

# 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**

<b>Submitter/s:</b>	Kate Shearer, Theatre Administrator – Union House Theatre, M U Student Union Ltd Susie Dee, Artistic Director – Union House Theatre, M U Student Union Ltd Sarah Austin, Mudfest Co-ordinator – Mudfest 9, M U Student Union Ltd Sally Reiffel, Office Manager – La Trobe University Student Theatre and Film Office Bob Pavlich, Director - La Trobe Union Student Theatre and Film Office Yvonne Virsik, Artistic Director - Monash Student Theatre, Monash Student Association Jim Rimmer, Community Development Officer - Victorian College of the Arts Student Union Marc Morel, Performing Arts Coordinator – RMIT Union Arts Lynne Ellis, Director-in-residence – RMIT Union Arts
<b>Organisation/s:</b>	Union House Theatre, M U Student Union Ltd Mudfest 9, M U Student Union Ltd La Trobe University Student Theatre and Film Office Monash Student Theatre, Monash Student Association RMIT Union Arts, RMIT University Victorian College of the Arts Student Union
<b>Address/s:</b>	Union House Theatre & Mudfest 9 M U Student Union Ltd First Floor Union House University of Melbourne Vic 3010  La Trobe Student Theatre and Film Office Student Union, La Trobe University, Bundoora Vic 3083  Victorian College of the Arts Student Union St Kilda Road, Southbank Vic 3006  RMIT Union RMIT University, 124 Latrobe Street Melbourne 3000

	Monash Student Theatre Monash Student Association Campus Centre, Blg 10 Monash University Clayton Vic 3800
<b>Phone/s:</b>	Union House Theatre (03) 83446964 Mudfest 9 (03) 83448869 La Trobe Student Theatre and Film Office (03) 94791198 Monash Student Theatre (03) 9905 8173 RMIT Union Arts (03) 9925 3713 Victorian College of the Arts Student Union (03) 96821123
<b>Email/s:</b>	k.shearer@union.unimelb.edu.au s.dee@union.unimelb.edu.au s.austin@union.unimelb.edu.au s.reiffel@latrobe.edu.au <a href="mailto:bob.pavlich@latrobe.edu.au">bob.pavlich@latrobe.edu.au</a> student.theatre@adm.monash.edu.au yvonne.virsik@adm.monash.edu.au philip.norton@adm.monash.edu.au union.theatre@rmit.edu.au cd@vcasu.org.au

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## Who we are?

Amenities fees collected by universities are vital to run performing and visual arts services for students at universities (such as productions, exhibitions, workshops, mentorship schemes, artist in residency programs, engagement of professional artists and on-going technical and creative support to hundreds of student performing arts groups). Many student arts departments at University Student Unions across Australia will be decimated by this legislation. We represent five student performing arts organisations in student unions in Melbourne – including Union House Theatre and Mudfest at Melbourne University's Student Union Ltd, La Trobe University Student Theatre and Film Office, RMIT's Union Theatre, Monash University's Student Union Theatre and The Victorian College of the Arts Student Union.

Student Union Arts Organisations excite and engage students in the performing and visual arts. They do this by:

- Role modelling and mentoring industry practice
- Educating, extending and encouraging students in the performing and visual arts
- Providing an environment of learning through skills development and experimentation
- Providing safe and affordable venues for students
- Building community through social and cultural activities
- Pursuing outreach and partnerships with the wider community
- Offering opportunity for young people to develop a calling beyond their initial studies at university through diverse and stimulating extra-curricular activities.

## History:

### Union House Theatre

Union House Theatre has been the breeding ground for hundreds of arts professionals who have

worked both nationally and internationally over the past 150 years. Each of these people from the anonymous to the feted has played a vital role in fostering a community of artistic expression at the University of Melbourne.

