

Dear Sir,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill.

The University of New England is one of Australia's leading providers of regional tertiary education and was the first university to be established well outside a capital city. Undergraduates enrolled at the University of New England have unique needs that can often differ widely to those of their city peers.

The Undergrads of New England Guild (UNEG) Inc is the central representative body for all undergraduates enrolled at the University of New England. Following the collapse of the previous student association, attributed largely to the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU), UNEG Inc was established mid 2009 and formally incorporated as an association under the Incorporations Act. UNEG Inc has a range of objectives, the most fundamental of which is to represent the interests and welfare of our undergraduate students.

As the President of UNEG Inc, I strongly support the passing of this legislation. The introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) in 2005 saw the absolute decimation of campus culture and student support at UNE. For example:

- Along with the collapse of the student association came the loss of many vital services, perhaps most devastatingly the campus subsidised dentist.
- Clubs and Societies, often the core bodies for student engagement on campuses across the country were largely unable to continue without structural and financial support, and as it stands, less than 10 formally recognised clubs and societies run at UNE – even fewer could be considered 'active' on campus as funding grants have been unavailable.
- Following the introduction of VSU, students at UNE lost their student newspaper as a result of next to no funding and no student organisation to facilitate its management.
- Neither the current student organisation nor the university has the capacity in a post VSU environment to provide meaningful short-term emergency grants or loans for essential services including but not limited to food, petrol, emergency accommodation and text books.
- Student spaces are now essentially nonexistent on campus. The spaces that do exist are severely under maintained and in need of structural upgrades that in a post VSU environment are not feasible financially.
- Meaningful student advocacy services such as free or subsidised community legal services on campus or legal and welfare advisors on campus cannot be provided due to a lack of funding.

The University of New England enrolls above the national average of low SES students. Quality advocacy and support services and facilities are paramount in ensuring these students, who are often the most vulnerable in terms of retention rates, are afforded the best opportunity to succeed and attain the highest quality of education available.

Quality education requires quality services. This Bill makes it possible for regional campuses like UNE to be at the forefront of the student experience, and reach parity with their city counterparts while maintaining their individual appeal. Quality services ensure that at-risk students at UNE (such as Indigenous, Low SES, disabled, queer and women students) do not find themselves without the support they need to successfully obtain their qualifications. The current absence of funding sees the few advocacy bodies on campus struggling to manage.

I strongly believe that student affairs need to be managed by democratically elected student representative bodies. It is my belief that student run services are the most successful at developing a positive student experience and meeting the unique needs of students. It is essential that the students elected by the student body have a voice in the distribution and allocation of this funding.

It is my belief that the Bill will provide UNE and other regional campuses, hardest hit by VSU, with the opportunity to rebuild campus culture and better support and provide advocacy for students. Without the funding provided through the proposed fee, students at UNE will continue to be unable to access fundamental advocacy and welfare services, and will continue to miss out on the benefits a thriving campus culture brings to the university experience. Without this funding, students at UNE will continue to be denied the highest quality education that they deserve.

Yours sincerely,

Sonya-Lee Donohue  
**President, UNEG Inc**