

What about the unions that actually have improved and prospered under VSU? The University of Western Australia Student Guild has long had voluntary membership, thanks to the policies of the former Court government. It boasts high rates of union membership, a low yearly fee of \$120 per year and offers services that most students want. The University of Queensland Student Union actually says that VSU has led to improved services on campus because it has forced the union to supply the services students actually want rather than the services student unions think students should want. In its submission to the Senate inquiry into this legislation, held last year, the union noted:

Since its enactment in 2006, the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005 has had a profoundly positive effect not only on the operations and service capacities of the University of Queensland Union but most importantly the entire UQ student body. VSU has been a very practical way of easing the financial burden on UQ students who had previously struggled to meet the upfront cost of union fees in addition to other daily living expenses such as rental accommodation, food, utilities and textbooks.

Ultimately, however, VSU is about a straightforward concept—an individual's right to choose. It empowers students to make their own choices about what sort of university experience they want, rather than forcing them to subsidise the choices of others. There is an important principle at stake that must be defended: no-one should be forced to support or join any organisation against their will. If this legislation is passed, that right, that choice, will effectively be taken away. It is my hope that this legislation is defeated.

Senator CROSSIN (Northern Territory) (12.51 pm)—I rise today to speak to the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009 before this chamber.

This legislation marks the fulfilment of a key election promise to university students, who are the future leaders of this nation, to undo the damage caused to universities and student services by the rampantly ideologically driven Liberal government. I notice that in his contribution Senator Fifield did not take up my interjection in reminding this chamber that of course the current Leader of the Opposition, Malcolm Turnbull, was once the president of the student union association at the University of Sydney. It is interesting that the contributions from the other side make no mention of the fact that some of their current leaders came out of that movement. According to the now former Liberal government, the reason for the current legislation stemmed from their empty rhetoric about the freedom of association. However it was all too transparent to Labor and to students that what really motivated the Howard government was using their Senate majority to finally cut the legs out from underneath student unions that so effectively stood up for students and their rights and who demanded an end to the Howard government's demolition of the tertiary education sector. That was the motivation behind their legislation when in government.

Governments should look behind the rhetoric and examine the real impact that their legislation has had on the ground. Prior to the last federal election, the Labor Party made a very accurate prediction about what would happen to student services and the holistic education experience of university students if this legislation was passed. All of the predictions that we made when we stood here in this place and defended the interests of university students have in fact come true. As we predicted, money was ripped out of the education system by the current legislation. In fact, we now see that, in total, a decrease of about \$170 million of funds for

student unions and student services was the direct result.

We predicted the loss of jobs as a consequence and, as we predicted, the VSU legislation created a reduction in employment of 30 per cent, with 1,000 jobs lost as a direct consequence. We predicted that this would actually increase expenses for students, and regrettably we saw exactly the detriments we feared come into effect as direct user-pay charges to students increased, in most cases way above the consumer price index. Australian students had to literally pay the price for the Liberal government's blind ideology and complete ineptitude. They paid the price in terms of not only increases in basic food, goods and services on campus but also absorbing the damage to teaching and research budgets as universities desperately tried to tighten their belts to cope with the damage to student services caused by the then coalition government

It is important to also note that our predictions about important services and organisations for university students and staff being adversely affected by the introduction of VSU came true. As a direct consequence of the legislation, we saw health services, counselling services, childcare services, welfare support, student advocacy, sport and recreation and clubs and societies all incur serious financial penalty. They were massively constrained or, in many instances, were forced to fold and vanished from campuses entirely. By proposing and voting for voluntary student unionism, the Liberal government showed unequivocally that it was completely uninterested in the health and wellbeing of students.

Of course, this was a particularly embarrassing chapter for the Howard government, because it was clear that not even all of their own government senators bought their empty rhetoric. Senator Barnaby Joyce crossed the

floor to vote with us against that legislation. It was Senator Joyce who highlighted in his speech that the VSU legislation would impact over 5,000 families.

So I rise in this chamber to fulfil our promise to university students. We promised a balanced, practical solution to rebuild important student support services and amenities, and this legislation provides for exactly that. What we are proposing to establish is a comprehensive new scheme, whereby higher education providers can charge students an annual capped compulsory student services and amenities fee. This fee need not come straight from the pockets of impoverished university students. Like the payment of HECS-HELP fees, the fee can be deferred through a student amenities HELP scheme, an SA-HELP scheme, and equity can be created between VET and universities by broadening the application of the HELP category to include VET FEE-HELP.

The policy formulation process undertaken by Minister Ellis was extensive and consultative, and I would like to take this opportunity to applaud the minister and her department on their work in developing this response. This bill delivers on the government's election commitment to rebuild important university student services and to also ensure that students have representation on campus. It outlines a robust and balanced solution that will not only help ensure the delivery of quality student services but also help once and for all secure their future. The government have consistently committed to ensuring that students have access to vital campus services and we make no apology for honouring this commitment here today.

