

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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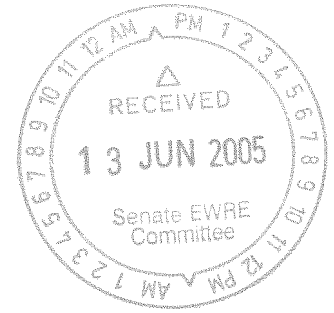
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Federal Senate Inquiry - VSU and the 'Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-Front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005' legislation.

As a staff person with 18 years in the industry, I would like put forward a perspective on just one aspect of the damage VSU will do to student associations - that of student advocacy and support.

Rivcoll, the student association at CSU- Wagga campus, has three staff members that deal with student advocacy. I am the longest serving case worker at Rivcoll, though I also have other roles, and this information is based on my experiences.

Increasingly at CSU, students associations are being held accountable by students through comments on the Student Association Forum, open to all CSU students and hosted on the CSU website. Other input comes via our toll free phone and fax facilities but these do not have the impact of the public forums, which cater to the masses and generate interest groups that highten the levels of input and demands.

I have recently resonded to a request for information on...

- 1. The actual number of students assisted in each quarter (or better month)*
- 2. What sort of assistance was received*
- 3. What type of student was assisted – DE (Distance Education), internal, full time, part time*
- 4. What resources were allocated to this students case”*

The figures for my position are about 40 - 60 students per quarter. This, however, does not take into account the students assisted by other staff at Rivcoll, nor those who take on this role at the other CSU student associations. Speaking generally on numbers, a weekly average might be ten requests and in the mayhem periods, I might have 20 or more cases on the go at the same time. I don't believe that I would have had any less than four or five open cases (often more) for long as I can remember, including over the end of year break. The timings overlap and there is no shut down period when dealing with student problems.

Statistics, however, do little to provide a true understanding of levels of service, so the following qualitative information is drawn from my casework.

Student contact comes in cycles. Inquiries are infrequent at the beginning of a Semester or Trimester and they usually relate to coping with workload, withdrawal from subjects, challenging decisions on credit for past study and the like. This quiet start contrasts with the lead up period to exams where stress levels are high and

people who thought (or hoped) things would be under control find that all of a sudden they are not. This brings in the advice on seeking special consideration, applying for Grade Pendings or other coping mechanisms, perhaps even sacrificing one subject to ensure success in others. Of course, once grades go out, case work peaks. People want to challenge grades, particularly if they have led to recommendations of Exclusion (quite a common occurrence in the past). In between times there are always students who suffer from accidents, ill health, family tragedies or other misadventures and, increasingly, allegations of plagiarism and academic misconduct. Often these cases are complex.

Fortunately, many requests only take a ten minute phone discussion. Follow up, however, can lead to students forwarding drafts of their appeals for comment and subsequent hours of proofing, amendment (or complete rewrites) and feedback to the student. At the extreme end of the scale, several cases would have exceeded 50 staff hours.

The type of assistance offered depends on the nature of the problem. The routine tasks; clarification of regulations, information on student rights and the best way to approach matters are not too time consuming but this is not so with the tough cases. Remote students generally cannot access files so, with the student's authority, I research files to provide a summary of information held by the University on the student's situation. If I am required to represent a student at an appeal panel without the student's presence, considerable additional time is involved in researching the background. For students who do attend panel interviews themselves, being a support person to the student might add eight hours travel to get to and from another campus, or a major city. In a recent academic misconduct case, the meeting alone took over an hour and a half. This case is still ongoing after five months.

The most drawn out case I had involvement with was one involving a Dean as a direct supervisor of a student. It dragged on for more than two years. Other memorable and time consuming cases involved repeated contact with ombudsmen, analysing hundreds of pages of almost illegible hand written statements to assist a prison inmate (student) on hunger strike over education rights, providing case summaries to solicitors or arguing with the University. Fortunately the incidence of these cases is very low but as a percentage of workload, they are quite high. They are often made tougher by abuse directed towards the student association and its employees, which usually stems from student frustration. Nevertheless, students are given the best practical assistance we can offer, which has included independent advice from barristers.

My position offers assistance to both DE (Distance Education) and internal students, but the higher percentage are DE – estimated at 60% DE - 40% internal. I never ask whether or not students are full time or part time, nor where they come from, nor if they have paid their fees (some times they have not). As the largest of the student associations at CSU, Rivcoll's philosophy is one that supports the smaller student associations as well as any student from CSU. This extends beyond mainstream campuses to CSU students studying through outside agencies (such as SGA in Sydney), or from overseas. Rivcoll's assistance goes to members and non-members alike.

While not all cases lead to success stories, many do and we certainly know of problems that we have turned around, whereas the student's independent attempts have failed. The experience within Student Associations and the level of support offered is a fundamental corner stone that will be lost, should VSU be introduced.

The postings on our Student Association Forum reflects the attitude of students. Many do not believe they will be affected by academic misadventure, never visit a campus and should not pay fees. Our experiences show, however, that even astute Postgraduate students still get tripped up by regulations or face difficulties through personality clashes and misunderstandings. Commencing undergraduates are infinitely more at risk and advocacy would be unaffordable on a user pays basis.

Recent proposals, ie permitting Universities to collect a fee for different types of services, would overcome some of the drawbacks of VSU for sporting and cultural activities but the student advocacy would incur conflicts of interest. Advocacy requires direct challenges to the University and its staff. It is hard to imagine how mechanisms could be put in place to protect employees from pressure from more senior University members. It is even more fanciful to suggest that universities would engage barristers on behalf of students to challenge the legality of its own decisions. Advocacy may be taken on by the University, but students will still lose out.

On a personal note, as a 55 year old employee likely to lose my position, any further comment must reflect bias. My knowledge of the University and its systems suggests that I could gain employment within CSU but this knowledge is countered by the past crossing of swords with academic and administrative staff through my advocacy role. I face an uncertain employment future, though I had anticipated a further ten years in the workforce. Another concern is the likely loss of entitlements earned over my 17 years since, by the time the VSU is debated and introduced, Rivcoll's annual funds will have been consumed. There are no cash reserves and Rivcoll's own constitutional clauses will make it defunct without universal membership, leaving no entity to pursue to reclaim entitlements.

Universal membership of student associations is the fairest system but if VSU is to be introduced, universities should be able to charge a fee for specific services. To ensure independence of the advocacy role, however, there needs to be an independent line of funding and control. Perhaps this could be funded directly by the government in the form of a campus ombudsperson.

Thank you for considering this information and I trust that the whole matter of VSU will be dealt with expeditiously so that Student Associations, their staff and even universities have the required lead time necessary to adapt to the change and ensure the impact on students is minimised.

Regards

Bruce Boyton.