



NUSA Submission To
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Review:
Review of Higher Education
DISCUSSION PAPER

Presented by Newcastle University Student's Association (NUSA)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION:	4
RECOMMENDATIONS:	4
INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION ABOUT NUSA:	5
SECTION 1. HIGHER EDUCATION IN MODERN AUSTRALIA	7
1. HOW ADEQUATE IS THE STATEMENT OF FUNCTIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN MODERN AUSTRALIA?.....	7
SECTION 3.1 MEETING LABOUR MARKET AND INDUSTRY NEEDS	7
2. ARE THERE IMPEDIMENTS TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR BEING ABLE TO INNOVATE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF COURSES AND PROGRAMS? WHAT ARE THESE IMPEDIMENTS AND HOW COULD THEY BE REMOVED?	7
3. WHAT ARE THE APPROPRIATE MECHANISMS AT THE NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL FOR ENSURING HIGHER EDUCATION MEETS NATIONAL AND LOCAL NEEDS FOR HIGH LEVEL SKILLS? WHAT IS THE ROLE OF STATE AND TERRITORY GOVERNMENTS IN THIS AREA?	9
4. HOW ADEQUATE ARE THE MECHANISMS FOR ALIGNING SUPPLY AND DEMAND OF GRADUATES? HOW DO PRICING AND LABOUR MARKET SIGNALS IMPACT ON STUDENT CHOICES?	10
6. HOW EFFECTIVELY ARE AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS RESPONDING TO DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE, ESPECIALLY IN PROVIDING LIFELONG LEARNING TO MEET THE CHALLENGE OF THE AGEING POPULATION AND THE NEED FOR UPGRADING OF SKILLS AND RE-TRAINING?.....	10
7. WHAT IS THE RELEVANCE AND APPLICABILITY OF THE FINDINGS AND APPROACHES PROPOSED IN THE UNITED KINGDOM PAPER, HIGHER EDUCATION AT WORK, FOR INCREASING SKILLS LEVELS IN THE WORKFORCE TO AUSTRALIA?	11
SECTION 3.2 OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE IN HIGHER EDUCATION	12
8. SHOULD THERE BE A NATIONAL APPROACH TO IMPROVING INDIGENOUS AND LOW SES PARTICIPATION AND SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION?	12
10. WHAT INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES HAVE PROVED SUCCESSFUL IN INCREASING LOW SES OR INDIGENOUS PARTICIPATION AND SUCCESS? (PLEASE PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT OUTCOMES AS WELL AS ACTIVITIES.).....	12
11. WHAT EVIDENCE IS AVAILABLE FROM INSTITUTIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS OF EITHER FAILURE TO GAIN INCOME SUPPORT OR THE INADEQUACY OF INCOME SUPPORT?	13
SECTION 3.3 THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION....	15
14. HOW DO INSTITUTIONS MEASURE THE QUALITY OF THEIR LEARNING OUTCOMES AND HOW DO THEY KNOW THEY ARE NATIONALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY COMPETITIVE?.....	17
SECTION 3.4 CONNECTING WITH OTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING SECTORS	18

15. TO WHAT EXTENT SHOULD VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND HIGHER EDUCATION CONTINUE TO HAVE DISTINCTIVE MISSIONS AND HOW SHOULD THESE MISSIONS BE DEFINED?.....	18
16. DOES THE MOVEMENT BETWEEN THE SECTORS OF STUDENTS WITH CREDIT NEED TO BE IMPROVED? IF SO, IN WHAT WAYS?.....	19
17. TO WHAT EXTENT SHOULD RELATIVE PROVISION BETWEEN THE SECTORS BE PLANNED OR DEMAND DRIVEN. WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF CURRENT DIFFERENCES ON FUNDING, GOVERNANCE AND REGULATION IN LIMITING PLANNING OR INFLUENCING CHOICE BETWEEN THE SECTORS?	19
18. CAN INSTITUTIONS PROVIDE EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICES WHICH HAVE LED TO MOVEMENT BETWEEN THE SECTORS WITH HIGH LEVELS OF CREDIT AND GOOD LEARNING OUTCOMES?	20
SECTION 3.5 HIGHER EDUCATION’S ROLE IN THE NATIONAL INNOVATION SYSTEM.....	20
19. BY WHAT MECHANISMS SHOULD RESEARCH ACTIVITIES IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES BE SUPPORTED?.....	20
20. ON WHAT PRINCIPLES AND FOR WHAT PURPOSES SHOULD RESEARCH ACTIVITY BE CONCENTRATED IN PARTICULAR UNIVERSITIES OR TYPES OF UNIVERSITIES?	21
21. DO YOU BELIEVE THERE IS A PLACE IN AUSTRALIA’S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM FOR UNIVERSITIES THAT ARE PREDOMINANTLY ‘TEACHING ONLY’ UNIVERSITIES? IF SO, WHY?	21
SECTION 3.6 AUSTRALIA’S HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA	21
22. ARE THERE ANY UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF THE CURRENT APPROACH TO INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA?	21
23. WHAT IS AN APPROPRIATE ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT IN ASSISTING THE AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM TO INTERNATIONALISE? ON WHAT PRINCIPLES SHOULD THIS ROLE REST AND WHAT PURPOSES SHOULD IT SERVE?	22
24. CAN YOU PROVIDE ANY EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN ENCOURAGING LOCAL STUDENTS TO UNDERTAKE STUDY IN OTHER COUNTRIES?	22
SECTION 3.7 HIGHER EDUCATION’S CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIA’S ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL	23
27. IF YOU THINK THAT KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ARE APPROPRIATE ROLES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, HOW DO YOU BELIEVE THESE FUNCTIONS SHOULD BE FUNDED?	23
SECTION 3.8 RESOURCING THE SYSTEM	23
SECTION 3.9 GOVERNANCE AND REGULATION.....	24
31. IS IT TIME TO RESHAPE TERTIARY EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA AND STREAMLINE FINANCING AND REGULATORY ARRANGEMENTS? IF SO, WHAT STRUCTURAL CHANGES WOULD YOU MAKE AND WHY?	24
32. IS THE LEVEL OF REGULATION IN THE SECTOR APPROPRIATE? IF NOT, WHY NOT, AND WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO REDUCE THE LEVEL OF REGULATION?	25
35. IS THERE MORE THAT COULD BE DONE TO IMPROVE UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE? HOW SHOULD THIS BE DONE?.....	25

INTRODUCTION:

Newcastle University Students' Association (NUSA) welcomes the new governments' review of higher education. Higher education in Australia has seen drastic and devastating changes under the Howard government.

