

16th June, 2005

Dear Senators,

I write to express my concern regarding the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005.

Whilst ostensibly this legislation is about freedom of association, I thought it was important that you understand that this legislation is likely to have significant negative consequences for Students (both current and potential), University Staff and the Bendigo Student Association (BSA), and as a consequence, for the wider Regional community and businesses.

In fact, the issue of “freedom of association” is a fatuous one in the case of La Trobe University, Bendigo where membership of the BSA is entirely voluntary, but all students pay a compulsory “General Services Fee” to the University, which is then applied towards providing a range of services and facilities which are accessible to all students enrolled at La Trobe University, Bendigo.

If this Bill is passed into legislation following the Coalition achieving a majority in the Senate from 1st July, 2005, it will become illegal for any University to compulsorily collect fees from Students for anything other than Academic Purposes, resulting in an immediate funding shortfall for services provided to Students at La Trobe University, Bendigo which totals in excess of \$1.1 Million in 2005.

Of the amount expected to be collected from this year's General Services Fee, the Bendigo Student Association will receive approximately 75% (\$858,000). These funds enable us to provide the great diversity of services which assist students to make the most of their experience during the period of their studies at La Trobe University, Bendigo.

Full details of the services with which we support students can be obtained from our website: www.bsabendigo.com.au

Examples of services which receive funding from the General Services Fee include:

- * Social functions during Orientation Week
- * Student Representation and Advice on Academic matters
- * Student Diary
- * International Students Guide / Mature Age Students Guide
- * A diverse range of Student Clubs and Societies
- * BSA Art Awards (formerly Siens)
- * Comprehensive Sport & Recreation Programme, including On-Campus and University Games participation

- * Evolution Sports and Fitness Centre
- * Student Employment Service
- * Student Information Centre
- * Printing & Photocopying Service
- * Second Hand Book Sales
- * Accommodation Listing
- * Trips & Tours and Short Course Programmes
- * Student Poverty Relief - Breakfast and Lunch Programmes

In addition to the amount that the BSA receives, \$50,000 is provided as a subsidy to students using the Childcare Centre. Loss of this subsidy is likely to result in fewer students being able to return to study whilst they have young children, and negatively impact their future economic position.

The University receives the balance of the General Services Fee (approximately \$210,000). Amongst other things, these funds are used to employ the Campus Nurse and contribute to the Medical Service, as well as partly funding the University Orientation Programme, Academic Skills programmes, the Graduate Careers Officer, the Transition Co-ordinator and Campus Security.

I believe that all of these services are essential to ensuring that students are able to achieve their maximum potential from their University experience, and to maintain a vibrant Campus life.

In turn, it is through participating in many of these activities that students develop social networks, which research shows are an important factor in ensuring that those students "connect" with the university environment and both remain and succeed in their chosen courses.

Future employers of graduates, and the communities of which they subsequently become a part, are also the beneficiaries of the increased skills gained by those students who undertake the opportunities to develop their event planning, leadership and team-work skills which are afforded by their participation in many of the activities which rely for funding on the General Services Fee.

As General Manager of the Bendigo Student Association, it is obvious that I have a vested interest in maintaining the "status quo". However, I ask that you also consider the fact that many of the people who work within Student Services Organisations, including myself, consider that the work we do is making a valuable contribution to the lives of students, their ability to satisfactorily complete their studies, and, ultimately, to ensuring that Universities graduate well-rounded students who have the skills and ability to excel in their professions.

As a father of three school age children, it also concerns me that services and facilities may not be available when my children are at the stage of their lives when they will be looking at their University options. If they do need to leave this region to attend a Capital City University, I would hope that there would be sufficient activities and social groups for them to "fit-in" quickly and build those networks which will be vital to their success as students. I would also hope that if they have issues during their

University studies, that there will be somebody to whom they can turn for support, or to intervene on their behalf, as the power imbalance between individual students and a University administration is not one that guarantees equity and a just outcome.

From my own perspective, I also believe that much of the valuable advocacy work which is done by our organisation cannot continue within a “user-pays” VSU environment.

In the past, many of our “successes” in representing student interests have occurred, not in adversarial situations, but in being involved, consulted, or becoming aware of changes or issues with University administration. We have then been in a position to lobby to protect student interests, and to ensure that outcomes are at least fair for students. None of these can ever hope to be funded by a separate, discrete charge.

Again, from my experience, it is clear that those students who are most in need of support and the presence of an advocate for them in their dealings with the University, need to be actively encouraged to obtain that support, and would be most unlikely to seek that support if it was only available to them at commercial rates.

I ask you to closely examine the Bill, and ensure that appropriate amendments are made to ensure that future students continue to receive the additional services and opportunities necessary to ensure that their University experience is the best it can possibly be.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue further with you.

Yours Sincerely,

Rob Stephenson FCPA