



The Postgraduate Association of the University of Western Sydney Inc

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Submission to Senate Hearing: Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guideline Amendment to Higher Education Support Act 2003 (HESA)

Prior to the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU), a new student arriving at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) could expect to find a campus that was a living, evolving community. They could access a range of services from the Student Organisations including welfare services; advocacy and support; various clubs, societies and collectives and autonomous student spaces. There were regular events held across all campuses in student owned and operated venues – bands, pool competitions, trivia nights, and events run by corporate sponsors. Alternatively, they may have chosen to have lunch at one of the food outlets where student fees subsidised costs and kept them low. Or, they could have a free lunch provided by clubs and societies trying to entice new members. A new student could try everything from the conservation club to the debating society. Clubs and other student groups provided a diverse range of options, and were the backbone of life on campus. The first few weeks of the new academic year were hectic and exciting – they gave students a taste of what was going to be available to them in the next three years, and introduced them to the world of making adult decisions about their behaviour in a safe and student focused environment.

The post-VSU campus world could not be more different. Without strong and active student organisations to organise student focussed events the environment is now a barren one where university administrators rather than fellow students are making decisions about what kind of things a new student would want in their first weeks. Food on campus is now more expensive than similar options in local shops. The clubs and societies that have managed to hang on are generally linked to a specific discipline such as the Law Society, or to religious groups. In general, the experience at UWS has been that as the student run organisations were worn down through the loss of staff and lack of funding, money has been poured into the creation of a commercial entity. They do provide some ‘events’ during orientation sessions and the first weeks but they are aimed at individuals rather than helping students to form friendships and relationships in this new environment. Where joining a collective was always about working with others towards a particular objective, having a temporary tattoo applied or a having a session with a tarot reader are clearly solitary and individualistic activities. Now new students enter their adult life with all the responsibility, but no opportunity to experience new ideas, to stretch their personal identity or even to simply enjoy the experience of university and have some fun.

Prior to VSU, student organisations either owned or controlled a number of spaces on campus. Having access to student administered spaces allowed autonomous organising to occur and provided a base for a range of student groups to operate. Importantly, they provided a place for students to access information about becoming involved in their educations through taking on a role as a representative on university committees and boards, or as a member of the student council itself. As these spaces have been taken

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back by administration it has become increasingly more difficult to find students willing to take on committee responsibilities, or to fill vacancies on council. Spaces across campuses have disappeared until we reach the situation we now have at Bankstown where the only possible space for students to meet socially is the cafeteria – a cafeteria owned and run by the university through the commercial entity it created. There is no longer a bar or other venue to hold events; in the past week we have seen the existing student organisation's offices gutted and the women's and queer spaces have been demolished to make room for a university owned bookshop. With the ever diminishing loss of student controlled spaces there has been a comparable decline in campus life.

Young universities have been particularly hard hit by the VSU legislation as student organisations were totally reliant on fees. Without the explicit support and financial backing of university administration, the UWS student organisations were given little if any chance of surviving in a post-VSU environment. Unlike the older and more established universities, UWS student organisations had not had the time to develop property portfolios, or to buy into revenue raising businesses outside of the university setting. There are no generous bequests or alumni groups that attract substantial membership fees. Services have simply disappeared along with staff and space: it is for that reason that we support the Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines currently before the Senate.

Independent Advocacy

The guidelines make reference to the need for independent advocacy on Australian campuses. The loss of independent advocacy for students was a direct result of the Voluntary Student Union legislation implemented by the previous Government. For many years university managers had acknowledged that this service was best located within independent student associations who were able to offer advice and support free of the restrictions of university control. The only reason that universities in some cases have had to take over advocacy services is the lack of funding forced on the student organisation sector by VSU.

While universities should be thanked for stepping in and providing advocacy services, this action was only ever a short term solution. Advocacy provided by university employees cannot be independent and is not perceived to be independent by the student body.

University employees are restricted in the level of support that they can offer students. They are not able to support students in legal actions against their employer. There are internal pressures at play against university employed advocates - it is unfair to ask advocates to advocate fearlessly against their own employer. Regardless of the fearlessness and talent of any advocate, they would be compromised if they were asked to support a student against a university staff member who is involved in their own employment. University advocates are also stigmatised by their employer. A student feeling let down or harassed by a university staff member often does not feel confident in approaching another university staff member for help. Students often believe that promises of confidentiality and charters of independence are not enough when the risks to their university education are so high.

Independent student associations have no such problems. They are truly independent of the university and are clearly recognised as such by the student body. They do not have to reveal information to other university departments, such as risk management teams. They are able to defend a student all the way through the university process and beyond, such as helping with submissions to state ombudsman's offices, or even support the student in the event of legal action. University advocates simply can not compare in regard to the standard and scope of independent advocacy that student organisations can provide.

This legislation must, at the minimum, return Australian universities to best practice in advocacy services. It must be made clear that universities must support third party providers, namely independent student organisations to provide independent advocacy.

