

The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Regional Universities

Objective

The purpose of this brief is to highlight concerns about the impact of the proposed introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism on regional and otherwise geographically isolated universities, and specifically its impact on The University of New England (UNE).

Regional Universities face specific socio economic disadvantage because of isolation and lack of sufficient population density to maintain the following services on a purely commercial basis without further subsidy.

1. Medical
2. Dental
3. Childcare
4. Security Bus
5. Sports Facilities

Executive Summary

Regional universities will be harder hit by VSU than metropolitan campuses, due to their location in regional and rural Australia where alternative services and facilities for those most at risk of closure under VSU, are just not available or are not commercially viable options.

1. The introduction of VSU will significantly undermine the number, quality and viability of services provided to UNE students. In practical terms commercial providers will not replace student organisation subsidised services because the size of the market makes them unprofitable. Many services will therefore simply disappear and disadvantage our students.
2. The introduction of VSU will impact adversely on UNE's capacity to provide casual work for students, and undermine its contribution to the local economy as a major employer of local people and service provider.
3. The introduction of VSU will adversely impact on the longer term market positioning of UNE.

UNE Background

UNE is a regional university offering a five star student experience¹, located 6km outside the Armidale town centre with limited access to public transport (hourly during semester, with no night service) and local services. Armidale itself is a small community with a population of 22,000. Nationally, UNE has one of the largest percentages of students from rural, isolated lower socio-economic backgrounds, with on-campus students representing a significant proportion of those from regional Australia.

Operationally, UNE combines a large distance education student population with the largest on campus residential student environment in Australia. The university's physical separation from the local town and any metropolitan centres and lack of practical access to alternative providers engenders much greater reliance on campus infrastructure and service delivery.

The unique nature of the UNE student experience for both the distance education student and the residential student is strongly supported by the non educational facilities and services that UNE has to offer. Distance education students use the campus for residential schools when on –campus students are away on vacation. As a result, both the University and these facilities have an exceptionally high percentage of utilisation throughout the year.

The combination of infrastructure that is educationally oriented and infrastructure that supports student life works well. It is in the national interests that regional universities like UNE continue to be attractive, viable tertiary education providers, in order to produce the skilled workforce necessary for regional development, particularly in light of serious skills shortages in rural and regional Australia.

Our unique student experience not only helps to retain regional students as regionally employed graduates but also converts a proportion of students from cities to become employed in regional areas, significantly contributing to regional development. UNE's 67 year investment in regional education should be protected.

Regardless of their mode of attendance at university (whether by distance, on-line or on-campus) all students benefit from access to a range or subset of differing services throughout their studies.

¹ *The Universities Good Guide 2000 - 2005*

1. Issues for Consideration

1. The introduction of voluntary student unionism will impact adversely on the ability of regional universities to provide essential services to students. *Those services most at risk of closure are listed in the appendix.*

The introduction of VSU will significantly undermine the number, quality and viability of services provided to students. In practical terms commercial providers will not replace student organisation subsidised services because the size of the market makes them unprofitable. Many services will therefore simply disappear disadvantaging students. For example many medical providers in Armidale are currently not taking in new patients

- Regional universities provide a range of services that provide far more than catering options. They range from dental and other student welfare support services to a second hand bookshop and child care facilities.
- These services are uniquely tailored to the different needs of the student population. For example, UNE's childcare facilities are available for distance education students visiting briefly for a residential school. This is made possible because we have flexibility as the owner and operator of the facility.
- The normal assumptions behind the provision of alternative and competing suppliers of services break down in the face of a 6km physical separation from the CBD and a once-hourly bus service. A student cannot exercise choice in the space of a short lunch break and if time is not an issue the bus fares would negate any price differential theoretically available in town.
- The UNE student population, especially since most students are well away from their home base support, has specialised needs that are best provided for by specialist providers. Whilst alternative service providers may be readily available in metropolitan areas this does not translate to rural and regional universities, as the breadth and depth of essential student services cannot be reproduced in a rural and regional community.
- Many student support, welfare and academic representation based services would not be viable under a "user pays" model or readily replaced by universities. For instance, the UNE second hand bookshop, security bus, dental and other welfare and support services would most likely have to close. Such services are run solely for the benefit of the students, studying on campus 6 km from the town centre.
- A number of services have already proven unviable to operate commercially, with two banks closing down their campus operations, the Commonwealth in 1998 and the National Australia Bank in 2001. The on-campus travel agent franchise and real estate business shop front recently closed down, and in 2003 the student organisation took over the post office (now an agency in the student organisation shop) and the hair dressing salon in order to ensure these services would still be available on campus.

