

# Chapter 1

## Majority Report

1.1 On three occasions, in 1999, 2001 and 2005, the Government has introduced legislation to end the practice of universities charging commencement fees for compulsory membership of student unions, guilds or other representative or service organisations whose purposes and activities are of a non-academic nature. In this third attempt the Government has not proposed any variations or concessions. Government sources have described the policy underpinning the legislation as 'totemic', and the changed composition of the Senate provides some promise that it will be passed.

1.2 At the core of the policy is a determination to uphold the right of self determination. In this context, that means that students should not be obliged to pay for services which they will not choose to use, nor join organisations which are unlikely to represent their interests. This does not mean that students who forgo membership of student organisations are passive, or indifferent to the possibilities open for a full and interesting campus life. Rather, it allows a student to engage in normal student life, selecting the services desired, and the extra-curricular attractions on offer, and paying for them accordingly. The committee heard a great deal of speculation about the imminent collapse of undergraduate life as it has been known for generations, as a result of what is proposed in this bill. There is a much stronger case to be made that the measure will have the opposite effect. That case is made in this report.

### **The bill and its referral to the committee**

1.3 The bill amends the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* with the insertion of section 19-37 in regard to quality and accountability requirements. In essence, this new section prohibits 'higher education providers' from requiring students to be members of student organisations that are not of an academic nature. This is the main operative section. Other amendments, as in new section 33-37, provide for penalties to be imposed on universities which are in breach of section 19-37.

1.4 The Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005 was introduced into the House of Representatives on 16 March 2005, and the provisions of the legislation were referred to the committee on 11 May through the Selection of Bills Committee. The inquiry was advertised and over 190 submissions were received, mostly from student organisations. A list of submissions may be found in Appendix 1.

1.5 The committee held public hearings in Melbourne, Armidale, Perth and Canberra. Witnesses appearing at these hearings are listed in Appendix 2.

1.6 It should be noted that this bill is often still known as the 'VSU' bill, and that this inquiry is often cited as the 'VSU' inquiry. VSU, standing for 'Voluntary Student

Unionism', was the name given to the short title of the bill introduced in 1999. The original bill attracted such a great deal of attention (and over 400 submissions to this committee's first inquiry) that the use of these initials has been popularly retained to refer to re-titled versions of the legislation.

### **Student organisations affected by the legislation**

1.7 As can be noted from a study of the submissions, the terms 'union', 'association' and 'guild' have different meanings, depending on the model of student services and representation in each university. Some witnesses before the committee indicated their dislike of such terminology as 'union' because of connotations suggested by that word. The committee here provides a rough guide to the way in which these terms are used, which is as follows.

1.8 In general, the term 'union' usually refers to a student services organisation, which, although run by a student elected board, is professionally managed, usually by a chief executive officer who is a member of the Australian Campus Union Managers Association (ACUMA). They are the evolved successors to traditional university debating clubs and fraternities of some older universities, and provide cafeterias, reading and recreation services, and they commonly license or contract services through commercial and retail outlets.

1.9 Student associations, including bodies commonly known as SRCs (for Student Representative Council), are the organisations most frequently associated with university political activity. Their main function, however, is to represent students in dealings with university administrators. Their representatives sit on governing boards and senates, and participate in a range of university governance bodies and committees. Student associations are the bodies which maintain student legal advice services to help students with academic appeals, as well as on matters which extend beyond disputes which students may have with the university about course progress and examination results. Most of these associations are affiliated with the National Union of Students (NUS), which is a political lobby group with offices in the Melbourne Trades Hall. Some student associations, however, also run services which in many other universities are run by unions, including student counselling services.

1.10 Finally, 'guilds' are bodies, found mainly in Western Australia and Queensland, which combine the functions of unions and student associations. They may be characteristic of newer and smaller universities, although UWA, nearly a century old, has a guild structure. Some organisations, including that at RMIT, follow a guild structure but call themselves unions.

