

# 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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## Background

The Postgraduate Board (PGB) is the representative body for postgraduate students at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). The PGB comprises members elected in September of each year by UNSW postgraduate students. Representation is made by the PGB to the University at all levels—Academic Board, University working parties and committees, faculties, schools, departments, and various administrative units—on behalf of postgraduate students. The PGB represents postgraduate students to other bodies within the University, such as the University Union and the Sports Association, as well as to external bodies including Federal, State, and Local governments.

Postgraduate students at UNSW first gained distinctive representation in the late seventies, a situation which was formalised in 1993 with the formation of the Postgraduate Board as a constituent board of the Student Guild, being an autonomous entity with respect to postgraduate issues.

The aims of the Postgraduate Board are:

- (a) To advance the interests and welfare of postgraduates within the University;
- (b) To advocate for and where appropriate provide amenities and services for postgraduate students of the University;
- (c) To promote interaction with other students and staff of the University;
- (d) To cooperate with postgraduates at other universities;
- (e) To promote high quality, equitable and accessible postgraduate education;
- (f) To promote, in combination with the NTEU, the industrial rights of postgraduates employed at UNSW.<sup>1</sup>

While its primary role is representation, the PGB also offers a number of services that are exclusive to over 10,000<sup>2</sup> UNSW postgraduate students. These services include the 24-hour Postgraduate Computer Lab, 24-hour Postgraduate Lounge, free individual advocacy, a variety of publications, laptop hire, locker hire and subsidised childcare. Two qualified staff members are available for consultation, a Manager and an Advocacy Officer. Through payments to the Student Guild, the PGB helps fund services provided

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<sup>1</sup> UNSW Postgraduate Board Schedule, section PB 2.1

<sup>2</sup> Session 1, 2005 11,270 postgraduate students enrolled at UNSW.  
<http://149.171.73.132/webpsi/index.html> accessed 15th June, 2005.

by the Guild such as free legal aid, additional child care (House at Pooh Corner and Honey Pot), and clubs and societies funding. The PGB encourages all postgraduate students to take advantage of its representative capacity and services.

In 2005 postgraduate students pay \$35.20 per session (full-time students) or \$27.50 per session (part-time) (including GST) for membership of the PGB. This amount is collected by the university and dispersed to the PGB via the Student Guild.

Many UNSW postgraduates are exempt from payment of PGB fees. Exemptions are automatically granted to students who are external, who are enrolled at College of Fine Arts (COFA) or Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA), who are simultaneously enrolled at another institution, who are enrolled in summer session only for that year, or who are enrolled off shore. Exemptions are granted on request to students who have finished experimentation or research and are writing up their theses, who need to correct and resubmit their theses, or who have a conscientious objection to membership of a student organisation.

The rigorous application of such exemptions means that the PGB received membership fees from 6,586 postgraduates in 2003, rather than a potential 13,874 enrolees. Despite this, the PGB provides representation and services to **all** enrolled postgraduate students, regardless of their financial membership, a state of affairs particularly appreciated by students in need of personal advocacy.

## **Assessment of the likely effect of the legislation on the provision of student services, and related consequences**

The Postgraduate Board and its staff provide **independent** advice, advocacy and other services in support of student rights and student welfare. Postgraduate Board services are unique as they come from a purely student focused position with valuable organisational memories and experiences. These services are invaluable to students and generally cannot be replaced by the University, or other entities.

It is vital to students that student association staff are independent of the University, Centrelink and government departments. While university staff may have the welfare of students in mind, they are not able to act independently of their employer. Student association staff have no conflict of interest in providing services to students. They are employed by students specifically to help protect members student rights and welfare. The Postgraduate Board and its staff work constantly to build and maintain credibility within the University environment for being professional, fair and trustworthy, a profile which the Board believes best serves the interests of postgraduate students.

