

Senator HANSON-YOUNG (South Australia) (6.12 pm)—I rise today to speak to the Rudd government's attempt to rebuild important university services through the **Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009**. The impact that the Howard government's regressive voluntary student unionism has had on universities has been devastating, particularly on regional campuses. It has been devastating for students right around the country and undermined the quality of student support services across campuses. While the Greens are indeed supportive of moves to administer a levy to breathe much needed life back into campus culture, we remain concerned that student representation, in the true sense of the word, will not be fully restored under this bill.

Student advocacy services are traditionally regarded by universities as a very important part of the provision of campus culture and student life, particularly in ensuring there are adequate transparency processes in place when dealing with university appeals. We know that, today, students are paying more than ever for their higher education. We know that the fees under both the HELP system and for full fee-paying students, whether domestic or international, are much bigger than they have ever been before. Yet the all-round, true educational experience of studying on a university campus is just not the same and has been diminished under the current VSU legislation. The loss of advocacy services following the implementation of the abolition of compulsory upfront student union fees in 2005 highlighted the devastating affect that this had on campus culture and advocacy services, particularly for those least able to advocate for themselves in matters relating to university rules and decisions that have adversely affected them.

Following the Australia-wide consultation process undertaken by Minister Ellis last

year as part of the government's election promise to restore campus amenities, services and representation, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations concluded in its summary report:

... the abolition of upfront compulsory student union fees had impacted negatively on the provision of amenities and services to university students, with the greatest impact at smaller and regional universities and campuses.

Despite the comments made just now by Senator Birmingham, we know the devastating effects that this has had on campuses are real. We know the devastating impact that VSU has had on campus culture. In my own state of South Australia, the home state of the minister responsible for this legislation, the member for Adelaide, we have seen the devastating impact that VSU has had on our three universities. The University of Adelaide, of which I was student president in 2003, has seen the dissolution of the students association and the postgraduate students association. And while the sports association, clubs association and overseas students association have continued, they exist with a loss of resources and capacity, particularly in their professional, administrative and policy support.

Some of the tangible impacts that this has had on Adelaide university students has been the diminished capacity for effective representation on university decision-making bodies, making student representation basically void; increased social isolation experienced by international students; a 40 per cent drop out in participation of sporting clubs; and the closure of the arts and crafts centre. Flinders University, arguably the hardest hit by VSU in South Australia, has seen the dissolution of six student controlled organisations, including the students association, the sports association, the clubs and societies association, the international students association and the postgraduate students association.

There is no true student representation now at Flinders University.

The services that have been affected by the former government's regressive policies have been the closure of quality and affordable childcare services; the collapse of the international students association, which has obviously increased the social isolation experienced by international students—an issue that we hear more and more about as a result; the loss of student media; higher sports club membership fees and higher costs for venue fees for those students who are able to gather and play sport together as part of their extra-curricular activities, expanding on their entire educational experience; and that the employment service is now a user pays service, which seems a little harsh if you do not have a job.

Finally, the University of South Australia, which is home to the largest tertiary international student population in the state, has seen a diminished capacity to pay affiliation fees to maintain state and federal coordination and representative structures, and the loss of the professional international student adviser position. Again, the impact on international students due to the current state of VSU has had negative effects, and we are starting to see the repercussions of that time and time again. We hear reports of the isolation of international students and the lack of appropriate services, information, advice, representation and advocacy—all of these young people have suffered because the appropriate services are not delivered for them. Some universities have offered these, others have not. We know that in the past they were run by their student organisations and funded from the student services fees so that they were truly a representative body.

The loss of services experienced by universities in South Australia that I have touched on are only just a handful of exam-

ples of the devastating effects this policy has had on welfare and support for students—as I said, students who are paying more than ever for their education. Let me also point out that there are many people in this chamber and in the other place who got their education for free. Students now are paying more than ever and yet the entire experience—along with the support to actually get through that education and maximise those opportunities—is diminished every day because we do not have well-funded student support and representative services on campuses. We have seen the collapse not just of student organisations but also of essential services such as child care and effective representation on university decision-making boards so that students can actually point out, 'Hey, things aren't right here,' or, 'We need to change this,' or, 'Could you please look at this,' or, 'We're a bunch of international students and we don't feel that we've got the support we need to finish our course.' None of those support services are guaranteed at the moment and, unfortunately, under this current legislation it is not guaranteed either.