### **Freedom of association in a university context**

1.11 Freedom of association is a principle which the Coalition Government has endeavoured to extend to all aspects of life in Australia, and there is no reason this should not apply to campus life.

1.12 The committee majority was concerned at the extent to which freedom of association was viewed by university administrators and student organisations as a technicality to be satisfied rather than a principle to be embraced. This view was evidenced by the number of universities which claimed that the principle of freedom of association was being honoured in allowing students to opt out of union membership, but still required the payment of a student fee.

1.13 There has been comment made during the committee's hearings, that the Government's motive in introducing this legislation has been 'political': that is, to weaken the influence of student bodies dominated by left-leaning *apparatchiks* who, it is sometimes claimed, are responsible for the misuse of student funds and the commitment of student union support for particular causes through the National Union of Students.

1.14 The Government denies any preoccupation with the complexion of student political opinion. This is subject to the normal corrective of annual student elections.

1.15 The committee majority notes that the legislation is criticised on the basis that it is 'ideological'. Most substantial legislation is in some way 'ideological', even bills which are agreed to on both sides. If the question is asked on what basis this legislation is introduced, Government party senators agree that there is a basis of 'ideology' by way of a commitment to freedom of association. This concern arises from a view of life which values the fullest expression of individual rights within community structures, consistent with regard for the rights of others. It is a view which attempts to achieve a balance between respect for social and community obligations on the one hand, and the right of individuals living within communities to make choices which suit their ideas and way of life.

1.16 As Government party senators on the committee view matters, this legislation rests on optimism that students will rise to the challenge of running their traditional organisations on a voluntary basis, rather than on any kind of restriction. In ideological terms, this legislation may be regarded as 'liberal', in that it places value on choice and opportunity. As Minister Nelson noted in his second reading speech on the bill, many voluntary organisations and co-operatives thrive on the basis of mutual support for agreed objectives. For instance, sporting clubs are run on this basis across the country.<sup>1</sup> The committee majority makes the point that students are now assumed to approve of an obligatory payment to subsidise all student services, whereas they should be accorded the same rights as their peers in the workforce: that of choosing the interests and recreations they wish to pursue, inside and outside of the university.

### **The capacity of students to determine their own needs**

1.17 It follows from the arguments presented in this majority report so far that Government party senators have a more optimistic faith in the ability of students to

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1 Hon Brendan Nelson MP, *Hansard* (House of Representatives), 16 March 2005, pp.3-5

determine their own needs than do Opposition senators and vice chancellors. It was clear from the vice chancellors who gave evidence that university administrators in general doubt the capacity of students to determine what services they may need and what services are of value to them. Government party senators view interpretations of student opinion by vice chancellors with considerable scepticism, mainly because the student population is now so diverse and because university commitments and experience is only one facet of the lives of a majority of students.

1.18 It is understandable that vice chancellors will see the work and the life of students differently. Government senators respect their view, while pointing out that for an increasing proportion of students such attitudes may appear to be paternalistic in the absence of choice about obligations placed on them which are not always relevant to their studies.

1.19 Professor Chubb, Vice Chancellor of the Australian National University, said later at the hearing that he thought it ought to be left to the university to decide what services it provides.

I would say that it ought to be left to the university to decide what services it provides and, if we choose to charge a fee to provide a range of services, why should we be prohibited from doing that?<sup>2</sup>

1.20 Professor Chubb rejected any suggestion of paternalism, but there was a clear indication in his comments that the university knew best what was in the interests of students. So did the Vice Chancellor of Swinburne University of Technology, Professor Ian Young, who stated in his evidence that students lack the maturity to decide what services are of value to them:

This is a rather condescending comment, I am afraid, but when you have a group of 18- to 22-year-olds the reality is that their focus is very short term. They are interested in the here and now.<sup>3</sup>

1.21 His views are echoed by Professor Peter Coaldrake, the Vice Chancellor of the Queensland University of Technology, who told the committee:

