

# 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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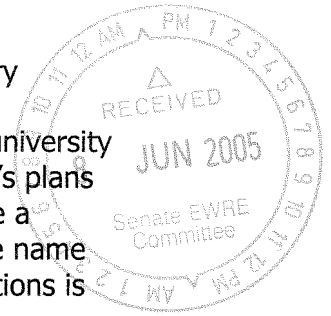
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As someone who has been involved in providing student support in a tertiary environment for twelve years, as someone who has been a student at two universities and is now enrolled at a third and as the parent of a first year university student, I am very disturbed by what I hear about the Federal Government's plans for the abolition of compulsory student 'union' fees which I believe will have a serious detrimental effect on the provision of student support activities. The name 'union' is, I believe, unfortunate - the function of university student associations is very different to that of a traditional labour union.



At the University of New England, where I am currently both chaplain and student, the General Service Fee (GSF) provides:

- Week activities that help new students to find out what sorts of support and social activities are available both on campus and in town - a particularly important function for students from rural areas, living away from home and often overawed by the sheer size of university and feeling desperately homesick.
- advocacy and support for students who are experiencing difficulty with their relationship with the university – something that must be provided by an independent body, and which is particularly important for students who are living at some distance from their families, as are most students from rural areas and some from metropolitan areas
- an off-campus accommodation service which is invaluable for students moving away from home but unable to afford to live on campus, or not wishing to do so for a number of reasons.
- an employment service – in a town where part time employment for people without professional skills is very difficult to find unless you happen to be a 'local' with appropriate contacts in the community, this is a particularly valuable service
- advocacy and support for students who are experiencing problems with their accommodation – both on campus and off campus - again, of particular value to rural students whose families may have little or no experience of rental accommodation
- a dental service where standard procedures are free to students and more expensive ones are heavily subsidised
- a medical centre which is one of only two practices in town that bulk bills patients
- a free tax return completion service
- subsidised child care
- advocacy and support for members of various minority groups within the student body
- access to legal advice for students who have problems that affect their studies
- together with the university's Safety and Security, a free Night Rider transport service for students who are working late at the library and do not have their own transport back to college or into town
- low cost access to gymnasium and sporting facilities which encourages students to maintain fitness
- various food outlets, a hairdresser and a retail shop and post office which provide a 10% discount to all students. Because of the fluctuating numbers on campus during the course of a year, commercial ventures have failed on a

number of occasions and yet the location of the campus in relation to the town means that these things are necessary on campus.

- support for various clubs and societies which enable students to gain valuable experience in organizing activities
- a community radio station which again offers valuable experience to students who are enrolled in media-related degrees, both at the university and at the local TAFE
- employment for 200 people, many of whom are students
- a range of subsidized social activities, such as live band concerts
- regular free lunchtime barbeques. These last two help students, especially those not living on campus, to build social networks which combat loneliness and homesickness. Students who become socially isolated will often abandon their studies and are more likely to attempt suicide, so social activities are significantly more than just a way to fill in time.

While it is true that most students will not use all these services, there is a wide enough range so that they will use some of them. The advocacy and support services for students in crisis will only be used by a small percentage of students, but no-one can forecast whether they might need them and those who do are very grateful that they are available.

Left to their own devices, many students (especially younger ones) would choose not to pay a GSF, not because they do not value the services provided, but because they are unaware of the effect that not paying will have on the services they do value, and because they do not value some of these services until they need them. I do not use many of the services that are paid for by my taxes and rates but I recognize that in order for Australian society and my local community to run smoothly, taxes and rates need to be paid and I have the freedom to vote for whomever I choose to represent me and to lobby government about the way my tax and rate money is spent. In the same way, a university campus community cannot run smoothly without the services provided by student associations and I am free to vote for whomever I choose and to lobby the elected representatives about how my GSF money is spent.

I don't pretend that there aren't problems with the current administration of the GSF. I recognize that these fees do cause financial difficulties for some students, but much of the problem is because of when they fall due and how they must be paid. I also recognize that some students object to having their money used for purposes that they find offensive, but this can be controlled. I recognize that students who study by distance do not have the opportunity to obtain 'value for money' from their GSF, even though most universities charge a lower rate for their external students. This could also be investigated and the University of Melbourne appears to have implemented a very fair schedule of pro-rata amenities fees. I also recognize that student associations do not always administer their services as well as they might but this is an argument for better control over how money is spent and decisions are made, not the total abolition of fees.

I have no problem with the idea that the Federal Government might tighten controls on how GSF is spent and put a (reasonable) ceiling on the amount that can be charged (ideally based on representations from individual universities about the services they provide, rather than an arbitrary figure). I think that it would be helpful if the timing and payment method for GSF were changed so that students

with low incomes were not faced with having to delay buying text books in order to pay their GSF at the beginning of semester. Perhaps there is an argument for looking at different ways of providing some of these services, although suggesting that the university be responsible for providing advocacy for students having problems with the university is nonsensical because of conflict of interest issues, and expecting an institution whose core business is the provision of tertiary education to oversee the provision of most of the other services I have listed seems unreasonable.

Many of the services provided by student associations are, as I have already pointed out, of particular value to students from rural backgrounds and others who have moved away from home to study. These students who are a long way from their usual support networks are often at a loss as to how to deal with the challenges of university life, but unwilling to talk to a member of the academic staff or one of the counselling staff.

In summary, I believe that the introduction of voluntary student 'union' fees would have a significant detrimental effect on the provision of many of the support facilities that are necessary for students to maximise the benefits of their tertiary education.