

# Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
Legislation Committee

## Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005

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**Submission no:** 7

**Received:** 3/06/2005

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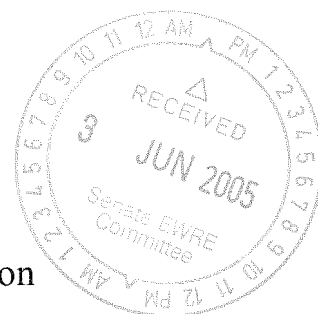
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# Submission

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Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
Legislation Committee



## **Inquiry into the provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005**

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**Submitter:** Jane Davies  
Research/Liaison Officer, UNEPA

**Organisation:** University of New England Postgraduate Association  
(UNEPA)

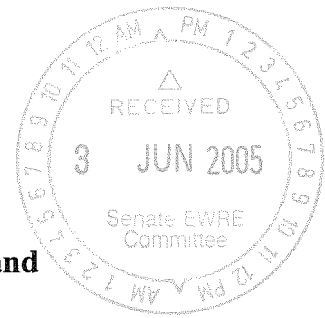
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**To: The Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
Legislation Committee**

**From: Jane Davies, Research/Liaison Officer, University of New England  
Postgraduate Association (UNEPA)**

**Re: Senate Inquiry - Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of  
Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005**

To Whom It May Concern:

As a member of staff working for the UNE Postgraduate Association, I am extremely concerned about the potential currently proposed VSU legislation has to negatively affect the operations of UNEPA and other student organizations at the UNE campus.

In regard to the matters before the committee I urge you to consider the following:

**(1) assessment of the likely effect of the legislation on the provision of student services, and related consequences**

#### **Situation at UNE**

At the University of New England four student organizations support services and amenities for students and staff on a campus which is some 6 km from the city of Armidale. The campus is served by an intermittent bus route, which provides a half hourly service between 8 am and 5.30 pm weekdays with some Friday and Saturday night services. This means that students and staff are quite isolated from services in Armidale city, making the range of commercial and support services offered by student organizations essential to the comfort and well-being of all University members.

#### **UNE Postgraduate Association**

UNEPA was established by a group of postgraduate research students in 1981 when postgraduates had no representative organization to support their needs. By 1992 the University had begun to collect fees from postgraduates and a portion of these funds came to UNEPA and the organization was able to employ a staff member to provide support services to postgraduates. Apart from assisting individual students with academic and other issues related to their candidature, the staff member was able to conduct research to assist with quality assurance, as well as providing secretarial services and coordinating the UNEPA Executive Committee's representative functions.

During the past twelve years UNEPA's influence and prestige as a serious and significant part of the University's profile has grown, along with its services and membership. In 1997 a long-term goal of the association was realized with the

establishment of the Postgraduate Centre. This meant that another full-time staff member could be employed to assist with the coordination of Centre services as well as assisting with UNEPA's administrative functions. The Centre currently has sixty-four users of whom forty-seven are International students and thirteen are External students.

### **Support for International and External Postgraduates**

UNEPA has become a vital area of support for International and External postgraduates. All facilities in the Postgraduate Centre have been designed by postgraduates, and the whole concept of the area continues to be maintained in response to postgraduates' feedback and requests. The Postgraduate Centre provides 24 hour security access to a computer room with study carrels, plus a lounge room with a kitchen and TV. This allows postgraduates who are at a crucial point in their dissertation or thesis to work in the Centre for long uninterrupted periods.

All UNEPA's services have been tailored to meet the needs of our current postgraduate cohort and we are flexible enough to be able to respond very quickly to changes in the postgraduate population. International students have found our services particularly conducive to their needs, and External students are able to book study carrels in the Postgraduate Centre before they arrive on campus.

Although students have to be present on campus to access the physical facilities of the Postgraduate Centre, External postgraduates are able to obtain support and advocacy through our 1300 telephone service. They are also able to download our newsletter and contact their postgraduate representatives through our website. Earlier this year when the University was experiencing problems with new software, I was in individual email contact with more than a thousand of our External members and assisted them in completion of their enrolments and other course requirements.

### **Funding and Employment Issues**

Without a guaranteed funding base, UNEPA cannot employ staff: without its staff, UNEPA would be unable to provide most of the services outlined above. As a member of staff I have been present at many meetings with other student organizations at UNE which have looked at ways of retaining our services should the University no longer be able to collect an amenities fee under VSU. We have discussed the pros and cons of a guild system as a means of attracting student membership. However, looking at the experience of WA guilds during the years of VSU legislation, it is quite clear that a guild structure would be no protection against the loss of revenue. In fact, from a postgraduate perspective, a guild structure is likely to have a deleterious effect on the ability of the postgraduate area to benefit from funds as postgraduates have fewer numbers and are therefore less likely to have voting power to maintain services.

