



4 November 2010

The Secretary  
Senate Select Committee on the Scrutiny of New Taxes  
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The University of South Australia (UniSA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Inquiry into compulsory student fees. Those fees have been proposed in the *Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities) Bill 2010*.

UniSA supports the Government's intention to introduce a fee that facilitates improvements in students' experience of university life. UniSA notes that the proposed fee may be applied to a range of on-campus services, but may not be used to support political parties or the election of persons to political forums.

UniSA offers the following comments on the Committee's terms of reference.

***The short and long term impact of the new tax on the economy, industry, trade, jobs, investment, the cost of living, electricity prices and the Federation.***

The repeal of the previous compulsory student union membership fee structure resulted in a reduced revenue base and consequent diminution of services provided to tertiary students.

Since 2005, UniSA has striven to maintain services and activities focussed on providing students with a quality on-campus experience. In particular, UniSA has continued to support:

- Student representation in governance
- Student support including academic advice and advocacy
- Student life experiences, including fun and cultural activities, sport and recreation groups and activities, and student media.

Commercial catering facilities have provided on-campus food and drinks via contractual arrangements.

It is anticipated that the introduction of an indexed \$254 fee per annum would have positive economic impacts for the South Australian economy and jobs. Simply making services available in the following areas will improve participation and spending on:

- Food and drinks on campus
- Involvement in sports and recreation activities
- Administration of student clubs
- Provision of child-care services
- Provision of legal services to students
- Provision of health and wellbeing facilities
- Provision of accommodation services
- Provision of careers and employment advice
- Provision of activities that support the development of creative, intellectual and life-skills
- Provision of student media

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- Advocating for student needs, including specific needs of targeted demographic groups.

UniSA supports the provision of non-academic services that will assist all students. Making these services available on campus will result in greater accessibility for lower-socioeconomic-background students, special groups and international students.

University graduates' contributions to productivity gains within the community are obvious. Retention within courses and their successful completion are performance indicators with accompanying impacts on public funding. UniSA's focus on engaging first-year students is based on the premise that successful first-year experiences lead to a likelihood of successful overall completion. As well as academic strategies in course design and delivery, UniSA strives to provide a social environment that significantly enhances the experience of being a UniSA student. The availability of dedicated funding to support the student experience will support new students in a successful transition to university life.

Improved student services will result in a higher quality of student engagement and experience in the short term. In the long term, higher quality student experience will be embedded within UniSA's culture.

There are also wider cultural and community benefits of offering improved services. University facilities are widely used by surrounding communities, and activities such as sport transcend the university and build regional social pride and cohesion. Notably, half of the Australian teams represented at Olympic level are linked to universities.

UniSA notes that the introduction of the Student Services and Amenities Fee will contribute to the rebuilding of campus services in regional and outer metropolitan areas. UniSA has four metropolitan campuses, one regional campus (Whyalla) and one regional centre (Mt Gambier), in addition to several regional partnerships. The introduction of a Student Services and Amenities Fee will facilitate the growth of the above-mentioned services in regional areas, with commensurate positive economic impacts for regional communities.

#### ***Estimated revenue from those new taxes and any related spending commitments***

At a maximum fee of \$254 (indexed) per student per annum, the introduction of a Student Services and Amenities Fee would result in the return of approximately \$5M per annum to UniSA.

However, UniSA is concerned that implementing the Fee will impose an administrative and cost burden, as discussed below.

#### ***The likely effectiveness of these taxes and related policies in achieving their stated policy objectives***

The Government's policy objectives are to reinstitute essential student services and facilitate student representation and advocacy. The proposed Student Amenities Fee will effectively contribute to the quality and richness of the student experience that UniSA strives to deliver. A globalised future will involve greater connectedness and expanded flows of information, technology, capital, goods, services and people throughout the world. By providing services and activities on-campus, students will benefit through involvement in creativity, networking and relationship-building, and share in a stronger sense of collective purpose.

Although compliance will entail further administrative efforts, UniSA is supportive of the measures achieved through adopting the *Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines*. These require institutions to consult with students about the uses to which the Student Services and Amenities Fee will be put.

Providers receiving Commonwealth grants post-2012 must comply with the Guidelines, which require student representation in governance matters. No information is yet available about compliance issues including reporting, benchmarks, protocols and monitoring.

Student advocacy on campus has remained a strong tenet of UniSA's commitment to providing a high-quality student experience. Students are currently represented on Academic Council, Academic Board and the Teaching and Learning Committee (a sub-committee of Academic Board). An independent, impartial Student Ombud is available at the University. An independent organisation, UniLife, provides a forum for students to express opinions and develop leadership skills, offers advice on academic issues, and organises sporting and social events.

### ***Administrative implementation issues at a Commonwealth, state and territory level***

There are numerous complexities associated with introducing the Student Services and Amenities Fee. Issues that require further consideration include application of the fee to:

- Students accessing higher education through Open Universities Australia
- Students undertaking Foundation Studies and accessing tertiary education through Colleges and other pathway programs
- Students undertaking cross-institutional study programs.

The application of the Fee to international students presents complexities for enrolment timeframes. International students are subject to earlier timeframes for confirmation of enrolment, and are required to pay deposits up front for study. The implementation of the Student Services and Amenities Fee to international students commencing in 2011 would impose an additional administrative and cost burden.

The implementation of appropriate technologies (e.g. software capabilities) for revenue collection is a significant sector-wide issue that will require a collaborative effort. Negotiations to develop software cannot commence until the Bill is passed, and costs of software development cannot be quantified until the requirements of the sector are known. It is highly unlikely that software modifications could be made in time to apply the proposed Fee from January 2011. Further, information flows between corporate finance, student enrolment and reporting systems, and external reporting systems, will depend on the availability of system capabilities. Therefore, all Fees, refunds and data scrutiny would initially be undertaken using manual processes in 2011. This creates a significant administrative and cost burden.

Dates for Commonwealth reporting requirements have not yet been promulgated. These requirements will also require new administrative efforts.

### ***An international comparison of relevant taxation arrangements***

Not applicable.

### ***Alternatives to any proposed new taxes, including direct action alternatives***

UniSA considered, but did not adopt, a Student Amenities Fee following the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism. UniSA favours a sector-wide consistent approach.

### ***Any other related matter***

The *Administrative Guidelines; Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines; and Student Services and Amenities Fees Guidelines* that underpin the Bill have not yet been published. These are crucial to assess the implications of the Bill. In particular, the Guidelines will contain information about dates on which the Fees may be applied; this will have direct relevance for enrolment dates, system capacities and load-based calculations. UniSA recommends that the HELP census dates are adopted consistently across the sector as the recognised dates for applying all types of HELP loan. UniSA urges the Government to release these Guidelines rapidly, to ensure that institutions can implement the proposed system in an informed and timely way.

Yours sincerely



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