### **Representation**

Pursuant to its role of collective representation, the PGB focuses on the task of advocating generally on behalf of postgraduate students to schools, faculties, and at the University level. This includes participating in a wide range of University committees and working parties, lobbying the University on behalf of postgraduate students, monitoring the study and research conditions of postgraduate students across the University and responding appropriately, and making submissions to the University on important policy issues. Through its affiliation to the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations

(CAPA), the peak national representative body for postgraduate students, the PGB is able to achieve broad and effective advocacy at the national level for UNSW postgraduates.

The Postgraduate Board also employs a Manager who maintains the administration of the Board as well as undertaking research on issues in higher education and particularly issues that affect postgraduates. The Manager monitors all changes in the way policy and conditions are maintained by UNSW management and works to ensure that the rights of postgraduates are not undermined. Often research is a result of student inquiries or complaints.

An example of such support for postgraduate requisites can be seen in the submission by the Postgraduate Board of the UNSW Policy on Minimum Facilities and Resources for Postgraduate Research Study. This policy was endorsed by UNSW Academic Board for mandatory implementation across the University. This is an important contribution to the quality of the student experience and the ability of the University to market its services to potential postgraduate students within Australia and overseas. The PGB is working closely and cooperatively with the University to ensure that targets for implementing this policy across all faculties are clear but realistic.

Recent issues on which the Postgraduate Board has submitted papers to organisations external to the University include Review of Transport Concession Policy, Student Income Support Inquiry and Response to the NSW Ombudsman Inquiry into Complaint Handling in NSW Universities. Aspects of these issues impact particularly strongly on international students who are attracted to UNSW and Australia because of the quality and value of education promised. The UNSW Postgraduate Board's deliberative contribution to such topics of concern recognises the important contribution that international students make to this University, financially, culturally and intellectually, in addition to their impact on the Australian economy.

### Implications of Proposed Legislation for this Service

The proposed legislation would spell the end of students providing representation with postgraduate students' needs as their highest priority. It would not effect the election of students to the governing bodies of University Council and Academic Board, as these elections are run independent of the PGB. However, the students on these bodies are required to act in a manner that benefits the University over the body which elected them. Thus, they cannot directly represent postgraduates in the way that the PGB can.

Many postgraduate students give generously of their time to attend committee meetings, participate in submission preparation and generally provide the excellent level of representation needed and appreciated by postgraduate students at UNSW. However, informed representation cannot be achieved without research, organisational memory and communication networks that are achieved through the staffing of the Postgraduate Board, and the small honorarium paid to the PGB Convenor/ Co-Convenors which enables them to take leave from their studies to better pursue the representation of postgraduate students.

### **Advocacy**

The PGB employs a full-time advocate, who is available to provide advice about academic and general grievances to all postgraduate students. The role of the Postgraduate Advocacy Officer is to act on behalf of postgraduate students both generally and individually in a number of fora that have the potential to affect their welfare and their ability to complete their studies. The advocate's main role, however, is to advise individual postgraduate students on matters of academic and administrative concern and, where appropriate, to attempt to resolve a grievance on their behalf. The types of issues the Postgraduate Advocacy Officer helps to resolve include those associated with enrolment, thesis supervision, progression, assessment and any administrative or academic issue where a student requires advice or support in resolving their difficulties.

With regard to matters of supervision, for instance, the Advocacy Officer assists students to negotiate resolutions with supervisors and, if required, assists students to negotiate alternative supervision arrangements.

The Advocacy Officer assists students with submissions to the University regarding assessment decisions all the way through to appeal stage, including representation to Higher Degree Committees.

The Advocacy Officer also assists students to lodge complaints if a matter becomes intractable, and drafts submissions on behalf of students in relation to these complaints. These complaints range from resources on campus to submissions regarding the termination of a scholarship and/or candidacy.

As these matters mostly involved long case histories, some with long standing grievances against the University, their resolution by the Postgraduate Board represents a significant saving of resources for the University.

