

# 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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## **CONTENTS**

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<b>1.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>pg 3</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>CURRENT SUPPORT FOR POSTGRADUATES</b>	<b>pg 4</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>IMPACT OF VSU</b>	<b>pg 5</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>TESTIMONIALS</b>	<b>pg 6</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>pg 8</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>pg 9</b>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

James Cook University, North Queensland is an example of a high quality regional tertiary institution that has fulfilled its objectives at encouraging the participation, engagement, internationalization and integration of remote and regional students into higher education. Located geographically on the outskirts of Townsville, JCUPSA offers a unique perspective on the Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees.

“The northern Queensland region is characterised by a highly dispersed population, with a large number of rural and remote communities. In common with many areas of regional Australia, participation rates in higher education in northern Queensland are appreciably lower than those in metropolitan centres.

The University has a vital and constructive role in the cultural and environmentally sustainable economic development of northern Queensland based upon its commitment to academic excellence. JCU aims to maintain and enhance a world-wide reputation, at the same time as serving its regional community.

Some of the features that individually distinguish James Cook University and that help to define its unique combination of strengths, responsibilities, and challenges, are as follows:

- JCU is a multi-campus, medium-sized Australian regional university with a broad curriculum and a very strong research focus.
- It is one of the most successful research universities in regional Australia, and receives high levels of international recognition for a number of its areas of research. It also has a relatively high proportion of research students.
- JCU plays a major part in the enhancement of the intellectual capital of the region. It is the region’s premier provider of professional graduates, most of whom choose to practise and work in the region.
- A significant number of JCU students are amongst the first generation of their family to have gained access to university education. JCU also has a high proportion of indigenous students and is particularly alert to the need to enhance cultural and intellectual understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.
- The University has sole responsibility in its very large catchment area for the teaching of a broad range of disciplines, and it will continue to determine the breadth of its coverage according to strategic decisions informed by changing societal demands and the resources available.
- JCU is, through its strategic commitment to internationalisation, becoming a major provider of higher education to overseas students, not only by bringing students from other countries to study at its campuses and study centres in Australia, but also by teaching in offshore centres in partnership with in-country institutions.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> JCU In the Third Millennium 2003-2008, Revised March 2003

## 2. CURRENT SUPPORT FOR POSTGRADUATES BY THE JCUPSA

JCUSA is an institution which provides approximately 14,500 students with services that they are unable to access or receive in the local community. The James Cook University Postgraduate Association (JCUPSA), existing under the auspices of the JCUSA, is the representative organisation for approximately 2,500 postgraduate students at James Cook University and services both Townsville (Douglas and Vincent) and Cairns campuses as well as its satellite locations.

The JCUPSA has its own management committee of elected postgraduate students including International, Remote, Women's, Indigenous and Faculty representatives. Meetings are open to all postgraduate students.

### **The services of the JCUPSA include:**

- communication between students, the JCUPSA and the University
- academic support, advocacy and referrals for students
- Postgraduate representation on University committees
- regular email newsletters to postgraduate students
- development of social and intellectual links between Postgraduate students
- information about relevant higher education issues and policy changes
- seminars and workshops to promote professional development.

The JCUPSA also organises meetings between the JCUPSA staff, Management Committee and students. Postgraduate Induction days are organised once a year in conjunction with the Dean of Postgraduate Studies at Townsville and Cairns. The JCUPSA website has a range of useful information on news, issues and events, including: scholarships and funding opportunities, links to various researcher databases, and employment opportunities.

The JCUPSA employs one staff member on a permanent basis, to oversee the activities of the JCUPSA. **The role of the Research and Information Officer** is primarily one of providing support and advice to Postgraduate students; advising the Committee on relevant matters and policy changes; and undertaking research activities and preparing submissions on behalf of the JCUPSA.

JCUPSA is an affiliate of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and has a representative on the National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAAC).

