

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee

Inquiry into the provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005

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**The Effect of Voluntary Student Unionism on
The Queensland University of Technology
Student Guild Women's Portfolio**

The QUT Student Guild Women's Portfolio Provides necessary and vital services to all students at QUT. The following submission highlights this and examines the effects of the proposed Inquiry into the provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005.

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Women at QUT make up 54% of the University student population, but as graduates earn less than men in similar positions, only make up just over a third of positions above senior lecturer, and are concentrated in non-academic positions like faculty administration. Although women are more likely to pass a Bachelor degree they are under represented in PostGraduate studies. Women students are more likely to be homeless and/or live under the poverty line. All of these factors contribute to their academic achievements and potential success or failure. It is for these reasons that the QUT Student Guild Women's Portfolio is inclusive of all women's issues and addresses them through service, support and representation.

Organisational Structure

The QUT Student Guild's women's portfolio works through a voluntary collective open to all women students at QUT. The collective meets weekly on all campuses to discuss issues which they see being relevant to women's students, and from there they develop strategies to meet their desired outcome. This process also occurs via the existing e-group, which was formed with the recognition that personal attendance isn't always an option. The student elected Office Bearer and her 3 campus representatives (one for each campus) are then in charge to ensure that the strategies set by collective are followed through.

This is done in a few ways. On most occasions the office bearers will consult with their 2 staff members (both being part-time staff members) and divide tasks amongst all parties. Staff members will act as advisers and support in the project, but the final decision will always rest with the student office bearers and ultimately the collective. Staff members then research different areas within the project. It is not unusual that staff would then produce a briefing paper to educate both collective and office bearers about the issue which gives women an in depth analysis of the situation at hand, these papers are also available to any interested party. When the project is finished the officers write a paper on the outcomes of the project and make recommendations for future reference.

The collective structure that is employed at QUT Student Guild functions extremely well. It is what sets the Student Guild apart from the University and many Women's sector organisations in terms of service provision. This is because it is the women affected who determine what is needed and their self-chosen and designed actions are taken rather than an implemented service decided and designed by a secondary party.

The collective structure is also responsible for the overwhelming support and skill sharing provided by women and passed onto other women in various ways. From friendly gestures and listening ears to self-analysis and personal development, the dynamics of this ever-evolving Student Guild body proves itself an invaluable asset to the University Community. Sharing of knowledge coupled with practical experience is a very important facilitative role that is played by the QUT Student Guild's Women's Collective. Involvement in the collective introduces women to formal meeting

procedures, group work, negotiation skills, policy writing, Constitutional analysis, leadership and supportive roles and organisational skills to name a few. This skill development and personal empowerment gives women the strength and ability to move forward in their chosen field of study, enhances their level of community involvement and enriches their lives and the lives of those around them.

Services

The QUT Student Guild's Women's Portfolio provides services to its specific members. These services are tailored to the differing needs that have been expressed by women students. The services were established through the collective process outlined above, which culminated in a range of relevant and targeted service provisions.

The following is a list of some of the services provided by the QUT Student Guild Women's Portfolio-

- *Women's Rooms on all three campuses-*
The Student Guild recognises that the university, to a large degree, reflects society, which is dominated by male ideas and beliefs. Women at QUT are afforded a space in which to feel free from the overt sexism of society's masculine culture. It is a space which women access that is open to all forms of usage from resting and child minding to general organising and a special event space. It is also where women's collective is held. Women who use these spaces fundraise to provide tea and coffee facilities for others. Women at QUT have also equipped all women's spaces with microwaves, toasters and other useful items.
- *Campaigns-*
Throughout the academic year the women's portfolio runs a number of campaigns. Campaigns that the QUT Student Guild run and/or have direct involvement with are:
 - International Women's Day,
 - Reclaim the Night,
 - Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Week,
 - Eating Disorders Awareness Week,
 - Women in Education Week,
 - Blue Stocking Week and
 - Thursdays in Black.

Events surrounding the campaigns are often varied. On campus, events that the women's collective have organised to support different campaigns are information stalls, workshops with specialised facilitators, forums, lunches, vigils, creative actions, lobbying, debates and much more. The collective and staff members have also had a great deal of involvement with community groups during campaign weeks; as a result QUT Student Guild Women's Portfolio have become a respected and integral part of the women's community sector.

- *Workshops-*
During semester a range of workshops are coordinated for women. The cost of these workshops are subsidised in recognition of the economic struggles that students encounter.

In 2005 the QUT Student Guild's Women's Portfolio is running:

- 2 self defence work shops,
- 2 Car maintenance workshops,
- a learn to surf workshop,
- 2 series of Yoga
- 2 series of belly dancing classes and
- 2 circus workshops.