Over the past six months, twelve (12) students were counselled against their desire to lodge formal complaints against the University, by the Advocacy Officer who advised that their cases were not sufficiently strong. Each of these students subsequently decided not to proceed in these matters. Twenty-five (25) further cases of a more minor nature were also advised that they had a limited chance of success. It is largely through the students' recognition of the Advocacy Officer's independence from the University that these savings are gained by the University. Students usually heed advice not to proceed with a complaint as the Advocacy Officer clearly has no conflict of interest.

The Advocacy Officer also provides advice, and, if necessary referral, in a range of other matters relating to Centrelink, tenancy and also immigration matters. A number of tenancy cases are now to be referred to the PGB by the University's International Student Services (ISS), including the \$5,000 matter mentioned below. The ISS is not equipped to handle what has become a very large area of complaint, particularly as some unscrupulous local agents and landlords commonly attempt to take advantage of international students. It is vital that international students have expert representation in this area, both for their own sense of security, and for the reputation of the University internationally.

A minimum of two hundred and fifty (250) cases are counselled annually (these numbers do not include the large numbers of students who seek advice on quickly resolved issues via phone, email, or drop-in), making it evident that the continued funding of the

independent Postgraduate Board Advocacy Officer is vital for the welfare of students and for both the economy of resources and reputation of the University.

The many students who receive assistance, advice and advocacy from the Advocacy Officer would not have been able to predict at the commencement of their candidature that they would need the Advocacy Officer's services. The Advocacy Officer can make the difference between success and failure of the University experience for a large number of postgraduate students. The independence of the Advocacy Officer is an in-built check on the quality of academic service provision.

### Implications of Proposed Legislation for this Service

It is expected that the impact of the proposed legislation would prevent the Postgraduate Board from continuing to employ this vital staff member.

While this role is performed by the Postgraduate Board it is carried out with an appropriate level of independence. The University is required by legislation to provide students with independent advice with respect to complaints, a role currently performed by the Advocacy Officer.

The initial aim of the Advocacy Officer is to reach a no-fault resolution to a dispute through mediation with both parties and preventing escalation. Without the independent mechanism of the Postgraduate Advocacy Officer in place, many more cases of student grievances would spiral into intractable complaints which would clog the administrative avenues of the University and may even translate into a sharp rise in litigation.

Of the one hundred and twenty-five (125) cases handled in the past six months, fifty-eight (58) cases were Postgraduate Coursework students, and sixty-seven (67) were Research students. The vast majority were resolved at the lower levels of University management; i.e. cases were resolved without recourse to the Registrar or senior University Management. For example, of the forty-eight (48) cases relating to supervision, only four (4) progressed to the Registrar or a similarly senior level in the University. Others were predominantly resolved at School level, reducing a substantial burden on the University's administration.

Of the twenty-one (21) cases related to requests for remarking, only one (1) was referred to the Registrar. In a number of these cases, students were particularly aggrieved and in at least half of these cases were keen to appeal to 'the highest levels of the University'. They were dissuaded from this action, and the matters satisfactorily resolved without undue pressure on the University administration.

Significantly, the most monetarily valuable case, a \$54,000 reinstatement of an Australian Postgraduate Award, was settled at the School level. In this case the student's parents had commenced legal proceedings by briefing a lawyer; however, the Postgraduate Board Advocate intervened and resolved the issue quickly at School level. Had the matter not been resolved, the University may well have incurred significant legal costs in order to defend its position.

The Advocacy Officer provides a supportive means for students to rectify their problems. Without this independent support and advice, many students may choose to simply discontinue their studies rather than continue in a perceived intolerable situation.

Successful interventions by the PGB Advocacy Officer have had the positive result of enabling international students to continue their studies at UNSW. For example, in the case where the Advocacy Officer represented international students at the Consumer, Trader and Tenancy Tribunal and saved them \$5,000 in a tenancy case, the students indicated that if this case were lost, their parents would not have been financially able to continue to pay their tuition fees. In other cases involving international students, the timely intervention of the Board has prevented students withdrawing their enrolment at UNSW, representing a potential loss of tuition fee income for the University.

