

# Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
References Committee

## **Inquiry into impact of voluntary student unionism**

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*This submission has been authorised by the WUSA Council.*

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## **Introduction**

The University of Wollongong Undergraduate Students' Association (WUSA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Inquiry into the possible impact of the *Higher Education Support (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill*. In writing this submission, WUSA has conducted extensive consultation with undergraduate students at the University of Wollongong and in doing so, have identified a number of issues related to the impact of the Bill on the quantity and quality of services available at the University of Wollongong. Following this consultation and analysis, it is WUSA's conclusion that the introduction of the Bill will have an overall adverse impact on students at the University of Wollongong as it will result in a loss of essential services for over 14,000 undergraduate students and will deny students the non-partisan, non-political advocacy and representation currently provided by WUSA.

This submission will outline the services that are currently offered by WUSA and will use the experiences of universities in Western Australia as a framework for how the introduction of the Bill will impact upon those services. This submission will also examine broader implications of the introduction of the Bill for the University and the University community. In essence, the introduction of the Bill constitutes a funding cut to the University of Wollongong, as the University will have to bear the expense of providing those services that are not profitable enough to attract private suppliers. For example, after the introduction of voluntary student unionism in Western Australia, the Acting Vice-Chancellor of Edith Cowan University suggested that it had cost the University approximately \$100,000 to support the University Guild in its provision of a limited range of representational, social and cultural activities. As this suggests, the introduction of the Bill will result in additional funding pressures placed on the University of Wollongong and may effect a further reduction in funding for academic programs. It may be that the University of Wollongong has no choice but to carry the costs for the services currently funded directly by students, if it is to remain competitive at a local, national and international level.

## **What is WUSA?**

For over thirty years, WUSA has provided services and representation to the 14, 000 undergraduate students at the University of Wollongong. WUSA is a semi-autonomous sub-body of the University Council, run by democratically elected undergraduate students who volunteer their time to represent undergraduate student interests. WUSA is a professional organisation, which is committed to advocating on behalf of students, responsible and transparent student governance and non-profit customer service. WUSA provides services effectively and efficiently and thus delivers substantial value for money. Without WUSA its services may not be available or will be available only at an increased cost to students.

## **What services does WUSA provide?**

**1. Advocacy, Representation and Governance:** Elected WUSA representatives provide independent and confidential advocacy for individual undergraduate students on matters including dealing with University administration, academic staff, the library, CentreLink and tenancy issues. WUSA also provides essential and non-political representation for undergraduate students both within the University and the broader community. It provides a vital 'space' in which the different perspectives of marginalised groups, including indigenous students, international students, queer students and students with disabilities, are recognised and valued. WUSA has consistently demonstrated its ability to build strong relationships with key stakeholders and engage in productive and positive dialogue with colleagues in other units within the University and broader community.

WUSA directly contributes to the governance of the University through its participation in the University committees responsible for the development of procedures and policies directly affecting students. This includes mechanisms of quality assurance and review. It is thus an essential element in ensuring the continued integrity of the University's academic programs and in assisting the University in its pursuit of academic excellence. WUSA is also vital to University governance because it provides a layer of consultation and accountability between students and the University management and ensures that the needs and interests of students are a consideration in University decision-making

processes.

An important aspect of the governance role played by WUSA relates to the assistance WUSA provides to the University in ensuring that it satisfies its legal requirements. WUSA provides an independent audit of University policies and decisions and helps ensure that the University complies with its own policy framework and with broader legal requirements under anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation. For example, while the University has developed policies on anti-discrimination and equal opportunity, WUSA has taken responsibility for actively campaigning and advocating for the rights of indigenous students, international students, queer students and students with disabilities in relation to anti-discrimination and equal opportunity matters. WUSA's advocacy services assist the University in monitoring the impact of its policies and decisions on undergraduate students and can assist in detecting inconsistencies in the way that University policies are implemented between faculties and academic units. WUSA provides, in essence, an independent evaluation of the University's performance and practices. This independent audit is vital in terms of quality assurance and enhances accountability and transparent governance.

WUSA's role in ensuring monitoring and advocating for compliance with legislation such as anti-discrimination and occupational health and safety legislation is supplemented by the role that WUSA plays in the University's risk management processes. Due to WUSA's strong consultative processes with students, it is able to identify areas of risk efficiently and effectively and contribute to the University's risk management procedures. Areas of risk that have previously been identified by WUSA include the existence or emergence of discriminatory practices, instances of harassment, transport concerns, campus safety problems and occupational health and safety obligations.

**3. Social, intellectual and cultural events:** WUSA is vital to the creation and maintenance of a vibrant social, cultural and intellectual environment at the University. WUSA performs this crucial task through activities such as the publication of the student magazine, the Tertangala (which has, since 1962, provided students with publishing opportunities and is a valuable information channel); the organisation of social events; the funding and support of Clubs and Societies; support for campus collectives; the organisation of forums and debates; the coordination and funding of campus theme weeks and 'O' weeks; and the coordination of information campaigns on matters such as safe

sex, drink-spiking and student rights not to be discriminated against, vilified or harassed.