The 25 % allowable increase in HECS set by the Howard government, has had a devastating impact on debt adverse students - that is students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, see section 3.8 in the submission.

The raising of the age of independence and the refusal to increase youth allowance and other income support has effectively abolished the concept of full time study and wide spread student poverty is now evident, see section 3.2 of the submission.

In order to ensure that higher education encapsulates social and cultural learning as well as engages local communities, student associations and organizations must be autonomously and independently funded. The Howard governments' *Higher Education Amendment Act 2005* (Cth) introducing Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) must be repealed, see section 3.3 in the submission.

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this submission and are detailed in the body of the submission, they are listed here for convenience.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation (1): That any statement of the functions and characteristics of higher education place emphasis on learning and the dissemination of knowledge, the global communities advantage rather than the economic advantage gained by the state through the growth of GDP.

Recommendation (2): That tertiary education fees be abolished and all past HECS debts forgiven.

Recommendation (3): That the age of independence for receipt of Youth Allowance be lowered to 18 not 21 as proposed by the National Union of Students NUS.

Recommendation (4): That student support payments match the Henderson Poverty Line.

Recommendation (5): That the age of independence for receipt of Youth Allowance be lowered to 18 not 21 as proposed by the National Union of Students NUS.

Recommendation (7): That the Higher Education Amendment Act 2005 (Cth) be repealed and that VSU be replaced with the DSSL model of funding to ensure independent student representation, advocacy and support.

INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION ABOUT NUSA:

NUSA Mission Statement (2006):

The Newcastle University Students' Association shall, through effective representation and advocacy, support for clubs and societies, activities and the provision of necessary services, ensure a climate conducive to student excellence in academic performance and personal development.

NUSA will fulfill its mission through implementing measures to achieve the following goals:

- (1) To provide accessible, professional, personal and confidential representation and advocacy for students of the University of Newcastle;
- (2) To be recognised as an important link between the University and the student population;
- (3) To encourage participation and involvement in University life and to encourage interaction amongst and between students and their association;
- (4) To provide affordable, efficient and necessary services for all undergraduate students;
- (5) To promote student and social issues and to assist networking of students on such issues, inter and intra University;
- (6) To create a climate in which students feel empowered.

The Newcastle University Students' Association (NUSA) is the peak student representative organisation on campus and it's the only organisation on campus which is solely student controlled and focused. NUSA is an incorporated body under the Associations Incorporations Act 1984.

NUSA is a democratic organisation, controlled by NUSAC (the Newcastle University Students' Association Council), which consists of undergraduate representatives elected each year in September. Any undergraduate student can stand and vote in the elections, which are run by the Returning Officer, a NUSA staff member.

While the NUSA Council makes formal decisions on the allocation of funding, most of its activity and power is directed by students at a grassroots level. Student office bearer's activities are directed by the collectives that meet regularly to address issues facing students at the University.

NUSAC represents the student body both throughout the University and to the wider community and, being student controlled, are able to do this without the interference of the Government or University bureaucracy.

NUSA Council meets every month and all undergraduate students are invited to attend the meeting. The office bearers of NUSAC are the Executive, collective Conveners and Faculty Representatives.

- The Executive are responsible for the daily running of NUSA affairs, crises in education, office or staff questions, authority requests etc. The NUSA Executive is made up of: the President, Vice President and the Activities, Welfare, Education and Media Officers.

- The Conveners organise and oversee the student collectives. In NUSA these include: Indigenous, International, Education, Welfare, Equity, Women's, Queer, Environment, Working Students, Media and Transport.
- Lastly are the Faculty Representatives who report back to Council on events or issues effecting students in their field of study, e.g the Business & Law Representatives and the First Year Reps.

Section 1. Higher education in modern Australia

1. How adequate is the statement of functions and characteristics of higher education in modern Australia?

Education is about more than increase economic productivity or the producing capital of a state. Education is about global ‘wealth’; that is by achieving knowledge and other equalities, ensuring empowerment of each global citizen and guaranteeing a sustainable future.

Students should be active participants, or stakeholders in higher education, rather than being seen as consumers of products. This also should be reflected within higher education institutions themselves, universities are places of learning and knowledge, not corporations. This is of high importance for international students. NUSA through its International Student Department often hears international students’ complaints about being treated as “cash cows”, simply consumers of the degree ‘product’. Social and cultural development, integral to successful academic results needs to be fostered at universities for domestic and non-domestic students alike.

Higher education is more than preparing vocationally. Universities are places of learning, however they must also foster cultural and social development, and involve the communities that surround them.

The statement in the discussion paper also does not encapsulate importance principles such as institutional autonomy, freedom of inquiry or indeed academic freedom. Higher educational quality research is integral to furthering both global and domestic society.

Recommendation 1: That any statement of the functions and characteristics of higher education place emphasis on learning and the dissemination of knowledge, the global communities advantage rather than the economic advantage gained by the state through the growth of GDP.

Section 3.1 Meeting labour market and industry needs

2. Are there impediments to the higher education sector being able to innovate in the development of courses and programs? What are these impediments and how could they be removed?

Insufficient funding of the higher education sector by relevant government authorities has caused the sector to search for funding from other private sources. Which has placed pressure upon the sector to privilege the interests of these companies above other interests. Such as the interest of students to be educated in a particular course or program that may not be seen by industry to have economic potential.

Because higher education is not free there is a disincentive to students to take certain courses with the only reason being because they are interested the course. This cost

means students try to minimise potential debt by only participating in courses that are essential requirements of their program.

This cost combined with the effects of VSU legislation ensures that there is no incentive for students to participate in the wider educational experience. This inherently will increase insularity, which in turn reduces the potential number of students willing to participate in new innovative courses which do not have obvious skill development that will assist them within their program.

