

Submission By The La Trobe University Postgraduate Association Incorporated (LUPA Inc.) In Support Of The “Higher Education Legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009”

Submitted On Friday 20th February 2009

LUPA Inc. (La Trobe University Postgraduate Association Incorporated) supports the purpose of the bill, which is to ensure the availability of quality student services. This is required following the loss of revenue from compulsory student levies previously in force.

LUPA supports the bill as it will amend the higher Education Support Act 2003 to provide universities with the option to implement a service fee from 1 July 2009.

LUPA also supports the new Services and Amenities- HELP (SA-HELP) scheme, to give students the option of taking out a loan to pay for their fees.

LUPA believes that student representation and academic advocacy can only be effective where it is truly independent, and that it cannot be truly independent where the university has discretionary control over 100% of student money under this fee. It simply won't work.

LUPA strongly supports the academic services that student organizations provide to the students, for example, academic seminars.

In a previous submission to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Review (14th March, 2008) on “The impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students”, LUPA detailed the negative impact on student services. The information follows:

La Trobe University Postgraduate Association Inc. (LUPA Inc.)

Submission to:

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Review:

The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students

On Friday 14 March, 2008

Introduction

La Trobe University Postgraduate Association (LUPA) is an independent student body representing postgraduates at La Trobe University. It provides services and support in the form of representation, advocacy and advice, academic seminars, social and cultural events and a monthly e-newsletter. Like most postgraduate associations, it evolved from the SRC many years ago to cater to the specific needs of postgraduates, and has no political affiliations. Although LUPA has survived the introduction of VSU with its core services intact, it is a diminished organisation with limited scope to fulfil the needs of all postgraduates. Post VSU, LUPA has two major concerns: To maintain its independence, and to receive adequate and sustainable ongoing funding. The threat of amalgamation with the SRC is ever present, and is mainly driven by financial considerations. The current agreement to fund student bodies at La Trobe will expire at the end of 2008. La Trobe University is to be commended for funding student bodies, albeit at half the previous level, but it will struggle to maintain even this level without some sort of structured ongoing payment from students or the Government.

Financial impacts

The financial impact of VSU was already being felt at LUPA well before its implementation, as the organisation had restructured in a proactive effort to survive its impact. Staffing was halved, and office bearer honorariums were reduced. These cuts enabled LUPA to create a surplus to carry forward into lean times, and ensure the organisation could at least survive in a basic form until its situation improved. As a result of the introduction of VSU, LUPA's funding for 2007 dropped by 55%. In the first full year of VSU, the organisation had to utilise some of its reserves to cover expenditure. In 2008, due to a slight increase in revenue, the organisation will break even. However, this is only possible due to in-kind support from the University. At this stage the University has made no commitment to funding student services or organisations in 2009. LUPA examined the possibility of charging for membership or services, but did not collect any voluntary contributions or fees from students after the introduction of VSU, as the terms of the funding agreement with the University stipulate that a pro rata amount, up to 25%

may be withheld by the University if LUPA introduces its own voluntary fee. While this restrictive practise on the part of the University is questionable, the Universities in kind provisions have offset any potential revenue loss, as the University is currently not charging LUPA rental, electricity or cleaning costs. These cost savings have enabled LUPA to continue providing an almost full range of services, despite the loss of funding. However, this situation potentially makes the organisation beholden to the University, weakening the benefit of having an independent student body. This is of particular concern with regard to the provision of advocacy, which must be done without fear or favour if it is to be of real benefit to the student (and ultimately, the University itself).

Changes in service provision since VSU

Although LUPA has managed to maintain its core services, the whole operation has suffered cost cuts in every conceivable area, so service delivery is on a “bare bones” basis. LUPA’s academic seminar program, unique in that it’s provided by a postgraduate association, and responsive to student feedback, has effectively been halved. LUPA’s cultural activities did not take place in 2007, and its social activities were reduced. A number of services and activities are at risk if funding is not restored to a level closer to pre VSU level. In particular social and cultural activities may have to be provided on a user pay basis, limiting student engagement opportunities to those who can afford to pay. LUPA, while attempting to maintain all services, has prioritized advocacy, advice and representation as the core services critical to postgraduates.

Staffing and workload

Staffing was reduced by half prior to the introduction of VSU, but LUPA continued to contract out some advocacy, seminar and I.T. work. These tasks have now been bought “in house”, and are performed by the remaining staff and volunteers. Honorariums to committee members have also been cut, causing some committee work to be done on a voluntary, rather than a paid basis. This has also led to a greater reliance on the remaining office staff. The loss of a broad range of paid people with specific skills has been detrimental to the organisation, and has increased the workload and stress level of the remaining staff.

Amenities and services for university students

The essential suite of amenities and services that postgraduate students should be able to access is also applicable to mature age students. They include advocacy and advice, representation, academic seminars, (at La Trobe these are provided by LUPA), childcare facilities, counselling services and social and cultural events. The broader and more general suit of services provided by other student bodies on campus can also potentially benefit postgraduate students, and we support the provision of adequate resources for them. However a lot of postgraduate students are juggling their studies with family and professional responsibilities, and the services listed above are the most critical for them.

Funding amenities and services

The experience at La Trobe with regard to raising voluntary fees has not been encouraging, and even though an improved value offer has been presented to students this year, the earnings will still not be sufficient to provide any significant contribution to the real cost of funding amenities and services. LUPA has not had an opportunity to discuss or study the various models, and simply wishes to say that any funding model must be sustainable, and not reliant on a whim of the government of the day. Some sort of deferred payment, such as HECS, would lessen the impact on students. What is imperative is that some form of income stream is in place for 2009, because forward planning and budgeting has to be done this year if students are going to be adequately supported next year.

Summary

The impact of VSU has been negative and far reaching, and lessened the University experience of many students. The support provided by postgraduate associations directly contributes to the completion rate of students. LUPA believes an independent student body dedicated to the needs of postgraduates will contribute to the success of students, the university and ultimately society as a whole. Adequate and sustainable funding needs to be provided soon if postgraduate associations are to continue to play this crucial role. LUP thanks the Minister for the opportunity to make this submission.

The Submission was compiled with the assistance of the staff and committee members of LUPA Inc. (La Trobe University Postgraduate Association Incorporated) and prepared by Dr. Bingxin Wang, Executive Director and Student Advocate of La Trobe University Postgraduate Association, Mr. Frank van Groeningen, Administration Office Manager, La Trobe University Postgraduate Association, and Ms. Dongping Huang, President of La Trobe University Postgraduate Association.

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