

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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12 May, 2005

Dear Bruce

I write on behalf of the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association (Australia) Inc (TCMA), the professional body representing tertiary chaplains throughout Australia. We have significant concerns about the proposed Higher Education Support Amendment [Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees] Bill 2005 due to come before Federal Parliament soon.

There are some national concerns that we share, were this legislation to come into force. The experience, for instance, of Western Australian universities under that state's VSU legislation in the late 1990s and early part of this decade provides evidence of serious and ongoing diminishment of student support services and student life under 'voluntary student unionism'.

Student organisations are just that - organisations - which have a vital part to play in the life and well being of our campuses. The function of university student organisations is very different to that of any traditional labour union.

Some of the important facilities provided by student organisations include:

- Orientation activities that enable new students to find out about support services and diverse activities available to them. These are particularly important functions for students from rural areas, those living away from home and international students, many of whom can be overwhelmed by the sheer size of a university campus.
- advocacy and support for students experiencing difficulties with university systems or with their studies. This kind of service must be provided by a body independent of the university.
- assistance with locating affordable and reliable off-campus accommodation
- subsidised child care
- advocacy and support for members of various minority groups within the student body
- low cost access to gymnasium and sporting facilities
- subsidised food outlets and similar services.
- Bulk-billed medical services – particularly in regional cities where it is difficult to access general practitioners in the community
- support for various clubs and societies which enable students to gain mutual support, social interaction and valuable experience in organizing activities

- employment services, including direct employment for students and advisory services on locating suitable employment in the wider community.
- subsidized social activities, which in some instances may be of benefit to the local community.

All students are part of the community which is supported by the range of services that student bodies provide. The crisis and emergency services, for instance, are utilized by many students who could not possibly afford to pay a fee for such services at the time they require them. No one can forecast whether they might need them and those who do are very grateful that they are available. Services provided by student associations are also of particular value to students from rural and remote backgrounds, to international students and to those who are isolated from their usual support networks and may be at a loss as to how to deal with the challenges of university life.

We are aware that there are some issues with the current system of student service fees, including utilizing funds for political purposes, and the timing of payment. However the potential harm from this legislation far outweighs any legitimate concerns some might have. Our view is that whatever conclusion is reached, the range of services provided by student bodies must be retained through reliable and ongoing funding mechanisms. There must be no expectation that universities will simply absorb the costs of these services within their current budgets.

As university chaplains, we trust that you will work to ensure that the legislation, at least in its current form, does not pass through Parliament. We believe that the proposed legislation should retain some form of service fee which enables reliable funding mechanisms for student provided services on campus by an independent body. Such services should be accessible to all students and should not be limited just to those who have paid a voluntary fee or to those who can afford a fee at the time of service delivery.

Yours sincerely,

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Approved by Executive meeting 14 July 2005.