VSU also reduces the potential bargaining power of student unions to negotiate with the sector to develop more wide ranging courses and programs that do not necessarily have a direct economic benefit and may not achieve large student numbers and therefore be seen by the institution as non-viable economically.

This raises the issue inherent within the sector of viewing students as a potential commodity that needs to be trained to contribute to the self perpetuating capitalist system. This is not entirely opposed by students as evidenced by how a course or program advertise to potential students by displaying how the particular course will facilitate their successful participation within the supply and demand model of the economy. How much this is due to potential student interests or industry and corporate interests is a matter of conjecture.

In summary the major obstacle to the higher education sector being able to innovate in the development of courses and programs are; the increasing economic view of the higher education sector that is judging its effectiveness on how it can potentially contribute to the industrial and consumerist economy rather than the diversity of views and intellectual richness of society. The removal of incentives for students to study in fields that do not have a perceived economic potential and active promotion of disincentives to study in such courses or programs is prompting the move towards a singular almost exclusive focus on skills based learning causing the higher education sector to be constituted of trainees rather than students.

Though this may also be analysed as part of the broader trend of society towards a purely fiscal and economic model for the determination of contribution and purposefulness. When analysed from this standpoint the onus is on the sector as the traditional centre for innovation, alternative thinking and research within society to move away from this model of evaluation.

Ways of reducing these impediments are the removal of VSU and increased government funding of the higher education sector involving the removal of the HECS system and the provision of sufficient funds so that the sector can become entirely free of corporate and industry investment.

This will also expand the higher education sector reducing the need for graduates to enter the industrial or corporate sector and thus reduce the perception of a degree as means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Further an expanded sector will be more capable of investing in programs or courses that may not bring a financial and/or economic return.

3. What are the appropriate mechanisms at the national and local level for ensuring higher education meets national and local needs for high level skills? What is the role of state and territory governments in this area?

Firstly higher education is not simply about training in industrial skills as outlined in the answer to the previous question.

For higher education to meet the local and national need for specific skill areas incentives must be made to encourage potential students to undertake programs that train them those areas that do not have sufficient numbers of highly skilled professionals to sustain themselves. Though if such an area reaches this point it must be reviewed as to whether or not the industry suffering the skill shortage is in the broader context sustainable or necessary. If an industry fulfils these requirements then as mentioned above incentives such as HECS discounts for the programs that will train students in these areas. Though to simply assume that people will choose to participate in a particular course or program simply because it is cheaper and will allow them to participate in a sector where supply does not meet demand is naive and can potentially be a debasement of peoples integrity though providing these incentive will surely attract more people to the industry within themselves they are not sufficient to completely meet the requirements of an industry suffering from a major shortage of skilled graduates. To fully meet demand there needs to be a greater appreciation within society of those sectors that are necessary and suffer significant skill shortages e.g. nursing.

In the case of nursing there is a role for state and territory governments which is to reduce demand through better structuring of the sector by reducing the number of trained nurses executing management roles.

Having a free higher education system would also assist in the prevention of skill shortages by increasing the bulk number of graduates.

The role of executive bodies in ensuring higher education meets national and local needs for high level skills is to plan from relevant modelling of future skill requirements of the society and to promote those programs that train potential graduates in these required skills. Another role of executive government is to reduce any disincentives there may be to people undertaking education and training particularly in those sectors that are sustainable and/or necessary e.g. Health, and to promote a broader social regard and appreciation of the contributions that such sectors make to the society.

Using this model for promoting the production of graduates proficient in the required skills the role of state and territory governments could be the identification of local need of industries and sectors providing a faster and more efficient response than would be possible if managed from a national level.

4. How adequate are the mechanisms for aligning supply and demand of graduates? How do pricing and labour market signals impact on student choices?

It should firstly be noted that higher undergraduate education should be free higher education learning creates more globally aware citizens, active participants in both local and international communities, contributing to a sustainable future, and an equal and free world. University graduates should not just be consumable products that “fill demand”.

The abolition of the HECS system will help guard against market shortages through increasing the gross number of graduates. It will also remove one of the major disincentives to participation in higher education and thus make a targeted government programs to increase graduate numbers in sectors suffering from skill shortages more effective.

NUSA contents that pricing affect choices; NUSA supports the National Union of Students’ (NUS) findings that “price does matter:

- Tuition fees prices do seems to have a significant but negative impact on access by debt adverse mature age, rural and isolated students (although much more research needs to be done to quantify the extent of this);
- Tuition fee prices have a significant impact on low SES participation. While the availability of HECS loans seems to remove credit constraints on high performing Year 12 school leavers regardless of SES the large study debts act as an aspirational constraint in middle high school in disadvantaged areas (risk debt aversion);
- These negative effects are magnified during periods of heightened public debate about study debt such as when HECS rates are significantly increased (sticker price debt aversion)”

NUSA thereby advocates for the abolishment of tertiary educational fees. Higher education is a right, and must be freely available. (The abolishment of fees in helping to ensure participation in higher education by Indigenous and lower SES students is further discussed below see s.3.2.)

Recommendation (2) below is supported by NUSA examination of HECS in s 3.8.

Recommendation (2): That tertiary education fees be abolished and all past HECS debts forgiven.

6. How effectively are Australian higher education institutions responding to demographic change, especially in providing lifelong learning to meet the challenge of the ageing population and the need for upgrading of skills and re-training?

Institutions appear mostly to be responding well to demographic change; through the increasing utilisation of technological resources as means or methods of education

and information sharing. This allows the greater flexibility demanded by the changes in and current social demographic requirements. This is being melded increasingly with more traditional forms of learning.

Although training in the skill required to utilise these forms of technology is not always forthcoming and proper acknowledgement needs to be given as to differing skill levels and the impact that these differences have on academic performance.

Also educational institutions tend to assume that all participating students have equal access to these technologies and thus through over utilisation of technology or by not supplying alternatives institutions tend to put at a disadvantage those who can not access or are unable to utilise these forms; typically older students or students from a lower socio-economic background.

With the active encouragement of mature aged students and a greater implementation of programs to help integrate such students with the broader student body higher educational institutions should have minimal trouble in successfully meeting the needs of retraining a large portion of the current workforce.