Students are going to at any particular point individually rate the service they need by their need at that particular time. They are not going to take a holistic view of what they might need or anticipate they need in the next two or three years such as whether or not they are going to have challenges with assessment, going to be sick or whatever it happens to be. So I am not sure that students at any particular point, particularly early on in their studies, are likely to make-I hesitate to use the term-‘rational’ choices in that respect.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Professor Ian Chubb, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 7 July 2005, p.5

3 Professor Ian Young, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 4 July 2005, p.15

4 Professor Peter Coaldrake, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 7 July 2005, p.23

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1.22 The committee majority strongly rejects the view that universities know better than students how their own funds should be spent, as it also rejects the notion that students lack the maturity to make these decisions. The view of the Government is that the community knows better what it needs. That is why at every opportunity taxes are cut to put more money in the hands of families and individuals.

### **False analogies with taxation and government services**

1.23 Some witnesses and submissions compared compulsory fees upon enrolment, even though not connected to their academic studies, as the cost of belonging to a community, akin to rates or taxes levied by governments. The committee majority wholly rejects this view for a number of reasons.

1.24 The first is that it reflects a poor appreciation of the value of existing local, state and federal government services generally available to students. The major items of Commonwealth, state and local government spending cover defence, income support payments for those unable to provide for themselves, healthcare, family payments, police and legal systems, aged care and emergency care. Such services are necessary foundations of our society and are provided for students and non-students alike. It is a nonsense to defend student union subsidies for cafes, financial loans and legal officers as ‘public goods’. They are not equivalent to police or garbage collection services.

1.25 Second, it is a gross overstatement of the necessity of those fees for the operation of a university campus. Governments do not provide broad-based permanent subsidies for social events, cafes, bookstores and sporting club memberships. Governments already provide funding for childcare and employment services. There is no need for an additional ‘tax’ - levied solely on students - to provide additional subsidies within the boundaries of the university.

1.26 Finally, it ignores differing capacity to pay. Not only are the same fees paid regardless of the value of service to the student, the fees are paid regardless of the income or other circumstances of the student. This compulsory fee is akin to a poll tax, which has no equivalent in the way that governments at any level levy taxes and rates. Members of the community can choose to pay for non-government services. Students should have the same choice without forfeiting their course enrolment.

### **Opting out of union membership**

1.27 Government senators are concerned that a number of universities offer only a ‘technical’ opt out of union membership. This allows students to opt out of union membership, but still required them to pay the same fee as though they had joined. The rationale offered for charging the same fee was that the cost of union membership is zero. The fees paid, in most cases, still go towards union services. Given the lack of a fee differential it is not surprising that most students do not choose to opt out. The claim that most students support the union because so few opt out is disingenuous. The situation is acknowledged by the unions themselves, for instance, the president of

the ANU students association, conceded that the student fee still goes to pay for union activity. The following exchange in recent Canberra hearings is revealing:

“Ms Rao (ANUSA)... The fact that students are allowed to opt out of this membership is our solution to that so that we do not force people to take on views or to be represented in a way that they might not wish to be.

Senator Fifield—But you will take their money and use their money to represent views.

Ms Rao—Because the university collects it and gives it to us, yes.”

1.28 Arrangements such as these are similar across the country. In Victoria an opt-out provision is written into state legislation, as is the requirement that all students pay an amenities fee. There is similar legislation in force in Western Australia.

1.29 The problem with current arrangements is that conscientious objectors to union or guild membership are placed at a double disadvantage. As one submission noted, the compulsory levy on a student who opts out of membership is equal to the union membership fee, making it a net loss. Such students lose what few benefits the guild gives them, but the fee must still be paid.<sup>5</sup>

### **Political use of funds**

1.30 Under a compulsory fee regime it is almost impossible to prevent student funds being used for political activities without student approval. In 2004 in the lead up to the federal election, from 31 August to 9 October, the National Union of Students (NUS) spent \$250,000 on political campaigns: one campaigning for students to 'Enrol to vote' and the other to 'Put the Liberals last'. This money comes from the compulsory amenities and services fees paid by students and provided to the NUS by way of levies on affiliated student unions.

