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**Assessment of the likely effect of VSU legislation before the parliament on the provision of student services and related consequences.**

The legislation currently before parliament would effect many changes in the way the students of the University of Newcastle – Ourimbah Campus receive fundamental and vital services. The Ourimbah campus is made up of both University and TAFE students. Presently University students pay a compulsory fee to the university which in turn passes it on to Campus Central to provide services and facilities. TAFE students are not required to pay a fee. Why would TAFE students pay a voluntary fee? Services such as buildings and other capital facilities are already provided to them via university student fees for free, and maintenance via the same fee. They are only required to pay extra for food and other services but the infrastructure exists for them.

This is exactly how a voluntary system would fail Australian tertiary institutions. You may be able to provide food to the campus and make money, but who pays for the areas for students to enjoy this or perhaps the food they bring themselves? Campus Central has provided all these areas on the Ourimbah campus. Without Campus Central students would be able to choose between the library or an empty classroom to sit and consume their food. Hardly an ideal situation and with tertiary institutions finding it harder and harder to make ends meet where are they to find money to build such areas on an ever expanding campus?

Over the years Campus Central has used the buying power of 2,500 fee paying students to bring down the prices for many services on and off the campus. This has been especially true in the sporting area as there are no sporting facilities on the Ourimbah Campus. Campus Central has been able to obtain local fitness centres to lower their member prices for students. Without the ‘buying’ power we will not be able to keep these costs down which will affect the way students look after their health.

The following are more detailed descriptions of changes to our services:

1. There would be no organised sport for the students other than what volunteers can organise. The students themselves would have to plan their events, run them, source insurance and take the financial risk involved on themselves. As most students are studying and working to make ends meet and thus have little time to also organise fully events with expert input and assistance.

2. All Clubs and Societies would lose their administrative support which would mean they would be completely run and financed by volunteers. As with sport, many students are too busy to do this so the participation in these Clubs would drop. This would have the knock on effect of not providing the student with the chance of a complete well rounded experience.
3. There would be no capital works program. In the last five years Campus Central has spent in excess of \$2 million in improving the facilities on the Ourimbah Campus for the entire campus community. Most of this money has been put into the university owned buildings which would mean that in the future the university would be responsible for providing the capital for new projects or renovations. There is still much to be done especially with the student population growing as it is now. There will be another 700 students at Ourimbah over the next 2 years. Campus Central had a capital works plan that would cater for this increase but has been shelved indefinitely due to the proposed legislation.
4. The first week of university is a very important event for most students. Currently “Orientation” week is enjoyed by most new students and many returning students. There is free entertainment, food and special social events designed to encourage students to get into university life. Many of Campus Central’s publications are given away during this week, which tell students what to expect throughout the year. Would the university be able to provide this information in a way which reaches students?
5. International students will be placed under additional pressures without the support that comes through clubs and societies. Being at a small and regional campus can be difficult on international students as they try and find their feet in a new country in a regional town lacking many of the city connections. They have their own club which is subsidised by Campus Central to help them settle into a new country and enjoy their university experience. Without this help and support it is possible that they will either move to a larger university in a major city or even worse give up and leave Australia altogether.
6. Looking after the arts is another important role Campus Central plays in the life of students. Encouraging young musicians to come and perform in front of an audience helps many to go further – how many of today’s musicians started their careers at university. Providing funds and a venue for artists to show their paintings and sculptures is another important item that would disappear.
7. One of the areas that will disappear and one that cannot be based on a ‘user pays’ bases on the smaller campuses is student representation. Where will the students go who have a genuine complaint against the university – to the university? Having the staff around who are experienced in handling disputes with the university helps many students. Without the facilities fee there will be no staff to deal with these situations and students will be left to take on the university by themselves.

The full impact cannot be determined until the legislation has had a chance to take effect and it may turn out that there are even more services axed if the number of students who decide not to pay is overestimated. The question must be asked, would you pay voluntarily for a library or community centre if you got full use of that centre without paying for it? That is the question that students will be asked with the proposed legislation but who then maintains these facilities and develops new ones as numbers increase?

Please remember through this debate that there are other university campuses of much smaller size than Sydney and Melbourne, the Ourimbah campus is one such campus that lacks a 'critical mass' to drive commercial projects.

Students pay the fee and students get to decide where and on what the money is spent through the action of a democracy. This is of course no different to government where Australians pay for services to be provided that wouldn't be provided any other way and it is Australians who decide how the money is spent.

Yours truly,

Lauren Van Munster,  
President.