Universities Australia, the peak body representing the university sector, painted the picture clearly last year. It stated:

Universities have struggled for years to prop up essential student services through cross-sub-

sidisation from other parts of already stretched university budgets, to redress the damage that resulted from the Coalition Government's disastrous Voluntary Student Unionism ... legislation.

This was reinforced by the Chair of Universities Australia, Professor Richard Larkins, when he said that the VSU:

... directly impaired [the] ability [of universities] to deliver quality education and research ... We had to use money for research and teaching and use it to support the student experience on campus.

Moreover, though, because of this consultative response by the minister, the Rudd government has now been able to achieve broad endorsement of the legislation by key relevant stakeholders. During the Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations inquiry into the impact of the new legislation we heard ringing support for this legislation from a range of individuals and organisations. Mr David Barrow from the NUS said:

... the fee will improve student life for students.

The National Liaison Committee for International Students said:

The NLC fully supports this legislation to rebuild important student support services and democratic student representation.

Australian University Sport said:

I cannot emphasise how badly we feel at Australian University Sport that this fee is essential.

The Australasian Campus Union Managers Association said:

The capping of the fees, the deferability characteristic of the fees and, within the guidelines, the defined uses for the fees we think are quite sensible amendments to the current circumstances for our sector.

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations said:

... this bill becomes an effective measure to restore and sustain quality student services for

postgraduate students that are sustainable into the longer term.

These are clear endorsements not only of this government's move to undo the damage of the previous, Liberal government but also of the sensible and appropriate measures which address the harms identified.

I want to talk a little bit about the impact of this legislation on regional universities. The legislation will have a particularly direct consequence for smaller, regional campuses such as Charles Darwin University. Submissions received during the Senate committee's inquiry showed that the Howard government's VSU legislation had a great impact on regional universities like CDU, for two key reasons: firstly, regional universities like CDU generally enjoy a lower level of discretionary funds than other larger, metro universities such as the Group of Eight; and, secondly, the cost of the provision of student services per enrolled student is often much greater for smaller universities.

So what did the combination of these factors mean on the ground for students at CDU? It meant that, as the university started to lose a significant slice of its revenue, it was forced to tighten its belt and, in some instances, shed important student services. Many staff lost their jobs as a consequence of the introduction of that legislation, and the student union at Charles Darwin University became financially unviable and, as a direct consequence of that legislation, was forced to dissolve. This means that many students now at CDU have never experienced student representation and a student voice on campus; a student-organised orientation week; student-organised social events, student funded clubs and societies on campus; a student magazine to inform students of the happenings on their campus; and much more. Life as a university or TAFE student should be more than just home, bus, lecture, bus and back home. It should be a holistic educa-

tional experience both in and out of the classroom.

I think it is a real shame that students in Darwin who wanted to stay in the Northern Territory should have missed out on this experience, while students who travel down south to go to university got to enjoy much more of a holistic experience. I believe that students should get equal treatment, with equality of access to student services of a comparable level, irrespective of their geographical location or which university they attend. This equality of access was a principle that was eroded under the Howard government, and it is a principle that the Rudd Labor government will reinstate with the passing of this legislation before the Senate.

It is important to note as well that there has been a huge response by students at CDU to the promise of this legislation. During orientation day at CDU, the National Union of Students travelled to the Casuarina campus in an attempt to gauge the interest of students in re-forming their old student union if this legislation passes. Carla McGrath, the NUS Indigenous Officer, set up a stall, talked with students who had never even heard of student unions about the role that they play and engaged with students who remembered what an important role the student union had previously played on campus. She attracted much attention. From students, she collected pages and pages of signatures demanding a return of their student union. From the media, the *Northern Territory News* covered the story. And the National Tertiary Education Union came along and supported the NUS because they recognise the importance of a student union on campus to complement the learning experience that is provided at university. So there is clearly a demand from students to reintroduce student services, including the student union at CDU. This legislation gives students an opportunity to re-engage.

It was not only the student union, though, that became a casualty of the Howard government's war against students; students who used and accessed university sport and recreation services and equipment were also casualties. CDU incurred cuts to sports funding, which has had an adverse effect on student participation, particularly among female students. University sport helps to improve the health and fitness of students and assists students from interstate, rural and remote areas in building social networks and becoming part of their university community. Sport and recreation facilities are important not only to campuses all around the country but also to the Australian economy, building a productive and well-rounded workforce into the future.

The reforms in this bill will help to sustain university sporting teams and facilities, allowing them to foster the next generation of Australian sporting champions. About half of the Australian Beijing Olympic team, in 2008, had university links, showing that it is vital that university sport is strengthened in the future. This arrangement will allow for the funding that was previously stripped away from the system to be reinjected into universities that were chronically underfunded and chronically neglected by the former, Howard government.

So I am proud to support this bill. I am sure that it will once again provide for students to gain access to the education and to the student services that they need. It will enable them to complete their university education in a holistic manner, without universities having to reach into their teaching and research budgets to ensure that the complete range of services offered by student unions and student union organisations are there for students so that they can enjoy a holistic, post-compulsory secondary education experience—enjoy university life the way it ought to be enjoyed.