1.31 When questioned about this, the president of the NUS, Mr Felix Eldridge, said that he was 'sure' that the affiliate members would not want the NUS to make donations to a political party and that in any case the NUS is forbidden from doing so by its constitution. Nevertheless he defended the decision to run a partisan advertising campaign, as the following exchange shows:

Senator Fifield—This is a return to the Australian Electoral Commission from the National Union of Students Inc. for the period 31 August 2004 to 9 October 2004. Mr Eldridge, is this the 'put the Liberals last' campaign expenditure?

Mr Eldridge—Part of it is, yes. Part of it is our 'enrol to vote' campaign, and I would imagine part of it is the 'put the Liberals last' campaign.

Senator Fifield—So it is a campaign all up of some \$250,000. You said earlier that you thought your affiliate members would be upset if the National Union of Students donated to a political party.

Mr Eldridge—Yes, I am sure they would be.

Senator Fifield—You do not think that they would be upset that \$250,000 of—is this money from affiliation fees?

Mr Eldridge—Yes.

Senator Fifield—Money which is provided by affiliated student body members of your organisation?

Mr Eldridge—Yes.

Senator Fifield—Money which they would get from amenities and services fees or other fees?

Mr Eldridge—If their campus had held a referendum and students had decided to join the National Union of Students, then yes.

1.32 The committee majority strongly objects to the collection of compulsory 'amenities and services' fees from students, as a condition of enrolment, being used for partisan political campaigns. It highlights the flaws in the compulsory system and in the existing 'opt out' provision of the Victorian legislation: the NUS was using funds compulsorily acquired from students, many of whom would not have approved of the campaign. The committee majority believes that students should be given the option of whether and how their money is used in partisan political campaigns. This right is best expressed through the ability of students to pay or not pay as they see fit.

### **A note on rural universities**

1.33 There appears to be a general view that universities in non-metropolitan areas are more vulnerable to the effects of VSU than are universities in the city. The committee majority believes this view to be based on unfounded assumptions. Despite repeated questioning of witnesses, there was no substantive evidence to support the repeated claim that regional campuses would be affected in a way materially different to metropolitan campuses.

1.34 For instance, a typical exchange occurred in Canberra with Mr Stephen Horton (President, Council of Australian postgraduate Associations) who asserted that regional campuses such as James Cook University would be particularly affected by the legislation. However, he was unable to provide any instances of how this would occur:

CHAIR (Senator Troeth)—For instance, we were interested to know the number of medical practitioners in Armidale who were available in the town to service a reasonable regional population of 22,000 in the town itself, let alone the hinterland. Given that the university was not an unmanageable distance from the town with a regular amount of transport running we were interested to know the ratio of doctors to students and the general town population and yet we have not been able to find those figures anywhere. We would have thought, given the supposed strength of this argument that is being mounted, that we would have obtained some evidence to bolster it. So that is an example of what we were talking about.

Mr Horton—I would not have figures for this, but how many people would be able to take on the roles that student welfare and academic support staff perform at regional campuses in particular? There are sociologists, psychologists and a variety of other professionals as well who work in these organisations. I would question how many people work freelance outside the university who could specialise in the specific needs of students, particularly international students—a very specialised area of work. Considering the money that international students are paying, they are likely to demand assistance when they need it. International students are encouraged to go to regional centres. The change in the DIMIA points for permanent residency gives more points to students who attend a regional university. Are we going to send people to regional universities and say to them, ‘You will get very little support. Find your own way’? I think that is a recipe for disaster.

CHAIR (Senator Troeth)—I think the point that Senator Fifield is making is that as yet we have been given no concrete evidence.<sup>6</sup>

1.35 The unfounded assumptions of rural disadvantage are that metropolitan students are unlikely to be attracted to the country. The answer to that is that it depends on the quality of the academic program and its preparation for a career.

