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4 November 2010

The Committee Secretary  
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

***Inquiry into the Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2010***

I am pleased to have this opportunity, on behalf of La Trobe University, to contribute to the Committee's discussions and consideration of the Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2010.

Please find attached the University's submission on this matter.

Should the Committee have further questions, we would be pleased to respond. Please do not hesitate to contact Mr Gary Thomas, Acting Pro Vice-Chancellor, Equity and Student Services  
03 9479 3385.

Yours faithfully,

Professor Paul Johnson  
**Vice-Chancellor**

cc: Professor Belinda Probert, Deputy Vice-Chancellor  
Mr Gary Thomas, Acting Pro Vice-Chancellor, Equity and Student Services

## La Trobe University

### Submission to the Scrutiny of New Taxes

#### Proposed Student Fees

La Trobe University welcomes the proposed amendments to the Higher Education Support Act 2003, namely;

- (Re) introducing a compulsory student services and amenities fee capped at \$250 per student per annum with subsequent indexation provisions
- Establishing the Service and Amenities component to the Higher Education Loan Program (SA\_HELP)
- Introducing benchmarks for information and access to student support services for higher education providers
- Ensuring student representation and advocacy

The University highlighted the importance of student services in our submission to the *Inquiry into the Provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005*. The University's financial position post this amendment resulted in staff redundancies and the withdrawal of some services. Funds available to the University's sports clubs and childcare centre were effectively halved. Student fees had subsidised the cost of childcare making it more affordable to students. Since the loss of this subsidy, the take up of childcare places by students has dropped from fifty-five percent to thirty-five per cent.

La Trobe University recognises the positive impact quality services including the functions and activities provided by student associations can have on the overall student experience. Students themselves identified the importance of services in an *InSync Survey* commissioned in 2009.

The questions students were asked related to their awareness of, use of and importance to them of various Personal Support, Social and Recreational, Academic Support and Information and Communication services the University provides.

The Personal Support questions related to, Childcare, Personal Counselling, Health, Off Campus Accommodation, Part Time or Casual Employment, Financial Aid, Student Legal Service, Chaplaincy and Muslim Prayer Rooms, and the Equality and Diversity Centre.

Social and Recreational questions sought answers on Sports Facilities and Programs, Sports Clubs, Clubs and Societies, on campus entertainment and Student Theatre.

Academic Support areas included Career Planning and Advice, Disability Support Orientation, Indigenous Student Services, Student Leadership and Volunteering and Academic Learning and Language Support.

The Information and Communication questions related to the Student Diary, the Handbook, University website, Ratsheet, Rabelais, UniNews, Bendigo and Student News (online news).

The survey was also conducted at four other Victorian universities. La Trobe achieved a 13% response rate, which was higher than any of the other universities who participated in the survey.

In relation to importance to students the rankings were divided into those who had used the services and those that had not. There was a very similar correlation between the importance students placed on the various services whether they had used them or not. For instance, the top eight services listed in importance to students who had used them was the same eight, albeit in different order, for those who had not used them. The top eight services were (not in any order): Career Planning and Advice, Disability Support, Health, Academic Learning, Language Support, University website, Personal Counselling, Financial Aid and the Equality and Diversity Centre.

### **Short and Long Term Impact of the Changes**

#### *For La Trobe University and for the Tertiary Education Sector*

La Trobe University has approximately 25,000 students across all campuses. These amendments would provide a positive financial effect of \$6.25 million. It could mean an expansion of services available particularly at our regional campuses and the provision of a richer student experience. Service provision at regional campuses is challenging due to the effects of smaller student numbers. The income generated by the amendments would significantly ease financial pressures whilst ensuring equitable service delivery.

Benchmarking is viewed as an opportunity for the University to improve quality and to share good practice across the sector. The University strongly supports its introduction, with an appropriate review mechanism incorporating active participation of students and practitioners from the diverse range of institutional types and locations.



Student representation and advocacy is encouraged at La Trobe University. Student leaders are members of all major committees and decision making bodies at the University. Their active engagement in shaping their own and their peers' education is highly valued and will continue in the future. Students' active and independent participation in their education is reflected across the entire student experience at La Trobe University.

Good student services are vital for the effective participation, retention and success of a larger and more diverse higher education student cohort. In the long term, these funds will contribute to the ability of the sector to produce graduates who are fit for life with a greater sense of community and active citizenship.

### **Likely Effectiveness**

Since the 2005 amendments to the Act, universities have been acutely aware of the impact of services on students. The range and diversity of services available relies on taking hard decisions to do more with less. Over time this has resulted in greater participation in decision making by student leaders, increased and wider consultation with students on the whole and an improved use of research to understand the significance and impact of services. This approach will not change. Universities are communities of stakeholders aiming to ensure the best use of resources for the greatest good.

The introduction of SA\_HELP will alleviate the financial pressure for many students. Students by and large are supportive of increased services and are willing to contribute to their education costs as an investment in their future. As graduates they are more likely to secure higher earnings and leadership positions over counterparts without qualifications.

Active debate and political involvement by the student body is viewed as a healthy part of university life. However, concerns that fees would be used to support political agendas at the expense of servicing student needs are recognised and would be allayed by the La Trobe University focus on securing the best services in range, effectiveness and value for public funding.

### **Administrative Issues**

La Trobe University asserts there would be minimal administrative issues with the changes at the institution level. The infrastructure for reporting and monitoring fees is already present.

Communicating the change to current and prospective students will be one of the major tasks associated with these amendments. There is much being written about the potential benefits of the proposed amendments in the media. Institutions will require a suitable lead time in which to effectively communicate such changes to their students and communities.

### **Alternatives to Proposed Changes**

An alternative to a student fee would be to increase the base funding grant to providers to incorporate a specific student services component. This would be based on the student load negotiated within university compacts.