

Submission for Senate Enquiry into *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005*

Students of James Cook University

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1 Introduction

James Cook University (JCU) is a multi-campus tertiary institution, with main campuses situated in the remote Queensland cities of Townsville and Cairns. As a national leader in tropical research, JCU provides an excellent location to continue to conduct advanced research and education.

The success of JCU as a tertiary institution is due to a combination of its friendliness, thriving research community, high quality education and effective support services. The support services JCU provides allows students to achieve a high level of tertiary education within a supportive environment.

The student support services are provided by the James Cook University Student Association (JCUSA), an entity independent from JCU, by the collection of a compulsory \$275/yr fee. With this fee the JCUSA endeavours to assist students with all aspects of their tertiary education through:

- Academic and writing help;
- Counselling;
- Advocacy services;
- Many social and cultural events, including orientation week.

The existence of the JCUSA has ensured that not only are students adequately supported, but also allowed for the continued fostering of the friendly culture that JCU is renowned for.

With the introduction of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-Front Student Union Fees), the JCUSA and students face an uncertain future as funds collected from students, which is critical to these services will be reduced drastically.

This document will outline the estimated impacts upon the students of JCU and try to provide some suggestions which may result in a more effective system, one which is not at the cost of student's education and welfare.

2 Student Insurance

A major service which is currently provided by the JCUSA is student accident insurance cover. This ensures that any personal injury obtained while on university business will be financially supported, based on the severity of the injury.

The benefits of this scheme also extend into some degrees, where personal accident insurance cover is needed.

Work placement is an important component in many degrees, particularly within the key areas of nursing and education. In order to participate in work placement, the student must have personal accident insurance cover.

Whilst on unpaid work experience, the student is covered by the JCUSA, thus avoiding having to pay personal insurance cover directly, which varies depending upon the period of work placement.

The introduction of the abolition of compulsory student union fees could potentially see the blanket insurance cover for students disappear. For students within education and occupational therapy especially, the introduction of this amendment will entail the average student paying up to \$300 in personal accident insurance cover per year to complete their degree (Appendix A).

This is only slightly above the existing compulsory student union fees, which entitle the average student to a broad range of services and activities on top of personal accident insurance cover.

Also, many students already experience financial difficulties, and faced with injury they may be forced to discontinue their tertiary education in order to survive.

The support obtained through the insurance cover undoubtedly eases the financial strain placed upon the student, thus enabling the focus of the student to shift to recovery, rather than financial burden.

Evidently the accident insurance cover provided by the JCUSA affects all students, and in particular is relevant to the completion of some degrees.

Although some students may see the benefits of paying student union fees for this service, in reality the majority of students will forgo the long-term security of insurance for personal financial use.

This will ultimately render this service redundant as the loss of finances due to Voluntary Student Unionism will reduce the possibility of a blanket insurance cover for all members.

3 Social and Welfare Services

Obtaining a degree or tertiary qualification is not limited to obtaining an education; it also includes acquiring personal and professional experiences which enable growth as an individual. This component of tertiary education is thoroughly supported by the JCUSA, where social aspects are encouraged and welfare requirements of students are supported. With the prospect of a reduction in the support provided by the JCUSA, a fundamental aspect in university life is facing extinction.

<i>Academic Consultation</i>	<i>Welfare Consultations</i>
2608	1402

Table 1: 2004 Student Association usage statistics (approx. 13,000 students)

3.1 Clubs and Societies

James Cook University currently has 45 clubs and societies. These range from social, sporting, humanitarian and faculty/school based. All have a vital role in student welfare, regardless of the media focus on and gross misinformation regarding funding for particular clubs. The faculty-based clubs provide networks for students who may not have strong

ties in the area. Other clubs link up students from overseas including our closest Northern neighbours, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and remote islands in the Far North.

Amy Viridi, current president of the JCU Amnesty group, resurrected the club two years ago after a period of inactivity and the efforts of the members have made an impact on the local community. Townsville also has a large amount of refugees particularly from Sudan, and the Amnesty group has formed a partnership with the local Migrant Resource centre to tutor and visit local migrant families.

The JCU Car Less Club is new this year but has grand plans. At a university level, the club encourages students and staff to use their cars less and through "Car Less Days" promotes the idea of cycling, walking, taking a bus or at least ridesharing one day a week. At present, the club is planning to collaborate with the Council's Sustainable Development committee.

The Fisher Shield which has been held since 1969 is a key part of university life. The Shield comprises eight different team and individual sports which are held throughout the year. Approximately 750 residents from the halls and colleges participate, with many more involved as spectators. The loss of financial support in any form will be devastating to the socialisation of the many international and new students who take part.

The abolition of compulsory student union fees will effectively remove the initial funding many clubs and societies use to cover upfront costs for fund-raising, advertising, equipment, etc, which are required for them to become self-sufficient. This kind of small grant scheme is not provided by any other body relating to the university, so these clubs and societies which form an important arm of university life may never get off the ground.