1.36 Some witnesses and submissions noted that facilities at regional universities are used by local residents and integrated with local life. These facilities should not be sustained solely by student contributions. Local authorities must make some contribution towards maintaining these facilities instead of depending on the fees paid by students, many of whom will only live in the district for a short time.

### **Likely effects of VSU on clubs and sport**

1.37 Sport and recreation is an adjunct to a university education. It is far from being 'core business', and indeed, a majority of students enrolled in university courses around the country would seldom if ever use the facilities provided by the sports unions. University sport is a good example of an activity which benefits a relative few at the expense of all students who pay to enter university. Whatever justification can be made for continued subsidy of services like counselling and advocacy could never be extended to include sport, because of its distinctiveness as an extra-curricular activity.

1.38 The committee heard sports union operatives at some length at its Armidale hearings. University sports unions across the country collect about \$40 million in student fees. Australian University Sport claimed, on the basis of Western Australian experience that this would be reduced to about \$8 million. The committee majority believes this to be a realistic estimate, reflecting the real level of interest and participation in university sport. But the committee majority rejects the pessimistic belief, promoted by the sports unions, that organised university sport across Australia

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6 Mr Stephen Horton, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 7 July 2005, p.39



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will die if VSU is introduced, or that it will have a significant effect on sports organisations, support and achievement levels on sports competitions generally.

1.39 If we take Monash University as an example, with each student paying \$428 as a compulsory up-front services and amenities fee, over half of this goes to unspecified administration costs and only 5.4 per cent of the total goes towards sport. If students need sport, they are not getting value for money from the amenities fee.

1.40 Any decision about the future of university sport will need to be made by the universities themselves. University sport to date, relying on compulsory student fees, has been largely left alone by university administrations. Sports and recreation facilities should now be looked at in light of what universities can offer as a total package of services, particularly to attract foreign fee-paying students. If a university decided that sport should be a core university function for reasons which have to do with its profile or brand, and because it wishes to distinguish itself from other institutions, the sports facilities should be funded by that university out of its revenue. If sports unions take advantage of the generally good infrastructure and equipment that has come as a result of compulsory fees to date, they should, with some imaginative entrepreneurial management, and with corporate sponsorship, increase activity rates and pay for the maintenance that such facilities require. In the case of regional campuses, sporting facilities need to be looked at on a community basis with local government, university and local sporting clubs working together.

1.41 Most university clubs and societies have low overheads, and many use public facilities for which members are charged at similar rates to non-students. A university ski club would be an instance of such a body, with membership advantage coming from social interaction, the guidance and skills transfer from more experienced members, and the organisational skills which are similarly passed along. Membership of clubs and societies arises from shared interest, and the loss of a subsidy for running expenses should have no effect on the membership if there is sufficient interest in the activity.

### **The changing attitude to higher education**

1.42 The legislation before the Senate reflects changing attitudes to university education and the circumstances in which a high proportion of students undertake their studies. There has been a marked change in nearly all aspects of higher education since the 1960s when the sector began a rapid expansion to cope with the first wave of the 'baby boom' generation. The political activity in universities in the 1960s and 1970s, often reflected on with the nostalgia of middle age, had more to do with the growing pains of universities, the demography of those times, and the prevalence of scholarships, than with national and world events at the time.

1.43 In contrast, universities at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century operate in circumstances of relatively low enrolment growth potential, at least domestic enrolments. Mature aged students make up a much higher proportion of full-time students, and part-time students have increased as a proportion of all students. There

has been a massive increase in the proportion of external students, to the point where in some universities they outnumber regular full-time students. Undergraduate students are reportedly older than they were a generation ago, with about 40 per cent of all students being over 25 years of age.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is harder to define what a 'regular' university student may now be. While their parents' generation often enjoyed a large measure of financial support through scholarships to support themselves, students today face the need to provide for themselves to a far greater extent. The perception of the 'quiet campus' over the past decade or more is grounded in the reality of a student body having far less time to engage in traditional undergraduate activities. Balancing study with part-time employment has created a more 'worldly' outlook among students. Such changes as these have had an influence on the policy which underpins this legislation. The bill as drafted recognises that students should be obliged only to pay for services and activities which they require or desire.

