

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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I am writing on behalf of a community leadership team working in partnership with Sport UNE to raise funds to upgrade Sporting facilities at the University of New England for the benefit of Students and members of the local and regional communities. Our Committee which is comprised totally of volunteers from the regional business community is extremely concerned that the Federal Government's Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005 will undermine the provision of services by student organizations such as Sport UNE.

Our fundraising initiatives have already been compromised by regional concerns over the VSU legislation with potential benefactors being unwilling to commit funds to the University if Sport UNE will be unable to manage and maintain facilities as an outcome of the proposed VSU Legislation.

Sport UNE is a service provider that has developed Sporting facilities that are widely recognized as being amongst the finest in all Australian Universities. These facilities provide a significant attraction for students to study at our regional University. UNE's sporting facilities which have been developed by Sport UNE over the past 35 years (with no financial support by the University or State or Federal governments) now form an integral part of the sporting facilities within the New England Sporting Community. The current VSU Legislation if passed by the Senate will provide Sport UNE with no capacity to maintain facilities let alone upgrade and develop them in the future.

The services provided by all four of UNE's student organisations (Sport UNE, UNE Union, UNE Students' Association and UNE Postgraduate Student Association) are important for the students at UNE. The Armidale Community International Sports Precinct Fundraising Committee is extremely concerned that if these facilities and services are not maintained, UNE and Armidale and indeed all regional universities and their communities will suffer. We therefore request that the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee consider an appropriate amendment to the legislation to ensure that student services are maintained on an ongoing and viable basis.

Like many regional universities, UNE is challenged by the need to provide commercially viable, yet quality services to the relatively small number of students who require them (with internal students only on campus for around eight months each year). In the past, external residential schools have filled some of this gap, but these numbers have steadily declined in recent years. Despite UNE's relatively low student numbers (in comparison to metropolitan Universities), for students and their families the availability of a wide range of services is an essential part of their decision to attend UNE. The withdrawal of these services as a consequence of the VSU Legislation is likely to push students towards better serviced and resourced metropolitan universities in the future.

UNE's student organisations provide employment each year for 60 fulltime staff and up to 175 casual staff, contributing 4 million dollars to the local economy in salaries and wages alone. Almost \$1 million of this figure is through the provision of student employment opportunities (where up to 160 casual jobs are specifically earmarked for students). Without the support of UNE's student organisations there would be limited opportunities for UNE students to gain casual employment in Armidale. For many students the lack of local employment options can be a deciding factor in selecting a university, again disadvantaging regional universities such as UNE against metropolitan universities.

As well as directly benefiting the students of UNE, facilities are available for the use of the wider university and Armidale communities, helping the region and the university to attract and retain qualified staff and their families to live and work here. Within a VSU environment, facilities and services such as student advocacy and maintenance of playing fields which by their nature generate very limited revenue, yet require a high level of resources to maintain will either fall to the University to fund, or will result in the decline in facilities and increased pressure on those provided by the local Council, welfare organisations or Armidale sporting clubs.

For many years, UNE's student organisations have employed professional managers and core staff in order to ensure that a balance is maintained between the ever increasing cost of wages and risk management within a university environment and the need to provide a range of genuinely valuable, financially viable services and facilities for students. The introduction of VSU Legislation which is likely to decimate student services is creating considerable anxiety and tension amongst Student Organisation staff who are rightly concerned about their future employment.

At UNE, students have a real and vibrant community, supported by four well managed Student Organisations, who for many years have provided exceptional services and facilities for UNE students, the University and wider community. The breadth of the non academic services offered by the student organizations help UNE achieve a 5 star rating for graduate satisfaction and helps UNE compete against the larger and better resourced metropolitan universities in attracting students to study at a regional university.

My Committee therefore urges that the Senate Legislation Committee consider an amended to the VSU legislation to recognize the value and essential nature to students and their community of the services provided through the universal collection of General Service Fees, and include a funding model that will allow as many of these services as possible to be maintained for the benefit of UNE and the New England Community. Members of the Armidale Community International Sports Precinct Fundraising Committee would welcome the opportunity to discuss our concerns with you when the enquiry convenes in Armidale on 5th July.

Gerard Stephen

Chair,

Armidale Community International Sports Precinct Fundraising Committee