

Additional Comments by the Australian Greens

Introduction

Given the incredibly short turn around time the Committee was expected to inquire, and produce a report into the proposed legislation, the Australian Greens commend the Chair and the Committee Secretariat on their efforts.

The impact of voluntary student unionism has been devastating for universities across the country, and has undermined the quality of student support services on campuses.

Despite welcoming moves to charge a levy to breathe life back into campus culture, the Greens have a number of outstanding concerns which we consider need to be addressed before student representation is well and truly restored.

Background

Student advocacy services are traditionally regarded by universities as a very important provision for campus culture and student life, particularly in ensuring there is an adequate transparency process when dealing with University appeals.

The loss of advocacy services following the implementation of the Higher Education (Abolition of Compulsory Up Front Student Union Fees) Act 2005 highlighted the devastating effect this had on campus culture, and advocacy services, particularly for those least able to advocate for themselves in matters affecting university rules and decisions which adversely affect them.

While the Australian Labor Party in Opposition pledged to restore campus amenities, services and representation, the Greens are concerned that the Rudd Government's *Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009* falls short of ensuring true independent student representation is restored.

Service delivery and the representative role of student organisations must be supported, yet at present, there seems no guaranteed direction as to how the proposed \$250 levy from each student will be spent.

The Greens believe student representation and academic advocacy can only be effective where it is truly independent. It is clear that this cannot occur where the university collects, and has discretionary control over, this proposed fee.

We will be calling on the Government to ensure that any mandatory fee that a

University imposes is only used for essential student services – and not general capital works individual campuses already receive funding for, or for upgrading poorly maintained facilities, which the Government must fund separately to bring them up to sufficient standard.

Support for Independent student representation and advocacy

In order to have true representation on university campuses, there needs to be a return to effective, well resourced advocacy and representation structures to handle essential student services.

Since VSU was introduced in 2005, funding has been slashed from crisis support, child care, counselling, sport, advocacy and more.

Student fees used to pay for student facilities, services, welfare, and a host of other programs that made university a richer and more diverse experience than it is now after the Government's changes.

The Greens are also concerned that the phrase “restricted political activity” will preclude advocacy on behalf of students to various levels of government on issues that concern quality of education and welfare.

Recommendation 1

The Greens recommend subsection 19-67(3) of the Bill that states “*the Students Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines cannot require a provider to fund an organisation of students, or of students and other persons,*” be deleted.

Recommendation 2

The Greens further recommend that the Bill and the Guidelines be amended to ensure that all revenues from the proposed levy are independently administered by student representative bodies, to ensure there is sufficient transparency on where their money is going, and for what purpose.

Recommendation 3

If 100% of the levy is not independently administered by student representative bodies, the Greens recommend, at a bare minimum, that the Guidelines mandate Higher Education Providers to quarantine a minimum proportion of 40% of the proposed levy (on a per-head basis) to undergraduate, postgraduate, and international student services and representation respectively.

Recommendation 4

We recommend that all fees levied in support of the restoration of student services is open to scrutiny, accountability and transparency, to ensure that the funds are being appropriately managed and directed.

Recommendation 5

While the Greens support the notion that no student money should fund the activities or campaigns of individual political parties, we believe that the guidelines must be amended to allow for effective student advocacy and representation to universities and various levels of government, on issues that concern the quality of education and student welfare.

Recommendation 6

The Greens will not support any attempt to restrict funding for student media services across university campuses.

Independent review and complaints body

As the legislation and guidelines currently stand, it is up to the individual Higher Education Provider to determine where and how the student levy will be spent, after consulting with individual student bodies (where they exist). While this may sound reasonable in theory, the Greens believe that the Government should establish an independent review body to oversee how the proposed \$250 university levy is actually spent.

Key stakeholders like heads of student organisations and university bodies should be actively engaged to review how universities are actually spending the levy of up to \$250 they will receive from each student.

Recommendation 7

The Greens recommend that the Government fund an independent review body, to oversee:

- 1.) how the proposed student levy is being spent;**
- 2.) the level of engagement between individual Higher Education Providers and their student representative bodies;**
- 3.) an independent, accessible complaints body for students to utilise when they have concerns about how and where their fees are being spent**

Conclusion

The Greens have a proud tradition of supporting accessible and affordable higher education, and in principle support moves to remove the Howard government's draconian VSU provisions, to allow universities to again fund a wider range of services and facilities.

However we remain concerned that the Government's legislation will impose a new levy on students without students having a say in how that levy is actually spent.

The Greens are concerned that restrictions may remain preventing students from effectively advocating for their right to quality education and student welfare supports, to both university bodies and various levels of government.

The Greens will therefore be proposing changes to the legislation to remedy this situation, and as such, reserve the right to our final position on the bill when it is brought before the Senate.

Sarah Hanson-Young
Greens' Senator for South Australia