

# 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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Submission to Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee

by

**The Postgraduate and Research Students' Association  
The Australian National University**

The Australian National University is Australia's most prestigious university and maintains its reputation through high-quality research and training. High-calibre postgraduate students are produced by improving the life balance of students as well as enhancing the quality-assurance process. The role of the ANU's Postgraduate and Research Students' Association (PARSA) is paramount to achieving this. The proposal to abolish compulsory up-front union fees is certain to erode the capacity of both ANU and PARSA to generate outstanding graduates and world-class research.

This submission outlines the likely effect of the proposed legislation on services provided to postgraduate students by PARSA.

PARSA's primary focus is the welfare of all postgraduate students at the ANU, particularly with respect to their studies. PARSA is governed by up to 29 volunteer postgraduate students. Members serve on over 30 university committees across the ANU and engage in activities aimed at improving the provision of services to students.

PARSA provides information and referral services, advocates on behalf of students and strengthens social support networks. PARSA also provides seminars and panels on postgraduate-related issues and administers an Emergency Loan Scheme – an essential service given the high level of financial stress often encountered by postgraduate students. The importance of these services is highlighted by recent research showing that postgraduate student retention and completion rates decrease when students experience a lack of resources and weak social support networks<sup>1</sup>. In particular, the research suggested that "initiatives to increase the sense of community and reduce the sense of isolation for students" are necessary to increase postgraduate student completion rates.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2003). Postgraduate research students: People in context? *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*. 31: 209-227.

Examples of PARSA's achievements in the past 12 months are listed below:

- PARSA strongly supports student evaluation of teaching and supervision. After three years of our advocacy, the 'Doctoral Experience Questionnaire' is now administered during postgraduate degrees instead of solely at completion – this will enhance the feedback process and will enable the ANU to work towards increasing student retention and improving research and training quality;
- PARSA enforced the ANU's 'Minimum Resources Policy' to ensure that all postgraduate students were provided with resources essential to their study; and
- PARSA was instrumental in encouraging ACT Universities and the ACT Government to develop a collaborative working group in response to the severe lack of housing available to students.

PARSA is entirely funded by compulsory student fees; we receive approximately \$33 per student per semester. How we utilise funds is becoming increasingly important as ANU's postgraduate student population expanded by 25% from 2003 – 2004<sup>2</sup>. The Association ensures that these funds are spent in the best interests of postgraduate students. PARSA condemns the use of student funds for political activities. This is clearly evident through examination of our budget (Appendix A, 'PARSA Budget 2005'). Our funds target the provision of numerous student services.

The introduction of voluntary student unionism would have devastating effects on the operation of PARSA. Judging from the experiences of Western Australia and Victoria, PARSA could not expect to retain more than one-third of its current funding. This would necessitate the redundancies of all staff and the loss of our office, both of which are critical for PARSA to remain effective. Our administrator is the first point of contact in most situations and, without this person, students will not be able to readily gain access to the services they need. Furthermore, volunteer student representatives would be without the necessary support for effective communication and advocacy. Staff that would be lost under the proposed legislation include:

- Administrator – the first point of contact for all student and staff enquiries. For example, the university contacts this person when student involvement is required for a particular issue. Additional roles include management of accounts, auditor liaison, minuting of meetings and general office organisation. The Administrator is also the Association's Public Officer;

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<sup>2</sup> Statistical Summary 2004, The Australian National University  
URL: [http://unistats.anu.edu.au/Summary/Stats\\_Cards/card04s.pdf](http://unistats.anu.edu.au/Summary/Stats_Cards/card04s.pdf).

- Project Assistant and Student Consultant – responsible for managing research projects, the compiling of reports as well as providing support and advice to PARSA with regard to student welfare and PARSA’s projects. Additional roles include providing individual postgraduate students with advice and information in relation to their studies or other aspects of university life;
- Legal consultant – PARSA contracts an experienced solicitor who provides free legal assistance to ANU students who face issues ranging from landlord and tenancy disputes to migration issues; and
- Social and Publications Officer – responsible for PARSA’s printed publications and website, various marketing and promotional activities as well as the coordination of numerous social events for all postgraduate students.

It is imperative that the services outlined above remain operational, particularly when considering the proposed expansion in postgraduate student numbers at the ANU. PARSA will greatly assist with this planned influx by ensuring that a wide range of services are made available for postgraduates to utilise.

The ANU has recently been recognised by two independent assessments<sup>3,4</sup> as a world-leading university, being ranked as the 16<sup>th</sup> and 49<sup>th</sup> best university worldwide. Within Australia, it consistently receives the highest rank of any university. Criteria used in these rankings include not only the quality of research and research training, but also the attractiveness to international students and academics. Given that one-third of ANU’s postgraduate population is comprised of international students, it is imperative that support services are provided to maintain international interest in studying at ANU.

PARSA’s role in assisting both domestic and international students through legal and administrative difficulties, as well as providing opportunities for social interaction, is crucial to postgraduate students’ settling in, forming social support networks and succeeding in their studies. Without the funding PARSA needs to offer support, these roles would go unfulfilled. This would serve to diminish the ANU’s local and international reputation as a world-class university and would result in a decline in the quality of teaching and research.

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<sup>3</sup> Academic Ranking of World Universities 2004, Shanghai Jiao Tong University  
URL: <http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/ranking.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> World University Rankings, The Times Higher Education Supplement, 5 Nov. 2004  
URL: <http://www.thes.co.uk/worldrankings/>.