



10 November 2008

Questions Without Notice

Student Services & Amenities

Ms GRIERSON (3.37 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Sport and the Minister for Youth. What action has the government taken to restore student amenities and representation on university campuses across Australia? What has been the response to this announcement?

Ms KATE ELLIS—I thank the member for Newcastle for her question. I know that some students at Newcastle University whom she represents made very clear to us the urgency that they see in undoing the damage caused by the legislation put forward by the previous government. I also note that we have now heard a number of very divided and differing positions put forward by the coalition on this particular issue. I recognise that we do have some ideological extremists on the other side of the House when it comes to this particular issue, but I would like to assure all that we are advocating a reasonable, balanced and sustainable new way forward to ensure the quality of our universities.

Earlier this year, I conducted consultations right around the country and heard first-hand of the devastating impact of the VSU legislation and the fact that it was students themselves who were paying the price for this extreme legislation put forward by the previous government. I will inform the House of what I learnt. I learnt that \$170 million was ripped from our campuses and that the impacts were both immediate and extreme. We heard how it was students who were paying directly. We heard that childcare centres had been closed, that childcare subsidies had been slashed and that this had lead to increases in fees—for example, \$68 a week at Latrobe University and \$800 a year at UTS in increases in childcare fees alone. We heard that sporting clubs were hit by big drops in participation as a result of them having to massively increase their fees. We heard that parking fees at Monash University, as one more example, rose from \$80 a year up to \$280 a year for one student. We heard of massive price increases in catering services and the closure of health, welfare, legal, accommodation and counselling services.

But it was not just directly that students were paying; students were paying indirectly. We heard that a number of universities were being forced to move resources out of teaching and research budgets into propping up student services. We also heard from a number of universities that they were very concerned about their ability to continue to attract overseas students if they did not have services on campus.

So last week we announced a new way forward. Those opposite might choose to keep fighting the same old battles of the past but we are announcing a new way forward. Under this announcement, from 2010, all universities in Australia will be required to meet basic benchmarks on access to information and basic services as a condition of their Commonwealth funding. Additionally, they will be required to meet representation protocols on every campus across Australia regardless of whether or not they choose to introduce the fee. On top of this, we will give universities a choice of introducing a fee which will be capped at \$250 and accompanied by a HECS style deferred payment loan system. This fee, if introduced, can then be spent on further amenities within very strict guidelines. These guidelines will not allow for the funds to be spent on broad political campaigns such as we have seen in the past. It is universities who will be held accountable for ensuring that these guidelines are strictly adhered to.

Those opposite should note that we have absolutely no intention of returning to compulsory student unionism. In fact, we are moving forward. We will not be amending the section of the legislation which outlaws a university from forcing any student to be a member of an organisation. We have outlined a balanced, responsible and new way forward.

Opposition members interjecting—

Ms KATE ELLIS—And 'decisive'—thank you, members opposite! We are pleased to have received many positive responses from the university sector. While the coalition might be divided on this, I would like to share some of the responses that we have heard from others.

Mrs Bronwyn Bishop—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order on relevance—the relevant point being that, in giving an answer which is complete, the minister should disclose her conflict of interest.

The SPEAKER—Order! There is no point of order. The minister was asked to comment on responses. The minister has the call.

Ms KATE ELLIS—As I was saying, we have heard a number of positive responses and I would like to share them. The Group of Eight universities called it a 'sensible compromise'. We heard from Universities Australia who said that: Universities have struggled ... to prop up essential student services through cross-subsidisation from other parts of already stretched university budgets ... We heard from Australian University Sport, who stated that sport has been an innocent victim and that participation numbers had been hit hard. And we heard from the very reasonable member for New England, who noted that, under the previous government's legislation, the baby had been thrown out with the bath water, which is absolutely true. But I can assure the member for New England and others that what we are offering is a balanced, responsible and sensible way forward to ensure that our universities remain world-class institutions with services and representation.