Some of these have been selected specifically because of the under representation of women in that particular industry or field. Workshops are also coordinated around political and social issues; these are almost always associated with campaigns that are being run at that time. We have found that the diversity of women students that participate in workshops is extremely large. Women find that it offers them a forum to learn, interact and challenge in an inclusive and supportive environment.

- *Publications-*

Each year the women's portfolio produces a magazine called 'Philosophia'. Submissions come from a diverse range of women in the university community, and culminate in a fantastic explosion of intellectual, creative and informative representation that is reflective of when women are empowered in this particular way. 'Philosophia' generally is a print run of 2000 copies, which are distributed throughout QUT and just over a dozen sent to other university women's departments. It is often reproduced due to overwhelming interest.

The Student Guild Paper 'Utopia' reserves an edition annually for the women's portfolio named aptly 'The Women's Edition'. As this reaches a substantial number of students on campus this acts as a fantastic medium for budding contributors and pressing campus and social issues. Utopia has a print run averaging roughly 5000 per edition.

- *Women's Resource Library-*

The Student Guild has been adding to the Women's Resource Library collection for some years now and has an extensive range of fiction and non-fiction literature available. The libraries allow women to read texts about women, women's issues, feminism and allows them to be challenged and to learn. The libraries are located in the women's rooms on each campus and books can be borrowed by any Student Guild member. There is also a significant amount of course materials that has been donated by students.

- *Guildonline.net-*

A large initiative of the QUT Student Guild was the introduction of the Guild's website. The women's portfolio has a specific section of the site with information that is current and useful. This is often the first point of contact for many women who want to access the services, support or wants to contact their representatives.

Support

Women students come to the Women's Portfolio for a great number of reasons. On some occasions it is to access support either of a friendly nature or during a personal crisis situation. Women in the collective come together and support each other through informal discussion, which is by no means, considered as personal counselling by either party. These discussions give women, who may have no other support structures, a forum where they are given the listening ear and open mindedness that they need; this interaction occurs in the women's rooms, which is another reason why they are so very important.

The staff members of the Women's Portfolio act as a referral service to other organisations. Through the years, contacts have been developed which formed a database of Student Guild, community and state organisations where students are referred to according to their personal needs and wishes.

Organisations that we have contacted in the last six months are The Education, Welfare and Queer Portfolio's of the Student Guild, Caxton Legal Services, Domestic Violence Connect, QUT Counselling Services, Children by Choice, Planned Parenting, The Hot House and Brisbane Rape and Crisis Survivors Centre.

Students who access referral services have said that the Women's Portfolio will always be their first point of contact because alone they would not know where they should go to access assistance for their complex problems.

They have also indicated that the process one has to go through to ask for assistance is one that at times can be made harder because of the social attitudes in which their situation is addressed. The Student Guild believes that a non-judgmental referral service is an integral part of service provision. Students are in age groups, social and economic strata and often isolated from traditional support structures and this places them in vulnerable situations. They need to be able to access assistance to allow them to thrive academically. The QUT Student Guild Women's Portfolio not only allows students to achieve their personal potential but also enriches the nation with skilled graduates.

Staff members have been responsible for creating and collecting information that women students have accessed for both a personal and academic nature. This is a support service which allows women to approach a situation which may be made hard for them to address. This level of anonymity instils courage to further pursue an issue. Heavily accessed resources include information about Family Planning, Domestic Violence and Sexual Health.

Representation

As briefly outlined in the organisational structure of the Women's Portfolio there are a number of Student elected Office Bearers in the Women's Portfolio who hold office for a 12 month term. Typically there is one Women's Co-ordinator for each of QUT's 3 campuses, they are responsible for holding collective and maintaining the women's room

on their campus. There is also one Woman's Director who then co-ordinates campaigns, ensures that the collectives and her co-ordinators have support and follow procedure to remain active and accountable. She also ensures that the issues she was elected on are fulfilled and that she and her co-ordinators have made a substantial contribution to the QUT community.

The 4 Office Bearers have votes on Student Guild Council and hold their votes with the recognition that they are carrying the votes of all women students at the University and cast their votes accordingly. They are also eligible to nominate for various University committees and boards and encourage the participation of women in the collective to do the same.

Each year the National Union of Students holds The Network of Women Students Australia (NOWSA) conference, which attracts hundreds of women students from universities around Australia. The QUT Student Guild Women's Portfolio allocates a portion of its budget to subsidise students' travel and accommodation. The conference is widely advertised around the university and women are invited to apply to for funding to attend.

