

Oppose political discrimination at University of Newcastle

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality in Australia
24 February 2014

The following statement is being distributed today to students at the University of Newcastle.

The University of Newcastle Clubs and Societies is using the legislation governing the Students Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) as the cover for a discriminatory attack on the democratic rights of students who belong to student clubs associated with political parties.

The former Labor government, with the support of the Greens, enacted the SSAF legislation in 2011. The legislation re-imposes a compulsory fee on students to make them pay for basic services that should be freely provided at university campuses. It contains the stipulation that funds raised from the fee cannot be used to support political parties or the candidacy of a person for any political office.

The purpose of this anti-democratic stipulation has been clear since the legislation was introduced—to prevent student organisations from making financial grants or donations to political parties or candidates in an election, while no such restriction applies to granting funds to organisations of a religious, sporting or social nature.

Now, for the first time at any university in Australia, University of Newcastle Clubs and Societies is re-interpreting the SSAF to justify proscribing political activities that have been carried out on campuses for decades.

On February 17, Rowena Grant, the Clubs and Societies Coordinator for UoN Services Limited, the public company that provides student services at University of Newcastle campuses, sent an email to political student clubs, including the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party.

In the email, UoN Services Limited asserts:

“Due to the political nature of your student club, we thought it imperative to inform you of the rules for O Week 2014 on bringing any political members—be they members of federal or state parliament, or candidates for political parties—on campus.

“If political members are found to be present at the Expo, they will be asked to leave and your student club runs the risk of losing their booking at the Expo...

“This is due to the Student Services and Amenities Fee legislation, which specifies that SSAF funds may not be used to support a political party.

“Our interpretation of the SSAF legislation is that bringing a political member to the Expo is supporting a political party....”

This is an open attempt to curtail the activities of all political clubs. These include the IYSSE as well as clubs that support the Liberal Party, the Labor Party and Socialist Alliance. Other clubs advocate views on the environment and social issues that support the positions of political parties ranging from the Greens to the Christian Democratic Party.

UoN Services is implementing a profoundly discriminatory policy. Non-political student clubs can invite whoever they like to take part in their O-Week and other activities, as is their democratic right. Religious clubs, for example, have the unquestioned right to invite non-student members of their faith to talk with students and participate in services. And no-one would dream of opposing the right of sporting clubs to invite non-student athletes to encourage students to take up their particular sport.

When it comes to political clubs, however, there is now to be censorship and intimidation. All these clubs face the threat of their O-Week stalls being shut down if they invite members of parliament or election candidates to speak to newly enrolled students.

All students should insist—as a matter of fundamental democratic rights—that *all* clubs can invite whoever they choose to participate in their O-Week and other activities. It is utterly absurd to allege that the presence of members of parliament or election candidates on campus means SSAF funds are being donated to a political party.

Moreover, the positions of UoN Services are an affront to the intellectual and cultural traditions of universities. It used to be commonplace for student unions and clubs to organise political events where politicians debated the issues of the day. And student-organised candidate forums were once a feature of federal and state election campaigns, with representatives of political parties invited to face student audiences to outline their policies.

Whether UoN Services is conscious of it or not, it is establishing a profoundly reactionary and anti-democratic precedent. What will follow?

Will non-student members of political parties be banned from becoming associate members of political clubs and providing advice and assistance to their activities?

Will political clubs be denied the right to use campus spaces, rooms and other facilities on the basis that their activities are “supporting a political party”?

Will the very ability of students to establish a club that supports the views of a political party be banned under the SSAF legislation?

It is not accidental that the management of a university has begun to re-interpret the fee legislation in a way that facilitates the suppression of political activity. The political atmosphere is changing rapidly and the conditions are emerging where large numbers of students will be turning to politics, especially to socialist politics, to fight against the attacks being waged by governments of all stripes on living standards, the erosion of democratic rights and the dangers of war.

Under the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, tertiary education funding was systematically slashed, leading to the cutting of courses and staff, overcrowding, inadequate facilities and raising the cost of getting a degree. There is no question that further budget cuts or fee increases by the new Liberal-National Party government, as well as cuts to health and social spending, will provoke further anger among

students.

Opposition is also developing to the Australian government’s complicity in the mass US spying exposed by Edward Snowden, its ruthless treatment of asylum seekers and its participation in Washington’s preparations for war against China, including providing the US military with greater use of Australian bases.

The IYSSE warns that the UoN Services’s re-interpretation of the SSAF legislation is setting a precedent that will be used to prevent students from developing the political means to fight these attacks through the organisation of political lectures, classes, meetings, debates and demonstrations.

We therefore call on all students, student clubs and student unions across Australia to insist that UoN Services withdraws its “interpretation” of SSAF and upholds the democratic right of students to engage, without management interference, in political activity on campus.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact