

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

Submitter: Jamie Harris
Policy Research and Advocacy Officer

Organisation: Wollongong University Postgraduate Association

Address: Building 116, Northfields Avenue
University of Wollongong NSW 2500

Phone: 02 4221 5289

Fax: 02 4221 4248

Email: jharris@uow.edu.au

To : **Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee**

From : **Jamie Harris, Policy Research and Advocacy Officer,
Wollongong University Postgraduate Association (WUPA)**

RE : **Inquiry into the provisions of the Higher Education
Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front
Union Fees) Bill 2005**

Dear Committee members,

I write to you as a member of staff of a student organisation at the University of Wollongong. I would like to express my concern with the implications of the proposed VSU legislation. Could I ask that the following information be considered as part of this Senate inquiry.

(1) assessment of the likely effect of the legislation on the provision of student services, and related consequences

At the University of Wollongong there are four student organisations: Wollongong Unicentre; University Recreation and Aquatic Centre (URAC); Wollongong Undergraduate Student Association (WUSA); and Wollongong University Postgraduate Association (WUPA). These organisations are funded through the compulsory service fee charged to all students. In 2005, this fee was \$351.50 for undergraduate students and \$360.10 for postgraduate students.

For postgraduates, the fee is allocated as \$199.10 to Unicentre, \$104.00 to URAC and \$57.00 to WUPA. A similar allocation is used for undergraduate student fees with WUSA as the beneficiary, instead of WUPA. I understand that WUSA is making a submission to the inquiry, and refer the Committee to that submission for information on how the undergraduate body perceives that the legislation will effect the provision of student services, and related consequences.

It is worth pointing out that as well as WUPA, which is tasked with representing and communicating postgraduate student interests to the University, the traditionally service-orientated and sports-orientated organisations at Wollongong (Unicentre and URAC) will be severely impacted upon by the proposed VSU legislation. First, the Unicentre provides a great range of facilities, services and activities (see www.unicentre.uow.edu.au) and second, URAC provides excellent sporting facilities and recreation opportunities for students (see www.uow.edu.au/urac). However, the focus of this submission will be on the impact of VSU on WUPA specifically. Nonetheless, the proposed changes will also impact on Unicentre, URAC and WUSA and will mean the introduction of user pays systems to currently subsidised services such as childcare, health care, food, entertainment, and sporting and cultural clubs.

WUPA is the smallest and youngest of the four student organisations at the University of Wollongong, and I fear that the proposed legislation will have the biggest relative impact on WUPA compared with URAC, Unicentre and WUSA. These organisations do have longer organisational histories and the benefit of accumulated assets, as well as much larger staffing numbers, whereas WUPA has only just managed to establish itself. The legislation may well be a fatal blow to our organisation, which would be unfair and

objectionable since we have proven ourselves to be highly effective in representing students and in contributing to the ethos of our university. We are proud of our accomplishments, which have helped us gain respect and a good reputation among the postgraduate community, and by the University and its staff.

Currently, WUPA's annual budget is around \$250,000 and out of this funding we employ two full-time staff and three part-time staff, and these jobs (my own included) may cease to exist under VSU. Some of our programs include social, cultural and academic programs, and we distribute publications, fund and administer a 24-hour computer laboratory with free printing and cheap photocopying, and we conduct research on the needs and views of postgraduates (see <http://www.uow.edu.au/wupa/pr.html>). We also contribute to policy and procedure within the University through representation on a large number of committees. Considering the high proportion of international students who are part of the postgraduate cohort at Wollongong, it is felt that WUPA also has an important role to fulfil in terms of fostering collegiality and providing social and cultural opportunities for international students. However, WUPA's contribution to the 'university experience' and to the 'Australian cultural experience' as well as our programs, facilities, and services are under serious threat from the VSU legislation.

An example of a vital service under threat from this proposed legislation which I would like to draw attention to is WUPA's advocacy and referral service. In my position, I am employed to provide independent guidance, information, advice, referrals and support to postgraduates. WUPA has seen fit to create this position to assist students in difficulties over financial support, personal problems or conflict with university authorities, and the work related to this function is seen as invaluable by students and the University. The advocacy service has assisted many students over the last few years, and continues to do so. This service helps with complaint handling within the university, and assists with resolving disputes and grievances in ways that ensure good outcomes for both individual students and for the university. The role of the student association advocate is clear, and that role is in support of the student. Having other university staff advocating can lead to a conflict of interest.

During 2004, 86 one-on-one phone consultations and individual casework meetings were held with postgraduate students (an increase of 25% on 2003). Students advised were mainly international (72%) rather than domestic (28%), and there were slightly more females (53%) seeking advice than males (47%). Considerably more coursework students (75%) sought advocacy support than research students (25%). The top faculties from which students came wanting help were from Commerce (particularly students studying at the Sydney Business School), Engineering, Arts, and Creative Arts. The most common issues postgrads wanted to talk about were appealing exam, assignment or thesis results, progress reports, intellectual property, supervision, and administrative problems. This year, the advocacy service has also been frequently accessed by students. Many students have been assisted with information, advice and support that are experiencing difficulties in their capacity as students, and as international students in a foreign country. One new aspect of the service is access to a Justice of the Peace. WUPA now has a JP on its staff, and this has proven to be highly utilised by both students and University staff needing certification of documents.

One of our most recent and laudable initiatives that I would like to mention briefly is the development of a new fully-refereed academic journal. The journal is called *Rhizome*,

and our board of referees consists of all professor level academics, most of whom are from the University of Wollongong, but we also have a number of external professors represented including academics from University of New South Wales, University of Sydney, University of Melbourne, University of Tasmania, Lulea University of Technology Sweden and Colgate University New York. The first volume for this journal is now in press, and the calibre of the articles is very high. For example, one article is contributed by a postgraduate researcher from the University's School of Earth and Environmental Sciences on her archaeological work on the Island of Flores, which recently attracted worldwide interest, with the discovery of *Homo floresiensis* (the 'Hobbit'). *Rhizome* seeks to showcase the best postgraduate research at the University of Wollongong, and to provide a forum for cross-disciplinary dialogue in the postgraduate community (see www.uow.edu.au/wupa/rhizome). WUPA has employed a doctoral student as the editor of *Rhizome*, and this position, and in fact the entire project budget will probably cease to exist if WUPA loses its funding due to the VSU legislation.

There are an enormous number of services, facilities and initiatives provided by or advanced by WUPA at the University of Wollongong which may well face extirpation under VSU. These include:

- The Postgraduate Resource Centre (PRC), which provides a computer laboratory (12 PC's) and free printing for postgraduate students who bring their own paper. We also provide a 5c photocopier, which is the cheapest on campus, and compares with the same copiers in the University library which are 11c. The PRC also provides a scanner, facsimile, student lounge area, microwave, and free tea and coffee. In peak periods, the PRC is utilised by about 100 students per day. Most of the PRC users are international coursework students, who don't have their own office space as the research students do in the University. The facility is also accessed 24 hours per day by those postgraduates living in the University's residential colleges. This facility and its student-oriented culture are under extreme threat from VSU.
- Emergency student loans. WUPA provides interest-free loans of up to \$75 to postgraduate students for emergency purposes such as purchase of a textbook, purchase of internet hours etc. This will cease to exist if WUPA is wound-up as a consequence of government legislation.
- Social activities. WUPA holds an enormously popular end-of-year ball for postgraduate students. We also hold BBQ's at least 5 times per year, and at each BBQ, at least 400 free meals are given out to postgraduate students. Often, we have guest speakers at the BBQ's or encourage students to talk with WUPA representatives about any issues that should be addressed in the University. Often these social events provide an excellent opportunity for international students to make friends, which is very important for students to settle into the University and to deal with the culture shock associated with living and studying in a new country.
- WUPAnews – an electronic fortnightly news bulletin which is sent via email to our 3,500 members. We keep members informed of seminars and other events in the university; help students who are seeking to recruit other students and community members for their postgraduate research questionnaires etc; and generally lift awareness of what projects and initiatives WUPA is working on.
- The Postgraduate Reporter – this is hard copy magazine with articles submitted by postgraduate students on issues of interest to the postgraduate community.

WUPA pays contributors at the rate of 5c per word. One of our part-time staff lays out the magazine and helps facilitate a media collective who are responsible for soliciting articles and organising advertising.

- Brochure Series – WUPA has produced a number of excellent brochures over the past year, and WUPA has been commended by a number of senior academics on their scope and content. The brochures include a Guide to Getting Published, Information for International Students, and a Women’s Handbook (see www.uow.edu.au/wupa/publications).

It should also be noted that WUPA, as a representative student body, gives postgrads a voice on many University committees. In 2004, WUPA participated in or made representations to the following decision-making bodies at the University of Wollongong: University Council, Academic Senate, University Research Committee, University Education Committee, Postgraduate Research Policy Committee, Investigation Committee (Academic Misconduct), Academic Appeal Committee, Library Consultative Committee, Equity and Student Support SubCommittee, Unicentre Student Development Committee, Campus, IT Policy Advisory Committee (Academic), and the Environmental Management Working Party. WUPA representatives also regularly meet with many of the key people and stakeholders within the University to raise issues of concern on behalf of the postgraduate community. The University of Wollongong benefits from the existence of WUPA, as a representative student body, because WUPA Council members serve and contribute much on academic committees and working parties of various kinds.

In conclusion, I would like to make the point that WUPA is essentially run by students for the benefit of students. It provides a vehicle for student participation in a broad range of extra curricular activities which are likely to play a significant role in the personal development of students. It is a not-for-profit, service-based organisation that exists purely to provide student support and representation. It is surely undeserved that WUPA and its members become the target of punitive legislation for fulfilling its stated objects (see WUPA constitution www.uow.edu.au/wupa) and providing, what is in my view, an important element in the social and cultural life of this university. WUPA, being closer to the student body (at the coalface) is well placed to directly engage the postgraduate community, to identify real or potential problems quickly, and to make representations to the University on behalf of students. Furthermore, the introduction of the legislation (as it now stands) would force the university to assume responsibility for many of the services provided by WUPA, and this effectively amounts to a funding cut for the university. Therefore, instead of students paying for these services through an amenities fee, the services will be funded by government, and therefore by the taxpayer. This seems a circular argument since the government is a long time advocate of user-pays systems.

At present, the continuation of WUPA is under threat. The organisation will need to comply with all legislative requirements relating to the collection and disbursement of student fees. In this regard, dialogue has been initiated with the University on how the services provided by WUPA such as meeting rooms, academic advice and advocacy, and our computer laboratory can be maintained and on how staff jobs and entitlements can be protected.