

Introduction

I am a student at the University of Sydney, currently in my second year of a Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Laws. I am writing this submission because I believe that the committee has a duty to consider the views of those who will be most affected by the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005.

In this submission, I would like to draw on my own experience at the University of Sydney. I will address the first matter which the committee has adopted as its terms of reference: “assessment of the likely effect of the legislation on the provision of student services, and related consequences”.

Personal background

During my time at the University of Sydney I have had the opportunity to take part in many activities run by our student organisations, particularly those run by the Students’ Representative Council (SRC) and the Union. I am deeply concerned about the future viability of these activities and organisations if this legislation is introduced.

I am a member of a variety of Union clubs and societies, including the Jazz Society, Film Society, Sydney University Dramatic Society, and the Labor Club. I regularly attend Union-run activities, particularly free entertainment at Union venues. I am also the Women’s Officer for the SRC and am involved in its education and social justice campaigns.

My involvement in a wide variety of Union and SRC activities is not unique – it reflects the experience of the vast majority of my school and university friends. We all benefit from the sense of community that is provided by our student organisations under universal student unionism.

Campus community

This sense of community would not exist under the system of voluntary student unionism proposed under this legislation. In order for our student organisations to continue operating, a large amount of their time and resources would need to be redirected into marketing campaigns, rather than into the sporting, artistic, social and political activities that create a sense of campus community. This would not be in the best interests of students at the University of Sydney.

Alternatively, these activities would need to be outsourced or replaced by the University or private business. In the process, these activities would lose the unique perspective provided by student organisations. I believe that students know best what sorts of sporting, artistic, social and political activities will enrich their lives. This perspective cannot simply be replaced with the perspective of university staff or private business.

Moreover, many of the activities funded by the SRC and Union are run on a non-profit basis. This is important because many students are on low incomes. By providing free welfare and legal advice, and by subsidising essential services like childcare, our SRC and Union make it possible for those students to continue their higher education. It is hugely unfair on these students to introduce a pure user-pay system.

Representation

Students have a significant stake, both educational and financial, in the administration of the university. As such, it is important that students are represented in university decision-making processes.

Under the current system of universal student unionism, all undergraduate students are members of the SRC and have the opportunity to democratically elect their representatives. As such, the University of Sydney can identify and consult the SRC (and the Faculty societies it subsidises) on any matters affecting undergraduate students. In turn, the SRC can raise concerns with the University.

The Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005 will interfere with this relationship between the University administration and students. Any process of consultation or negotiation would lose its meaning if the SRC no longer represented all undergraduate students. This is not in the best interests of students or the University.

I am also concerned about the impact of the legislation on the capacity of the SRC to run campaigns on issues of social justice, such as the women's rights campaigns I have been involved in. The commitment of the SRC to increasing students' participation in the political process, and to representing the views of students on social justice issues, should be valued as part of an educated and civil society. It is unfair to trivialise these campaigns as affecting only a minority of students, when consistent results in democratic student elections show that they are supported by the majority of the student population.

Consultation

Finally, I would like to raise my own concerns about the lack of consultation with university students at a campus level. The Government has not requested that university administrations conduct surveys of students; nor has it considered holding campus referendums on the issue. The Government has not adequately responded to the repeated opposition of diverse organisations in the higher education sector, including individual university administrations, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, and the National Union of Students. The Government has also ignored the thousands of students who have attended protests against the legislation, since it was first introduced into Parliament in March.

Conclusion

Under the current system of universal student unionism, our student organisations run sporting, artistic, social and political activities that enrich our lives at university and beyond. All students should contribute to and be able to participate in these activities, as is now the case.

The Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005 will adversely affect these student services at universities across Australia. This is not in the best interests of students, universities or the community in general.