

# Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
References Committee

## **Inquiry into higher education funding and regulatory legislation**

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**Submitter:** Rev. Matthew Wilson

**Organisation:** Tertiary Campus Ministry Association (Australia) Inc.

**Address:** Charles Sturt University (Albury) Student Services  
PO Box 789 Albury 2640

**Phone:** 02 60516942 (w) 02 60213382 (h) 0413182684 (mob)

**Fax:** 02 60516748

**Email:** [mwilson@csu.edu.au](mailto:mwilson@csu.edu.au)

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## **Tertiary Campus Ministry Association (Australia) Inc.**

ABN 752 395 65800  
Co-/Rev. Matthew Wilson - Chaplain  
Charles Sturt University (Albury)  
Student Services  
PO Box 789  
Albury 2640

8 October 2003

Mr John Carter, Secretary,  
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations  
and Education References Committee  
Suit SG.52, Parliament House  
CANBERRA, ACT 2600

Dear Senators,

### **Re: Inquiry into higher education funding and regulatory legislation**

The Tertiary Campus Ministry Association (Australia) Inc. is a multi-faith body representing chaplains in universities and other tertiary institutions throughout Australia. While we affirm that reform in the higher education sector is necessary, we are deeply concerned about the effects on students and staff, their families and the wider Australian community of some of Minister Nelson's proposals. Our concerns and the actions we strongly urge the Government to undertake are outlined below, based around the following two principles:

- Universities should equip people for life-long learning and not simply be involved in vocational training.
- We wish to affirm that students are not the sole beneficiaries of their education – specialist training and broad education are vital for a functional and free society as well as enhancing Australia's standing in the global context.

As a professional group that interacts with an enormous range of students, we are deeply concerned about a number of the predictable effects of Minister Nelson's proposed amendments to the tertiary sector:

- The magnitude of debt that will be incurred by students and/or their families and the significant increases this will create in overall household debt levels.

- The pressure to increase hours of paid work while studying and the resultant lack of time to devote to studies
- Lack of equity for those students and/or families who cannot afford to pay either HECS upfront or full fees.
- The vastly increased difficulties for families from lower socio-economic backgrounds in supporting their children through tertiary education. This would appear to create discrimination based on socio-economic factors.
- Students from low and lower middle socio-economic backgrounds who cannot obtain HECS places will be disadvantaged compared with those from more affluent backgrounds. The proposed loan scheme appears to be inadequate to cover costs of courses and living expenses and adds significantly to the individual's debt burden.
- The apparent assumption that students will continue to have the quality of relationship with their families which will make it reasonable for their families to be willing and able to support and subsidise them for the duration of their studies. This is not, in our experience, a reasonable assumption in a significant number of cases.

From our experience of dealing with university communities, we believe that the proposed changes will have a detrimental impact in at least three areas.

1. They will place increased pressure on young people who are already evidencing high rates of mental health problems which contribute to the high rate of suicide in this sector of society.
2. They significantly diminish the flexibility of the tertiary degree and students opportunities for changing courses.
3. They largely ignore the wider community benefits of a Higher Education and the wider participation of the higher education sector in the community.

We request the Government to amend its proposed legislation to

- a) enhance the incentives for those students and families from a lower socio-economic background to undertake tertiary education, including a more realistic level of financial support.
- b) ensure that those who cannot pay full fees or up-front payments will not be significantly disadvantaged in their future lives through high levels of debt.
- c) reduce the dependence of students on their families for funding fees and cost of living during tertiary education
- d) provide increased support and funding for the support of students and families experiencing a range of mental health or other problems which require specific professional support.
- e) increase the number of commonwealth scholarships available
- f) create further incentives for privately funded scholarships
- g) eliminate the penalties that will be imposed on students who wish to change course or those who encounter unpredictable personal and family crises or illness during the course of their studies which may necessitate withdrawal from or repeating parts of their courses.
- h) outline in significant detail and open for public discussion the proposed additional learning entitlement for retraining purposes as an integral part of the amendment package

We also believe that the following proposed industrial amendments remove basic rights from workers in the Tertiary Education Sector. We demand that they be dropped.

- Proposed amendments to the Workplace Relations Act 1996 effectively removing the right of higher education employees to take industrial action.
- The linking of funding to having staff working under individual employment agreements which reduces the possibility of staff entering into enterprise bargaining or collective agreements.

We are also concerned with the proposed amendments to university governance:

- The power given to the minister with regard to annual negotiation with each university re discipline mix and number of places is likely to create instability within the higher education and undue government interference in the governance of universities.
- The power given to the minister to enact punitive measures for universities which do not meet the agreed discipline mix will limit flexibility in course offerings and unfairly penalises universities and their students.
- The proposed reallocation of places and disciplines could have a serious negative effect on the social and economic welfare of communities in which universities are the major employers

While noting that the Government has increased the threshold for these penalties to apply to 5 % variance from the agreed mix, we believe that this remains undue influence and regulation by government of the Tertiary Education sector. We ask the government to consider the social and economic impact of these proposed changes on universities and their surrounding communities, and undertake a less regulatory approach to co-ordinating the balance of disciplines, courses and places across the Tertiary Education sector.

We thank you for your consideration of these matters and look forward to your response.

Matthew Wilson

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**Rev. Matthew Wilson**

Secretary *Tertiary Campus Ministry Association (Australia) Inc.*  
Chaplain *Charles Sturt University (Albury), LaTrobe University (Wodonga)*

EMAIL: [mwilson@csu.edu.au](mailto:mwilson@csu.edu.au)  
MOB: 0413 182 684  
WK: 02 60516942  
FAX: 02 6021 3382