3.2 Welfare Services

Throughout the tertiary education of a student, problems may be encountered whether they are financial, academic or personal. It is the support available for such occurrences by the JCUSA that enables many students to progress through these periods. An outline of current services is attached in Appendix B.

Recent debate about the utilisation of these services has indicated that a majority believe that the services are only utilised by a minority within the student population. However, data collected from the 2004 period* shows that welfare services were used 5000 times, nearly 50% of the student population at JCU. The usage of the services may vary in degree, though it is evident that many use the services.

A decline in funding would limit the extent of the services provided, and in some cases they would become obsolete, and students would have to seek support elsewhere. Once again, this would see the student become financially and emotionally stressed, jeopardising the completion of their tertiary education.

3.3 Inter-campus bus service

James Cook University has 3 campuses in Townsville. Main Campus houses all the student support services, the student's mall, main library, and Faculty of Science, Engineering & Information Technology, Faculty of Medicine, Health & Molecular Sciences as well as some schools from Social Science and Law, along with a number of Colleges. Western Campus adjoins Main Campus, with many Arts and Educations schools based there, along with the main sporting fields, and the remainder of the colleges. The third campus, Vincent, is located 20 minutes from these campuses, and houses the School of Visual Arts.

The only on access to this campus is by private transport, or by the Student Association run inter-campus bus. All students who are primarily located at Vincent are required to

travel to Main campus during their academic year, for classes, use of the main library, to pay fees and levies, access services, and to get access to Student Association services. As well a number of degrees offered in the Faculty of Arts, Education & Social Sciences require, or offer subjects at Vincent campus, requiring Main campus and Western campus students to travel to Vincent.

In the absence of the inter-campus bus these students would have to provide their own transport to attend compulsory subjects, and this may come as a rude shock to college students, who pay a large amount of money to be close to university, only to find they are isolated from where they have to be, and the university does not provide a means for them to get there.

3.4 Repercussions of the Amendment

With the introduction of the Higher Education Support Amendment, it is almost certain that social and welfare services will face the biggest impact, as these services provide incalculable benefits to both the individual and the community of JCU.

Not only will the average student be discouraged to participate in social and sporting activities by increased prices, but in the instance of personal difficulties, the student will be unable to be provided with the required support at an affordable price.

Although the impacts of voluntary student unionism will not be visible instantly, the ramifications of the amendment will be seen far into the future of regional universities.

4 Commercial activities on campus

DEST's claim that automatic student associations tend to be anti-competitive, presenting a barrier to other providers is unrealistic in the real world.

We at JCU agree with the University of New South Wales Student Guild (Submission No. 342, Inquiry into the government's Backing Australia's Future report.) that it is not the subsidy provided by the compulsory fee but the highly irregular market of the university" that deters the entry of private retailers into the campus market. Few businesses would be prepared to operate in such an isolated, erratic environment. Extended trading hours would not be realistic, and the small number of businesses which could be housed on campus would also operate as monopolies with little incentive to have realistic pricing.

The university can only maintain a small number of private businesses on campus. The Mac Shop, managed by Matt and Michelle Hahey has operated for 12 years. There is also Under Wraps Hair and Beauty managed by, Rosslyn Channon a café and an Australia Post outlet. All are located in the Student Services Mall which is the main meeting point for students and houses many association services including the Uni Club and the Refectory.

Michelle Hahey said she expected a drop in student numbers coming to the Mall area if current services being run there were to cease. and they would be forced to operate out of another area on campus which would affect their viability.

5 Research students

The current JCU Student Association has a postgraduate society which provides specialised assistance to research and other postgraduate students, including:

- Advocacy and mediation for thesis and supervisor disputes;
- Thesis writing help;
- Travel and research grants;

- Childcare and counselling services.

As research students are a major investment for the university until they graduate, and a great earner with international students, it is vitally important to keep the completion rate as high as possible. The services listed above are essential to the economic and research quality outcomes of any university, especially for smaller, regional universities such as JCU.

6 Recommendations and Conclusion

Whilst voluntary student unionism will force the increased accountability of student unions, the damage to the quality of university life, and the ability of many students to complete their courses will be enormous. Student Association fee fund many essential services, which are largely taken for granted by the students who use them.

We urge the consideration of the current Victorian model which maintains a set of core services which are covered by a student contribution, while reducing spending of compulsory fees on other areas which are not applicable to the average student.

The ability of an individual to exercise their freedom of choice is undoubtedly a fundamental aspect in a democratic society. However, when an individual is faced with the decision between fundamental rights and financial security, the individual will undeniably choose the latter, particularly within the volatile financial environment of the average student.

It is this reality that JCUSA must confront with the introduction of voluntary student unionism, and the cost may be irreparable.

The introduction of voluntary student unionism places university culture and student support in a precarious environment, with the worse case scenario being the effective dissolution of all aspects of current university lifestyle.