### **A challenge to student leadership**

1.44 The committee majority notes that much of the evidence presented by student associations and unions, and by university administrations was remarkably pessimistic in its forecast of the effects of voluntary student unionism. It has been the historical experience of reforming legislators that upholders of the *status quo* will forecast, often with statistical 'verification' the dire consequences which must inevitably follow a particular change. There is a correspondingly low estimation of the likelihood that new arrangements will work well and result in improvements that might not be anticipated. The committee majority takes the view that people will always emerge to create new opportunities and make the new ways work. The views expressed in most of the submissions on this bill underestimate the capacity, the resilience and the initiative which student bodies and many individual student leaders are likely to demonstrate in order to re-establish their service and representative institutions on a firmer and higher threshold of active popular support.

1.45 The fundamental challenge to be addressed by student organisations is that of maintaining broad student support. This will require a very different approach to student leadership than has usually been exhibited up till now. Hitherto, the student association structures, underpinned by assured income to maintain infrastructure and services, have provided an easy revenue stream. The new dispensation will require the exercise of leadership skills of a different kind. These will include entrepreneurial skills and public relations skills. In some cases we may see the emergence of individuals who may have shown no interest in student affairs under compulsory unionism. It is more than likely that a large proportion of currently active students will continue their involvement in either representative or service providing functions, and will quickly learn to adjust to these new circumstances. The committee majority does not see this legislation as being 'anti-student' or even 'anti-radical student'. Voluntary student unionism both maintains and extends the opportunities and challenges for student self-management. 'Radicalism' may be a characteristic of student leadership

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7 Professor Glyn Davis, reported in the *Australian*, 20 July 2005, p.38

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most in demand for the purpose of re-casting student representation structures in order to win active support from the student body.

1.46 It was a matter of concern to the committee majority that with a few exceptions, such as the Melbourne University Student Union, student organisations had failed to examine the possibility of bundling together different services at different price points, as do other member services organisations, such as motoring organisations. It is unfortunate that more time has not been given over to future planning in the event of this legislation eventually passing both houses of the Parliament. There has been at least five years notice given.

1.47 It is clear that if student organisations operating under the proposed legislation continue to offer the current membership and service models, then their organisations will fail. Failure of student organisations under the proposed VSU legislation will not necessarily be the product of the legislation but could be as a result of:

- poor administration;
- failure to effectively market their services;
- failure to respond to student demand; or
- failure to adapt membership models to a voluntary environment.

1.48 While it is clear that some organisations will not adequately plan for the new environment and then blame organisational failure on the legislation, there are some signs of progress and improvement, indicative of a culture change that will need to follow the abolition of VSU. The committee heard evidence from the President of the Monash University Caulfield campus union in relation to new commercial ventures which have increased revenues for the union across all the Monash campuses, returning the profits to student services. The initiative to establish the student controlled commercial venture known as Monyx came from the university administration, but it is significant that it was taken up with enthusiasm by Monash students.<sup>8</sup>

### **The responsibilities of universities**

1.49 There is a lesson for university administrators here. As well as accepting more responsibility for funding what they claim are core areas of university services, currently left to be run by student unions, universities will need to consider whether the current structures for student associations are suitable for the post-VSU era. It may be that the guild structure is more suited to meeting the needs of students than separate bodies providing amenities and representation. A degree of cross-subsidy will be needed to ensure that essential services are maintained, and this can be achieved only if fee-for-service amenities are run with a high level of efficiency and *panache*. The committee majority believes it is the responsibility of university administrators to initiate moves to improve the way student organisations can respond better to student needs.

1.50 Universities have also a responsibility to ensure that they do not pass on to student organisations the responsibility of organising or conducting services which are clearly related to the academic program of the university. While the committee majority does not claim that this practice is common, it was disturbing to note in the submission from the Australian Law Students' Association (ALSA) some evidence which suggests that the law students' bodies in some universities may be doing more than organising law balls and other social activities.

