

## **Foreword**

I write this submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee's inquiry into the effect of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005 as a fourth year undergraduate science/commerce student at the University of Sydney. The purpose of this submission is to highlight some of the student services which are provided by the Union and the Students' Representative Council at the University of Sydney, which in all likelihood will be adversely affected by the introduction of voluntary student unionism, as proposed by this amendment. Specifically, this submission will concentrate on services with which I have personal experience with in my three and a half years as a student at the University of Sydney.

## **Orientation Week**

As a first year student, the earliest experience at university after enrolment is often orientation week (O-week). O-week is an essential experience for new students, as it affords them the chance to ease into what is often a very large change in their lives. During O-week, students are introduced to the clubs and societies on campus, and given a chance to interact with fellow students who are also experiencing a similar transition to university life as themselves. Having this opportunity means that students who may otherwise feel isolated have the chance to meet people with similar interests and experience the full range of campus activities. It also means that they are given a chance to acclimatise to their new environment before being thrown into academic work, so that when the semester does start, they are able to concentrate fully on their studies, having somewhat blunted the often jarring shift from high school to university. O-week is funded and run by the University of Sydney Union.

## **Clubs and Societies**

The clubs and societies program is very wide in scope. For instance, there are many clubs which exist for students from particular disciplines of study. They provide academic support, and may offer additional classes and more in-depth information to aid students in their studies. They often provide career information and advice, with

forums for students to meet potential employers, or gain specific knowledge which aids students in finding employment in their field of study.

There are also many clubs which provide an opportunity for students with similar interests to come together in a social context. Students have an opportunity to participate in many areas of student life outside their studies through clubs and societies. There are many clubs where students of the same cultural or religious background can meet and hold events. There are clubs which promote drama, film, music and the arts. There are clubs which plan and hold social events. In other words, this is a huge and diverse variety of differing interests that are catered for. The clubs and societies program is run and funded by the University of Sydney Union, as well as the Students' Representative Council.

## **Representation and Support**

The issue of student representation encompasses many different services. For one, it includes issues such as student representation on a national level (which is provided by the National Union of Students), and gives students a voice on issues that affect them. Apart from this however, there are the more basic, but just as vital issues of representation on a university level. This includes services such as representation for students who have been asked to show cause as to why they should continue to be enrolled, as well as helping students who are making academic appeals. It also involves providing basic legal advice, as well as advice in regard to tenancy and housing, which are issues that specifically affect students, given they go directly to the ability of a student to attend university. These services are provided by the Students' Representative Council.

## **Cultural Diversity and Anti-Racism**

There are several programs being run which promote cultural diversity on campus, and in the community. In addition to clubs or societies which represent different cultural groups, the Union publishes a cultural diversity journal which gives students a chance to voice their opinions and ideas on issues relating to cultural diversity and

racism. The journal is not only a space for students to promote cultural diversity, but also an area that allows for experiences of students from different cultural backgrounds, and the problems of racism to be raised and discussed, and helps ensure that students are aware of these issues. By airing this discussion, the journal helps foster a climate of understanding and openness, regardless of a student's particular cultural background. The cultural diversity journal is funded by the University of Sydney Union.

The issue of racism is also dealt with by the anti-racism collective. The collective runs campaigns which highlight and combat racism in the community and on campus. This includes providing forums for students to discuss the many issues which surround racism as well as holding film screenings and weekly meetings, which help to further educate students in regard to racism. The collective also helps co-ordinate campaigns against specific groups which have a racist agenda, and instead seeks to promote cultural understanding and diversity. The anti-racism collective is run and funded by the Students' Representative Council.

### **Effect of the Legislation**

All the services I have detailed are funded by either the University of Sydney Union or the Students' Representative Council, and could not exist without this support. Both these organisations' funding face significant declines under the proposed amendment to the legislation, and the programs that are currently being run, including but not limited to those I have detailed above, face significant cuts and quite possibly will be lost in their entirety. At the very worst, this amendment will force student organisations into receivership, and they will no longer be able to provide any of the services currently offered.

It is inconceivable that any of these losses can be considered positive for students, or for the universities themselves. There is no stakeholder in the university sector, whether they are the universities themselves, the many staff employed by student organisations, or most importantly the students themselves, that will benefit from the loss of the services provided by student organisations.

## **Conclusion**

I have highlighted just a few of the services I am most familiar with that are provided by the student organisations at the University of Sydney. There are many more that are just as important to students as those which I have detailed, and no doubt many of the same programs operate on campuses Australia wide. Under the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005, the funding for student organisations, and hence these services, will be withdrawn.

I urge the committee to recommend the protection of student services. To facilitate this, student organisations must be adequately funded, and this can only occur if the current system, whereby a universal is fee paid by all students, is maintained.

Therefore, the only way to ensure the continuity of these services is to ensure this amendment is rejected in its entirety.