Labour market forces can be partly relied upon to encourage participation of such students. But to ensure a significant that is enough to meet demand of the workforce is retrained institutions will have to work with government bodies and industry to encourage workers to submit for retraining. Such initiatives could consist of making higher education free, allowing participation in only a few courses to workers who have a previous applicable degree which will then mean that they have completed the program and through allowing a more flexible approach to studying and working so potential candidates for retraining may retain their job and successfully study within a reasonable time frame at the same time.

7. What is the relevance and applicability of the findings and approaches proposed in the United Kingdom paper, Higher Education at Work, for increasing skills levels in the workforce to Australia?

See answers to previous questions regarding initiatives and incentives to encourage participation of a broad spectrum of the population in higher education.

It is important to note that despite the phrasing of the questions graduates and students are not a commodity and that education is not about providing skills to align the supply and demand aspect of the current economic model.

It is the role of government and the higher education sector to facilitate research and innovative thinking within and for the good of society. It is wrong and fundamentally impossible to place a monetary value on education and learning and government is treading a dangerous path by not allowing anyone regardless of socio-economic status to participate in education and allows a skewing of the sector by letting private companies ingratiate themselves with institutions.

Education needs to be seen as end in itself rather than a means to gain status in society.

Section 3.2 Opportunities to participate in higher education

8. Should there be a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success in higher education?

Any approach that is specifically targeted at Indigenous students must be made with extensive consultation with indigenous communities, students and staff. NUSA has not had the opportunity to *extensively* consult on this issue and the following brief statements are made on the experience at NUSA, and pertain to non-indigenous lower socio economic persons.

NUSA welcomes the discussion paper that will be released by NUS in light of the recent Indigenous Student Conference that will encompass ideas about higher education.

According to the University of Newcastle's Performance Portfolio 2008, "access and participation rates for students from low SES backgrounds are nearly twice NSW and Australian averages; they are the highest in Australia". According to the portfolio this "reflects our demographic base and our enabling programs, as well as higher school liaison and other activities to attract and support students from low SES backgrounds". High school liaison may be important the study by Cardak and Ryan (2006), cited in the National Union of Students' (NUS) submission makes the argument that "the selection processes" pertaining to entrance into university, "occur well before year twelve [sic]". NUSA supports NUS' recommendations that outreach programs extend especially in disadvantaged communities, however, NUSA as well as NUS believe that the cost of higher education coupled with the lack of income support is the single largest reason why there is low participation by indigenous and lower SES students. It is thereby reiterate that tertiary education fees must be abolished and the income support system radically overhauled (see below at question 11).

10. What institutional initiatives have proved successful in increasing low SES or Indigenous participation and success? (Please provide information about outcomes as well as activities.)

The University of Newcastle provides free tuition for its' Yapug program 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Enabling Program', that is a bridging program for indigenous students, as a first step to undertake a degree, the equivalent for non-indigenous Australians are NEWSTEP and Open Foundation. Bridging and support programs are seemingly very successful at the University of Newcastle, according to its Performance Portfolio for 2008. However, further advertising at high school level especially at disadvantages schools could lead to further enrolment.

Wollotuka is heart of the Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander community on campus. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) commended the

University of Newcastle “on the support given to Indigenous students by Wollotuka including its activities...”. Social and cultural activities are vital to the academic success of all students, particular however to Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander students.

NUSA through its indigenous collective and convener roles ensure that indigenous students at university participate in broader social and cultural activities to ensure that education and academic isolation does not occur. Events such as the Indigenous Games ensure a national cohesion that combats cultural isolation. At a local level, the Indigenous Collective at NUSA co-jointly organises social events like lawn bowls, karaoke and trivia nights with other collectives in NUSA to encourage non-indigenous Australians and non-domestic students to actively involve themselves with the Indigenous community. NUSA and other student associations must be independently and adequately funded to ensure these activities continue.

11. What evidence is available from institutions about the impact on individuals or groups of either failure to gain income support or the inadequacy of income support?

NUSA has seen a dramatic increase in student poverty since the Howard government was elected in 1996, to the point that is significantly affecting the quality of life, the health and the ability to study of many Australian students.

NUSA's experience is backed up by research. Already in 2001, the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee (now named Universities Australia) had found that fully one-third of all students “frequently” or “sometimes” skipped classes in order to work, and that over 70% of students were working an average of 15 hours per week¹. By 2007, the situation had become even worse: 15% of students were working more than 20 hours per week and one in eight students (and one in four indigenous students) regularly went without food because they couldn't afford it. Between 2000 and 2006, student reliance on paid work rose markedly from 67% to 75%, and the proportion of students relying on private loans more than doubled to represent a quarter of all students. The average support from Centrelink dropped by 12% during this period and 18% fewer students were eligible for any assistance at all. By 2006, only 35% of all students were eligible for Youth Allowance, Austudy or ABStudy².

As early as 1998, NUSA had made its own investigation into student poverty through a voluntary panel study of 52 students. While the study should not be considered representative, more than half of all participating students had gone a day without food, and 83% suffered stress or anxiety due to their financial situation. Coping mechanisms ranged from plagiarism to have more time to work, to theft, drug use, eating less and replacing medication with orange juice. As indicated previously, social support payments for students have dropped and narrowed considerably since the 1998 study.

¹ Long & Hayden, *Paying their Way*, Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee 2001.

² Australian University Student Finances 2006, Universities Australia, Aug 2007. This survey was based around 19 000 individual responses.

Currently all students under the age of 25 are ineligible for any form of social support on their own merit unless they can prove their independence (most students who are not considered independent are subject to a combined parental income test which is low enough to exclude most students). The irony of the system is that the principal method for proving independence is an income test of \$18 525. As a result, it is those students most in need of support who are ineligible, and only 35% of students are being supported at all. The result is that the great majority of full-time students are working, and are working long hours, in order to finance their studies, and as the Universities Australia report outlines, this puts students in serious financial and educational stress. NUSA considers that the independence test is extremely paternalistic, degrading and insufficient, and that it should be abolished.

