establish these services as they are vital for all students. The Guild is concerned that if it is left solely for the university to decide whether or not we will receive the fee, this loss of services will continue to occur.

Other portfolios

The Guild's Women's, Queer, International, Disability have all lost full-time staff members resulting in these portfolio's further marginalisation on campus as specialised support has diminished which in turn has affected these groups most in need of full time advocates. Students who identify as belonging to any of these portfolios do not have the adequate support catered to their own unique needs. With the Student Services and Amenities Fee granted towards our organisation we would be able to ensure that these marginalised groups get the support they need in the challenging university environment.

Clubs and Societies and Sport although retaining staff do not have the much needed support of additional staff to manage the many clubs and societies and sporting teams on campus. The Guild are concerned that Clubs and Societies and Sport will have to continue to seek sponsors for support instead of being able to use the Student Services and Amenities Fee to expand these portfolios. As at the moment the Guild are only able to give \$100 per semester to help Clubs and Societies cover operational costs such as printing. All our portfolios are severely underfunded and will continue to be so as the Guild has no guarantee that the Student Services and Amenities Fee will go towards our organisation.

Childcare Services

The Guild runs four childcare centres across three campuses that service the students, QUT staff and their local community. Childcare has been identified as a priority area in discussions about the Student Services and Amenities and Other Measures Bill 2009, and for the federal government as a whole. The demand for affordable childcare services is increasing, as are the costs of maintaining high quality services. Often high quality is sacrificed in order to achieve this affordability for families.

The Guild childcare centres strive to provide high quality care and education for young children; that respects children as competent, creative individuals directing their own learning journey. We aim to provide physical, emotional and social environments where all participants feel free and secure to discover their self, others and their surroundings through meaningful interactions. High quality care means not just meeting basic, minimum requirements as set out in the Child

Care Regulations (2003). It means employing qualified teachers who deserve recognition for their work through appropriate pay for their early childhood specific qualifications and conditions that allow adequate time for collaboration, planning, documentation and professional development. It also means maintaining staffing levels above minimum legal ratio requirements. High quality also means well resourced centres, and interaction with the wider community to enhance children's learning.

The introduction of VSU has meant that centres have felt pressured to cut costs in order to maintain long term viability. This has been seen through cutting the numbers of 0-2 year olds that can be cared for in order to keep staff costs lower. There is also pressure to employ less qualified people requiring lower staffing costs. Little time is allowed in the day to adequately plan for children's learning and engage in high quality documentation that record children's learning processes and keep families informed. There have been fewer opportunities for professional development, as training and overtime budgets have had to be cut to reflect the reduced funding. Centres have had to keep to minimum staffing requirements only for each grouping as there are no additional funds to provide for the extra staff needed to provide high quality education and care.

If Guild childcare services are to maintain high quality education and care of young children, there must be an injection of funds received through the Student Services and Amenities and Other Measures Bill 2009 to ensure long term viability. The Guild is well positioned to ensure those funds are distributed appropriately to their childcare services, providing for additional qualified teachers, resources and professional development, whilst maintaining the affordability of these services for the families that use them.

Concluding comments

Kate Ellis, Minister for Sport and Youth has said that the 'government's approach is about restoring basic, necessary and important services and amenities to students.' The Guild believes that the Bill as it currently reads will not restore basic, necessary and important services as it is the university's discretion to pass the fee to the Guild, when we are the primary providers of services which are independent to the university and most importantly student controlled. Kate Ellis has further commented that 'Australian students have been literally paying the price for this loss, through increased costs on campus...' inherently students will be still be paying the price as there is no guarantee that the money will address the fundamental impact of VSU on campuses across Australia. Without money going directly to the student controlled organisation, universities have the scope to set up rival advocacy services which overbears the role of student organisations that have historically best represented the needs of students. Thus, the compounding effects of VSU will continue to undermine the representation, advocacy and

essential services provided by our organisation and many across the country.