

# 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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**Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
Legislation Committee on the provisions of the *Higher Education Support Amendment  
(Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005***

**EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY**

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The following is a submission from Edith Cowan University (ECU) on the provisions of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005*. The submission addresses the following matters:

- ECU's experience with voluntary student unionism
- likely effect of the proposed Commonwealth legislation on the provision of student services at ECU
- need for a compulsory amenities and services fee

**ECU's experience with voluntary student unionism**

The experience of ECU with voluntary student unionism is highly relevant to the Senate Inquiry given ECU's lack of resources as a relative young university and the difficulties posed by its multi-campus structure.

In 1994, the State Government banned compulsory student unionism in Western Australia. At the same time, the Federal Government provided Commonwealth funds to Student Guilds affected by the State Government's ban. Funding provided by the Commonwealth however ended in 1996 with the change of Federal Government.

The income of the ECU Student Guild fell from \$1.85m in 1996 to \$122,000 in 1998. Discontinuities in funding resulted in the significant disruption in the provision of non-academic services to students during a period when the University was opening its new flagship campus at Joondalup.

In order to ensure that the Guild was able to function, albeit at a level of activity considerably lower than previously, the University agreed in 1998 to provide some funds to support specific Guild functions.

From 1998 to 2002 (inclusive), ECU provided cash and in-kind support to the Student Guild of nearly \$750,000. Cash allocations were made to the Guild to enable it to conduct activities for the direct benefit of students, such as Orientation activities and on-campus events, plus assisting with the cost of conducting Guild elections.

Additionally, during this period responsibility for key student amenities was assumed by the University (sporting facilities, medical services, catering, bookshops etc) at considerable expense.

The University demonstrated substantial and sustained support for the Student Guild during this particularly difficult period in its history because of the belief that an effectively functioning Student Guild is an important element in the University achieving its mission.

It should however be noted that the funds provided by the University were funds that would otherwise have been used to sustain and enhance its core functions of teaching and research.

## **Likely effect of the proposed Commonwealth legislation on the provision of student services at ECU**

The purpose of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005* (the Bill) is twofold: first, to ensure that no university student is compelled to join a student organisation, union or guild as a condition of enrolment; and second, to ensure that universities do not compel students to pay for non-academic services unless the student chooses to use the particular service.

Under amendments made to the *Edith Cowan University 1984* (the Act) which became operational in January 2003, no student at ECU is compelled to join the Student Guild as a condition of enrolment. On enrolment all students automatically became members of the Student Guild unless they choose to opt-out.

However, under the new provisions the University does collect a compulsory annual Amenities and Services Fee which is used to fund a number of important non-academic services and facilities which enhance the lives of students on campus.

The fee has been set by the University Council on the advice of the Student Guild at the following modest rates:

Full-time students:	\$100.00
Part-time students:	\$50.00
External students:	\$30.00

The amount of fees collected each year is approximately \$1.5 million.

Under the amendments made to the Act, the University must hand over to the Student Guild a percentage of the fees collected that is not less than 51% of the fees collected or the percentage equivalent to the percentage of students who are members of the Student Guild, whichever is the higher.

Under the Act, the University Council must prescribe the measures by which the Student Guild is to account for the fees received. However, there are no sanctions for non-compliance under the Act.

The fees are used for the provision of a wide range of agreed amenities and services to students, including representation and advocacy, health and welfare services, and cultural, sporting and recreational activities. At ECU the Guild and University Council must agree on specific allocations to broad categories of expenditure.

ECU caters for thousands of international students and cash strapped local students who would otherwise struggle to pay for services on a user-pays system.

If the Bill progresses through Parliament in its current form, the University will have difficulty sustaining the level of non-academic services currently provided to its students.

In an environment where Commonwealth funding to universities has decreased in real terms over recent years without indexation (from 57% of the total funding provided to universities in 1996 to 41% in 2003)<sup>1</sup> and reliance on alternative sources of funding has increased, as a new generation university ECU does not have the accumulated wealth or the legacy of earlier investments of the longer established universities to withstand the loss of funding flowing from the Bill.

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<sup>1</sup> *Key Statistics on Higher Education*, Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee (2005), page 3.

In particular, the following effects are likely:

- a number of staff retrenchments in the Student Guild
- reduced marketing advantage when recruiting both local and international students
- a diminished university experience for all students

**Need for a compulsory amenities and services fee**

In order to help the University provide a supportive campus environment for its students, Senators are urged to consider the need for a 'compulsory amenities and services fee'.

The fee could be used to support a set of key facilities and services that meet only the pastoral needs of students. A common set of services, to be tailored to suit the circumstances of each university, could include:

- Sporting facilities
- Computer facilities
- International student service
- Child care
- Dental services
- Welfare services
- Photocopy facilities
- Sporting clubs and societies

To ensure the optimal and transparent provision of services to students, the University acknowledges there is scope to improve how a compulsory amenities and services fee could be administered.

On behalf of the students studying at ECU I urge you to give consideration to this issue.



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