### **24-hour Postgraduate Computer Lab**

The 24-hour Postgraduate Computer Lab is available for all postgraduate students to use. The computer lab is located on the first floor of the rear of the Library, with an easily accessible outside entrance. Swipe card access is placed on all postgraduate student cards at enrolment. Within the lab are a number of computers, a scanner and printer. The Lab also has comfortable seating, desks set up in study pods and a postgraduate noticeboard.

I have been a regular user of the postgrad computer lab since my laptop was stolen recently and I think the facility is vital... I was dreading the thought of having to fight through hoards of flirting and gossiping undergrads to write my paper. I love the fact it is available 24 hours a day and you can actually get some work done.<sup>3</sup>

### Implications of Proposed Legislation for this Service

This Lab is in constant use with students often waiting considerable amounts of time to use the computers. Students frequently report that there is a waiting time of at least thirty minutes with all available computers in use even prior to 9 am each day. Having been established entirely with student money, the Postgraduate Board hopes to increase the number of available computers in the near future, also using student money.

Under the proposed legislation the current facility would hopefully still exist, until the technology and furniture became outdated and unusable and was not replaced. However, under the proposed legislation there would not be any student voice protecting this space at University committees and with the shortage of space on campus, it may well be quickly reallocated.

### **24-hour Postgraduate Lounge**

The Postgraduate Board maintains the Postgraduate Lounge adjacent to its staff offices. The room has 24 hour access for all postgraduate students and includes computers, comfortable lounges, occasional tables and a kitchenette with a refrigerator and microwave. There is also a supply of spring water. The room has recently been painted as part of a broader refurbishment program, and air conditioning has recently been installed to make this high usage facility more appropriate for student use.

The Lounge is extremely popular with students and is in constant use 24 hours a day, throughout session and through the University breaks. 77.7% of postgraduate students

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<sup>3</sup> Response 72, PGB Survey, May 2004.

who responded to the Postgraduate Board survey of students conducted in 2004 rated the facility in the ranges from important to extremely important to them<sup>4</sup>.

### Implications of Proposed Legislation for this Service

This facility has been entirely funded with student money. Under the proposed legislation it would not be possible to update any of the facilities in the Lounge, maintain the resources within it, or even to keep up the supply of newspapers. Internet connections, which are paid by the PGB, would be closed down.

Likewise, under the proposed legislation there would not be any organised student voice to protect this space at University committee level. Given the shortage of space on campus, this space may also be quickly reallocated.

The Postgraduate Board employs a part time IT Consultant (also a postgraduate student) to maintain the computing facilities of the PGB. Under the proposed legislation this employment would cease and the computing facilities would rapidly fall into disrepair.

### **Laptop Hire**

The Postgraduate Board has supplied laptop computers for rental to postgraduate students for several years. This is a valuable resource for postgraduate students in a variety of difficult circumstances. Short term loans assist students who either have a problem with break down of their own computers, who need mobile computer support for specific projects, or who are undertaking short fieldwork assignments. Long term loans cover a far wider spectrum of needs with some students hiring laptops for over six months as it is a cost efficient alternative to purchasing a laptop outright.

The UNSW Student IT Requirement Policy states that

While UNSW students are expected to have off-campus access to appropriate information technology resources, the University's commitment to equity will see it continue to provide on-campus computer facilities to those students unable to access these off-campus<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, however, not all students can access University provided computer facilities, nor do the desktop facilities always meet students' needs in completing the requirements of their studies.

The Postgraduate Board hires the laptop computers to students at a minimal rate, respecting the limited financial means of many students.

### Implications of Proposed Legislation for this Service

The laptops themselves and the staff who administer the hiring scheme and maintain the computers are all paid for with student money. Under the proposed legislation this service would no longer exist.

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<sup>4</sup> Postgraduate Board Survey of Postgraduate Students at UNSW, May, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> UNSW Policy, IT Requirements for UNSW Students, April 6, 2004, p 2.



