



Anna Bligh MP



Queensland  
Government

16 JUN 2005

Minister for Education and  
Minister for the Arts

The Committee Secretary  
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations  
and Education Committee  
Department of the Senate  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

FAXED  
17.06.05

Dear Sir/Madam

On behalf of the Queensland Government, I wish to make a submission to the current inquiry being undertaken by the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee into the provisions of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005*. The submission provides comments with respect to the first term of reference for this inquiry — *assessment of the likely effect of the legislation on the provision of student services, and related consequences*. The submission also briefly touches on other matters arising from the potential introduction of the Commonwealth legislation. The submission draws on major concerns with the Commonwealth Bill raised by Queensland Vice-Chancellors in discussions with me and concerns raised in other quarters, including some Queensland university student associations and guilds.

In essence, I wish to make three key points:

- the fundamental importance of student associations and guilds and their independent representation and advocacy for students to the university;
- the likely detrimental impacts of the Commonwealth legislation on Queensland universities and communities; and
- international education impacts and issues.

Each of these points will be elaborated in turn below.

*Fundamental importance of student associations and guilds* — In its current form, the Commonwealth Bill puts at risk the future existence of university student associations and guilds in Queensland, and the services they provide. Currently, fees paid to student organisations in Queensland help provide for the delivery of student services across a range of areas including the following:

- the construction and maintenance of student amenities buildings;
- discounted food and catering facilities, including those which are supplied by commercial organisations;
- sporting and recreation venues, equipment and organisation of competitions;
- cultural clubs and societies;
- child care, travel and employment services;

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- student information, welfare and advocacy services including legal advice and support with academic problems and appeals; and,
- co-operative purchasing arrangements to make low cost food, second-hand books etc. available to students.

I would highlight particularly the critical independent advocacy role for students that university student guilds play across a wide range of areas — academic appeals, advice and representation with respect to alleged cases of discrimination, representation to university governing bodies and appeals' committees, and so on. This role of student associations is importantly at arms-length and independent of faculties and institutions, and will, in all likelihood, be lost upon passage of this Bill. Should this occur, students will have virtually no options for accessing independent advocacy services within institutions and will result in a fundamental diminution in students' rights, particularly as they relate to their program of study.

*Likely impact of the Commonwealth legislation on Queensland universities and communities —*

The likely impacts of the Commonwealth legislation on Queensland universities and their local communities are difficult to quantify at this point. Most Queensland universities, in concert with their student associations, are currently engaged in detailed work on the anticipated financial, logistical and other costs stemming from the legislation. Preliminary indications suggest these costs will be significant and will include the following:

- The loss of millions of dollars to the higher education sector in Queensland through the severe curtailment or abolition of student support services — Queensland universities have advised they have little capacity to offset the reduction in these funds in the continuing absence by the Commonwealth of full indexation to institutions.
- The abolition or severe reduction in services currently delivered by student associations including sport and recreation programs and facilities, student welfare, counselling and legal assistance, discounted food and catering services, child care, travel and employment services, and the like.
- Loss of jobs within student guilds and associated agencies — Student organisations in Queensland currently provide over 1 000 jobs on campuses associated with the provision of services to students. (For example, the QUT Guild employs over 150 people). This is without taking account of jobs in the community which might arise in the provision of services funded by student organisations, or from major construction projects which they may finance. All these jobs are at risk under the Commonwealth legislation.
- Impacts on students from rural and remote locations — The potential impacts are likely to be exacerbated in Queensland where many students are living away from home for the purposes of undertaking higher education. Such students from rural and remote areas of Queensland, or international students, rely heavily on the support mechanisms offered by student organisations.
- Regional impacts — More than 50 percent of Queensland's population lives outside the capital city and approximately 40 percent of higher education delivery in the State occurs in regional areas. Typically, proposals of the kind envisaged in the Commonwealth legislation impact disproportionately and unfairly on our regional institutions, and given the scale of regional higher education delivery in Queensland, the State is particularly exposed. Already some of our regional universities have foreshadowed the possible closure of student association offices from some regional campuses should this legislation be passed, and a significant curtailing of current services (such as refectory facilities) on these sites. Moreover, many of our regional universities are relatively young institutions (e.g. University of the Sunshine Coast, University of Southern Queensland) and do not have the student facilities infrastructure unlike older institutions where such infrastructure has been funded over many years through student levies. The passage of

this legislation will condemn current and future generations of students in many of our young and regional institutions to inadequate support facilities comparative to their peers in metropolitan centres.

- Other impacts include large reductions in the membership of student associations — In essence, this will fundamentally alter the powers and rights of the student body as a collective and will reduce further the sense of student identity, camaraderie and mateship across our campuses.

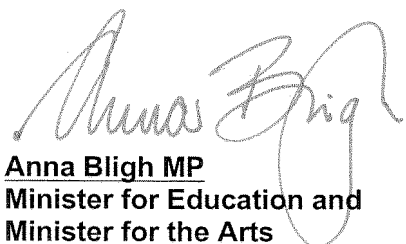
*International education impacts and issues* — The State currently generates over \$900m per annum from the export of education. Higher education is the largest sector in this market representing over 60 percent of all international student enrolments in Queensland. The sustainability of this industry is dependent on the quality of the experience institutions are able to provide to international students. Student representation, activities and welfare services currently provided through Queensland university student associations are an integral part of this experience. Without funds to continue and further develop these critical support services, this industry potentially will be damaged and our universities will be less attractive to the international student market at a time when international competition is accelerating.

In conclusion, I would reiterate that the Queensland Government does not support this Commonwealth legislation and holds grave concerns as to the likely impacts on the critical services provided by university student associations across the State.

The Vice-Chancellors of Queensland universities hold similar concerns and have foreshadowed a severe curtailing of the services and facilities available to students, and a corresponding reduction in the overall quality of campus life over time, should this legislation be passed. As one Queensland Vice-Chancellor has depicted this debate, membership of university student associations is like home, motor vehicle or health insurance with levies akin to insurance premiums. Students are unlikely to know when or if they may need access to services or facilities provided by associations and guilds and, in some cases, may never have the need to access them during the course of their studies. However, under current arrangements, membership of associations and guilds provides students with a guaranteed level of access to key services including personal counselling, legal, student welfare and independent advocacy services which are available to students in times of need and duress. The provisions in this legislation will remove this important safety net and expose some of the most vulnerable students in our universities to greater hardship and uncertainty at a time when the Commonwealth Government is shifting more of the costs of higher education to students and their families.

On behalf of the State Government and Queensland universities and student associations, I urge the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee to reject the Commonwealth Bill.

Yours sincerely



**Anna Bligh MP**  
**Minister for Education and**  
**Minister for the Arts**

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cc All Vice-Chancellors of Queensland Universities