



University of Southern Queensland

Inquiry into Higher Education Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010  
Submission to DEEWR

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill (Student Services and Amenities). The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) supports the introduction of the Bill and believes it should address a number of the concerns which have been experienced by the University, and its students, following the introduction of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Act 2005 (the VSU legislation)*.

It is understood that if the Bill is passed, universities will be allowed to set a fee, capped at a maximum of \$250 with indexation each year, to fund a range of student services including health, counselling and club funding, welfare and academic support services. Universities will be able to charge the fee but spending the fee will be limited to the purposes specified in the Student Services and Amenities Fee Guidelines. None of the fees can be paid to support a political party or the election of a person as a member of the legislature or local Government body.

Universities will need to meet national benchmarks relating to access to student support services and to fulfil new representation and advocacy protocols in order to receive funding under the Commonwealth Grant Scheme.

Some time ago, DEEWR issued two sets of guidelines, namely:

- *National Access to Services Benchmarks and National Student Representation and Advocacy Protocols (the Benchmarks and Protocols);*
- *Student Services and Amenities Fee Guidelines (the Guidelines).*

It is not clear if these guidelines have been updated. Likewise it is not clear what requirements will be included in the national access to service benchmarks for all domestic students, in line with the arrangements that already exist for international students. USQ would appreciate further advice about this matter and to know how these benchmarks will be established, what consultation process will be used and when these are likely to be available.

It is understood the uses of the new compulsory fee must be over and above those services required by the proposed **the Benchmarks and Protocols**. A number of changes will be required in order for USQ to ensure it complies with the Benchmarks. For example, USQ has not addressed the issue of providing information on and access to services relating to legal concerns.

### ***Student Representation***

The Protocols prescribe that USQ must provide opportunities in order for the interests of enrolled students to be considered in the University's decision making processes. Further, there must be opportunities for students to participate in a process to democratically elect student representatives and that valid and transparent polls should be conducted for this purpose. USQ is

required to consult with students in terms of the form of student representation, the best way to meet the Protocols, and regarding the provision of services funded by the new compulsory fee. It states that USQ must publish the details of the mechanisms by which students would be consulted.

The Protocols are not prescriptive in terms of the forms of student representation that needs to be established. USQ supports this position and would not be supportive of any further requirements in this area.

### ***Charging the Fee***

It is anticipated that the majority of universities are likely to charge the fee given the impacts of VSU across the country which have been well documented.

Students are also able to access a new HECS-style loans scheme called SA-HELP so they defer payment of the fee liability through the taxation system.

If the legislation is passed and the USQ Council agrees to charge a new fee, USQ will need to implement SA-HELP. The University will need to decide what sort of fee would be charged, for example, load based (full-time/part-time), as well as a charging structure for distance education students. The current Peoplesoft functionality does not support SA-HELP for a load based fee, and functionality will also be required to action the required deferral of this fee and to extract appropriate data for government reporting. Clearly, these actions will take some time to organise, will require consultation with the systems vendor and will incur administrative and systems costs.

There are also issues about timing of implementation. Given the above it would be very difficult to implement these changes for Semester 1 2011 thereby further delaying the positive impacts this legislative change could have on the quality of campus life and the delivery of essential services.

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