



Dear Senate Committee Members

I am a mature age female student with a one and a half year old child and I am also a student with a permanent hearing impairment. I currently study at Swinburne University of Technology (SUT). I am both a University and TAFE student.

I write to express my deep objection to the Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005 and to share with the Senate my experiences with student organisations such as the Swinburne Student Union (SSU) of which I am a proud member.

The current proposed legislation will in my view have a detrimental effect on students and the provision of services and political representation.

Please note that at SUT it is not compulsory to become a member of the SSU however the University collects a compulsory non-academic fee for the provision of services and representation. It is clear from the Swinburne experience that everybody benefits from the services and political representation provided by the democratically elected student union Council, and as such I wholeheartedly support the payment of compulsory fees by all students.

Student with Disabilities

Support for students with disabilities within Swinburne University of Technology would decline as a result of this legislation being passed. The Swinburne Student Union has a strong focus on providing support services for students with disabilities for example ensuring that all campus activities are able to be accessed by students with disabilities (making life less isolated for new and on-going students), a student with disabilities friendly orientation period and building a network of support through the SSU's mentor schemes. They have also developed an organisational Disability Action Plan which goes a long way in ensuring students with disabilities get the full University experience. This can often make the difference between students 'dropping out' or successfully completing their course. It is extremely important that future students with disabilities have access to these services as otherwise I fear that the already low rates of participation

Just as important however is the SSU's strong focus on student representation and advocacy (Student Rights Department) for students with disabilities. This is what some may consider the political side of the SSU. It was through the lobbying of the SSU that SUT updated and reviewed its seriously lacking Disability Action Plan. The review was undertaken via a SUT Committee and two representatives from the SSU were formal members of the committee. One member was a student with a disability (student representative elected by students at the annual elections) and the other was the SSU's Student Rights Manager. The revised DAP was a real win for students with disabilities and has seen SUT make a number of positive changes to its approach in respects to students with disabilities. This would not have occurred without the existence of a strong and committed student organisation. Further the recommendations made by the two SSU members of the committee has meant that SUT is required through policy ratified by SUT University Council to consider the needs and requirements of students with disabilities in all departments of SUT.

Support for Parents

It is becoming increasingly difficult to juggle parenting, study and work commitments in our communities particularly for those with limited access to financial resources. The SSU has parent friendly spaces and assists students on a range of issues such as obtaining affordable, safe and reliable childcare, negotiating extensions for assignments with teachers when children get sick and basically ensuring that students with children are given a fair go in the Universities study environment. In addition to this the women's meetings on campus can often be a life line particularly for single parenting women and offer a safe place to make friends and talk about life in general. All of these excellent initiatives assist in breaking down the barriers to study for people with children and in particular for single parents.

Financial support in terms of interest free and student friendly student loans, free food on campus, the free soup kitchen and free breakfasts are also of benefit as the financial support provided through Government agencies such as Centrelink simply do not adequately cover living costs and study costs.

The student union goes a long way in making life that little bit easier whilst one is undertaking a course of study. Without such support I fear that a significant amount of parents would simply drop out or never consider studying in the first place.

Political Representation

Each year the SSU runs democratic elections and through this process students are given an opportunity to decide how their non-academic fees are spent and the type of representation that they will receive. Whilst services are important the ability of student organisations to politically organise is in my mind equally important. I see student organisations in the same light as local councils and other levels of government. Through the democratic process students give elected representatives a mandate to speak on a range of political issues. Whilst the Government of the day may not always like what student organisations are saying in respects to Government policy, it is important and essential that students are able to voice their opinions. In the framework of a University students should be encouraged to discuss, debate and politically organise around issues that affect them and this includes but is not limited to areas such as mandatory detention of refugees, abortion, education policy, war, womens rights and indigenous rights just to name a few.

Further student representatives sit on a range of board and committees and provide an invaluable contribution towards the formulation of education policy within SUT. Their participation enhances the learning environment and improves the quality of education. Student representatives also assist in keeping the SUT administration accountable to the study body and ensure that the rights of students are maintained.

It is abhorrent to me that the Government is attempting to silence student organisations. Clearly it is an attack on students and a cowardly attempt to stifle dissent in the community.

I ask that the Senate reject this outrageous piece of legislation as it would not be in the interests of students, the wider community or in the interests of Australian Universities.