## **Postgraduate Email List**

Postgraduate study can often result in isolation from postgraduate students in other disciplines. Subscribing to the postgraduate group email list provides a way for students to keep in touch with the postgraduate community at UNSW. It is run by postgraduates for the postgraduate community. Once subscribed, students automatically receive any email posted to the list, such as scholarship notices, library information, accommodation notices and humour. The list provides a forum for postgraduates to discuss research issues, problems with thesis formatting and binding, activities, BBQs and dinners.

The list has become a valuable means for sourcing the opinions of the postgraduate community for the benefit of students themselves, and to the advantage of the University. It provides an easy means of communication to attract students to participate in focus groups and surveys, as well as providing insight into how institutional changes directly affect postgraduates and their opinions of such changes.

Yes - I agree. Where would be without the PGB? Just the existence of this list seems to make a big difference.<sup>6</sup>

### Implications of Proposed Legislation for this Service

The list is administered by staff employed by the Postgraduate Board using only student money. It is specifically valued for its independence and its role of providing a 'safe' forum where postgraduates can be honest in their opinions. The List is run on the Postgraduate Board server, maintained with student money.

Under the proposed legislation this service would not exist.

The UNSW Library has been involved in supporting the learning and research needs of postgraduates for some time. The postgraduate community is extremely diverse, and letting these students know about the potential support the Library offers can be difficult. Over the past 3 years, in my position as Associate Social Sciences and Humanities Librarian and as current convenor of the Library's Information Literacy Group, I have come to rely on the PGB's Postgraduate list. I use this both to inform students directly about Library workshops, and I also see it as a window into the current needs of the postgraduate student community. We have modified and improved our programs based on feedback this group provides.

I have also found attending the PGB Seminars extremely useful in understanding the research directions the various programs are taking. I believe we can be much more responsive to the academic needs of the postgraduate community because of these two communication activities undertaken by the PGB, and I would be extremely sorry to see these services disappear.<sup>7</sup>

## **Postgraduate Seminars**

Once a month postgraduate students from disciplines across the University meet and listen to two or three seminars presented by other postgraduate research students. The aim of the seminars is to provide a relaxed setting in which postgraduate students can

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<sup>6</sup> PhD student, 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2005. Name and contact details available on request.

<sup>7</sup> Pam Freeland, Associate Social Sciences and Humanities Librarian, UNSW, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2005.

meet each other and practise their presentation skills, while giving a basic introduction to their area of research. Occasionally speakers who have obtained a PhD or Masters by research are invited to talk to the group on how they have applied the skills they obtained while undertaking their postgraduate degree to jobs/positions other than those in academic settings.

This is a great way to meet other postgraduates in an informal yet academic environment. It allows the opportunity to expand students' thinking beyond their own discipline and to appreciate different modes of undertaking research. Details of upcoming seminars and their locations are disseminated via the Postgraduate Email List, the PGB website and the Office of Research and Training.

#### Implications of Proposed Legislation for this Service

Seminars are organised by Postgraduate Board members for the postgraduate community. The PGB provides a small subsidy for refreshments. Part of the attraction of the seminar series for students is that it is run cross disciplinarily and independent of organised University seminars. Under the proposed legislation it may be possible to still run the seminars, but the attraction to students may be lost if run under the auspices of the University.

#### **Publications**

The PGB produces a number of publications on a regular or occasional basis, including:

- \* Our newsletter, the *Whipping Post*, which is going online later in 2005.
- \* The *Postgraduate Guide*, which is produced annually in conjunction with the university.
- \* *Practical Aspects of Producing A Thesis at UNSW*, which is currently being updated.

All our publications are available electronically on the PGB website.

#### Implications of Proposed Legislation for this Service

Under the proposed legislation postgraduate students would lose the independent voice of the student publication. Documents such as the Postgraduate Guide and Thesis Guide could be funded and produced by the University, adding to the already stretched Student Publications workload, but they would be very different documents from that produced independently with student money.

The PGB website is maintained by PGB staff and is accessible on the PGB server which is also maintained by PGB staff. These facilities would not be available under the proposed legislation.

