

Friday 20th April 2007

Newcastle University Students' Association
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Australia Committee Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and
Education Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
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Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into Academic Standards of School Education

Enclosed is a submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee inquiry into Academic Standards of School Education.

The following submission calls for further independent learning, internet and financial education at the High School level.

I would appreciate any information on the outcomes of the Committee's consideration of this submission.

Yours sincerely,

Justin Watts

Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Committee inquiry into Academic Standards of School Education.

Inquiry into the Academic standards
of School Education

20th April 2007

Written by Justin Watts on behalf of the Newcastle University Students' Association
(NUSA).

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1. Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to draw attention to the three main areas in which, in the view of the Newcastle University Students' Association, High Schools could do more to adequately prepare students aiming for University. These are; independent learning; using the internet; and managing their time and finances.

The teaching styles at university vary remarkably from those at High School. The student is expected to be able to self direct a large portion of their learning through online tutorials and assignment tasks. As students have often had little experience with this, their performance at university can suffer. This could greatly be assisted if High Schools implemented some more independent learning exercises.

As a result of the larger student populations at university in comparison to High Schools, the internet is used a great deal more for communicating with students. Students need to be able to register for classes and communicate with teachers and fellow students via the university website. It is expected that students will be able to use the university website and the internet for this purpose, however there are very few times where they can gain this experience at High School, so difficulty is often experienced.

Students frequently enter university without fully understanding the costs involved and how they are going to meet the payments associated with University. Whilst most students still receive Commonwealth Supported Places, increases to living costs, and not to Government assistance and greater numbers of Full fee paying places provide financial challenges for many students. According to recent studies (Australian Vice Chancellors Committee (AVCC), 2001) levels of Government support payment are too low, independence criteria too strict and students are working longer hours in order to survive, impeding their ability to participate in their studies. Greater availability of information regarding the financial costs associated with living at university would better prepare students for the financial challenges ahead of them.

2. Background

Newcastle University Students' Association (NUSA) is the peak student representative body on campus and is the only Undergraduate organisation on campus which is solely student controlled and focused. NUSA is a democratic organisation whose controlling body, NUSAC, is elected annually by and from the student body. It provides student representation on campus and state and national representation through the National Union of Students. In making this submission NUSA hopes to voice concerns about how High Schools can better prepare students for certain aspects of university life.

3. Introduction

University provides students with a new a challenging environment to gain an education. This is made more challenging by some inadequacy on the part of High School institutions to prepare students for what they will encounter.

This submission addresses the terms of reference concerning whether school education prepares students adequately for further education, including the extent to which schools provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education.

This submission was compiled through research gathered from staff of The University of Newcastle as well as journal and news articles. The author would particularly like to acknowledge the assistance of NUSA President Megan Clement and Education Officer Kristopher Gesling.

4. Online components

4.1 Overview

The internet plays a large part in the operation of the University of Newcastle; enrolling, paying fees, viewing grades are all done online. As well as this all courses have online components such as vital information being sent through the student email account or posted on the Blackboard website and online lectures and tutorials.

An example of this is the Human Bioscience class HUBS1401 which has an online lecture and the option of having an online tutorial as well as the compulsory three hours of self directed learning. Over one thousand people undertake this course every year, many straight out of High School.

Each day the University website averages over 16 000 hits per day (see appendix 9.1) with over 40% coming from inside the University itself (see appendix 9.2). This shows just how frequently used the internet is by University students.

In comparison to university where the internet is a vital tool for communicating with tutors and lecturers and finding course information, at High School level it is only used for research purposes.

4.2 Problems

High Schools don't adequately prepare students to use the internet in the way that university requires. Many students experience difficulty enrolling into courses and using Blackboard (a website where students and lecturers can post information for one another). According to the IT help desk at the Newcastle University, a common problem that students have is submitting their assignments via digital drop boxes and using the Turnitin plagiarism checking program – often resulting in lost marks for their assignments. And with the University constantly looking for ways to save money, the relatively inexpensive online tutorials and lectures could be more common place in the future. NUSA is concerned that if this is to be the case, new students will not have the required experience with using the internet to gain the most out of their degree.