Due to time and financial constraints under which Law Faculties currently operate, Law Student Societies are relied upon to provide practical education experiences through organising and administering mooting, trial advocacy, negotiation and client interview competitions, the running of community legal centres and the provision of tutorials. With a decrease in funding Law Student Societies will no-longer be able to provide this broad range of educational opportunities to students. Universities have made it clear (through the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee) that they are not able to commit any funding to take up the short fall for these essential services. Consequently, VSU will decrease the quality of legal education received by students.<sup>9</sup>

1.51 This was further investigated at the hearing in Perth:

CHAIR (Senator Troeth)—So you do not consider that you are providing free assistance to the law faculty by providing these services?

Mr Lodder—We do consider that we are providing free assistance to the law faculty.<sup>10</sup>

1.52 The committee majority takes a dim view of university faculties failing in their responsibilities to provide all the essential elements of an academic program. If a university is unable to maintain a law faculty on any basis other than full responsibility for its teaching and administration, it has no business offering the course at all.

## **Conclusion**

1.53 As a community we take the view that students have the capacity, and should enjoy the right, to choose their university or any other place of learning, to choose their degree and to choose their subjects. No student is compelled by the state to attend a particular institution or to engage a particular course of study. Students should have the right to determine whether or not they wish to belong to a student guild, union or association. Students should have the right to determine whether to pay a general services fee based on whether they value the services offered.

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9 ALSA, *Submission 53*, para.2.2.3

10 Mr Andrew Lodder, *Committee Hansard*, Perth, Wednesday, 6 July 2005, p25

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1.54 Supporters of compulsory union fees have relied on assumptions that a vibrant campus life is dependent upon compulsory union membership or a compulsory fee. This is reiterated in scores of submissions to the inquiry, but their prevalence does not give the argument much weight. Such claims are based on conjecture about the impact of VSU, and reference to the fall in student union membership in Western Australian universities. No hard evidence has been provided to support such claims, and no evidence of a decline in the vibrancy of campus life or the social activity of students in Western Australia was given. There was no adequate explanation of why curious, bright, and energetic young students gathering at a campus would not maintain a vibrant extracurricular environment of their own accord in the absence of compulsory student union membership or a compulsory fee.

1.55 It needs to be recognised that universities are dynamic institutions, subject to the changes that are made necessary by varied expectations of students. As noted previously, the profile of the student body is changing, and the needs of students are increasingly directed toward maintaining employment responsibilities while they are studying. There are more mature-aged students and more part-time students. The services and amenities they require are more easily provided by niche entrepreneurs responsive to student needs.

1.56 While there will always be a need for student leadership in the organisation of provision of services and amenities, the nature of this leadership will change with the different expectations of university life post-VSU. Student leaders of the future will work for their support and they will earn it. This important challenge for student leaders has been ignored in submissions from student organisations, just as current student leaders have shown scant interest in preparing themselves and their organisations for university life post-VSU. We can expect both the emergence of different student leadership, and the re-invention of those who adapt to change. This was summed up by Mr Michael Josem, a student leader at Monash University:

...the abolition of high, compulsory up-front and unfair amenities fees will force changes. It will force us to work harder to serve students. We'll have to work smarter to deliver services that students choose to fund. No longer will we be able to continue, reliant on a compulsory fee. We'll have to deliver services that students actually want....That's challenging for many people. The status quo is comfortable. The mediocre is easy. The future, of change, progress and excellence, is unknown. We'll have to be excellent - not merely adequate. Unsurprisingly, many people don't like that.<sup>11</sup>

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11 Mr Michael Josem, Monash University Student Union (Caulfield), *Submission 45*, pp.25-26

**Recommendation**

**The committee majority commends this bill to the Senate and urges its passage without amendment.**

**Senator Judith Troeth  
Chair**