The other common method for proving independence is the “unreasonable to live at home” provision, which involves proving that a student's parents cannot exercise their parental responsibilities. However, the process for proving this is based on distrust and has proved to be extremely divisive. Students from abusive households or who have suffered from severe family breakdown find this process so distressing that many give up part-way through the process. The Universities Australia study found that 21% of students not in receipt of Centrelink payments wanted to apply, but did not because they believed that they would be unsuccessful, and 5% did not apply because the process was too complicated. NUSA considers that the “unreasonable to live at home” process is a further source of considerable distress for students having left abusive households.

It is considerably easier to claim Youth Allowance for non-students, who have an age of independence of 21. Most students not receiving support would be able to receive support immediately if they abandoned their studies, and this provides a significant disincentive to study.

While NUSA understands the rationale for tightly targeting student support payments to those students who are not being supported by their payments, it is clear that this approach does not work and many students living in poverty are falling outside of the eligibility conditions. NUSA believes that it is much more important to ensure that no students are putting their health or their education at risk because of poverty, and that therefore the age of independence should be lowered to 18 and the parental income test abolished.

The Australian Council of Social Services found in 2003 that student support payments are 18-37% below the Henderson Poverty Line³. As already stated, mean income from student support payments actually dropped by 12% from 2000 to 2006, and even those students eligible for support are finding it very difficult to survive under the poverty line, especially as the cost of living is rising. 46% of all students are finding it hard to pay for textbooks, and the cost of accommodation, including rent, is rising constantly. NUSA considers that the rates of Youth Allowance and Austudy should be pegged to the Henderson Poverty Line. NUSA welcomes the extension of Rent Assistance to recipients of Austudy.

In addition, NUSA has had complaints from students whose payments have been

³ *Proposals for reform to student income support*, Australian Council of Social Services (2003).

stopped for obscure reasons, including taking too long to complete their program of study.

Centrelink is currently under no obligation to inform recipients of these conditions and generally does not do so. NUSA believes that the support system should be much more open and transparent, and that students should be informed of all of the conditions of their payment upon application.

Recommendation (4): That student support payments match the Henderson Poverty Line.

Recommendation (5): That the age of independence for receipt of Youth Allowance be lowered to 18 not 21 as proposed by the National Union of Students NUS.

Section 3.3 The student experience of higher education

NUSA supports the contention that “over the last decade there seems to be a growing lack of engagement by students with their on campus aspects of university”. This includes the socially and cultural activities, including engagement with the local community. Higher educationally fees an abysmal income support for students have significantly contributed to this. Students cannot work to support themselves while undertaking a degree and actively participate in their university and community life. However, the *Higher Education Amendment Act 2005* (Cth), VSU has effectively abolished the non-academic side of university life and learning. This integral part of university life directly contributes to academic scores and engagement with higher learning. Without social and cultural activities including sport, students will further disengage. VSU must be repealed.

The following is an extract from NUSA submission regarding the abolishment of VSU; it also includes information pertaining to how community engagement and extra-curricular activities, including involvement with Clubs and Societies has diminished, particularly in regards to the Newcastle experience:

Since the advent of VSU, student representation, support and advocacy have diminished. Autonomous and independent funding is needed to ensure that students’ rights are protected. NUSA has seen drastic and devastating cuts since VSU in the following areas:

(1) Advocacy and Student Representation: NUSA through its collectives, student organised events and student representation on University boards and committees, ensure that students’ rights are protected on campus. A student’s democratic right to representation, advocacy and support can only be protected through an autonomously and adequately funded student association. NUSA’s ability to actively and independently advocate for students has been drastically diminished with the implementation of VSU. NUSA must autonomously fund any of our campaigns, as the SLA with the University of Newcastle does not provide funding for “political” activity. Campaigns for increases in University funding, more staff, better facilities and better student health care are all considered “political”. Campaigns

against increased bus fares, against increasing HECS debt, against student poverty, against online learning and against cutting courses are all “political”. Students have a right to express themselves politically; we have the right to participate in our democracy. Students’ ability to exercise this right has been directly threatened under VSU. Although NUSA has run a series of successful campaigns under VSU, such as The Clean Energy Campaign which forced the University of Newcastle to commit to a sustainable energy target and The Online Learning Survey campaign, which increased face-to-face learning hours, these campaigns had to be autonomously funded. These independent funds are severely limited and there is no long term sustainability of this type of funding, thereby directly threatening student representation at the University of Newcastle.

(2) Welfare and support services: Student organisations such as NUSA have a rare understanding of the particular needs of students suffering from poverty and VSU has meant that NUSA are unable to represent students and inform decision-making bodies about these issues. On a practical note, VSU has forced cuts in all areas of student support, particularly in regards to welfare services. Pre-VSU, NUSA provided \$300 emergency loans to student. NUSA can no longer offer this service. NUSA offers a weekly BBQ to students which had to be cut down immediately following the implementation of VSU. The lack of resources under VSU has meant that many student initiatives have had to be abandoned. For example, a voucher scheme which provided vouchers for food and text books, had to be abandoned in its germinal stages due to a lack of resources.

(3) Staff: In 2006 NUSA employed seven (7) staff; in 2007 and in 2008, NUSA employs two (2) full time staff and one (1) part time Grievance Officer. Staff redundancies and yearly contracts has meant that NUSA has lost a vast amount of institutional knowledge. Procedures have to be re-learned; time energy and labour that was once solely focused on the delivery of services and the development and implementation of new services has been cut in order for training. Moreover, the loss of staff has meant that Executive members on NUSA Council, which are positions held by students, have taken on much of the administration and daily operational functions of the organisation. This is just to keep NUSA running day to day. This restricts the council members’ time spent on their elected advocacy and representational roles and impedes on the very notion of being available for student representation duties.

Pre-VSU, NUSA employed a full time Grievance Officer. Under VSU, NUSA’s Grievance Officer can only be employed part time for fourteen (14) hours per week. This has meant longer delays for students, sustainability issues for staff members and most importantly, an absence of broader reform and policy development campaigns as concentration of time is given firstly to individual cases. Although broader campaigns have been run, they have been strictly limited as the capacity to provide time for the instigation of institutional change and policy suggestions has been halved under VSU. In 2007, NUSA’s Grievance Officer instigated an important policy review of the University moderation policy, ‘Moderation of Marks – Human Rights Law Review’. The complaint, which was initially ignored by the University, was acted upon by the NUSA Grievance Officer and was then forwarded to the NSW Ombudsmen where an official review was undertaken. The NUSA Grievance Officer must be autonomously and independently funded in a full time position in order to ensure that not only are

students individually provided with representation and advocacy, but that the broader student community is protected from unfair University policies and procedures.

