



Deakin University Student Association (DUSA)

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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1. INTRODUCTION

Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) welcomes the opportunity to present this submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee. This review of the provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-Front Union Fees) Act 2005 is of critical importance to both Deakin University and DUSA. The Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005 poses a threat to student wellbeing and rights on all Australian university campuses.

DUSA is a large student organisation, representing more than 34,000 students. We strive to contribute to all public debates on matters that affect our members – students – who are the major stakeholders in the Australian higher education sector.

We have been invited to speak as witnesses to several Federal inquiries, including the Higher Education at the Crossroads Inquiry in 2003 and the Senate Inquiry into Student Income Support in 2005.

2. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The two matters which the committee has adopted as its Terms of Reference (TOR) are:

- Assessment of the likely effect of the legislation on the provision of student services, and related consequences; *and*
- Consideration of the experience of universities and students where legislation has been adopted to regulate student unions, such as in Victoria and Western Australia.

DUSA has elected to concentrate on **TOR 1** in our submission. Deakin University and DUSA are jointly preparing strategies to minimise the effects of VSU; however, we believe that this piece of legislation will have significant negative impact on student services at all Australian universities.

This submission provides a brief discussion of DUSA's experience of operating under the Victorian model of VSU (TOR 2). The submissions and research papers listed in **Appendix B** document the experience of universities, student associations and students in Western Australia under VSU.

3. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: That “academic support services” and “essential non-academic services” are clearly defined for the purposes of the Higher Education Support Act 2003.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That “academic support services” are defined as:

“all services, activities and facilities that are provided by universities and/or Student Associations that protect the rights of, enhance the wellbeing of, or directly support the academic rights and/or wellbeing of, students on all Australian university campuses”.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That “essential non-academic support services” are defined as:

“all services, activities and facilities that are provided by universities and/or Student Associations that enhance the wellbeing, rights and experiences of students on all Australian university campuses but that do not contribute directly to the provision of academic services or academic support services”

RECOMMENDATION 4: That academic support services and essential non-academic services are adequately funded, either by the Federal government as part of their university funding packages or through the provision of a universal levy or General Services Fee (GSF) on students.

RECOMMENDATION 5: That any GSF levied from students be covered by HECS-HELP or FEE-HELP.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That where Voluntary Student Unionism is legislated, the Victorian model be adopted in order that student services and facilities can still operate.

4. TOR 1: Assessment of the likely effects of VSU legislation

4.1 PROBLEMS WITH THE PROPOSED LEGISLATIVE AMENDMENT

There are several fundamental problems with the proposed VSU legislation. The first problem is that the issues of compulsory non-academic fees and universal membership of the student association are essentially unrelated, thus linking the two in legislation makes no sense.

Another problem is that there is no definition of “academic support services” or “essential non-academic services” It is DUSA’s contention that academic services cannot stand alone; academic support services and essential non-academic services and facilities must be clearly defined for the purposes of higher education legislation and appropriately funded, either by the Federal Government or through the retention of a student amenities fee.

Academic services do not operate in a vacuum but in a physical space that must be maintained. Academic services cannot be delivered without appropriate resources and materials. As the proposed legislative amendment currently stands, universities will be unable to levy funds from students for library facilities, the maintenance of buildings and grounds, and other infrastructure, as is the current practice of many secondary teaching institutions.

Universities themselves know where money needs to be spent for the academic and non-academic wellbeing of students. The amendment to the Act prevents universities from charging students for some library facilities, where part of the General Service Fee collected from students has been used in the past to make up for some of the shortfall in Federal funding.

At Deakin University, DUSA is also aware of where money needs to be spent to enhance student wellbeing and protect student rights. DUSA funds appropriate services that are well-utilised by students. However, this does not mean that students will voluntarily pay the same amount of money that they have paid under Victorian-style VSU.

DUSA does not agree with the Federal government’s user-pays ethos in this sector. Education, including higher education, should be a fundamental right of appropriately qualified Australian citizens and should be free. Given the choice between up-front fees and deferred fees, however, DUSA believes that HECS-HELP is the lesser of two evils.

DUSA therefore recommends that a student’s amenities fee is rolled into their HECS-HELP debt in order that this last upfront disincentive can be eliminated. Rather than removing student services and suffocating student culture, the government could work to ensure that today’s students receive many of the same benefits as did those in the past.

4.2 LIKELY EFFECTS OF VSU LEGISLATION

4.2.1 DUSA services under threat

Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) provides essential services and facilities, and acts to protect the rights of students on all Deakin University campuses. The implementation of VSU will see the rights and wellbeing of students eroded. **Appendix A** of this submission outlines the services provided by DUSA and clearly identifies those which are likely to be significantly reduced or disappear altogether under full VSU.

Australian students pay a small amount of GSF – between \$60 and \$600 per year¹ – for all the services and facilities that protect their rights and provide them with more than just a degree. The Federal Minister for Education, the Hon Dr. Brendan Nelson, has talked repeatedly about the GSF being “the last upfront fee”.

In one regard the Minister is quite correct in identifying upfront fees as a disincentive. Tertiary students are generally not well-off, as full-time study means that a student cannot work more than a limited number of hours, and student income support has not kept pace with the massification of the higher education sector and with expanded equity targets. Students generally find textbooks and other course materials hard to afford and are likely to put off paying for anything that is not absolutely essential at any given moment. However, students, in particular those with financial constraints, need the services supplied by their student associations.