The impressive alumni include: Actors such as Zoe Caldwell (winner of 4 Tony Awards), Barry Humphries, Reg Livermore, Max Gillies, Graeme Blundell, Alan Hopgood, Jean-Paul Hussey, and Cate Blanchett. Comedian performers such as Steve Vizard, Rod Quantock, Magda Szubanski, Michael Veitch, Santo Cilauro, Mick Molloy, Tom Gleisner and Rob Sitch. Writers whose early works were produced include David Williamson, Jack Hibberd, Louis Nowra, John Romeril, Sivan Gabrielovich and Lally Katz. Many young directors, choreographers and technicians found their feet working with student groups. People including Lindy Davies, Barrie Kosky, Lucien Savron, Rose Myers, David Corbet, Richard Vabre, Paul Jackson, Anastasi Siotas and Melinda Hetzel are just a selection of alumni. Even businessman Richard Pratt and academic Germaine Greer were regular performers on the Union Theatre stage.

Please see the website: [www.must.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.must.unimelb.edu.au) for further information on student performing arts at Melbourne University.

### Mudfest

Mudfest was established in 1990 as the Melbourne University Drama Festival with an aim of recognising and promoting the rich and significant tradition of theatre at Melbourne University. After two successful annual festivals, a decision was taken to expand the Festival's programme into a broader range of artforms, whilst reducing its frequency to once every two years. In 1993, the 'D' effectively changed its definition to 'diversity' and the first biennial Mudfest was presented.

Mudfest1 (1990), Mudfest2 (1991) and Mudfest3 (1993) were all presented under the auspices of The Australian Centre. For Mudfest4 (1995) the responsibility shifted to the English Department. With Mudfest5 (1997), the Melbourne University Student Union (MUSU) became responsible for the festival, and has retained responsibility ever since.

The Festival is now the largest student arts festival in Australia with Mudfest9 encompassing over 70 different events across a diverse and exciting range of art forms and featuring students from La Trobe University, Deakin University, RMIT and VCA.

### La Trobe University Student Theatre and Film Office

La Trobe University Student Theatre and Film Office encourages and facilitates theatre, film and music activity by students from La Trobe University Bundoora campus. La Trobe University has a very strong tradition in the performing arts and is continuing to gain a reputation for theatre, film and music produced by current and past students.

La Trobe University Student Theatre and Film Office been the breeding ground of some of Australia's most successful performers (most notable Corinne Grant from *Rove Live* and Tim Ross of *Merrick and Rosso* fame). Although the university may not have the history of the more established institutions, La Trobe's Student Theatre and Film Office has entrenched itself as part of the cultural landscape of its university.

### Monash University Student Union Theatre

Monash Student Theatre has existed since the sixties. Professional staff are employed to create an artistic program, learning experiences for students and to facilitate students' own artistic expression through theatre. In this time, hundreds of pieces have been produced which create a vibrant culture on campus for students and the wider community and set up frameworks in which students have learnt to be future leaders. One student who benefitted from these experiences and now enjoys that rarity of a vibrant full-time career in the arts is current Monash Student Theatre Artistic Director, Yvonne Virsik, a Monash graduate and former participant in Student Theatre. Dozens of Yvonne's friends from student theatre at Monash are currently working in the arts and as community leaders. Their time involved in Student Theatre has in many cases offered them much more training for their careers than their degrees.

### RMIT Union Arts

RMIT Union has supported and encouraged student performing arts programs throughout its 35 plus years. RMIT University does not offer academic programs in performance, and so the resources offered by RMIT Union for students from a variety of disciplines to engage with theatre, dance, music, and other performance art forms represent the only opportunity students currently have available to them at this institution. RMIT Union Arts focuses on supporting & encouraging networking and leadership opportunities for the large and diverse mix of emerging artists in the arts at RMIT University, as well as supporting access programs for students who purely engage in the Arts for fun, or experience.

### Victorian College of the Arts Student Union

VCASU membership is undoubtedly small in comparison to a number of other student representative organisations but our members have very particular needs and we believe our constituency is well serviced. VCASU is a revenue neutral, not-for-profit, service-based association that exists to provide support and services for students on the Victorian College of the Arts campus. As we have one of the nations highest voting turnouts in Student Union elections the organisation is truly representative in its makeup.

### **What do we do?**

#### Union House Theatre

Union House Theatre has been described as an 'engine room' for students arts in Australia and is committed to a program of productions, workshops, creative developments, playreadings, mentorships, seminars and other events that expand and fuel the creative opportunities of Melbourne University students.

