



**House of Representatives Education and Employment Committee
Inquiry into the Higher Education Legislation Amendment
(Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010**

ATN Submission

The ATN welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission to the House of Representatives inquiry into the implications of the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010.

In making this submission, the ATN wishes to make the Committee aware that VSU has impacted negatively on student services and resulted in universities making significant adjustments to ensure the most basic services to students. We support the Bill as it's currently drafted; reflecting core elements that the ATN believes are necessary to ensure student services remain a viable and valuable part of the university experience. We are however, concerned about the proposed SA-HELP as a mechanism for collecting the fee. **The ATN recommends that the Student Services and Amenities Fee be incorporated into existing income contingent loan schemes.**

The ATN makes the following comments in relation to the Bill, noting that the Bill has been referred to the Senate Select Committee on the Scrutiny of New Taxes. This submission will address some key issues surrounding the impact of VSU that the ATN as a network would like to emphasise, noting that individual ATN members may make their own more detailed submissions to the Inquiry.

Impact on ATN Universities

The tangible financial impact across the ATN since the implementation of VSU is in the order of \$15.5 million. Of course the broader intangible impact is much greater. Further, the ATN wishes to emphasise the following:

- ATN universities pride themselves on their commitment to a universal education for all based on access and equity. ATN universities enrol more than 22% of the nation's students, 19% of low SES students, 14% of disabled students and 17% of indigenous students. Our retention rates across the ATN of disadvantaged students are above the national average. With more than 180,000 students studying at an ATN University across the nation, the ATN places a high priority on ensuring adequate support is readily available for those students who need it. Voluntary Student Unionism is a significant issue for our institutions, as it impinges both on our core values of equitable access and on our financial capacity to sustain the services which are important to students.
- ATN universities have around a quarter of Australia's international students. Reduced services are a significant threat to the level of international enrolments (a market currently facing significant challenges), to the satisfaction of international students with their on-campus experience and more generally to the global reputation of the Australian higher education system.

- VSU, as it currently operates, has the potential to create a further divide in classes of universities – those institutions who can afford to fund a greater range of student services out of operating surpluses are likely to attract a greater proportion of high quality students.

Finally, without changes to VSU, student services and support are at further risk of erosion with second order consequences for students such as the impact a loss of non academic opportunities for students will have on graduate employability skills.

Measures put in place to preserve the integrity of student services

The continuity of student services offered at ATN institutions since the implementation of VSU is varied. Generally, each university in preparing for the introduction of VSU undertook a comprehensive review to determine which services were most vital to their student profile. This resulted in services being categorised broadly into universal services (i.e. fully funded by the university), subsidised services (partly funded by the university) and those of a commercial nature (devolved to private operators with the institution managing the contractual arrangements).

Implications and consequences of the Bill

The passage of the Student Services and Amenities Bill is critical to ensuring the sustained delivery of essential student services. These essential services include well being and academic services; student advocacy service; clubs societies and collectives; sport, recreation and arts programs and support services for overseas students. These are not ‘marginal and extreme political activities’ as described in the Opposition’s Senate committee report on this issue. Failure to pass this Bill will have a potentially negative impact on the nature of services provided for our regional students.

We are however concerned about the proposed SA-HELP as a mechanism for collecting the fee. Tertiary students are currently party to a range of options all with a level of bureaucracy attached:

- HECS-HELP
- FEE-HELP
- VET-HELP
- OS-HELP

The addition of SA-HELP would see university students completing two application forms: one for HECs/FEE-HELP and one for SA-HELP. This presents an unnecessary administrative burden for all concerned – the student, the institution and the government. The ATN recommends that the Student Services and Amenities Fee be incorporated into existing income contingent loan schemes.

2 November 2010