Some of the major areas of student services and facilities that will be diminished or even disappear if VSU is brought in are related to welfare, advocacy and representative services. These are all non-profit services and activities; they cannot be undertaken on a profit or even a cost-recovery basis. A general levy on all students for the good of all students is the only way that these essential services can be provided.

All students at Deakin currently have the right to free and independent advocacy while they study and this service is provided by DUSA. It cannot be provided by the university as this would destroy the independent nature of the service, and will not be provided by anyone else except on a fee-for-service basis, if full VSU is legislated.

DUSA also supports representative activities within the university. Student Representatives are supported in understanding university structures and processes, and University Committee and Board Secretaries are assisted to find students to take on representative roles.

DUSA helps domestic and international students to find housing, provides food vouchers and small loans in emergencies, and also act as a central referral point for student information.

DUSA has developed an excellent working relationship with senior university management over a number of years. Our Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sally Walker, has stated that “DUSA is an exemplary student association”. The university itself gains from DUSA’s willingness and ability to communicate the viewpoints, needs, and wishes of students.

4.2.2 DUSA Services - Commercial

Under the proposed VSU regime, DUSA’s food outlets may only be made available during times that they are “profitable” in an economic sense. This is contrary to the ethos of student associations: good food should be available to students during all the hours that classes run, during study weeks, and throughout exam periods. The experience of student associations in Western Australia under VSU demonstrated that food quickly became unavailable to students during these “unprofitable” times.

The DUSA run book shop, Unitexts, also provides discounts and subsidies to students. Once again these benefits to students are jeopardised.

4.2.3 Deakin University Services – The Library

Some of the compulsory GSF is used at the University to provide improved a special despatch service for library books for off-campus students and an overseas mail service for students who are studying offshore.

¹ By comparison, Harvard students pay several thousand US dollars per year for student services on campus.

4.2.4 Deakin University Services – the Division of Student Life

The GSF also partially funds maintenance on University owned recreation, leisure and sporting facilities and also supports the development of new services to support the academic progress of students at Deakin.

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5. TOR 2: Experience of universities and students under VSU

5.1 VSU in Victoria

DUSA operates in a VSU environment under the “Victorian model”. Under the Victorian model students at Deakin University pay a General Services Fee (GSF) which is collected by the university and then disbursed to various non-academic or academic support facilities and services including the library, DUSA, and the Division of Student Life (DSL).

Students can opt out of membership of DUSA if they choose to. There is no compulsion under Victorian VSU for any student to become a member of a student organisation. Students must still pay the GSF; their fee will go directly to support the facilities and services as outlined above.

DUSA aims specifically to support Deakin University students on all campuses and as off-campus students, and uses the GSF money it receives to provide all the services outlined in **Appendix A**. The services offered are all in high demand from students. Not every student uses every service, but the students who use each service value what they get from DUSA.

DUSA is not affiliated with and does not pay membership money to the National Union of Students (NUS).

Deakin University Student Association has worked effectively under the Victorian model of VSU. Very few Deakin students have ever opted out of membership of DUSA during their period of study. DUSA has worked with the university to improve the experiences of students, and has also worked independently to protect student rights in terms of advocacy and university policy.

<p>RECOMMENDATION 6: That where Voluntary Student Unionism is legislated, the Victorian model be adopted in order that student services and facilities can still operate.</p>
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5.2 VSU in Western Australia

The experiences of universities and students under VSU in Western Australia have been well documented.

A list of research and discussion papers about the experience of Western Australian student associations is included as Appendix B. These papers outline the services and facilities that were either minimised or lost altogether in Western Australian universities under VSU.

6. APPENDIX A

DUSA services that will disappear or be significantly reduced under full VSU are:

- Orientation to university life
- Advocacy for all students
- Festivals and significant days, including Multicultural Day
- Conferences, including the DUSA Postgraduate Conference
- Entertainment including free food days, campus balls and big events such as Grungestock which is held annually in Warrnambool
- Over 100 clubs and societies
- The DUSA website, which logs over 600 visitors per day
- Sporting clubs, facilities and events including the Southern Uni Games
- Bookshops, owned by DUSA, offering discounts to all DUSA members
- Provision of a book-loan scheme for disadvantaged students
- Services including photocopying, binding, laminating, passport photos, etc
- Food and beverage services
- Welfare services: low-cost housing owned by DUSA, food vouchers, tenancy advice, and small short-term loans
- Off-campus housing advice and services
- Student representation within DUSA and university committees and boards
- Analysis of issues affecting students from a student-based perspective
- Support and assistance for student representatives
- Research exploring student needs and experiences
- Support for disadvantaged and/or marginalised groups within the university student community
- Student publications including Crossfire (cross-campus newspaper), campus news-sheets, e:connect, an electronic fortnightly newsletter that goes to all students, and Artemis (the DUSA women's magazine)
- Services for distance students including coffee clubs
- Student lounge areas

7. APPENDIX B

The following is a list of major research papers outlining the impact of VSU on Western Australian student associations, students, and universities.

Collins, K (1999) **Voluntary Student Unionism: Protecting the rights of Australian students Research Bulletin No: 7/99** Queensland Parliamentary Library, Brisbane

Greenwell, C (2005) **VSU and its impact on the Curtin Student Guild** Curtin Student Guild, Perth, WA

Hastings, G (2005) **Student organisations in Australia: At risk with Anti-Student Organisation Legislation** National Union of Students (NUS) Research background paper for MPs, journalists and other interested parties, NUS, Melbourne

A visit to the websites of the four Western Australian university student association websites will also provide extensive information on the services that have been lost or drastically reduced under Western Australian VSU.