**(2) consideration of the experience of universities and students where legislation has been adopted to regulate student unions, such as in Victoria and Western Australia.**

Having read reports and reviews compiled by CAPA and NUS on the effects of VSU in WA, I am only too aware that I and our other staff member at UNEPA would be unemployed were the current VSU legislation to be enacted. In WA when VSU was first introduced the Federal Labor government provided some assistance (SOS funding) to WA student guilds. However, when the Coalition took over Federal government this funding ceased in 1997 and student guilds were crushed by the effects of VSU.

**Student Organizations Serve the Student Community**

Because student organizations do not function as unions, but rather are the providers of services supporting the well-being of the University community, much as a city council operates, it is essential that ALL students contribute to their upkeep in order to maintain the quality and variety of services available. In the case of WA guilds when VSU caused their membership rates to drop to between 6% and 35%, the guilds halved fees and placed an emphasis on discounts and joining incentives. It is not difficult to see that as a provider of student services, if you halve fees and at best only attract one third of potential members, you cannot hope to provide the range and quality of services originally available. Naturally this is going to be a disincentive to join for future cohorts of students – what will they be getting for their money? They most certainly won't be getting the comprehensive range of non-cost recovery services, publications and advice/support currently offered by UNEPA.

**Probable Effects of VSU on Armidale**

To illustrate the deleterious effects of WA-style VSU, I think it is important to emphasize the plight of Edith Cowan University Guild, which collapsed following the implementation of VSU and had to be directly administered by the university. Surely this can in no way have benefited the university, the student body, or the community. I would hate to see this happen at UNE, but using the example of WA student guilds, this is the most likely scenario should the currently proposed legislation be enacted. UNE student associations employ around one hundred eighty people and the loss of these jobs in the Armidale community would be a major economic blow to the region.

The research carried out on VSU legislation also examined the effects on Victorian universities where a less draconian form allowed universities to collect fees for non-political activities. At least student associations were still able to carry out their core functions and campuses still had the benefits of the services they offered. UNEPA is affiliated with the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) which is also politically non-aligned. We put student needs first and foremost and believe we have more power as an apolitical association to lobby to the advantage of our students. As UNEPA has never been involved in political activities other than to

protest against VSU legislation, or HECS charges, both of which were perceived as detrimental to students' interests, it is unlikely that the association would be seriously affected by the introduction of Victorian style VSU.

### **UNE Postgraduates' Views on VSU Proposals**

At a recent general meeting of UNEPA discussion on VSU revealed a very strong feeling amongst postgraduates against the proposed legislation. The meeting also considered that UNEPA would be unlikely to survive in its current form due to the expectation that numbers of students contributing to the association would not provide a reliable funding base to allow UNEPA's services to be supported. Going by the reports from WA where, from 1997, the effects of VSU were unmitigated, postgraduates at UNE stand to lose most of the services they currently enjoy. Added to this, women's issues, International student support, and External student support will no longer be provided for in the ways preferred by postgraduates, if at all. The legislation has the potential to remove student control of student affairs in areas where they need to be closely involved.

Although postgraduates were reluctant to condone any form of VSU, there was consensus at the general meeting that the Victorian model would allow virtually all of UNEPA's current activities to be supported and ensure that postgraduate participation in University boards and committees remained a meaningful activity. UNEPA's elected representatives rely on the infrastructure provided by the association to ensure that they have access to postgraduate opinion so that their input into discussion on teaching and research issues is well-informed and constructive.

### **Conclusion**

During my years serving postgraduates at UNE I have worked with some of the best brains in the country – brilliant people who have used their intellect and passion to develop and improve the experiences of postgraduates at UNE through the services and opportunities offered by UNEPA. Should VSU in its currently proposed form be legislated, all this would be lost and our campus would be a less vibrant place. I believe that UNE would lose a great deal of its appeal to students, especially those from overseas, and this loss would be felt by the Armidale and New England community both economically and culturally. From UNE's and Armidale's position, there appears to be nothing in the legislation that can benefit the University or the community – in fact, quite the reverse.

**Jane Davies**  
**Research/Liaison Officer**  
**University of New England Postgraduate Association**