(4) Student Media: OPUS is the student controlled and student run, independent student magazine on campus. OPUS is a platform for students to publicly raise their concerns. It is distributed widely and received well by the broader community. VSU has meant that this integral part of the student experience can no longer be fully funded. Publication has been cut from seven (7) issues per year to four (4). Student, staff and the community can no longer be reimbursed for their time contributing both through writing and the design of the magazine. More importantly, this forum for student voices has diminished significantly. The University does not fund student media, as it is classified as “political”. NUSA employs an ethical advertising policy, meaning that advertising cannot cover the cost of production of the editions.

(5) Student Office Bearers: In 2007, honorariums were cut for student officer bearers in order to ensure budget sustainability. This year, honorariums were raised given the increase in University funding which freed up autonomous funding sources to be used for honorariums. However, University funding is not guaranteed, nor can it be used for honorariums for student office bearers. In order to ensure that NUSA’s student roles are sustainable and effective in providing student representation, a guaranteed autonomous income is essential. This is not possible under the current legislation.

The Effect of VSU on Other Services: VSU has effected all the services that NUSA provides to students. NUSA’s printery that was run at cost on site for students and lecturers was shut down. The printery service not only provided lecture notes, it was used for clubs and societies, for students who wanted cheaper printing than what the University provided and also binding and laminating. Fruit and vegetable box prices have increased, bus tickets are only discounted to financial members, not all students as NUSA would like. Home-start up kits, yearly planners, stationary and recycled notepads can only be provided to financial members, not all students. The University of Newcastle’s second-hand book shop was closed with the advent of VSU, and although an important service that practically addresses student poverty, NUSA could not financially takeover and fund this service.

These cuts have caused widespread disengagement, furthermore it prevents already struggling students receiving support to undertake full-time study.

Recommendation (6): That the Higher Education Amendment Act 2005 (Cth) be repealed and that VSU be replaced with the DSSL model of funding to ensure independent student representation, advocacy and support.

14. How do institutions measure the quality of their learning outcomes and how do they know they are nationally and internationally competitive?

Institutions success can only be measured by students and their experience. It is therefore vital that students are involved actively in measuring their higher educational experience. NUSA supports NUS’s contention that “There needs to be a

regular cycle monitoring of student engagement to inform policy directions for student finance, teaching pedagogy and staffing levels”, however this cannot simply mean quantitative research pertaining to retention and GPA. It must mean qualitative information by students directly to their own institution. Moreover, institutions being nationally and internationally competitive cannot be the sole concern in the higher education sector. Profit is not a measure of success. To have a complete higher education, institutions need more than graduates. Students participating in their local community developing socially and culturally is more vital than competitiveness on the international market.

Section 3.4 Connecting with other education and training sectors

15. To what extent should vocational education and training and higher education continue to have distinctive missions and how should these missions be defined?

Over the past 25 years, the line between VET and higher education have become increasingly blurred due to the vocationalisation and massification of the university sector. NUSA believes that this is unfortunate and that the Government has an opportunity to more properly define the differing yet important roles of TAFEs and other vocational educational providers and universities.

Historically, universities have been communities of scholars, or institutions where its members engage critically with ideas and with wider society. This has been to the benefit of Australia, both in the narrow economic (fiscal) sense and in the broader economic (utility, quality of life, democracy, equity and sustainability) sense. In order for universities to properly fulfil this role, they require a high degree of autonomy from the political moods of the day. This has become increasingly difficult due to the increasing politicisation of universities, most recently evidenced by the ironic senate inquiry into academic freedom and the voluntary student unionism debate.

Vocational institutions such as TAFEs have a very important role as well in increasing the skills of people who are searching or preparing for a career. This role needs to be supported as well, since TAFEs have different needs to universities. In addition, universities have taken on a vocational role in training potential doctors, engineers, accountants, managers, etc. However, the focus in these university courses is not on the specific skills needed to carry out these occupations, but on the higher critical skills they require. The increasing demand for university-educated graduates demonstrates the value the community attaches to higher criticism, and universities should not be forced to conform to vocational norms through productivity-based assessments. That is to say, universities should be fully funded and allowed to define their own roles, and should the employer demand for this kind of education drops, the demand for vocational education can be supplied through the TAFEs without sacrificing the essential nature of universities.

A disturbing trend is the abandonment by certain institutions of elements which are considered to be essential to that of a university. For example, many universities have

started to “rationalise” their courses and cut out humanities courses in preference for more vocational courses. An extreme example of this is Queensland University of Technology, which has cut out its humanities department entirely. The argument that QUT is still a university requires a significant contortion of the traditional role-based definition of a university and NUSA believes that QUT should be treated in a similar way to other vocational institutions like TAFEs. A Newcastle-based example of this is the cutting out of the Gender Studies major in the Bachelor of Arts degree, and NUSA believes that this trend should put Newcastle's classification as a university at risk.

By definition, the less “rational” or vocationally-oriented courses may not have the same economies of scale as the more popular and vocationally-oriented courses, but NUSA believes that this should single those courses out for special support (even with only a few enrolled students in a course, for example), precisely because of the importance and value of higher criticism. It would be a mistake to assume that a country can run on auto-pilot, without higher criticism.

16. Does the movement between the sectors of students with credit need to be improved? If so, in what ways?

NUSA has not identified any particular areas in which credit for courses needs to be improved, other than to say that students should continue to receive credit for previous study in the vocational sector. However, this should not detract from the fact that there is a significant qualitative difference between vocational and higher education (see above).

17. To what extent should relative provision between the sectors be planned or demand driven. What are the effects of current differences on funding, governance and regulation in limiting planning or influencing choice between the sectors?

