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To: EET, Committee (SEN)
Subject: submission for senate estimate committee on Voluntary Student Unionism legislation.



Inquiry into the Provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment

(Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005

The assumption by many conservative politicians that the student union services are under exploited does have some validity, however the argument has been taken too far. I know many suburban students (myself included) who do thoroughly exploit the union's services and get a great deal out of them.

Many students actually use the student union's services without realising it. For example, most maths students at the University of Melbourne would be familiar with the Melbourne University maths and Stats Society. They publish a magazine during semester and hold public lectures on interesting mathematical topics. I often go along to these and always read their magazine – and I know that most students studying maths do likewise. However, many fail to see the correlation between this society and the student union. (Note: I'm not in any way involved with this Society, it is just a good example.) Many other departments have similar groups backed by the student union.

The student union allows, as another example, the Melbourne University Food Co-op to lease property on campus for a cheap rate. A large number of students use this facility (again, I'm simply a user of the facility and have no involvement with it's organisation). Without the student union the future of this facility would be uncertain.

I have been actively involved in one group, the Melbourne University Environment Collective. We organise campaigns and activities on campus which are centered around the environment. For example we are currently running a campaign to encourage the University of Melbourne to increase how much green energy it provides. We are also running a campaign to improve cycling facilities on campus. The Environment Collective also arranges fun activities like tree planting, public lectures and free breakfasts. A large number of students benefit from the work this collective does. Further, being an active member of the collective I can honestly say that without it the University, for me, would be a very dull place. Becoming active in the collective (it is open to anyone) completely changed my entire attitude towards study at the University for the better. I believe that I will be able to make a better contribution to society because of my involvement.

I believe that the proposed Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) legislation will have an extremely detrimental effect on university life. For example, I am doubtful that any of the above organizations

and collectives would be able to exist under the legislation. All of them do require funds and student leadership to run properly. I am concerned that even a version of VSU that only excluded funds going to 'political activities' would be detrimental. Would an environment collective which is mostly apolitical be considered by the government (or regulatory body) as political? The full time office bearers who are in charge of the environment department are part of the democratically elected student representative body. Without their assistance the Environment Collective would not be able to sustain itself.

Of course, the environment collective is not everyone's 'cup of tea'. Many students clearly wouldn't have any interest in what we do, far less consider joining. However, there are plenty of other services that these students do use. Various clubs, societies and collectives on campus offer the majority of students attractive social and academic activities. I believe that most students do use the services of the unions one way or another. Limiting the student union to sports and activities clubs would upset this balance.

Finally, I am skeptical that an apolitical model of student unionism would really be apolitical. Someone has to decide how the body is run, and even if it is run as a corporate entity, it would still be political. A body which is taking students money unconditionally must be administrated by a democratically elected student representative body. To do otherwise would be akin to asking Australian taxpayers to be ruled by some large corporation (or even our monarch). Students are paying a 'tax' to the student union, it is only right that students decide how it is run. If the majority of students feel they are not getting anything out of the union, they should be free to run for election on the grounds that they would reduce union fees. Such a decision has no place in the hands of the government of Australia.