The JCUPSA has a close working relationship with the Graduate Research School and Dean of Postgraduate Studies and the University welcomes and supports the inclusion of postgraduate representation on the following University Committees:

- University Council
- Board of Higher Degrees by Research
- Academic Board
- Board of Coursework Studies
- Ceremonial & Honorary Degrees Committee

- Academic Support Advisory Committee
- Faculty Committees
- Research Committee
- Student Liaison Group

There are also a range of academic services and programs for postgraduate students through the Graduate Research School. The two bodies work together, providing postgraduate liaison officers and facilitating the Generic Skills Program. Liaison Officers work within each school to provide support where there are supervisor conflicts and assist in gaining access to resources and advice on student's progress. The Generic Skills Program has high patronage and provides a range of short courses such as Writing and Editing, Library Searches, Field and Safety, Statistics and Career Advice.

## **IMPACT OF VSU**

The introduction of VSU will significantly reduce the diversity of services and facilities for students. Why? Unlike our metropolitan counterparts who operate within competitive markets, the Townsville and Cairns campuses are in the unenviable position of being sole provider of essential welfare and academic support services for students.

Additionally, the campuses are geographically isolated from the city centre which makes it difficult for the thousands of students to access transport, food, sporting and cultural pursuits. The Student Association, funded by student fees, has traditionally provided services to address the situation, thus assisting the development of a campus life which sustains students during the difficult process of integration into the community and university culture.

As previously mentioned, JCU has an international reputation as a leading education facility in area of tropical related research and fields of study. As a consequence, research programs have received considerable funding from governments and private enterprise. The international students attracted by this scenario have unique challenges in acclimatizing to the Australian tertiary environment and in particular the Townsville community. The JCUPSA provides support for these students so that their special needs in this transitional phase are addressed while at the same time encouraging participation in campus activities.

Due to increase in numbers of students choosing to undertake postgraduate study at JCU, the workload of the Research and Information Officer has substantially increased to the point where relying on only one staff member is impracticable. It is the view of the JCUPSA that VSU will threaten staff retention as finances are channeled into provision of the most basic of services. As it expands, the University will require **MORE** staff experienced in dealing with the needs of postgraduate students, particularly those undertaking research of regional importance. As a consequence of VSU, we expect there will be **LESS** staff.

The University Council has directed its focus to developing the research capacity of the University and ensuring its undergraduate programs are maintained. With the introduction of VSU, the University has indicated that their choices are either to

continue to find ways to support the SA who will in turn operate as many services as possible, or to provide these services directly. JCU, like many smaller universities has already indicated that the latter option is virtually unfeasible.

**In the course of the ACCC hearing in 2002, the JCU proposed that the result of a loss of services would have a three-fold effect. It would:**

- Make it more difficult for some students to graduate from their chosen course of study and in extreme cases make it impossible for a student to enter study. Specifically, Indigenous students and other minority groups face obstacles that defy market solutions.
- Detract from the overall educational experience by limiting access to cultural, sporting and other socially based programs. As a regional university, students come from diverse backgrounds and these programs often provide the sole access to a social network of support.
- And in light of the university's commitment to internationalisation and growth, a cut back in service provisions would mean that JCU would face greater difficulty in competing for international students with the major universities. This aspect of the effect of the VSU legislation is disturbing in its apparent discrimination against the survival of regional universities.

## **TESTIMONIALS**

### **NO.1**

Dear JCU PSA,

I wish to formally thank you for everything you did for me during my candidature at JCU. It was through your academic support and advocacy that I was able to reach an agreement with the university and complete my master's degree. I owe my academic success to the support you provided for me.

Regards,  
International Student (name withheld)

## NO.2

Dear PSA,

I am a PhD student who, as an integral part of my research, lives in a remote location more than 500km from the University campus. My candidature has suffered from some serious conflicts involving poor supervision and the failure of the University grievance processes to reach an appropriate resolution.

The JCU Student Association was of great assistance to me in a meeting with University administration to discuss my grievances. An academic co-ordinator from the Student Association, assisted me with the preparation of my case, informed me of my rights as a student and possible pathways of action. She assisted me during the meeting in keeping the discussion from straying into debates over issues surrounding my candidature that would otherwise have prevented the negotiations from moving forward. Her input was essential in reaching a resolution and having it recorded for future reference.