With the possibility of individual financial burden in social, academic and personal life, it is clear that a drastic reform of the current system may not be entirely beneficial to the future of universities.

We strongly recommend revising the proposed amendment to include the considerations outlined above, and press the need for a model resembling the current Victorian model. This will ensure that university culture and student support will continue to thrive in the future at JCU and other remote and regional universities.

7 Appendix A

PERSONAL ACCIDENT COVER FOR UNPAID WORK EXPERIENCE PERSONS

CATEGORY 1 - Office, clerical, IT and similar office situations.

CATEGORY 2 - Retail, hospitality, vet assistant, hairdresser, childcare (similar inside occupations excluding manual labour)

CATEGORY 3 - Cleaner, nursing, gardener. Light manual labour eg carpenter, electrician, mechanics and plumbers.

CATEGORY 4- Farmers. Heavy manual labour eg welder and heavy machinery operators.

Period	Cat 1	Cat 2	Cat 3	Cat 4
15 days to be worked over a 3 month period	\$84.56	\$108.21	\$125.95	\$161.43
30 days to be worked over a 6 month period	\$102.30	\$131.86	\$161.43	\$208.73
3 Months unlimited cover	\$149.60	\$173.25	\$208.73	\$256.02
6 Months unlimited cover	\$244.20	\$285.59	\$350.63	\$451.14
9 Months unlimited cover	\$338.80	\$392.01	\$504.35	\$646.25

8 Appendix B

Fairly exhaustive list of Student Association services

RE O-Week	Race Day	Health Week	Kisses for Non-Smokers Campaign
Clubs and Societies			
Insurance	Free Tax help	Free legal advice	Soup Kitchens
Musos Night	Campus Band Comp	International Ball	BBQ pergola
Student Voice	Education forums	Campaigns	Conference funding
Disabled toilet	Employer of Students	Event Facilities	Public phones
Market Days	Student Enquires	Academic Advocacy	Student Welfare
		Free live music at Bludgers	Discounted gym membership
Western BBQ	Free bike pump		Townsville Student Council
Women's Room	Parents Room	Queer Space	
Lost Property	Pens	Free Centrelink Phone	Academic Appeals
Emergency Loans	Student Scholarships	Food Vouchers	Exam Plan Program
	Discounted events at The Club	Low food and beverage prices	Free entry to the club
Aerobics			
Postgraduate Student Council	Vincent Student Council	Cairns Student Council	Sexuality Affairs Committee
	Student Submissions to senate enquires	Budgeting information and advice	Tenancy Service
Centrelink Appeals			
Free Academic Transcripts on	Increased Security	Memorandum of Understanding with the	Free tea & coffee during exams

Graduation		University	
Open age events	Refectory	Hole in the Wall Cafe	Magpies Cafe
Environment Committee	Sport & Recreation Committee	International Committee	Education Committee
Free Condoms	Tampon Dispensary	Needle disposal bins	Building upgrades
Free bread	Recycling bins	Campus atmosphere	Meeting places for students
Rococo's Cafe	2 x coffee carts	Vincent Campus Refectory	Cairns Campus Refectory
Indigenous & Torres Strait Students Committee	College Committee	Women's Committee	Student Elections
Secondhand textbook sales	Dry Cleaners	Photo Processing	Graduation Gown Hire & Sale
Increased Library hours around exams	Anti-Poverty Week	Drinks mart Campaigns	Centrelink contact point
The Club	Stingers Bar	Pool	Gym
Photocopying	Faxing	Bullsheet	Bedlam
Locker Hire	Printer Re-inking	Memorabilia & Clothing	Orientation Week
Day to day enquires	Microwaves available for free use	Outdoor tables and chairs	Security Cameras
Cairns Gym	Squash Courts	Tennis Courts	Student Mall & Maintenance
Annual report	& Postcodes	Theatre	Movie
Clubs & Societies	Fisher Shield	Chancellor Cup	President's Cup
Student Employment Service	Building Development Fund	Chaplaincy donation	Association Administration
Oval Maintenance	Oval Lighting	Oval Fencing	Confectionery/Vending Machines
DVD	Music and Book Reviewer positions	Bullsheet Editor/Feature writer & Sports writer positions	Online events web photos
Social Sport	Student Sponsorship	Subsidized sporting travel	Northern University Games
Finance Department	Arts Week	Australian University Games	Movie Nights
Intercampus bus	Jac's Café	Association Shop	Hairdressers
Up-to-date Website	Media and Marketing Department	Student Diaries & Date Stickers	Wall planners
Mac Shop	Army Reserve Office	Focaccia's	Post Office
O-week bags	Student Chef & other competitions	Free Classified for Students	Notice boards
Eftpos facilities & ATM's	Child care	University Representation	Student Council

Student Discounts
around town & other
parts of the country

Access to other Student
Publications

Student Committees