**4. General services:** WUSA provides a number of services that assist students in terms of their welfare and educational needs. These services include:

**(a) Second-hand book bank:** WUSA sell over \$130,000 worth of textbooks on consignment for students which can help students who are facing financial difficulties to obtain textbooks at a significantly cheaper rate than would otherwise be available and also provide an outlet for textbooks that students no longer need.

**(b) Transport:** WUSA is committed to encouraging sustainable modes of transport and has created an on-line carpooling service. WUSA also funds and coordinates a weekly workshop to teach and assist students in repairing and maintaining their bicycles. These have helped alleviate transport and parking congestion in and around the University.

**(c) Free barbecues and entertainment**

**(d) Free safe-sex products:** WUSA provides free condoms, dams, lubricants, and drink-spiking detectors.

**(e) Women's Space:** WUSA provides a quiet safe space for women.

**(f) Queer Space:** WUSA provide a quiet safe space for queer students and staff.

**(g) Emergency loans:** WUSA can provide students with an interest free loan of up to \$50

**(h) Photocopying:** WUSA photocopy rates are 36 per cent less than the photocopy rates provided by the University library.

**(i) Faxing**

**(j) Justice of the Peace**

## **Impact of the *Higher Education Support (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill* on WUSA and its provision of services**

Without WUSA, these services will cease to exist or will exist only at significantly increased prices. In making this assertion, WUSA has examined the initial membership impacts of VSU in Western Australia. The introduction of voluntary student unionism in Western Australia had a significant and adverse impact on membership levels at all universities in Western Australia, with only Murdoch University retaining more than thirty per cent of pre-voluntary student unionism membership rates.

On average, membership retention rates were approximately one fifth of pre-voluntary student unionism levels. There is no reason to assume that retention rates amongst University of Wollongong undergraduate students will be significantly higher or lower than the Western Australian average and it is this figure of twenty per cent that WUSA has used as the basis for its analysis. For WUSA, the loss of eighty per cent of its members would result in its operating budget decreasing from \$560,000 to approximately \$110,000. This would threaten the financial viability of WUSA and could result in WUSA having to adopt a user-pays system for WUSA services. This would be significantly detrimental to students at the University of Wollongong, particularly students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Other post-voluntary student unionism options – such as loss of essential services or their costs being carried by the University which will detract funding from other programs- are of similar detriment to students. While it is likely that commercial services will continue to operate post-voluntary student unionism, it is unlikely that the range of non-profit services, publications and advice/support currently offered by WUSA will continue. This is supported by the experiences of all five universities in Western Australia.

Based on the model that is included in the *Higher Education Support (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill*, the post-voluntary student unionism environment at the University of Wollongong looks dire. Based on the experiences of universities in Western Australia and WUSA's financial analysis, it is likely that the following WUSA services will be lost or significantly reduced:

Funding for Clubs and Societies- lost  
Childcare subsidy- lost  
Funding for Indigenous students' campaigns and projects - lost  
Funding for International students' campaigns and projects- lost  
Funding for Disabilities budget- lost  
Funding for environment campaigns and projects- lost  
Funding for women's campaigns and projects- lost  
Funding for Queer campaigns and projects- lost  
Student Conference funding- lost  
Nation representation body affiliation- lost  
Program of cultural and social events- reduced  
Policy and research support for WUSA representatives- significantly reduced  
Administrative support for WUSA representatives- significantly reduced  
Education and welfare advocacy- significantly reduced or lost  
Student publications- significantly reduced or lost

Only those services which are income generating, such as the operation of the second-hand bookbank and the photocopying/ faxing are likely to continue in their current form.

The impact of the Bill on student governance at the University of Wollongong will also be significant and it of great concern to students. If WUSA ceases to exist next year due to the introduction of the Bill, then this will undermine student representation and advocacy at the University of Wollongong. It is WUSA's contention that without this advocacy, the quality of education services for students offered at the University will decline significantly. Furthermore, without the advocacy services provided by WUSA it will also become more difficult for University Management to evaluate their decisions and policies in terms of their impact on students in key fundamental areas such as equity. Due to this reduction in accountability, WUSA envisages a loss of transparency and legitimacy within the University system.

The impact of the Bill will also adversely impact upon the range of services offered at the University of Wollongong by organisations other than WUSA, such as the University of Wollongong UniCentre, the University Recreation and Aquatic Centre (URAC) and Wollongong University Postgraduate Association (WUPA). While this submission deals primarily with the impact of the Bill on WUSA, its actual impact on students at the

University of Wollongong is likely to be far more significant than simply the loss of the essential services detailed above. Unfortunately however, while URAC and UniCentre provide services that are potentially profitable and commercially viable (and which are therefore likely to continue to be offered in the post-voluntary student unionism environment but at a higher cost to students) WUSA and its affiliate, WUPA, are vital because of the non-profit services that they offer, particularly advocacy and representation. It is these services that are most likely going to be lost or reduced and their loss will be of the greatest detriment to students and to the University of Wollongong as a whole.

It is the recommendation of WUSA that the *Higher Education Support (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill* be rejected because of the significant and negative impact on the quality and quantity of services available to students at the University of Wollongong. The massive reduction in funding that WUSA has forecast will occur with the introduction of the Bill represents a serious threat to the long-term viability of WUSA and undermines the ability of the University of Wollongong to meet the needs and interests of its students.