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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**COMMITTEES**

**Education and Employment Committee**

**Report**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 15 November 2010**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 15 November 2010  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Rishworth, Amanda, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** Yes  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Ms RISHWORTH** (Kingston) (12.24 pm)—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Education and Employment, I present the committee's report entitled *Advisory Report on the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010* together with the minutes of proceedings.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

**Ms RISHWORTH**—by leave—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Education and Employment, I rise today to present an advisory report on the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010 together with a dissenting report.

This is the first bills inquiry to report back to the House under the new arrangements of the new parliament. The bill was one of the first to be referred by the Standing Committee on Selection under the new arrangements giving force to agreements between the government and non-aligned members. The committee was given until the end of the 2011 autumn sittings to report but we compressed the inquiry time frame because this proposal has already been the subject of extensive community and stakeholder consultation, including two inquiries by committees of the Senate. However, the current inquiry provided an additional opportunity for input and the inquiry received 35 submissions.

The bill empowers higher education institutions to charge a fee for the provision of student services and amenities, to be capped at \$250 and indexed annually. Further, it puts in place a facility whereby students can access a loan to pay the fee and can access improved student representation and advocacy.

The importance of reporting back to the House in a timely fashion lies in providing adequate time for each chamber to consider and, if it so determines, pass the bill so that higher education institutions might implement these measures in the new academic year.

The urgency of providing higher education institutions with the opportunity to raise much needed additional funds was spelt out by the Minister School Education, Early Childhood and Youth in his second reading speech when he noted a \$170 million shortfall in funding as a result of the Higher Education

Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Act 2005. Transition funding has been in place to support essential student services and amenities on regional campuses in the wake of the abolition of compulsory fees. This has now expired. This bill is vital to restoring some of the lost services and amenities to students, particularly those on regional campuses.

Every submission received from universities, and the majority of submissions from higher education stakeholders, referred to a decline in student services and amenities on their campuses since the introduction of voluntary student unionism in 2005. Those universities that had managed to maintain student services and amenities did so through redirecting funding away from research and teaching. This model is not sustainable even for larger metropolitan universities which have diverted money away from teaching and research into essential student services.

For universities in regional locations, the situation is even more grim. Griffith University, alone, estimated losses of \$31.3 million in revenue since 2005. The university projects that without student fees it will need to redirect \$10 million a year away from teaching and research to student support services and amenities.

Southern Cross University welcomed the proposed bill to help restore and provide amenities on regional campuses. This proposal will revive student services and amenities on all campuses, but particularly regional campuses. The revenue raised from the fee will help restore amenities as well as jobs and services lost since 2005.

The revenue from the proposed fee will be used to help provide students with a more rounded education experience and a better quality of university life. Universities believe that 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.

This bill has improved since a similar proposal was introduced and passed through the House in 2009. On that occasion the bill was denied a third reading as a result of a tied vote in the Senate. The government

reintroduced the bill but it failed to pass the Senate before the end of the 42nd Parliament. The purposes to which revenue raised can be used have been tightened and spelled out in the proposed legislation itself, rather than included as a legislative instrument. The revenue raised will help fund student welfare and support services, helping students to develop academic and study skills and careers, provide child care, provide financial and legal advice, accommodation assistance, personal accident insurance for students, orientation support, library and reading rooms, support for student artistic activities, debating, and student media. These are all very important parts of university life. It will also be used to provide student representation and advocacy services, support clubs and sporting and recreational activities of students, and support international students.

A higher education provider may not spend revenue from this measure on any other purpose. They are expressly forbidden from financing any person or organisation that uses the funds to support a political party or a local, state or federal election. And the expenditure of funds raised by the fee is restricted to supporting organisations that either service students or are constituted by students.

Universities will also need to consult their students on how best to serve them in the administration and implementation of this fee. The Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines will benchmark the minimum services required, but they will also allow flexibility in how to best meet the needs of students on each campus. The committee has recommended that the minister release the updated guidelines as soon as possible.

Each higher education provider will, through student consultation, decide what amenities and services will best meet the needs of those students. For example, Southern Cross University plans to consult students in tailoring student amenities and services for those students that come to their regional campuses but also for those students who need to access the university remotely. Some of their remote campuses under the current funding arrangements have had little in the way of student services or amenities and they are certainly looking at addressing that. They have asked for a period of grace in meeting the compliance section of the proposed legislation under the guidelines. They have also requested that a portion of the revenue raised from the fee be able to be accessed to cover the cost of setting up these services. The committee has recommended that the minister consider granting a period of grace to higher education providers in meeting the new compliance rules and that consideration be given to allowing providers to use a portion of the revenue raised to fund the set-up of the

administrative requirements that will occur under this legislation.

A further issue of concern to the committee is the possibility for international students to be charged twice for the same service. In responding to this concern, the committee has reiterated the finding of the Senate inquiry in 2009 that looked at the bill and recommended that the minister encourage the itemisation of international student fees.

I would like to take this opportunity to, first of all, thank the minister at the table, the Minister for Employment Participation and Childcare, for her work in the last parliament on this bill and also to thank the secretariat for their work in this inquiry. It was a very short inquiry and they worked very hard. In particular, I would like to thank Glenn Worthington and Becky Walker, who has only been in the job a month and was thrown in the deep end but did an absolutely fantastic job working with us.

There was overwhelming support for this bill from the major stakeholders, which highlights the importance of this proposed legislation. Universities believe that a well-rounded education better equips students to compete in the workforce and helps them to develop the skills, confidence and support networks that they will need throughout their lives. A well-supported campus is also more likely to encourage retention and engagement, and to raise completion rates. Accordingly, the committee has recommended that the bill be passed, and I commend the report to the House.