

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee

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

Submission no: 15

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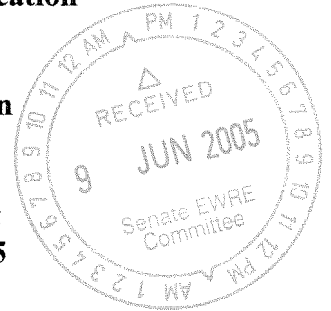
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**To: The Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee**

**From: The 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:

The following submission is from the University of New England Postgraduate Association (UNEPA) concerning the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005. We wish to draw to your attention the ways in which the abolition of compulsory up-front union fees will affect postgraduate students here at UNE.

UNEPA and its Services

UNEPA is a small student association that exists primarily to provide its members with services such as advocacy and welfare support, in addition to other benefits to assist members with their studies. It is perhaps our advocacy and welfare support assistance though that is the most heavily patronised of our services, where postgraduate students are able to come and speak with our staff in the event of any problems they may be experiencing with their studies, such as supervisory or enrolment issues. Often quite informal, our advocacy and welfare assistance gives postgraduate students the opportunity to seek impartial and confidential advice about academic and personal issues that they might be experiencing, without fear of victimisation or judgment. In most cases, our staff members offer guidance and referral towards another appropriate service or person to assist in resolving the problem, and in some cases our experienced staff can also represent students in negotiations or meetings with other bodies. We have 1 full-time staff member who spends a considerable amount of time dealing with such matters.

We also provide access for members to our Postgraduate Centre and our computing facilities, which is beneficial for those students who do not have their own office or computer, or those who are external postgraduate students visiting Armidale for a short period of time. In particular, our external student members find this service useful as the University does not offer a dedicated study space or computer laboratory solely for postgraduate students to use, and this service has proven most helpful for visiting higher degree research students who can book their own study carrel to use whilst they are on campus. The Centre is also equipped with a kitchenette, a television and relaxation / common room area, photocopying and telephone for students to use. Our full time administrative staff member assists with the maintenance of this service.

Representation is also a large role undertaken by UNEPA, and we have committee members on relevant university committees, such as the Council, the Academic Board, and various other research and teaching groups. Whilst this is a voluntary task taken on by student representatives, our staff members spend a portion of their time

assisting these representatives by briefing them on the meeting content and managing meeting minutes in a central location for tracking and reference.

UNEPA offers 4 annual scholarships to members from each of the Faculties (\$1250 per Faculty) to assist members in attending an international conference where they can present their research work. This service provides an opportunity for new researchers to showcase their work on an international platform, and is most beneficial for students who have no access to funding to present their work at overseas conferences.

We also hold regular social functions to and activities celebrate particular events, and we publish a regular newsletter, the Graduate Post, which includes articles and information of general interest to postgraduates here at UNE. These services are offered in response to student interest and are supported by a great deal of student input.

It is important to note that UNEPA does not replicate services provided by the University – we provide these services to students as the University either cannot, or will not, provide them. Further, UNEPA does not involve itself in any commercial activities, nor does it align itself with any political groups. Our prime reason for existence is to support postgraduate students at UNE, and we work closely with the University and other student groups to achieve this goal.

Effects of VSU on UNEPA

UNEPA relies heavily on its staff to provide the infrastructure on which UNEPA operates, including student support services (advice and welfare), administration and maintenance of the Postgraduate Centre, and a reliable day to day communications centre for keeping in contact with our members. As such, a large part of UNEPA's income is devoted to paying staff salaries, and a dependable and regular income source is required to pay our 2 staff members. However, under VSU, without knowing or being able to predict the amount of membership fees being paid by students, we would have no idea of what funds would be available to us. This would jeopardize our ability to retain our staff, and would ultimately destroy the core services we provide to our members – namely, advocacy, welfare, and the operation of the Postgraduate Centre. Further, if we cannot maintain our current staffing levels, and should we be required to pay redundancy monies to our current staff, our short-term future will be grim, as the amounts required to satisfy such payments would deplete our remaining budget and asset reserves. In short, VSU will be crippling to UNEPA, and its ability to provide the services it currently does to postgraduates here at UNE.

UNEPA believes many of the services we provide to postgraduates are essential to their retention and well-being. The continued use of these services by many postgraduates indicates that they too value the services we provide. The University is also supportive of the Association and is aware of the value that UNEPA adds to the University, but, like us, they are conscious of our inability to continue to provide our services under any form of VSU which prevents collection of student funds. We know from the experiences of student organisations in Western Australia following the 1995 Western Australian VSU legislation that, even under a guild structure, it was impossible to collect enough fees to remain viable and provide the welfare, advocacy

and referral services normally offered by student organisations. Student associations in Western Australia under VSU found that percentages of students taking out membership failed to provide an adequate funding base for the provision of standard services - indeed, funding to Western Australian guilds was cut to around 20% on average. This resulted in key services such as academic rights support, cultural events, women's departments, sexual assault referral services, postgraduate student support, and international student campaigns and projects being either lost or reduced dramatically.

Without a guaranteed funding base, the services currently operated by UNEPA simply could not exist. When you employ staff to provide services such as welfare, advocacy and other advisory roles for students with specific needs, you cannot rely upon ad hoc funding from individual students. People do not generally anticipate needing such services and are reluctant to pay for them up front, so under VSU by the time a student needs such services they simply won't be available. Under VSU, we could not employ staff to undertake welfare and advocacy roles, and the Postgraduate Centre would be lost as we would not have the resources to manage it. We believe that under VSU, our core services would be lost, and the only role we would be able to maintain would be a representative one, with committee members only being able to exert a student voice on University committees. However, without staff to support such representatives, the quality of our representation would diminish.

Further, being a rural campus, the effects of VSU will be amplified – many jobs will be lost in our town (student organisations currently employ approximately 180 people at UNE), and our ability to attract and retain students based on fewer services and a reduced educational experience will be minimal. VSU will be a crushing blow not just to UNEPA, but also to UNE and to our small regional community of Armidale.

We would ask that you give careful consideration to the potential effect VSU will have on UNEPA, UNE and Armidale in your deliberations over the proposed legislation.

Amanda Williamson
President

The University of New England Postgraduate Association (UNEPA)