

# 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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**University of New England (UNE) Combined Student Organisation's (CSO) submission to the Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee inquiry into the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005 (VSU).**

For many years student organisations at UNE in Armidale have provided essential services and facilities for students, the university and the wider regional community. We believe the VSU legislation in its current form will seriously undermine or destroy our ability to continue these essential services.

As a result, students and staff at UNE and the wider regional community will be disadvantaged by:

- reduction or loss of affordable dental service, hairdresser, online shopping facility, printing and photocopying service, external residential student accommodation, second hand bookshop, sports equipment hire/loan service;
- reduced sporting, cultural and social facilities;
- reduced sponsorship, accreditation and participation opportunities;
- loss of welfare, legal, taxation, accommodation, employment;
- loss of independent advocacy and representational support services;
- loss of external students help line(1800 number) and support;
- loss of the oldest student staffed radio station in Australia (Tune FM), which provides a vocational learning experience in all facets of radio production;
- reduced choice and increased pricing for on campus food, stationary and course material, where the closest services are 6km away;
- reduced students safety through loss of subsidised or free late night bus service, 'nitride' and 'walker reviver' sponsorship;
- loss of student leadership opportunities, training and sponsorship;
- loss of student academic and sporting scholarships;
- loss of free sport accident insurance;
- significantly reduced student and regional employment opportunities; and
- a loss of capital improvement or maintenance funding for sporting, catering and recreational buildings on and off campus.

Overall this will result in a less attractive University experience for current and future students and staff; a reduction in the marketability of UNE to prospective students; and a loss of sporting and recreational facilities utilised by students and the regional community.

In 1995, when VSU was implemented in Western Australia, only 5%-30% of students voluntarily paid their fees. As a result there were massive cuts to student services and facilities, despite Federal Government funding in the early years. Regional universities such as UNE will be more seriously disadvantaged under this legislation due to the relatively small number of students (particularly internal students), and the need to retain staff capability for twelve months despite students only being on campus for eight months each year.

Like most rural communities we know the reality of young people attending metropolitan universities and never returning to rural and regional centers. UNE and other regional universities are an essential link in keeping well qualified future generations in regional Australia, with over 62% of UNE's 2004 Australian graduates finding work in regional areas.

Nationally UNE has one of the largest percentages of students from rural, isolated or lower socio-economic backgrounds. UNE's student organisations employ qualified staff, independent of the university, to assist students with welfare, advocacy and academic mediation needs, ensuring that UNE is accessible to students from less privileged backgrounds who are well supported at our regional university by the wide range of student services available to them at subsidised and affordable rates. In addition Armidale has a large contingent of international students who are high users of the services provided by student associations. A guaranteed source of income is required to fund these independent and essential services for students.

For many years, the student organisations at UNE have used the compulsory General Service Fee levied by the University to develop and maintain facilities such as sports fields, gymnasium, indoor pool and practice areas (essential given the winter weather in Armidale), the retail shopping arcade, Belgrave Twin Cinema, and the recent renovations of Booloominbah Brasserie and the UNE Union Bistro and Cafeteria kitchens. As in many regional areas, the costs associated with such capital works and maintenance are prohibitive, with millions of dollars spent on such facilities, money which will in future need to be provided by the University unless the current legislation is amended.

Student organisations provide significant funds each year (in excess of \$200,000) for cultural activities such as on campus clubs and societies, the international food and culture week, international film festival, Shakespeare film festival, plus the subsidising of Sydney and Brisbane touring bands such as Eskimo Joe or the Whitlam's at affordable student prices. The provision of these non commercial services is an essential component of attracting students and bridging the cultural imbalance between city and regional students. Sport UNE subsidises the facility usage to encourage students to undertake regular physical activities (up to \$110,000 pa) and supports 25 affiliated sports clubs (\$80,000 pa); providing students with an opportunity to obtain a healthy balance in their lives whilst undertaking studies.

UNE Union provides a range of catering and retail services on campus, with subsidies amounting to around \$250,000pa ensuring affordable pricing for students. While these services are provided year round, in many instances they are only commercially viable for around eight months. Closing these services during non student periods will leave University staff and the small number of external or PHD students on campus with no food or retail services, some 6km from Armidale; and result in the loss of staff with critical skills. These food and retail services also contribute significantly to the local economy through the local sourcing or transport of product. Sport UNE provides extended opening hours throughout the year (up to 16.5 hr per day) in order to be accessible for all student needs throughout the year. Such trading hours would be unviable without the support of the UNE General Service Fee, particularly the 7 day a week access provided for external students during residential school periods.

In addition to the above services and facilities, the student organisations at UNE provide employment each year for 60 fulltime staff and 175 casual staff, contributing \$4 million to the local economy in salaries and wages. Almost \$1 million of this is paid to students, in an area where only around 25% of students registering for casual work actually obtain it; yet another example of how regional university students are disadvantaged against their metropolitan counterparts. The loss of such casual employment opportunities for students will again make UNE less attractive to prospective students and directly impact on the local economy.

It is worth noting that in contrast to the many non political uses made of the \$2.8m GSF paid annually by students at UNE; less than \$100,000 or 3.5% is spent on what might be broadly termed political purposes, such as grants to politically based clubs and societies (Liberal Students Club, Greens Club, etc.); NUS affiliation; publication of student newspaper; etc.

In a recent student survey of UNE students (responded to by almost 20% of internal students); less than 2.5% support the current legislation and over 82% are very concerned that the legislation in its current form will lead to a loss of services and an increase in prices for those that remain.

At UNE we have a real and vibrant community, supported by well managed student organisations, which for many years have provided exceptional services and facilities for UNE students, the university and the wider community; helping UNE compete against the larger and better resourced metropolitan universities. Collectively, the services made available for students by the CSO's have helped the university achieve a 5 star graduate satisfaction rating over recent years. In order for UNE to remain competitive and to both attract and retain students, it is critical that essential, non academic, student services and facilities be maintained.

We acknowledge that the Federal Government is keen to enact VSU legislation that will:

- Promote the ideal of freedom of association;
- Give students a choice as to which organisation they join as members; and
- End the potential for compulsorily-levied fees to be directed to political actions that may not accord with a student's own political views.

However, we request that in the interests of regional universities and their respective communities, the current legislation be amended so that a student services or amenities fee may be charged by the University to enable the continuation of essential, non political, services and facilities; such as those related to student welfare or support services, culture, sport and fitness, health or art.