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- With the introduction of VSU, UNE will be forced into a situation of having to divert funding from teaching and learning activities in order to maintain our market position through the provision of essential services on campus. Such diversion of funding would not be achievable without serious impact on the quality of teaching and learning.
- These services enhance the attractiveness of campus life. The loss of these services would impact significantly on the quality of campus life in regional Australia where many of these services are simply not available outside the campus.

2. The introduction of VSU will impact adversely on UNE's capacity to provide casual work for students, and undermine its contribution to the local economy as a major employer of local people and service provider.

- UNE's student organisations are a major employer in our community providing employment each year for 60 full time staff and up to 175 casual staff.
- For UNE employment contributes \$4 million dollars to the local economy in salaries and wages alone.
- \$1 million (25%) of this is for UNE student employment opportunities (where up to 160 casual jobs are specifically earmarked for UNE students).
- Without the support of UNE's student organisations there would be significantly decreased opportunities for UNE students to gain casual employment in Armidale.
- Retrenchments would be inevitable as the revenue base derived from these fees would contract significantly.
- The University itself is the single largest supplier of services and infrastructure to the local economy.
- These services also provide facilities to Armidale residents that are essential to attracting economic growth in this regional community.

3. The introduction of VSU will adversely impact on the longer term market positioning of UNE

- The Higher Education sector is increasingly competitive with domestic and international demand softening. UNE's recruitment hinges significantly on the "UNE package" of both academic offerings and health, welfare and support services and cultural opportunities, which attract students to study in a regional location where otherwise study at a metropolitan location would be more attractive.

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- This is evidenced by UNE's graduate satisfaction rating of five stars for six consecutive years². This rating has enabled UNE to compete successfully against better resourced metropolitan universities.
- The erosion of on-campus services and the resultant inability to offer a holistic "UNE experience" inevitably will materially impact on UNE's ability to attract students to study on-campus. This is also true of international student recruitment, where the availability of cultural opportunities, health and welfare support, and sport, health and fitness facilities are important items in the decision-making of such students.
- For many students the lack of local employment options can be a deciding factor in selecting a university, again disadvantaging regional universities such as UNE against metropolitan universities, where casual work is more readily available in metropolitan centres.
- The erosion of services on-campus will also impact on UNE's ability to attract quality staff, in competition against metropolitan universities, which will over time affect our academic standing.

² *The Universities Good Guide 2000 - 2005*

Appendix

Essential Services at Risk of Closure under VSU

Health, Welfare and Support

- The provision of health services in regional and rural communities is already under resourced. The removal or contraction of student services will place a significant burden on these already “stretched” services and volunteer organisations within our community. The necessary diversion of university funds to essential welfare and support services currently provided by student organisations would threaten additional university support services such as medical, childcare and counseling currently provided by the University.
- It is recognised that one group more vulnerable to health and welfare issues is the youth demographic which principally makes up our on campus student base. This group is significantly more vulnerable to issues such as youth suicide, with youth suicide demonstrably higher in rural areas.

Sporting Facilities and Services

- Sport is recognised by the Government as essential to the building of “active, healthy Australian communities” as demonstrated by its election platform of “Building Australian Communities through Sport”³ which recognised “...that the capacity of local communities to participate in sport is determined, in large part, by access to facilities and equipment.”
- The essential contribution of universities to Australia’s success in the international sports arena has also been recognised through the development of the “Elite Athlete University Network”. In October 2004 the Federal Government through its agency, the Australian Sports Commission, requested and received the commitment of Australia’s universities to this network⁴
- In 2004, 1388 athletes received over \$2.6 million in sports scholarships from Australian universities⁵. Sport UNE directly contributes \$15,000 to UNE sports scholarships with an additional \$15,000 raised through sporting sponsorships. This directly assists between 20 to 25 students annually.
- Sport, health and fitness in all other sectors of Australian society are substantially subsidised through taxes levied by government. In 2000 – 2001 the three levels of government provided a total of approximately \$2.2 billion in funding for sports and physical recreation; 60.8% was to fund venues, grounds and facilities⁶. University sporting facilities or programs are essentially excluded from this funding⁷.
- UNE’s sports services are not commercially viable overall as commercial rates will be beyond the level which students can afford to pay and will not support ongoing maintenance and refurbishment.
- UNE's sports facilities and services are important to both our student base and our community (both individual users and community sporting groups). Distance students through access arrangements with other universities are also able to access equivalent facilities.

³ Liberal Party of Australia website Election Policy – Building Australian Communities Through Sport, page 4

⁴ 2005 Report – The Real Facts on Sport and the VSU Legislation, Sydney University Sport

⁵ 2005 Report – The Real Facts on Sport and the VSU Legislation, Sydney University Sport

⁶ A.B.S – Sport and Recreation: A Statistical Overview, Australian 2003

⁷ 2005 Report – The Real Facts on Sport and the VSU Legislation, Sydney University Sport

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