#### **Childcare**

The Postgraduate Board is a primary sponsor of the two student based childcare centres on campus – House at Pooh Corner and The Honey pot. PGB representatives sit on, and are active within, the Boards of Management of each centre.

Waiting lists at UNSW childcare centres hover around 700 children. Many parents don't even bother to put their children in the waiting lists. These excessive waiting lists pose a serious barrier to students wishing to take up postgraduate positions at UNSW. The

waiting list is so extensive at the Honeypot that the Board of Management recently decided to close the list rather than falsely raise parents' hopes by listing them.

If a student is lucky enough to get a place for their child they must face the burden of high fees. Only the student organisations such as the Postgraduate Board subsidise campus childcare centres, and student money built the centres. The University owns the land on which the centres exist, but does not contribute to operational costs.

### Implications of Proposed Legislation for this Service

The proposed introduction of VSU will only place a greater financial burden on postgraduate students with children. Currently the UNSW Postgraduate Board makes donations of around \$25,000 (or 9% of the Board's budget) to the student childcare centres on campus. With the proposed legislation this donation will be eliminated and the cost of childcare will rise accordingly for students.

I am a Postgrad student and I have three children, two of whom are under school age. I am writing to express my horror on being told that there is no on-campus child care available. On application to Pooh Corner and Honeypot I was told that there is a three year wait for a place for a two year old. This not only means that I am unable to access childcare for my existing children on campus until 2009 (when they will have started school), but also that I will need to book a place 'just in case' I fall pregnant anytime in the next two years.

This is an equity issue. Women are still primarily responsible for childcare. Higher education is not an available option for women with children unless adequate quality childcare places are available. It is imperative that a significant proportion of these be on-campus infant places (for under two year olds) to enable breastfeeding mothers to drop in and feed their little ones when required.<sup>8</sup>

Financial modelling carried out for the Honeypot Childcare Centre indicates that if keeping the current organisational structure, sessional care costs to students will rise by \$20 per day (55% rise) and long day care places will rise by \$23 per day (also 55% increase).

The increase could be reduced if the number of sessional and casual places were reduced and replaced with long day care places, however, this negates the flexible philosophy under which the centre was established and discriminates against international students (approximately 20% of the centre's users) who cannot access the Federal childcare benefit for long day care.

International postgraduate students are a key component to UNSW developing a respected reputation abroad as a leading tertiary institution. The proposed legislation will particularly affect International students as they are not eligible for Federal government childcare subsidies (unless AUSAID sponsored). That means that they end up paying anything up to three times more for the same childcare place as local students.

Under the proposed legislation there will be no independent student voice lobbying for changes to the legislation, or to fight to keep the costs manageable.

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<sup>8</sup> Postgraduate Diploma Arts (Phil) student, 1<sup>st</sup> June, 2005. Name and contact details available on request.

This lack of available and affordable childcare means a lack of access to education.

## **Social Events**

The Postgraduate Board organises, advertises and funds a number of social events for postgraduates during the year. This provides a vital opportunity for students to meet others, thus decreasing the increasing isolation of the postgraduate student. It also enables a chance to relax and enjoy the life of the University student that exists outside of the lecture room or laboratory.

I remember when I first started uni I really resented having to pay the fee. I wasn't sporty and I didn't join any clubs and societies so I thought it was unfair.

I did enjoy reading the uni paper though and the happy hours in the bar. (All of course funded out of this fee). This was all rather trivial though until something happened half way through my second year. I suffered a major bout of depression. I had no idea what was wrong with me and didn't feel like I could talk to my parents about it. I was struggling to keep up with my lectures and I was becoming more and more socially isolated.

See that's the thing about big universities, unless you get involved in smaller groups (i.e. clubs & Societies) the whole largeness of the place can be intimidating and overwhelming. I realised I needed help but I knew that I couldn't afford it on my part time job. Then I discovered what seemed at the time like a miracle. I could talk with someone (a trained psychologist) through the counseling unit. If this service had not been freely available I know for sure I wouldn't have gone and I might not have finished my degree or worse I might not still be here at all! I'm quite serious about this, that service literally saved my life.