NUSA believes that higher education should be (as far as possible) equally accessible to all on the basis of merit, and that students should be allowed to choose their courses. In areas of critical need (such as medicine, teaching and nursing, for example), governments should finance more places without sacrificing the quality of the course delivered (that is to say, universities should not be expected to lower their standards merely to accommodate for more students). This approach will not on its own lead to a sufficient number of students graduating in a particular field, but must be coupled with improved education and more empowering self-education in secondary and primary education. In addition, NUSA believes that some courses of critical demand are over-represented by students of a particular socio-economic and cultural background, and that this is due to the socio-economic and cultural construction of this course. This reduces the potential pool of graduates in that sector. Put more simply, a shortage of teachers can be partially attributed to the advantage that native-English-speaking students or students who are fluent in an upper-middle class dialect of English hold in that course, in addition to a familiarity with Anglo-Celtic and Western (systematic, positivist) constructions of knowledge. This could be resolved by (for example) assessing indigenous students according to indigenous

criteria, and increasing the demand for teachers fluent in an indigenous language, rather than English. Furthermore, students who speak a lower-class dialect of English should not be expected to be fluent in an upper-class dialect of English in order to pass their course. These outcomes can only be attained if students are educated and assessed by academics who come from the same construction of knowledge, and would require affirmative action by universities in promoting students or academics who do not fit within the dominant socio-economic grouping. However, universities should be allowed (and funded) to do this autonomously, and without external political interference.

18. Can institutions provide examples of good practices which have led to movement between the sectors with high levels of credit and good learning outcomes?

NUSA is not well-placed to answer this question as a student organisation.

Section 3.5 Higher education's role in the national innovation system

19. By what mechanisms should research activities in Australian universities be supported?

NUSA strongly believes that research should be publicly funded as far as possible, and according to the needs or academic persuasions of academics rather than industrial requirements. For example, prioritising funding for research into coal technologies through government or industry funding could disadvantage more ultimately valuable research into renewable energy. NUSA believes that researchers and academics are sufficiently removed from vested interests as to be able to carry out research which is in the national or global interest, and that research funding should be as open-ended as possible.

For example, the government could set aside a certain amount of money in each academic sector as funding pools, and allow researchers to apply for funding according to their own merits. Obviously there will be a tension between the amount of funding available for research and the amount requested by researchers, but it should not be up to politicians to determine what research is “valuable” and what research is not valuable. In particular, research should not be funded on the basis of the expected added fiscal value that the research would bring, as this would ignore the utility value of particular research and would not be sustainable in a broader economical/ecological/social sense.

NUSA believes that an independent body of academics should be appointed in order to administer these research funding pools, and that this body should be appointed by constituent universities rather than by politicians or by political appointees. This would ensure that no more than the allocated amount of research funding is being spent on research, but that research funding is not allocated according to political or industrial interests.

NUSA also believes that research is a crucial component of what a university is, and that students should be educated by researchers, and should be encouraged to be researchers. NUSA believes that there is no such thing as a teaching-only university.

20. On what principles and for what purposes should research activity be concentrated in particular universities or types of universities?

AND

21. Do you believe there is a place in Australia's higher education system for universities that are predominantly 'teaching only' universities? If so, why?

NUSA believes that research is a crucial component of what a university is, and that students should be educated researchers, and encouraged to be researchers. NUSA believes that there is no such thing as a teaching-only university (teaching-only universities are called TAFEs). Naturally certain kinds of research will concentrate in certain universities, and NUSA does not believe that there should be any political interference or acceleration of this process. Research grants should be allocated on their merits rather than on the basis of the institution from which that grant application was made.

NUSA is strongly opposed to the "Melbourne Model" and has confirmed that the University of Newcastle's Vice-Chancellor is similarly opposed to this model of higher education. It would be to the significant economic detriment of Australia (and the rest of the world) if Australia were to restrain its research programs or transform certain universities into teaching colleges or TAFEs.

NUSA and its members will do everything that we can to build a campaign against the "Melbourne Model" or a teaching-only model, and any government which is planning this kind of intervention into the university sector should expect strong and radical (and politically risky) opposition.

Section 3.6 Australia's higher education sector in the international arena

22. Are there any unintended consequences of the current approach to internationalisation of higher education in Australia?

There are quite a few unintended consequences of the current approach to internationalisation of higher education in Australia. Many International students come to Australia to study and broaden their educational opportunities but arrive to find that they are discriminated against in many ways that severely affect their education. In many cases international students are unable to receive student concession thus dramatically increasing their expenditure, are unable to find adequate residence and/or are exploited by their landlords and are often very isolated and

excluded within universities. It is all well and good to encourage international students to come and study abroad in Australia but, unless there are adequate support services available to these students then their experience may not be as positive and valuable. Their experience could also influence and discourage other students from studying abroad in Australia.

Moreover within universities there are often large language barriers that can further isolate international students. The current approach to internationalisation of higher education in Australia aims to bring students to Australia to study however; it does not actively look to make Australian universities inclusive for these students. A diverse array of languages as specific courses of study as well as diversity in the languages courses are delivered in would create a more inclusive university for international students. This would also allow domestic students to broaden their experiences and education because, as stated, internationalisation is in fact a two way process.

As well as this, the internationalisation of university courses such as seen at Melbourne University with the implementation of the 'Melbourne Model' may make university courses more accessible to international students. However, there are unintended underlying consequences of this. Creating a more universal structure should not come at the cost of domestic students currently studying. This has in fact happened through the cutting of different programs as well as courses. This therefore limits what domestic students already at university can study and, particularly in relation to arts degrees, can mean that students are no longer able to do necessary subjects with which to fulfill their majors. Further, the implementation of such structures will mean that the entry courses for many professions will become full fee paying. Whilst, for equity reasons, some HECS positions will still be available, full fee paying courses will mean that many students will be unable to take the entry courses for their desired professions as they are unable to pay such high, upfront fees.

23. What is an appropriate role for government in assisting the Australian higher education system to internationalise? On what principles should this role rest and what purposes should it serve?

To assist the Australian higher education system to internationalise, it would be most appropriate for the government to respect the autonomy of each of Australia's universities. It would be suggested that the government should consult with universities and key stakeholders to develop a set of best practice guidelines. From this, the government could, upholding the best practice guidelines, provide certain incentives to assist the Australian education system to internationalise. Such incentives should aim to make Australian universities more accessible to international students (concessions, housing, language barriers, etc) as well as providing support to domestic students who wish to study abroad and/or study in Australian within a more international framework.