Union House Theatre is dedicated to a number of other services for students including: role-modelling industry practice through the creation of a season of productions each year with a professional creative team, providing three safe and affordable venues for hire of the highest technical and Occupational Health and Safety standards and supporting over sixty student and community organisations in the development of their own work each year through a range of educational, administrative and technical resources and support structures.

Apart from performance, arts management or technical skills gained from performances, workshops or mentorship schemes, there are many transferable skills and personal benefits for students participating in Union House Theatre activities from time management and organisational skills to increased self-esteem, identity and confidence in front of an audience. Many employers seek young people who were involved in arts activities while at university for the benefits of social development, communication and creative problem solving which are all highly valued in the work force.

## Mudfest

Mudfest is a highly participatory, multi-arts festival supporting and celebrating the creative work of tertiary student from Melbourne University, VCA and across Melbourne. The festival is committed to showcasing, developing and supporting the creative work of students and providing a supportive platform for the work to experience public critique. The festival provides a forum for exploration, innovation and experimentation for students outside of the curriculum.

Mudfest achieves this by: presenting a biennial three-week festival featuring a diversity of arts events and activities across all art- forms which is professionally production managed, publicised and artistically supported; working with students in the development of new work; resourcing students with information, skills development and infrastructure support; working with students to ensure project viability, financial responsibility and the Occupational Health and Safety of Festival activities and events; exposing students to industry professionals for skills development and industry experience and giving student arts a positive public profile.

## La Trobe University Student Theatre and Film Office

In the three years (on average) it takes for a student to receive an undergraduate degree, La Trobe University Student Theatre and Film produces around 60 plays and 25 short films, involving over 1000 student performers, writers, directors & backstage artists. Getting involved in extracurricular activities is the best way to ensure student's time in University is fulfilling and enjoyable. Through these projects, students gain skills, knowledge, self-empowerment and most importantly, an opportunity to make friends who share a passion for theatre, film & music.

## Monash University Student Union Theatre

Monash Student Theatre currently creates a rich performance program each year. The Artistic Director chooses a number of diverse projects to direct herself and takes submissions from students for pieces they want to mount. Students are involved in every step of the production process from acting to production management, to costume design, lighting and often writing. Monash Student Theatre also runs an excellent workshop program with professional tutors, manages a venue and supervise its safe and creative use. It offers career guidance and guidance to all theatrical groups who seek it including the performance clubs at Monash with their productions. Monash Student Theatre offers forums with professionals to help students become informed about the arts and currently runs a Nationwide Playwrights' Competition.

## RMIT Union Arts

RMIT Union Arts creates a rich program of events, exhibitions, and other activities in performance and other art forms across the major campuses of RMIT University each year, resourced by a theatre venue, galleries, and professional staff support. Additionally we support student-initiated Arts programs, and have a strong "arts collective" focus, with strong participation in sound art, musical performance, and the visual arts, amongst others. We offer a grants program to develop and support emerging artists, and foster a sense of community within RMIT University for everyone engaged in the arts, at whatever level of interest, experience, or professional practice, to encourage cross-fertilisation of art forms, and networking and leadership opportunities for students.

## Victorian College of the Arts Student Union

VCASU Office Bearers make significant contributions to policy development and student representation within the Victorian College of the Arts. Student office bearers sit on numerous

committees and councils including but not limited to VCA Council, Board of Studies, Student Support Services Committee, Academic Board, Library, IT, Post Graduate, Resource and Finance Committees.

Amongst the services and events imperilled by Voluntary Student Unionism at the Victorian College of the Arts are the Proud Annual Acquisitive Art Exhibition, Battle of the Bands, The Melbourne Environmental Arts Festival, Orientation Day (including the publication Orient Express), Discovery Day and the future viability of our campus publication Spark.

## **What is the impact of VSU?**

### Union House Theatre

Last year Union House Theatre had 10,000 students through its theatres. If the legislation were passed, Union House Theatre would have to reduce its services to students. A user pays system is not a workable model for the arts. Every student should have the opportunity to participate in the arts regardless of their financial situation. Services under threat include: our workshop and masterclass program, our mentorship scheme which partners students with an industry professional in a key creative role on a production, reduction in the provision of technical, administrative and artistic support for over forty affiliated student performing arts groups producing shows and the scale of productions Union House Theatre creates.

If our services were reduced it would have a devastating effect on the cultural life at the University of Melbourne.