NUSA acknowledges that High schools themselves are inadequately funded and supports statements made by the NSW Teachers Federation that “Without the

necessary funding for both maintenance and technical support ... ICT cannot be properly integrated into pedagogy” (NSW Teachers Federation, 2005)

Furthermore, NUSA acknowledges that face to face learning remains an essential aspect of university life and should not be considered in any way expendable.

4.3 Recommendations

That High Schools, where possible, introduce students to the ways of using the internet that are used at university such as submitting assignments, partaking in forums, viewing grades and selecting subjects.

5. Independent learning and living

5.1 Overview

One of the major differences between High School and university is the level of independence in all aspects of learning and life. University life is far more independent than school life especially if students are living away from home for the first time. Also university requires its students to carry out self directed learning, complete assignments that are open to the students' interpretation, and choose their own courses without any compulsory careers counselling.

Over 3000 people are members of the 32 NUSA affiliated clubs which are nationality, religious, social or course based. However with over 10 000 undergraduate students at the Newcastle campus (University of Newcastle Website 2007), only a small proportion get involved. Clubs, societies and collective organising through NUSA provide a good way for students to meet and engage with new people with similar interests. People that are not associated with any student organisations are more likely to be lonely and have poor social networks.

The AVCC has voiced its concern that as a result of VSU, many services that would have previously assisted students with their studies and social life have been disbanded "These include health and dental services; computing and library services; ... clubs; international student services; and student representation" (AVCC media release, 18 April 2006) As a result of this, it is even more crucial that students are encouraged to explore what services are available to them.

5.2 Problems

An outcome of some students not being equipped to handle their independence is that they often struggle to manage their time effectively and are not aware of ways to interact with new people and can feel lonely. Depression is prevalent among university students and is the main reason why students seek counselling (Khawaja and Bryden, 2006). NUSA has established the 'zine *Keep on Living*, written by and for students with mental health difficulties, to try and assist students with depression and this, along with the establishment of a network of students suffering from mental health difficulties, has proved to be very effective at connecting people who have

mental health problems. However, if students were more experienced in community involvement and aware of the benefits in their High School years, NUSA believes they would be less likely to experience difficulties at University.

Students also have problems with the self directed learning nature of University. The assignments are often more challenging than High School curriculum's, but this is made even more apparent by the students' lack of experience with working independently.

5.3 Recommendations

That High School should be more focused on time management skills and how to work independently.

That High School students should be taught the benefits of community organisations through practical involvement, thus encouraging ongoing involvement in university clubs, societies and student organisations and the university community

6. Financial situations

6.1 Overview

Many High School students enter university without being fully aware of the financial costs involved. According to the associate professor of economics at Melbourne University Jeff Borland (cited by Gittins 2003), attending university costs the average student \$17 000 every year. If a student falls into one of the categories which enable them to receive youth allowance, they will still be several thousand dollars short of being able to pay off the fees required to attend university. Infact, for a single student with no children, Youth allowance and Austudy are 37% below the poverty line (Australian Council Of Social Services (ACOSS), 2001) For this reason, two out of every three university students has a part time job (Professor Margaret Vickers, cited by Patty 2006).

6.2 Problems

Students who have to juggle a part time job and a full university load often have difficulty, especially if they have had limited experience exercising time management previously. This is often detrimental to their university performance and inhibits them from joining the University Community.

6.3 Recommendations

That High School students are educated about the financial costs involved with attending university and how to deal with them.

7. Conclusion

University is always going to provide challenges and excitement for new students. It presents many new opportunities and possibilities, but with this come complications and confusion. Much of this confusion could be avoided if the student had some prior experience with some of the intricacies of University life such as independent learning and internet use, as well as being made aware of the financial costs associated with university. If this were the case then much stress and confusion would be avoided, leading to a happier more productive university experience.

NUSA acknowledges that increased expectations of High Schools must be backed up by adequate resources and should be designed and implemented in a fashion which gives priority to the concerns and needs of teachers and students.

8. Recommendations

1. That where possible High Schools introduce students to the ways of using the internet that are used at university such as submitting assignments, partaking in forums, viewing grades and selecting subjects.