The introduction of VSU has had a devastating effect on services and life on campus. It is completely ludicrous and ignorant for the coalition to espouse otherwise. A 2007 VSU impact study published by the Australian University Sport and the Australasian Campus Union Managers Association reported that, amongst other things, the campuses across Australia have seen an overall 30 per cent reduction in employment in the campus services sector, involving the loss of more than 370 full-time and 1,300 part-time jobs nationally. One hundred sporting and 261 student union services have been lost nationally. There has been a 17 per cent reduction in the number of students in sporting clubs, from 72,000 to 60,000 students, and a 14 per cent reduction in the number of social

and cultural clubs. The direct funding for sporting clubs has been cut by 40 per cent and interuniversity sport activities has been cut by 50 per cent. The participation of women in sporting clubs has dropped significantly and has been far harder hit than the participation of men in sporting clubs. This has always been the case. We know that university sporting clubs have always helped to facilitate the participation of women in sport. Many of our elite athletes, particularly women, have come through their university sporting sectors and yet we know that the encouragement and participation and facilitation of women in sport have been detrimentally affected under this legislation.

Surely, when the effect of VSU has been so widespread and has hit so many different services, it is obvious that this is a policy that has had a negative overall impact on the campus culture and quality of the education experience. We should be moving to restore the services that many of us here today were fortunate enough to receive when we attended university. In fact, many of us in this chamber, in the other place and even in the press gallery cut our teeth in politics, in journalism or in advocating for our communities and would not, I would argue, be here if we did not have access to that hands-on experience. We know that student media has offered so much to the Australian journalist sector. We know that that practical, hands-on experience has been able to give those students the edge and put them above other students because they do not just have a bit of paper; they also have the practical experience and the networks to drive them further.

As a former student politician I find it bizarre that we are debating the need to restore essential student services to university campuses where many of us here today, on all sides of the political spectrum, caught the political bug during our university days. This is on all sides of politics. This is not just

about the Rudd Labor government versus the coalition; there are a politicians across all the benches here who participated and benefited from the services, the experiences and the opportunities that were delivered under well-funded student services and representative bodies.

In relation to my fellow South Australian colleagues, the minister responsible for this legislation, the member for Adelaide, was general secretary of the students association at Flinders University. The opposition spokesperson for education, the member for Sturt, was vice president of the students association at my university, the University of Adelaide. Senator Penny Wong was the National Union of Students national executive delegate. Senator Nick Xenophon was the editor of the student newspaper, *On Dit*, at Adelaide University. This is just to name a few.

The fact that many of our past and present politicians have participated in and enjoyed campus life previously suggests that we should perhaps be promoting and fighting for quality student services rather than trying to cut them down—not least to ensure that our universities remain attractive destinations for prospective students, particularly those from overseas. If we are serious about promoting ourselves as a world-class higher education system, we need to be clear that our world-class higher education system supports students with the best quality services and the best types of representation. That must be part of our overall goal.

While the Greens are indeed supportive of restoring campus amenity services and representation, we are concerned that this bill as it stands falls short of ensuring true independent student representation and that it is not fully realised under this current proposed legislation. We agree that service delivery and the representative role that student or-

ganisations play in campus life is essential, yet there seems to be no real guaranteed direction that students will actually get some say in how the \$250 that they will pay will be spent. Under the current rules it is simply at the goodwill of the university that students will be able to have their say. This is just not good enough for the Greens. We need to make sure that students actually do have a say in how their money is going to be spent—that they do have the opportunity to voice their concerns and have the advocacy they deserve. The Greens believe that student representation and academic advocacy can only be effective when it is truly independent. It is clear that this cannot occur where the university simply collects and has discretionary control over the proposed fee. We will be moving amendments later in the committee stage to reflect this.