24. Can you provide any examples of good practice in encouraging local students to undertake study in other countries?

There are not an abundance of examples of good practice in encouraging local students to undertake study in other countries. One example however is that of scholarships. Some universities offer monetary scholarships for domestic students studying abroad. However, studying abroad is often still very expensive and thus many students are excluded from being able to do this as they are not in a financial situation that would allow them to. Discrimination as a result of financial circumstances discourages students from studying overseas so, such scholarships are a way of overcoming this and encouraging students to study abroad. That said, scholarships are often granted on academic merit and this too can discourage students who do not achieve consistently high marks or have a high GPA.

The example touched on in question 1 of offering a broader variety of languages as both degree programs and course deliver languages would also be an example of good practice in encouraging local student to undertake study overseas however, not many universities do actually offer this.

Section 3.7 Higher education's contribution to Australia's economic, social and cultural capital

Community engagement, as well as higher education's contribution to Australia's social and cultural capital is discussed about in s 3.3. 'The student experience of higher education'.

27. If you think that knowledge transfer and community engagement are appropriate roles for higher education institutions, how do you believe these functions should be funded?

Community engagements and knowledge transfer is best implemented at the grass roots level, through the local community. Student associations and organizations are established institutions that have been ensuring and facilitating such engagement since universities conception. This is why the *Higher Education Amendment Act 2005* (Cth) must be abolished; that is the repeal of VSU; and autonomous and independent funding re-instated.

To reiterate recommendation (): That the Higher Education Amendment Act 2005 (Cth) be repealed and that VSU be replaced with the DSSL model of funding to ensure independent student representation, advocacy and support.

Section 3.8 Resourcing the system

The following brief examination of the HECS system and the recommendation to abolish tertiary education fees was prepared by NUSAs' Welfare convener Jonathan Moylan and submitted to the Federal Member for Newcastle Sharon Grierson.

Each year, around 9000 Australian school leavers are deterred from tertiary

education by the HECS system⁴. Although HECS is a deferrable debt, it nonetheless represents a significant burden on students once they start earning above the repayment threshold and introduces further inequalities into the university system. In effect, HECS is akin to a user-pays flat-rate tax on higher education, a tax which would be unacceptable in our general taxation system.

Furthermore, HECS has a disproportionate impact on women. According to the National Union of Students, it is estimated that 62% of men will pay off their HECS debt by the age of 34 as opposed to only 20% of women⁵. According to the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, while 4% of men will have a HECS debt at age 65, a staggering 65% of women retain their debt. The HECS system has also been a significant liability to the Australian government.

According to DEST's annual report, doubtful HECS debt (that amount which is not considered to be recoverable due to death, emigration or remissions) is already at \$2.88 billion, representing close to a quarter of all outstanding HECS debts. According to DEST, "This pool of bad debt will form an increasingly large proportion of the outstanding debt as the HECS scheme matures. This effect is referred to as debt creep."⁶

Given the problematic nature of the HECS system, NUSA is calling for the abolition of tertiary education fees, and the forgiving of past HECS debts. While this may seem expensive, NUSA believes that the HECS system exacerbates inequalities in the tertiary education and should be scrapped. Fortunately, this measure will not cost more than \$1.9 billion per year, with a once-off cost of \$11.2 billion, and will create productivity gains for the Australian economy⁷.

To reiterate recommendation (2): That tertiary education fees be abolished and all past HECS debts forgiven.

Section 3.9 Governance and regulation

31. Is it time to reshape tertiary education in Australia and streamline financing and regulatory arrangements? If so, what structural changes would you make and why?

The importance of tertiary education in modern Australian society needs to be reassessed in order to promote a political agenda that places tertiary education as a central theme of any prospective government. As such the value of heavily subsidised or free education needs to be looked at in terms of promoting Australia's economic future and the overall benefits that such a policy would provide for future generations. The promotion of the significance of an educated and skilled labour force within Australian society needs to be given greater emphasis by the media if Australia hopes

⁴ Aungles et al (2002) *HECS and Opportunities in Higher Education*.

⁵ Vagg, Mari (2002) *Submission of the Higher Education Review*, National Union of Students.

⁶ *2006 – 2007 Annual Report*, Department of Education, Science and Training 2007.

⁷ *Higher Education Report for the 2004 – 2006 Triennium*, Department of Education, Science and Training 2006.

to remain significant within a global society. Structural changes should be considered in line with the overall benefits that free education can bring to society in terms other than purely fiscal. The overemphasis of fiscal policy determining the nature of tertiary education in this country has had a significantly detrimental affect on the quality of graduates exiting our tertiary education system. If education were to be considered as a social responsibility by government rather than a system driven by the goals and philosophy of private industry our culture and society as a whole could benefit enormously by the increasing opportunities afforded to people based on merit rather than economic background.

32. Is the level of regulation in the sector appropriate? If not, why not, and what should be done to reduce the level of regulation?

The current level of regulation in the tertiary education sector is not appropriate and further deregulation is not the answer. There is a consistent attempt to hold the economic profitability of Universities above the academic benefits that they provide to our society which is detrimental to both students and academics. The push to corporatise public universities fails to look after the interests of academia which is failing to look after the interests of society as a whole. Further deregulation will allow universities to be less accountable rather than requiring them to excel in academic performance. All tertiary education institutions must begin a process of full disclosure of all financial and governance information to students, staff and the wider community. Only through full disclosure across the entire sector will we move forward from a system of competing interests towards the common goal of the advancement of knowledge. This is in no way intended to remove the autonomy of individual institutions to make their own decisions but solely to maintain accountability for those decision making processes.

35. Is there more that could be done to improve university governance? How should this be done?

There is currently little to no student representation in decision making processes within universities. The election of a very small number of student representatives on various governance bodies achieves nothing other than informing a small minority of students the actualities of the university bureaucracy. In no way does it provide the students with an adequate democratic voice in the decision making processes. Students are treated as customers rather than as a part of the academic community. University governance must become more inclusive of the full range of students undertaking study and move from a system of directing students to one that works alongside them for the advancement of societal knowledge. Student representation of student affairs must be respected and encouraged.