

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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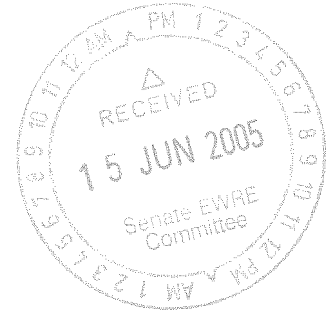
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15 June 2005

Mr John Carter
Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee
Suite SG.52
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Mr Carter,

**Higher Education Support Amendment
(Abolition of Compulsory Student Union Fees) Bill 2005**

Thank you for extending an initiation to Victoria University to make a submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee in relation to the provisions of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Student Union Fees) Bill 2005*.

The University's submission is attached.

If the Committee requires any further information I would be happy to oblige in any way possible.

The University would welcome any opportunity to speak further to its submission at the Committee's public hearings.

Any requests for clarification, or additional information, can be directed to the University's Director, Student Services, Mr Stephen Weller on 03-9919-5460 or stephen.weller@vu.edu.au

Yours sincerely,

Professor Elizabeth Harman
Vice-Chancellor and President
Victoria University

Overview of Victoria University

Victoria University is one of five dual-sector universities offering both Higher Education and Technical and Further Education courses. Over 50,000 students and 3,000 staff make up the greatest diverse international cultural mix of any Australian university. The University also has some 10,000 international students currently studying onshore and offshore.

With 12 campuses and sites strategically placed both in Melbourne's central business district and throughout Melbourne's western region, the University is well positioned to meet the needs of students, industry and the community.

The University carries out world-class research in a wide range of disciplines and cross-disciplinary areas and has strong links with industry, business and the local community. Alliances have been forged with key industry players to give students direct access to cutting-edge research.

The University has a vast array of courses and more importantly, a strong degree of student satisfaction, as measured by the Good Universities Guide own rating system. Victoria University graduates have awarded the maximum five stars for their educational experience. And Victoria University students won the Victorian Training Awards 'Vocational Student of the Year' two years in a row. The University was a pioneer in developing 'Pathways', which enable students to move within and between our TAFE and Higher Education sectors.

The University's mission to develop the capacities of industry and communities within the western Melbourne region was supported by 55.5% of 2004 onshore enrolments being western metropolitan residents. In 2004, 9.1% of students enrolled and undertook programs in industry, consistent with the University's strategy to 'build relationships that maximise the skills and abilities available to industry and the professions, and enhance student opportunities for career development'.

Key highlights of the University in 2004 include:

- 52% of students were male and 48% female;
- 57% of students were enrolled in TAFE, and 43% in higher education;
- There was a 3.5% increase in the proportion of full-time students to part-time students (in 2003 32.5% of students were full time and 67.5% part time and in 2004 36.0% were full time and 64.0% part time);
- 10.3% of all University enrolments were at postgraduate level; and
- 2.5% of enrolments were students with a disability.

Victoria University is proud to have one of the most diverse student populations of any university in Australia. The cultural and linguistic diversity is apparent in 34.1% of 2004 students indicating a non-English-speaking background – steadily increasing from 25.8% in 2001. Of all 2004 students, 18.2% indicated their home residence was overseas.

Proposed Legislation

On Wednesday March 16, 2005, the Federal Government introduced the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Student Union Fees) Bill 2005* (the Bill) into the Parliament.

The Bill would prohibit the University from collecting the General Service Fee (GSF) from 2006. Accordingly, the University's capacity to fund a wide range of important student services, currently dependent upon GSF revenue, would be severely restricted.

A key feature of the Bill seeks to make membership of student organisations voluntary. It is important to appreciate that membership of the student union, and related student organisations, at Victoria University is already voluntary and has been since 1995 when the 'Victorian model' of voluntary student unionism was introduced.

Implications

The Bill would preclude the University from collecting compulsory fees from students in relation to "an amenity, facility or service that is not of an academic nature." The University currently funds a diverse range of such services from the GSF.

In 2005 GSF revenue is expected to be approximately \$5.5 million. Over 40 FTE staff positions are funded from GSF revenue. These staff are all employees of the University and not employees of the student union or any student association.

The University's capacity to charge a compulsory fee in relation to these services will be limited to the extent that they can be considered of an academic nature. The *Higher Education Support Act (Cth) 2003* (HESA) does not define the terms academic or non-academic and it is unclear on what basis determinations of this nature are to be made.