After a couple of sessions with the counselor I began to feel better and less overwhelmed and LESS ALONE in this big new environment. I went on to finish my degree with a double major, with lots of distinctions, which was a great achievement considering I could have failed entirely. Now years later I've made the commitment to come back and do my Masters, which will lead to even bigger and better things that I can give back to society! None of this would be possible if the system had abandoned me back in second year.

There will always be people that need extra help to make the transition to university successfully. This is what Clubs, societies and the counseling unit are all about. They are about providing a sense of community and support for young adults taking their first steps in the big wide world. Without these services not only will universities suffer but down the track this will trickle down and effect society as a whole.

You never know what you're going to need until you need it!!<sup>9</sup>

## Implications of Proposed Legislation for this Service

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<sup>9</sup> Postgraduate student, UNSW, 1<sup>st</sup> June, 2005. Name and contact details available on request.

Under the proposed legislation the Postgraduate Board would no longer be able to fund these events, or provide the organisational infrastructure to facilitate them.

### **Joint Postgraduate Board/ Student Guild Activities**

Through PGB contributions to the Student Guild, postgraduates are also able to access:

- \* Free legal advice provided by a qualified solicitor
- \* Advice and advocacy on income support and other welfare issues
- \* Funding of clubs and societies and provision of a resource centre
- \* International students department
- \* Indigenous students department
- \* Lesbian students' and gay students' departments
- \* Environment department

### Implications of Proposed Legislation for this Service

It is expected that the Guild will be unable to maintain these services under the proposed legislation. The value of the independence of these services, particularly the Solicitor (the availability of whom 80% of postgraduates rated as important to extremely important<sup>10</sup>), is unquantifiable.

### **Recommendation**

The UNSW Postgraduate Board believes and fears that the proposed Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005 will have the same devastating effect upon representation and student services as were experienced at universities in Western Australia where State legislation resulted in services deteriorating to such an extent that the university authorities had to divert funding from teaching and research to maintain a basic level of student support.

The Postgraduate Board operates on a minimal budget of only \$340,000 per annum, with 32% of this being diverted to the undergraduate Student Guild to fund joint services. With this remaining operational budget of only \$230,000 the PGB strives to meet the representational and other needs of all postgraduate students at UNSW.

Should the proposed Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005 be introduced, it is expected that national trends will mimic those previously experienced in Western Australia and Victoria. By 1999 Edith Cowan University had a membership rate of only 6% of its student guild, following an initial post legislation take up rate of 13%. In both states campus organisations were initially able to apply for compensatory funding, a model that has not been canvassed under the proposed legislation. While vital to the continuation to the supply of essential services to students, this funding had a significant impact on government resources with organisations such as the Melbourne University Student Union receiving \$1.23 million.<sup>11</sup>

Compensatory funding to rescue student organisations and enable the continued supply of fundamental student services by student organisations is a necessary part of the

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<sup>10</sup> Postgraduate Board Survey of UNSW Postgraduate Students, May, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Graham Hastings, *VSU Legislation Experiences in WA, Victoria and Federally*, October, 2004.

proposed legislation which has been neglected. Without such financial support student organisations and all of the services they provide and critical roles they fill in campus life are doomed to failure.

The Postgraduate Board regards the proposed legislation as myopic and lacking in an understanding of the modern experience of the higher education student. Such indifference towards the continued, and enhanced, contributions made by student organisations to the success of students within Australia's universities stands at odds with the government's stated commitment to a 'vision for a confident, strong, high quality higher education sector that plays a vital role in our economic, cultural and social development.'<sup>12</sup>

The Postgraduate Board recommends that the proposed Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005 be abandoned.

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<sup>12</sup> The Hon. Dr Brendan Nelson, [Education, Skills And Innovation – Underpinning Prosperity And Building Australia's Future](#), Media Release, 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2005.