The student representative body from Flinders University in my home state of South Australia, the university of which the minister herself was active, wrote to me outlining their support for the intention of the bill but highlighted their concerns over how the bill will be rolled out. The Flinders Campus Community Services stated:

While we do support the introduction of this fee there are elements of the proposal, which do concern us. Our first concern is the prospect of this funding being handed over to the University Administration with few mechanisms for student input. Our fear is that under the current proposal student support services, which are considered appropriate and demanded by students, may not be delivered ... Any proposed fee must, at the least, include provisions for student input at both a governance level and a management level.

We need to ensure that, if students are going to be paying an extra \$250 to restore essential services we know need to be there, they have some say in being able to direct and deliver those services. We need to ensure that they can advocate whether those services are

what they want or perhaps there are other areas of concern that need to be dealt with. It should not just be left up to the goodwill of university administration and management. Students need to be inherently involved in knowing how their money is being spent and advocating for themselves.

Given the current guidelines only require that 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, I may add—the Greens believe a compliance mechanism must be established to oversee how the proposed \$250 university levy is actually spent. Specifically, we would like to see a reporting mechanism implemented to look at how the proposed student levy is being spent and, secondly, the level of engagement between individual higher education providers and their student representative bodies. We would like to see all fees levied in support of the restoration of student services open to scrutiny, accountability and transparency to ensure that funds are being appropriately managed and directed, whether that be by the student organisations or by the universities themselves.

While the Greens support the notion that no student money should fund activities or campaigns of individual political parties, we believe that guidelines must be amended to allow effective student advocacy and representation to universities and various levels of government on issues that concern the quality of education and student welfare. We, of course, do not want student services fees to be funnelled into contributing to Liberal, Labor, Independent or Green political campaigns for the upcoming elections, but we do want to make sure that students are supported and resourced in being able to advocate for their needs to their various levels of government and to their university management. It is absolutely imperative that we give

students the resources to advocate for themselves effectively.

I come back again to the case of international students. If there were a well-funded student organisation on each campus that could advocate for the needs of their international students, I do not believe we would be in the mess that we are today with the international student sector.

We would also like to see all fees levied in support of the restoration of student services open to scrutiny, accountability and transparency, as I have said. The Greens support the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations' concerns that item (n) of the Student Services and Amenities Fee Guidelines, entitled 'Academic Support', does not adequately provide the full range of academic and professional development activities postgraduates currently have access to on many campuses. Specifically, we would like to see the guidelines broadened to include academic support services, including advocacy and advice on academic issues and other academic support services.

**Sitting suspended from 6.30 pm to
7.30 pm**

Senator HANSON-YOUNG—As I was saying, if student bodies were allocated funding through the proposed student services fee or, at the very least, identified and guaranteed representation through the proposed guidelines, they could properly represent the interests of their members, whether they be undergraduate, postgraduate or international students. Currently, the legislation does not guarantee that students have a say in how their money is going to be spent. We need to ensure there is a guaranteed student voice if this bill passes the Senate.

It is clear from the recent issues surrounding international students in Australia that the need for effective advocacy and representation has been lost under the current system

of voluntary student unionism, with students increasingly finding it more difficult to know their rights, to voice their concern and to indicate their need for certain services. The Greens have a proud tradition of supporting accessible, affordable higher education and, in principle, support the move to remove the Howard government's draconian VSU provisions to allow universities to again ensure that they offer a wide range of services and facilities, offering students a holistic educational experience where they can maximise the opportunities they are given.

I welcome the constructive negotiations we have had with Minister Ellis and her office over the past few months. I hope the Greens will be able to come to some agreement to ensure that students have the right to effective advocacy and the right to quality education, student welfare and support services through both access to and support on university boards and in various levels of government. In particular, I will seek assurances from the government when this bill reaches the committee stage that, at a minimum, there are appropriate safeguards and transparency in the administration of the fee guidelines and that the fees are collected and directed through student services for undergraduate, postgraduate and international students respectively. As I flagged before, I will be moving amendments to address these concerns. Currently, the legislation does not ensure that the \$250 that a student will pay will go to their advocacy; it is up to the goodwill of the university. That is simply not a good enough guarantee.

Senator XENOPHON (South Australia) (7.32 pm)—A vibrant and vigorous higher education sector is vital to the health and welfare of any society and plays a key role in our democracy. This vitality goes beyond sheer economics. A strong sector is central to Australia competing in the global economy. Young and not-so-young Australians need to