



NATIONAL UNION OF STUDENTS (WA BRANCH)

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Joint VSU Submission

From NUS West, UWA Guild, ECU Guild, Murdoch Guild and Curtin Guild

Universal Student Unionism

We were all in agreement that it is vitally important to the student movement and student organisations that compulsory fees be reinstated for essential services; services which, by their nature, can only be provided by student associations. It was recognised that the services student guilds provide should be available to all students, as they relate to students' basic rights, their academic progress, and their welfare. In many situations, these services and supports cannot, or should not, be provided by universities.

However, membership of student organisations should not be mandated. There needs to be a distinction between the fees students pay to fund freely available essential services (which are provided by student guilds because they are the only ones qualified to provide these services), and the decision by students to support their student organisation by joining as a member (which then grants them contribution & voting rights, the right to run for office and extra member benefits). An opt-out system of membership would obviously be better for student organisations, and it still allows students to refuse guild membership.

In WA, at the last repeal of VSU these two issues were distinguished from one another. A compulsory amenities and services fee was charged to all students, and students had to decide whether to become a member of their guild. If students opted out of guild membership, then their amenities and services fee was allocated to another student support service area of the university. As such a tiny percentage of students opted out of membership under VSU, all students still had access to the services provided by the Guild, however, they would not have been eligible to run in elections or contribute at general meetings etc.

Several guilds also had agreements with their universities to ensure that even where less than 50% of students were guild members, no less than 50% of the amenities and services fee could be allocated to the guild. (Both UWA and ECU have agreements such that the Guild will be allocated an amount of Amenities & Services Fees which is no less than the percentage of students that are Guild Members, and more than 50% of the total funds received. The level of funding is negotiated with the University).

There was a concern that whilst services fees and guild membership should be treated

as separate issues, student services fees should not be depoliticised. It is important to stress not only the role student organisations play in supporting and representing students, but also the significance of these support services and the need for representation and advocacy for students.

* None of the guilds in WA have a split structure, but where this was the case, we suggested there would need to be some negotiation between the university, the Student Representative Council and the Union to determine where the amenities and services fees would go. This would largely depend on what support services were offered by each organisation. If all of the student advocacy, representation, welfare etc services were covered by the SRC, then they should receive almost all of the amenities and services fees.

Student Control of Student Affairs

If the legislation is to be passed in its current form, all WA Universities have expressed concern that the proposed Guidelines will fail to ensure that Student Organisations will retain control over the compulsory fee. It is our belief that independence should be the crucial criteria by which consideration is placed concerning the administration of the fee. Under the current scheme there remains the possibility that students will lose control of student affairs. Independent student organisations continue to be the best placed bodies to receive and administer the compulsory fee. Not only do Student Guilds and Representative Councils possess a greater bank of experience in supporting and providing services students, but there exists a fundamental conflict of interest for Universities to provide advocacy services to students. Should a student make a complaint against a lecturer, it would then be the role of the University to undertake action against one of their employees – this, most obviously, represents a clear conflict of interest.

The need for independence is equally apparent in the areas of representation and support. Apart from organising around government policy, Student Organisations have been continuously active in the area of University policy, organising around detrimental changes that Universities implement which has unduly affected the Student Experience on Campus. To continue to be active in changing university policy, it is essential that students are represented by independent student organisations. Given that the university will be the body implementing the detrimental change, it would be unlikely that the University, should they control the administration of the fee, would support an active campaign against their policy.

It must also be remembered that Student Guilds are structured so as to best provide support to students. Indeed, the need for independent support for students constitutes the *raison d'être* of Student Guilds. The support services available to students outside of university are often insufficient. Many students continue to struggle with poverty and leave university with large debts. As a result, Student Guilds provide an essential role in assisting students through often financially, emotionally, and psychologically difficult times. Without an independent student body on campus, students would go without these essential services.

The meaning of 'Independence'

In addition to aforementioned need for independent student organisations to retain

control of the compulsory fee, all WA Universities have expressed concern about the meaning of 'independence'. Throughout negotiations conducted with Universities in WA, some Vice-Chancellors have expressed an intention to remove essential services from the various Guilds in order to retain control of the fee. These expressions by various Universities raise concerns about the test which will be applied to determine whether an organisation which is requesting control of the fee is, in fact, independent. There remains the possibility that Universities will either strip services from Guilds and Unions in order to retain control of the fee, or alternatively set up rival organisations and representative councils as a means of retaining control of the student payment. It is our belief that the test for independence must be set high, ensuring that the fee goes directly to student organisations that are wholly independent from the Universities which they must advocate against.

Deferred Levy

If student services fees become compulsory, then having the option to defer payment could be helpful for many students. Likewise, if fees are not compulsory, the ability to defer payment might encourage more students to join their guild. If student services fees are not too high, however, hopefully not too many students will have to defer payment. It was agreed that deferred payment should not be mandated, but should be an option for those who cannot afford to pay at the time.

It was also suggested that, to offset any student debt that is incurred due to deferred guild fees, the government could erase part of the national HECS debt.

Government/ University Funding

We were all in agreement that any ongoing university or government funding should be avoided. This is not sustainable, as any change in government will see guilds around the country in trouble again. It also raises problems with accountability for tax payer funds. Also, in the current climate, with universities already desperately under funded, we did not feel it would be appropriate to take away any funding from universities, or to ask universities to fund student guilds.

The possibility of one off government funding to build up devastated student services, to the level they were at before VSU, was more attractive. It was suggested that a government funding pool might be the way to go, similar to the VSU transition funding pool for sports.

This would rely heavily on the distinction between essential student services, and other services which benefit students but do not have to be provided by student guilds. We all agreed that advocacy, representation, welfare services, and community/ student engagement were essential services, and could only really be provided by student organisations. Where a service could be provided just as well by the university as a student organisation, it would not be eligible for government funding, eg commercial outlets, childcare facilities, possibly sports. We did consider that separating all the services offered by student organisations into essential and non-essential might prove a problem, which would mean any sort of funding pool would also have problems with eligibility for application. There were also some concerns that a funding pool style system would force student guild to compete with each other for resources, which would

not be an ideal situation.

Transparency/ Accountability

The burden of accountability is somewhat lessened if no government funding is provided. However, having standards of accountability and embracing transparency in our organisations would definitely be a good move. Currently, all WA guilds have a requirement to be audited annually by an external body, and have to report annually to their university senate or governing body. For student organisations that do not already have these requirements in place, it may be a good idea to impose them. Whilst our operations are not restricted in anyway by the auditing or reporting, it does make our operations more transparent, ensures all guild council/ board members are aware of the state of their guild's finances, and makes sure that any significant problems are brought to light.

Framing

The term 'compulsory unionism' should be avoided, especially as this never represented the situation, and students could always choose not to be a guild member. In saying that we shouldn't use the phrase 'compulsory unionism', we are not suggesting that we should distinguish guild membership from other kinds of unionism, or distance ourselves from unions. As mentioned in the first section, we agreed that emphasis should be put on the need for student support services, representation and advocacy, and their importance in keeping students at uni. The amenities and services fees that fund essential student support services need to be compulsory in order to ensure students have the ability to survive at University without drawing on taxpayer funds.

We also need to highlight the fact that it is only student organisations that should be providing these services; to ask universities to provide advocacy and representation is a gross conflict of interest. In their under funded state it would also be unreasonable to ask universities to provide other support services currently provided by guilds. The good work guilds do in these areas, and have done for a long time should be emphasised. We need to publicise not only the continuing relevance of student guilds, but also the need for guilds and the work they do.