There will be no implications of the bill on membership by Victoria University students of the student union as membership is already voluntary with no students compulsorily required to join or belong to the student union or any related student association.

General Service Fee

Sport and Recreation

The University provides a range of Sport and Recreation programs and facilities for students on all campuses of the University. Programs include; representative sport regionally, nationally and internationally, adventure trips, sporting clubs, campus entertainment, Orientation programs (including a Student Host Scheme), volunteer and student development programs, activities and societies (non-sporting clubs), special events including the Art Prize, Band and DJ competitions, cross campus sport, Sport Awards and event support for formal and informal student and staff groups and programs

The GSF supports the operation of three Sport and Fitness Centres at the St Albans, Werribee (including casual bookings for the athletics track) and Sunbury as well as the Recreation Centre at the Footscray Nicholson campuses, and the Victoria University Aquatic and Fitness Centre at the Footscray Park campus. The GSF is also used to fund the development and maintenance of sporting and fitness facilities, student meeting rooms and lounges and indoor and outdoor passive recreation spaces through the establishment of a Student Campus Building Fund.

The University also provides a range of information and promotional material including the Student Diary, Orientation information, general publications, posters and brochures, interactive website, In-house TV and merchandise.

Advocacy and Representation

The University uses the GSF to provide an advocacy and advisory service to students in relation to University procedures such as Discipline, Unsatisfactory Progress, Student Grievance and other internal policies. Staff assist students in relation to external bodies where this may affect the student's enrolment and contribute to the review and development of University policy in areas that have directly affected students.

The University's GSF expenditure also provides support for students through the management of Resource Centres and Student Lounges. Laminating and binding, passport photos and newspapers and magazines for casual reading are available for students. Maintenance of an information dissemination service of posters and notices regarding Student Services activities on every campus is a vital role of Student Representation.

Health Services

The University Health Service is funded by the GSF and provides drug awareness education via group sessions, consultation and student driven projects that promote access to information, advice on all manner of health issues, talks to groups of students as requested and other health promotion activities. The service also provides student access to medical consultations with a general medical practitioner that are 'bulk billed'.

Childcare and Alumni

A portion of the annual GSF revenue supports the operation of the University's four Child Care Centres through the provision of subsidised daily fees (15% reduction) to students with children within the centres. Similarly, a portion of GSF revenue is used to provide one-year free membership of graduating students of the University Alumni Association.

Alternate Income Sources

It is the University's preference to continue to provide services that result in considerable benefits to all students and support their academic and educational experience. In the event that the legislation is passed unamended, the University will need to consider what services it will be able to fund through recurrent alternate sources of income. However, it is inevitable that the loss of \$5.5 million per annum will be difficult to replace within the University's annual budget and there will in turn need to be a review, and likely reduction, of services currently provided to students.

The Tertiary Education (Amendment) Act (Vic) 1994

The so-called 'Victorian model' for the regulation of Compulsory Non-Academic Fees (CNAF) is preferred by the University. The implementation of the Victorian model from 1995 allowed the University to ensure that important student services were provided to students and that funds compulsorily collected from students were applied for the 'direct benefit of students.'

The requirements of the 'Victorian model' prohibited the use of the CNAF for explicit political purposes and also made membership of student unions voluntary. (At Victoria University membership of the Student Union is currently non-compulsory). The legislation also ensured that the University had legal responsibility for the appropriate expenditure of all compulsorily collected student fees with a requirement to provide a report on expenditure within the University's annual report.

Accordingly, the University supports an amendment to the Bill that would allow for continued collection of a CNAF for limited and specific purposes.

Amendment to the Bill that reflected this view would allow the University to maintain and enhance the levels of services provided to students. These services add to and support the teaching and learning activities of the University by developing and fostering a culture of student engagement.

Recommendations

1. That the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee recommend to the Senate that the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005* be amended to allow higher education providers to collect a Compulsory Non-Academic Fee (CNAF) for limited and specific purposes.

The recommended amendment should limit the expenditure of CNAF revenue to the following activities:

- a. Provision of health and medical services to students;
- b. Ensuring the availability of computing, photocopying and library services, and other infrastructure services essential to support teaching and learning;
- c. Sport and recreation services and facilities;
- d. Child care centres or services;
- e. Services that promote student welfare;
- f. Faculty, social, cultural, sport and religious clubs and societies;
- g. Services for International students.

Professor Elizabeth Harman
Vice-Chancellor and President
Victoria University