

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the Scrutiny of New Taxes
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Inquiry into proposed Student Fees

Dear Senator Cormann and Select Committee members,

I write to you regarding the Australian Government's plan to reintroduce compulsory union fees.

Firstly, I should set out that I have obtained a degree from the Australian National University and I am currently studying at Monash University. Consequently, the issue of voluntary student unionism (VSU) is of particular concern to me.

University Unions in Australia are typically associated with either of the major political parties, with a large majority of them aligning with the labour movement. The proposed legislation will compel students to effectively support these unions regardless of their political demeanour. Furthermore, in Australian workplaces, compelling, or forbidding, union membership is illegal. It seems to be a strange double standard in which we force students to support unions that may or may not represent their agenda or beliefs.

Many proponents against VSU argue that student services at universities have collapsed since the introduction of the *Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005*. At most universities, services which were previously funded from compulsory student unionism were either deemed to be "non-essential" and closed down, or, the University took over and funded the services themselves. It appears from my time spent at university that the only services that were deemed to be "non-essential" were services such as:

1. Subsidised alcohol
2. Subsidised food
3. Subsidised entertainment events

In recent years the negative social effects of alcohol consumption, ranging from malicious damage to assault, has clearly been demonstrated both through peer-reviewed journals and popular media. As a response to the increasing rates of alcohol fueled violence and binge drinking, both the Federal and State Governments have attempted to reduce alcohol consumption through a variety of measures such as taxation, licensing and increased police numbers. By reintroducing compulsory student unionism, you are ensuring that hard earned student dollars are being divested away from education and into subsidisation of alcohol. This alone should be sufficient reason why VSU should remain in place. Further to this, subsidised food, the majority being unhealthy take-away food, and subsidised entertainment events, are hardly items that would assist someone in learning or obtaining a degree.

A common complaint from students is the cost of living and the cost of education itself. Working hours are often limited due to the onerous nature of some degrees, while essential textbooks can cost anywhere from \$50 to \$500. The proposed \$250 compulsory fee will be levied regardless of a student's income, resulting in a significant increase in the cost of living for students. I would rather see my \$250 go towards new textbooks in a library, in which all students can benefit for their education.

The current proposal does not take into account a student's ability to take advantage of subsidised activities or services. Many students often work outside university hours in an attempt to "get ahead of the pack" or simply do not have the time due to other commitments i.e. sport, family, community service, distance etc. In my particular situation, I am based at various clinical schools around Victoria, which are run independently to suit the needs of the medical students or the hospitals in which they are based. We are therefore socially isolated from the greater university cohort and would not benefit from a compulsory \$250 tax which would be diverted to suit the needs of campus based students. Furthermore, distance education students and mature age students often have limited interaction with university unions as they cater for undergraduate students and thus would be short-changed by this "reform".

On a final note, no business or organisation should receive funding regardless of its support. Many students are disengaged from their university unions as they feel that the union does not represent their beliefs. Student voting at university elections is abysmally low, with less than 50% of eligible students voting. For that reason, university unions do not reflect the silent majority and are therefore not accountable for their actions.

If the *Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill* 2005 is repealed, then I ask you to ensure the \$250 compulsory fee is paid to the University for specifically designated tasks, i.e.:

1. Increased funding for learning resources such as textbooks and computers;
2. Improvement of learning facilities such as lecture theatres;
3. Engagement of better distance education technology;
4. Subsidisation for essential course related material, e.g. stethoscopes for medical students and allied health services;
5. Subsidisation for childcare services.

Yours sincerely,

Nicholas Lonergan