### Mudfest

The impact of VSU would almost certainly mean that the festival will struggle to continue and develop. VSU would probably reduce the staffing levels of the festival resulting in students' work not being supported artistically, administratively or technically. The festival would not have the resources to employ professional staff to work with students on arts projects, to support students with a professional publicist, and to ensure the safety of students in theatre and gallery spaces.

The loss of a festival like Mudfest would have a devastating effect on the community of students that the festival reflects. All communities should have access to the arts and culture, as a mechanism to communicate with others, to feel positive, celebrate and to reinforce a sense of community and belonging and to understand social, political and cultural ideologies. Student communities should have this critical part of life supported outside of the academic pursuits.

### La Trobe University Student Theatre and Film Office

If the Voluntary Student Unionism Legislation is passed in the senate in its' current form, La Trobe University Student Theatre and Film may have to close. This is because our program relies heavily on funds collected by the General Service Fee. It is unlikely that the office and programs would be able to continue operation, as there are minimal opportunities to be financially supported by any other area of the University community.

### Monash University Student Union Theatre

Monash Student Theatre is a department of the Monash Student Association, thus it receives all its' funding from the student union. If VSU comes in and the union receives no funding, it is likely

Monash Student Theatre will be forced to close. It is impossible for Monash Student Theatre to operate under a user pays model (other than with ticket sales). All the students who enjoy the benefits of the program work hundreds of volunteer hours to create it, often losing money from potential employment. It is unreasonable and immoral to expect them to pay for the privilege of working as volunteers. Currently, Monash Student Theatre pay them by setting up experiences, frameworks and learning environments and students pay with their labour, ideas and energy. Without student theatre, many students will have few means in which to express themselves, learn about leadership and indeed, find a place they belong in a university environment. The campus will obviously also become far less vibrant.

### RMIT Union Arts

With a dramatic loss in funding, RMIT Union will find it difficult to sustain a rich cultural development and access program, across the major campuses of RMIT. The opportunities we currently offer for students to engage with a variety of art forms, from a professional development level, to access programs for recreation and personal development, would be largely unsustainable. The value of long-running programs, their brand and reputation, the experience and value of staff involved, would be severely impacted, if not disappear altogether. RMIT Union is committed to sustaining "student life" on campus, whilst it survives as a viable organisation, but realistically, the impact of VSU will make it almost impossible to provide this in any meaningful way.

### Victorian College of the Arts Student Union

Victorian College of the Arts Student Union (VCASU) is committed to universal student unionism and believe that voluntary student unionism, if implemented, will emaciate the student experience at Australian universities. We believe that Voluntary Student Unionism is not only anti-democratic and driven purely by ideology but is part of a movement against acknowledging students as the primary stakeholders of universities.

Of great significance to our student population is the potential loss of our Cultural Activities Grant (CAG) programme. The CAG programme supports the creative engagement of our students in public events. The grants of \$100 for individual projects or \$200 for collaborative projects are of great assistance to our students and the programme is in great demand.

Also of great significance to the students is the delivery of numerous priority care services including Accident Insurance, Legal Service & Dental Service, Advocacy Services and guidance through Grievance and Appeals procedures.

Victorian College of the Arts Student Union feel strongly that the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism will silence the student voice on Australian campuses and create untenable business models on the student organisations that continue to exist. We feel that a model that will require student organisations to place resource emphasis on membership retention will fatally compromise the delivery of essential and cost effective services to students.

### A Dagger Through the Art

Recently the five organisations listed in this submission organised a public forum to analyse the impact of the abolition of compulsory up-front union fees on arts and culture at universities.

The event was held on Wednesday 18 May at 6.30pm in the Union Theatre at the University of Melbourne. It was hosted by comedian Dave O'Neil with performances by David Bridie, students from Monash University Student Union Theatre, students from Union House Theatre and a hypothetical moderated by Julian Burns Q.C. with a panel consisting of: Max Gillies, Denise Scott, Hannie Rayson, Jo Stanley, Geoffrey Milne and Alice Garner. A video of the event is available upon request.

The arts community of Australia were also invited to add their name to an open letter to the government. An overwhelming response was received in protest to the legislation. A copy is attached for the Senate Committee's attention.