



La Trobe University Guild

Submission to the

House Standing Committee on Education and Employment

–

Inquiry into the Higher Education Legislation Amendment

(Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010

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History of Student Organisations at La Trobe University

As committee members may be aware from previous inquiries into the SSAF and funding for student services and representation, student organisations at La Trobe University were hit particularly hard by VSU. There was a 70% cut to the budget of the representative body, the Students Representative Council, with the closure of services such as free dental care, free taxation advice, student radio and student owned food outlets. Funding was slashed across the board, with clubs and societies, sport, student media and representation facing cuts between 25% and 75%.

The La Trobe University Union was shut down and its statute revoked following VSU, and all service provision was assumed by the university, including all buildings built with student funds, services and spaces previously utilised by the Union. An advisory board, named the La Trobe University Guild, was established, which had the capacity to review the monthly performance of the Division of Student Services against budgets, but power only to recommend changes to the Divisional managers, and is subject to the “overriding authority of the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Equity and Student Services”.

The collapse in funding to the SRC and the demise of the Union have gutted student culture at La Trobe, with the hard work of volunteers and the few remaining staff keeping services afloat and students engaged. Students in the Guild and SRC have attempted to make the most of the limited funds available, opening new services such as a Second-hand Bookshop and a band rehearsal space. Despite these efforts, the underlying dearth of funding has severely limited the capacity of the organisations to flourish, with limited staff and ability for strategic planning and growth.

Change in Direction Resulting from the SSAF

Following the announcement of the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) last year, La Trobe University indicated that it would be willing to reconsider the structure and funding arrangements of its student organisations. In anticipation of the fee income, the university agreed to a joint proposal from the Guild and SRC to create a new incorporated, independent student body called the La Trobe University Student Union. This organisation would have a governance-management structure which would enable it to easily grow in size following the introduction of the fee, and would take on a number of the services which the university had taken over after VSU. This restructure has already led to a turnaround in staff morale, student engagement in the organisation and vision for the future of student services at La Trobe. If the SSAF passes the Parliament, the Guild is confident that the new Student Union will be able to expand the range of services it provides and bring existing services up to an acceptable standard. The money will also allow the organisation to cease dependence on university funds which should be allocated to teaching and learning.

In the context of the wider funding constraints on La Trobe University, this fee will allow for money to be freed up for much-needed capital works such as classroom upgrades, new lecture theatres and new sporting facilities. La Trobe has been, with the exception of government-funded individual projects, unable to engage in significant capital works since VSU, leading to dilapidated facilities and amenities for students. Through funding for sport, student organisations and other student support services being drawn from the SSAF rather than general revenue, the university will have an increased capability to modernise the learning and common spaces available to students on campus, as well as improving indicators of academic quality such as staff-student ratios.

Value for Students in the SSAF

The value of having a well funded representative and service providing student organisation for at La Trobe University cannot be overstated. The university recognises the absolute importance of impartial student representatives having input into university policy and the positive impacts this has for all students in curriculum development and enforcement of student rights. Likewise, having a free, independent student advocacy service is essential for students who require support with grievances against the university. Currently, student representation is not listed under the allowable spend items in the bill, and the Guild believes that it is important that the bill is amended to allow this expenditure to take place. Additionally, it is imperative that universities are required to consult with independent, democratic student organisations regarding the division of the fee money to enable student organisations to be equal players in the provision of services on campus.

If these changes to the bill are adopted, then the fee will have an overwhelmingly positive impact on the experience of students at university. Through reopening of student-owned food and beverage outlets, the price of these essentials will be reduced. Through services such as dental care, Centrelink advice, taxation advice and the second-hand bookshop, students will immediately save money on essential goods and services. Through adequately funded student representation and advocacy, students will be protected from oversights in university policies and procedures and supported in bringing grievances. As detailed earlier, the fee will also enable universities to free up funds for capital investment, expenditure on maintenance backlogs and improvements to teaching and learning arrangements.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

That the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010 be amended to include in the list of allowable items for expenditure “Student Representation”.

Recommendation 2:

That the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010 be amended to require universities to consult with democratically elected student organisations regarding the division of fee money, in good faith, before any decisions are made regarding any allocation of fee monies.

Recommendation 3:

That if these amendments are agreed to, the bill be passed by the Parliament.