Despite my remote location, the Student Association has taken measures to ensure I have ready access to their resources and representatives, which is something that the University itself is often unable to do.

Best regards,  
PhD student (name withheld)

## NO.3

### **Experience with the support for students and academics.**

By Richard Monypenny, Head of Economics, School of Business, Townsville Campus.

Over the last few years I have sent students (probably 15-20) to see the JCUSA Academic Coordinator because I know that they will be well looked after and will be helped to solve their problems.

Usually the students are at risk of dropping out of their study at JCU. Usually the student needs a person to help them rather than just being referred to the web to get the relevant information.

If the Academic Coordinator were not available I would probably not have the time for me to look after the students and I would expect that they would drop out.

In my view if somebody in the University community does not provide the sort of service that the Academic Coordinator provides then I would understand how these students could feel that we have let them down.

I think that a Regional University should not allow these students to feel that we have let them down.

## **NO. 4**

### **To whom it may concern**

Research students are an essential component of the research life of a university, make a very significant contribution to research and innovation in Australia and are essential to Australia's future as a knowledge economy. Research students range in age from their early 20s to more than 60 years. Some students hold senior jobs and are undertaking research training to improve their skills or because of the opportunity to undertake research in a supportive environment. Thus research students provide very important and mature contributions to all facets to university life. By the time they finish they are expected to know more about the topic of their research than their supervisor.

The relationship between the research student and the university, especially the relationship between the research student and his or her supervisory panel is crucial to the student's completing a Masters by Research or PhD degree successfully in a timely manner. The JCU Postgraduates Students' Association provides services which are essential to maximising the chances that research students have the supportive research environment required for successful and timely completion. Such services provided by the JCUPSA include:

- Choosing the research student representatives on key university committees which develop policies to support research students, especially the Board of Higher Degrees by Research, Academic Board and University Council
- Conducting independent audits of compliance by Faculties and Schools with University policies designed to provide a high quality and research training environment
- Communicating university policies to research students from a student's perspective
- Supporting activities such as student induction and generic skills training
- Providing independent support and advice to students with problems that are impeding their progress.

As Dean of Graduate Research Studies at JCU, I have key responsibilities for policy development and pastoral care of our research students. I could not do my job effectively without the support I receive from the Postgraduate Students Association particularly their paid staff, who I find extremely dedicated, helpful and wise in their judgment. In my opinion it is crucial that such staff continue to be employed in a manner which ensures their independence from the University.

Yours sincerely,  
Helene Marsh  
Dean Graduate Research Studies

### **CONCLUSION**

The JCUPSA believes that the introduction of VSU will severely compromise not only the quantity of services and facilities provided for students, but more importantly, will impair the quality of service provision.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The JCUPSA recommends that the Senate act responsibly to reject the Bill in its entirety. Due recognition must be granted to the compelling arguments made by this, and the many other submissions received focusing on the important role student organizations have in university life.
2. The JCUPSA recommends that particular consideration should be given to the plight of regional universities when considering the model of VSU legislation. The challenges involved in providing quality tertiary education to people in regional Australia are issues that highlight the inequity of this legislation. The mass of support from public figures who benefited from the university experience in the past, shows that it cannot be argued that ‘user pays’ principles offset the benefits to students and academic staff alike.
3. Failing Recommendation 1, and in light of support from members of parliament such as Barnaby Joyce, JCUPSA believes that the Victorian model of VSU legislation holds out the best hope for a reasonable compromise that will satisfy the federal government and the students based at regional universities.
4. JCUPSA recommends that the Senate Employment Workplace Relations and Education Committee recommend to the Senate that the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Upfront Union Fees) Bill 2005* be amended to allow higher education providers to collect a compulsory fee to ensure the provision of specific non-academic services.

The recommended amendment should allow expenditure of a compulsory fee to support the following activities:

- Academic advocacy and welfare
- Postgraduate support and services
- Student employment services
- Sport and recreation services and facilities
- Childcare services
- Academic, social, cultural and sporting clubs and societies
- Student Insurance
- International Student services
- Provision of Orientation week activities