

James Cook University  
Submission to the  
Senate Inquiry

The social and economic importance of a quality Higher Education System has been clearly articulated throughout the various recent reports and reviews into Australian Higher Education<sup>1</sup>. When addressing the concept of quality in higher education it is important to think beyond the pure academic functions of institutions and consider the broader context of the 'student experience'.

The Student Experience of university captures all dealings with an institution from admission to graduation and all the educational and social experience in between. Research suggests that participation in all aspects of University life, including social aspects, is positively correlated to academic outcomes<sup>2</sup>. Positive student experiences have flow-on effects for regional Universities like JCU.

The reported student experience (whether it be word of mouth or matter of official record) is an important contributor to an institution's reputation, particularly in terms of remaining an attractive destination for prospective students from the surrounding region, interstate and overseas. A vibrant 'campus life' helps to build positive social networks which, in turn, helps students to adjust to University life.

Campus life and the associated social networks also assist with developing a sense of collegiality, which is particularly beneficial in the area of research, encouraging greater national and international linkages and collaborations. As a research intensive University, JCU is keen to foster such activity.

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<sup>1</sup> The "Bradley" Review of Australian Higher Education; The Innovation Review; The House of Representatives Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues in Australian Universities; The Federal Government's Discussion Paper The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students.

<sup>2</sup> Krause, K, Hartley, R, James, R and McInnis, C (2005) *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a Decade of National Studies* Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne

The Student experience is also significantly related to student retention. Student retention is a significant issue for regional universities and JCU is not immune. Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnes's (2005) report on National First Year University Student Surveys highlight that there is a correlation between increased time on campus/participation in campus life and student satisfaction, success and completion rates.

Findings from the Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnes's (2005) report also demonstrated that students from rural backgrounds, which JCU often attract "...tend to work more collaboratively and experience a stronger sense of belonging to a learning community (58 per cent of rural students compared with 49 per cent of urban students). The rural students also expressed more interest in the extracurricular activities on campus".

As a regional campus, particularly in a post VSU environment, delivering effective social and support services to help foster a 'campus life' has been an enormous challenge in recent years.

Since the introduction of VSU, JCU has witnessed a dramatic decline in student services and opportunities for students to engage in 'campus life'. Many of the services that remain in operation by the Students Association are commercial in nature and not well utilised by students. Consequently, JCU noted a significant decline in the 'Resources' scale on the CEQ 2009 and the International Student Barometer 2009.

Being a regional University the user pays system for services has not been well received and as a result the University has had to intervene at the expense of funds previously reserved for core academic functions to preserve a minimum level of support for students. Despite this, the minimum level of service is recognised as such by students. Unfortunately, resources to further improve these services are not readily available at this time.

Students are discerning consumers and as such, services and activities in support of student engagement need to be effective and credible from students' point of view. Historically, the most effective way to achieve this has been for student's themselves to be actively involved in determining and administering many of these programs.

As many of the student unions point out, the line between activities in support of a quality student experience and support services for students is very grey. Regardless, it is clear that

both are essential in efforts to recruit and retain students to the completion of their degree and for the overall education experience and outcomes students achieve.

Academic advocacy and advice and health and welfare services, which at James Cook University are delivered by the Student Association, are vital services which not only assist students (undergraduate and postgraduate) to resolve issues that impact upon their study but also greatly reduce the level of grievances and conflicts requiring action from the University. Matters dealt with through these services are typically resolved quickly with minimum fuss thereby reducing the administrative and legal (typically in relation to academic misconduct) impact on the University.

Given the significantly reduced capacity of the Student Association to continue to deliver these services in a post VSU environment, JCU has, by necessity, subsidised (\$300,000+ pa) the Student Association to continue to deliver these services. Such funding does not support full service provision but it is potentially problematic to continue to divert funds initially set aside for academic purposes. The University has chosen to fund rather than operate the service primarily because of the advocacy it provides.

An advocate by definition must be impartial and separate from the university in order to make students feel comfortable approaching them for advice. There is a perception that a University employed advocate may adopt an employer's view to resolving matters. JCU is mindful of ensuring that student concerns are addressed in an effective and satisfactory way, understanding of course that unsatisfactory conflict management can lead to poor retention rates and increased legal fees.

Prior to the introduction of VSU James Cook University had a solid relationship with the Student Association particularly in the area of Academic and Welfare Advocacy and Service delivery. If the Student Services and Amenities Fee bill is approved by the Senate, JCU will continue to fund these services and will likely increase funding to restore the pre-VSU level of service.

Cognisant of the fact that students, particularly at regional campuses, are often required to work part-time to support their study, James Cook University supports the notion that the fee be permitted to be included in their HELP debt. Financial hardships associated with having to find

the money upfront may then be avoided until such time as students are in a better position to afford it.

JCU are committed to the notion that any revenues collected from students for the purpose of services, amenities and representation are administered in line with best practice transparency, accountability and responsible financial management. A Student Amenities Committee would be established to oversee the internal allocation of funds and review of funding acquittals to ensure appropriate services are being developed and maintained.

In summary, James Cook University supports the introduction of a Student Services and Amenities Fee. The revenue from these fees will help to restore and indeed strengthen a sense of 'student life' on our campuses. The provision of quality student support services will go a long way towards the retention of students and assisting them to achieve better educational outcomes.

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