Upon returning they are required to submit a report to the Student Guild so the information that they bring back with them can be filtered through to women who are interested. The reports have also been used to shape the direction of the portfolio in subsequent years. Some of the topics that are discussed at NOWSA are Women in Education, Reproductive Rights, Women in Unions, Mental Health and Women in Sport.

**IN 2004 THE QUT STUDENT GUILDS WOMEN'S PORTFOLIO
BUDGET WAS \$121 925**

Women and Voluntary Student Unionism

It is difficult to estimate the extent of the damage that will be caused to the QUT Student Guilds Women's Portfolio under the proposed VSU legislation. The only way to gauge some kind of idea would be to analyse the effects of Western Australian VSU.

Under Voluntary Student Unionism in Western Australia, Curtin University, Edith Cowan University and Murdoch University all discontinued their women's departments. Curtin University and Edith Cowan University discontinued their Women's Rooms. Murdoch University discontinued their Sexual Assault referral Service and ended all conference funding. The University of Western Australia's Women's Department was discontinued but some services were reduced and diluted into the University's Equity Department.

Under this brief but accurate summary one must question the legislation's benefit. In the case of women's portfolio's just under half of the University community will suffer its adverse affects. The Women's Portfolio at the QUT Student Guild is concerned that the university community along with future generations will suffer the effects of an ideology, which doesn't seem to be representative of the needs of the group which is most heavily affected. We encourage the Senate to address these concerns and take

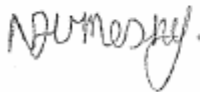
them on board when the Voluntary Student Unionism Legislation becomes a matter of discussion.

Apendix

The following 3 pages are inserts to the Submission made by members of the QUT Student Guild Women's Collective. They have not been edited in any way and are added at the wishes of the Women's Director.

Women's Portfolio
QUT Student Guild

I am a 4th year Education student at QUT and frequent many events that both the student guild and women's portfolio hold. I have consistently used the women's rooms on each of the campuses and have attended many of their workshops and campaigned events. They have been a source of building relationships with other students, helped me in times of financial hardship, emotional hard times and referred me on to other community organisations when I needed. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the women's portfolio for all their help over the last three years.



Neisha Dumesny

8th June 2005-06-08

To Whom it May Concern,

I have been studying two degrees at QUT for a period covering approximately 10 years. During this time the Womens rooms on all three campuses have been a regular destination for me, and indeed on many occasions a refuge from the many stressors in my life. As a gay woman, a student, a full time carer for someone with a physical disability and mental illness, a worker and a guardian of young children, I look forward to the times I can just relax in the womens space without being subject to all the responsibilities, expectations and judgements I encounter on a daily basis.

Since returning to University at the beginning of 2003, I have discovered that Kelvin Groves womens space has a particular advantage over some of the other womens spaces I have visited over the years; and that is the quality of its womens officer, Donna. Having served once on a temporary basis as a womens officer (approximately 4 months at the Carseldine campus) I know the demands and range of qualities required to perform the position well. Women seem to really respond to Donna in a positive way, and she seems to always be there to talk when you need her. She has a genuine interest in all women and their issues, and it is evident in how she interacts with them and in the environment she has created for them.

One of the major draws of a good womens space is the conversation and exchange of ideas that goes on amongst the diverse array of women that frequent it. Over the last year I have had more conversation and debate with women of many different backgrounds than I think I have had in the 9 years before. I think this is largely due to the environment within the womens room and womens comfort level when there. Where before women might have been unsure of the purpose of a womens room, coloured by there understanding of the political debate over the need for this separate autonomous space, here at Kelvin Grove the space is very welcoming, by virtue of such things as the television and video collection. These videos represent the many faces of womens experiences in the world, and on many occasions last year women who had never visited the space before would pop there head in for a look and if they recognised a film we were watching they would often stay, and whether we finished watching the film or not, it was often the springboard for discussion, discussion that usually resulted in them recognising the benefits of **their** womens space and ultimately regularly revisiting the space.

Sincerely
Tammy Atkinson
Ph: 3869 2041

Katy Burrows
Women's Director
QUT Student Guild

Dear Katy Burrows,

I am writing to express my heartfelt gratitude to the staff of the Student Guild. I have had invaluable support from the Education Officer at Gardens Point campus, where I'm studying. Other members of the Guild including the Welfare Officer and her Assistant have also been of great assistance.

In addition I'd like to mention the work of the Women's Officer and members of the Women's Portfolio. I have used the facilities, particularly the Women's Room at Kelvin Grove Campus of QUT on many occasions. The Women's Room provides a variety of support services and is well used by women students across a number of faculties. I am a professional social worker of 30 years experience and understand the need for essential support services for students who are currently quite highly stressed by demanding work loads.

Sincerely Yours,

M Muller

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