

Oppose the use of SSAF to attack student political clubs!

Defend the democratic rights of Griffith University students!

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Australia)

4 April 2014

Griffith University in Brisbane is the latest Australian university to use legislation governing the Students Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) as the pretext for a discriminatory policy against students who belong to clubs associated with political parties. Members of political clubs at the university are being denied rights enjoyed by all other students, and attempts are being made to restrict or even proscribe their activities.

The previous Labor government, with the full backing of the Greens, introduced the SSAF in 2011 to restore compulsory fees for student services. The legislation included anti-democratic clauses that prohibit funds raised from the fee being used “to support political parties, or to support the election of a person to a Commonwealth or State or Territory Parliament or local Government body.” The stated purpose of this stipulation was to prevent student organisations from using SSAF funds to make financial grants to political parties or election candidates. No such restriction applies to using SSAF funds to support organisations of a religious, sporting or social nature.

The broader implications of the Labor-Green legislation are now emerging. University authorities have decided to interpret the ban on funding political parties and election candidates to launch an attack on the fundamental democratic rights of student political clubs and their members.

IYSSE members are in the process of registering a student club at Griffith University. In an email sent on April 2, the Campus Life Clubs & Societies Office declared that because it was “a very political club,” it was banned from booking and using rooms and facilities, except for a “club lounge” and “computer room.” In a second email sent on April 4, the Clubs &

Societies Office emphasised that the ban was imposed under the SSAF legislation and “applied to all political clubs.” Currently, three registered student clubs are listed as “political” on the Griffith University web site: the Greens Club, Labor Club and Liberal Club. The Greens Club has confirmed with the IYSSE that the ban was only introduced last year.

The discriminatory character of this policy is obvious. Non-political student clubs can book rooms, organise events and invite guest speakers to promote their religious, sporting or social views, as is their democratic right. Only clubs seeking to organise events to discuss political issues and the views of political parties face restrictions. They have been told they can only use a club lounge, a small area with no privacy and no facilities, or a tiny computer room which is completely inadequate for any events.

To the knowledge of the IYSSE, Griffith is the first university to use the SSAF legislation to sanction such sweeping political discrimination and block political activities on campus. The administration is justifying its position on the absurd grounds that if a political club like the IYSSE holds a meeting in a lecture theatre or tutorial room on the campus, this is equivalent to a student organisation using SSAF funds to make a financial donation to a political party or election candidate—which, in any event, it should also be able to do!

Griffith University’s actions follow a declaration on February 17 this year by the UoN Services Limited—the public company that provides student services at the University of Newcastle in NSW—that the SSAF legislation prohibited clubs from inviting members of parliament or election candidates to participate in

Orientation Week activities.

The IYSSE issued a statement in response, “Oppose political discrimination at University of Newcastle,” and distributed it widely among students at the campus. *Opus*, the newspaper of the Newcastle University Student Association (NUSA), is publishing the statement in full in its April edition, together with comments by students opposing the actions of UoN Services.

The IYSSE statement declared: “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.”

The IYSSE statement warned that UoN Services was establishing “a profoundly reactionary and anti-democratic precedent.” It asked: “What will follow? ... 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’?”

Griffith University Campus Life Clubs & Societies

Office has made clear that this was no idle warning.

The implications are far-reaching. Students at Griffith are being told that any club that supports a political party is denied the right to use facilities on their campus to discuss and debate its attitude to the immense political, theoretical, economic and social issues of the day. In particular, the IYSSE is already being blocked from booking meeting rooms to raise the significance for students in Australia of the crisis in Ukraine, the US-Australia preparations for war against China, the assault on democratic rights revealed by Edward Snowden, HECS fees increases and the exploitation of international students, and the cutbacks to university funding being implemented by the Abbott government.

At campuses across Australia, it is precisely because students are becoming increasingly concerned about war, social inequality and the attacks on democratic rights that university managements are turning to the SSAF legislation to manufacture pseudo-legal justifications to suppress any student club activities aimed at clarifying the underlying causes and at mobilising students against them.

The IYSSE calls on all students, student clubs and student unions across Australia to insist that Griffith University ends its political discrimination and upholds the democratic right of students to engage, without management interference, in political activities on campus.



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