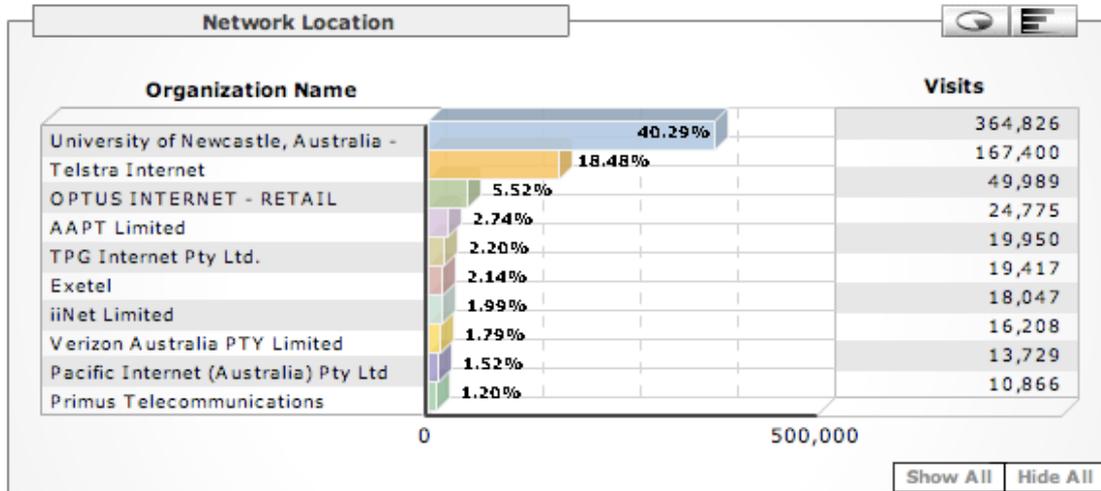
2a. That students at High School should be taught more time management skills and how to work independently.

2b. That High School students should be taught the benefits of joining university clubs, societies and student organisations and encouraged to engage with the university community.

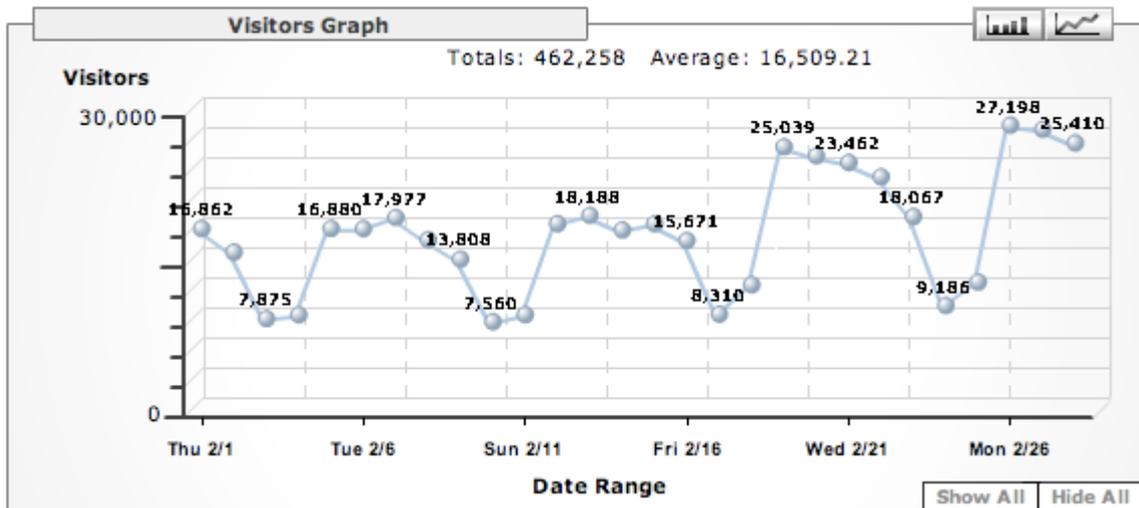
3. That High School students are educated about the financial costs involved with attending university and how to deal with them.

9. Appendices:

9.1 Network Location



9.2 Daily Visitors



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