

# 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 the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and  
Education Legislation Committee in relation to the Higher Education  
Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-Front Union Fees)  
Bill 2005**

**Submitted: 17<sup>th</sup> June 2005**

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**The Women's Department, Students' Association Flinders University**

The Women's Department is part of the Students' Association Flinders University (SAFU), which is one of the representative arms of the student organisations of which all Flinders University students are members. Representing the 15 110 students who study on campus and off, and funded by their annual Student Service Fee (SSF), the student organisations of Flinders University have a proud history of combining representation, advocacy and services for all students. The SSF supports and ensures membership of the Students' Association, the Flinders University Union (FUU), the Postgraduate Students' Association (PGSA), the Flinders International Students' Association (FISA), Clubs and Societies (C&S) and the Flinders University Sports Association (FUSA). Across all of these organisations we offer services and representation ensuring several things

- Representation of students on university governing bodies
- Student management of the organisations funded by student money
- Welfare and advocacy services to ensure every student's full participation in their tertiary education
- A rich campus life and culture which ensures students' engagement with, and participation in, the university community
- Awareness of issues of concern to students and the wider community

Such student representative bodies were initially discussed in the original planning of Flinders University, with such negotiation for these organisations beginning in 1965. In the planning of the “Bedford Park campus of the University of Adelaide”, as Flinders was initially conceived, the university appointed a head of Union Services, to get things up and running. April 1966 saw the first autonomous Flinders University Student Representative Council. Responding to the desire for a greater level of self-determination on campus, this SRC was replaced with the Students' Association in 1974.

In keeping with their member-directed principles, SAFU created a Women's Department by referendum of students in 1988. Currently the Women's Department consists of a Women's Officer and a Research Officer who work with a volunteer Women's Action Group to ensure representation of all female students. The key concerns of the Women's Department are to ensure that study at Flinders University is accessible to all female students, by ensuring necessary services, and preventing discrimination on campus. In keeping with these goals, the Women's Department runs awareness campaigns, provides a referral service and engages with students individually when required. The Women's Officer also acts as General Secretary when the person filling this position is away from the office, ensuring that SAFU has a female influence at the highest level of power. The Women's Officer is annually elected by the student body, in a strictly regulated process, ensuring transparency and accountability.

All student organisations at Flinders are supported by the Student Services Fee, which is \$326.80 per year for a full time student, adjusted appropriately for part time and external students. The compulsory levying of this fee ensures that all students contribute appropriately to the welfare of all students. Some students will make more use of certain services than others. Some students will access costlier services than others, and some will feel that they don't use on campus services, but this is the cost of our community. It is our shared responsibility to ensure that everyone has equal opportunity when it comes to tertiary education, and is empowered to make full use of this opportunity. This submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee will outline the services and representation which are most significant for women on campus, and the concerns that the Women's Department has about the introduction of the aforementioned bill.

### **Services on campus**

Women are enrolling at university in greater numbers than ever before, with women now making up around 54% of all university students. This is pleasing to see in a sector which has only truly embraced the participation of women over the last 50 years. Equity in the higher education sector is about far more than numbers, however, and the new challenge facing universities is to ensure that

women are able to reach their full potential and take advantage of all opportunities, now that they are here.

Services provided by the student organisations at Flinders University ensure that life matters do not prevent students, both male and female, from participating fully in their university study. Key to this are welfare services provided by the student organisations. Organisations supported by the Student Services Fee provide, among other things, the services explained as follows

- Childcare on campus

The FUU provides two options for childcare on campus, one being a regular commercial run childcare centre, which is accessible to students and staff. Recognising the fact that childcare costs of more than \$50 per day are inaccessible for many students, the FUU oversees the alternative Flinders Parent Centre. To join the Parent Centre a student pays \$60 per semester for one child, with additional children adding \$5 to the cost. The parent can then access two hours of childcare for their children for every hour of volunteer work. Providing the affordability, accessibility and flexibility essential in this situation, the Parent Centre also brings parenting students together, to provide them with support and the opportunity to network with other parents.

- Academic Rights

SAFU provides an Academic Rights Officer, who advocates on behalf of students who have some dispute with decisions of the university, whether in marking or other circumstances. This can apply in cases where there has been some miscommunication between students and teachers, or, in cases which we would see as of greater concern, when there may have been some direct or indirect discrimination against the student. This is particularly important for women students in non-traditional fields, students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, students with disabilities, student parents, or students who are going through some kind of personal crisis. The Academic Rights Officer has, in the past, provided assistance and resolved disputes with the university on behalf of women who have been escaping violent domestic situations, had health problems, financial problems or faced homelessness which have prevented them from participating in their study to a satisfactory degree. It is essential that such advocacy is available to students who need it, if we are to claim that tertiary education is truly accessible in this country.

- Referral service

In a similar vein, the Women's Department of SAFU often acts as a referral service for female students in crisis. Many of our students are young, going through their first serious relationships, moving out of home for the first time, or, if they are older, are going through life changes which have prompted them to further their education. One of the roles the Women's Department plays is to

refer women to services they may need to access. By maintaining contact with community groups and government agencies, we can offer advice to students on housing, health services, crisis care services, legal services and even hobbies and amusements.

- Student Support Officers

For students who are facing more serious problems the FUU provides a Student Support Officer. In times of crisis the Student Support Officers are able to provide counselling and support, have a wide range of information on community services, and can provide confidential referrals if necessary. These officers also have detailed information and experience with government agencies and schemes, which affect students, in particular Austudy payments and Youth Allowance, as well as assisting with other matters dealt with by Centrelink.

- Representation on University Governing Bodies

The General Secretary of SAFU, Education Officer and Women's Officer sit on senior university decision making bodies, such as the University Council, Academic Senate and the Equal Opportunity Committee. In this position they can ensure that a student voice is heard on all major decisions affecting students. Significantly, these office bearers can confidently state that they are representing all students, as every student, being universally a member of their student organisation, has had an opportunity to elect them to these positions.

- Safety and security on campus

Flinders University is a very large and isolated campus. Large areas of clear space make our campus very picturesque, but compromise safety for students and staff. Previous successful campaigns of the Women's Department of SAFU have improved lighting and pathways on campus, which is of particular significance as we have students who live on campus, and often need to traverse these areas after dark. We have also come to an arrangement with university security staff that they will accompany students to their car park or across campus if they need to move around after dark. Obviously these services will not be lost, should the student organisations be affected by this bill, but they are examples of the good work of our organisation, and vigilance on these matters is always a good thing. Similarly, the Women's Department maintains two women's rooms on campus. These are women's only spaces which offer a refuge from the busy campus life, and a place of reflection for female students. From anecdotal evidence these rooms are very well used by women who study in non-traditional fields, who may find that they are the only woman or one of very few women in their classes and female international students, whose cultural background may mean that they find the gender integration of Australian universities confronting.

Included here are services particular to women on campus, in order to give indication of the perspective of the Women's Department. Other services which

are not mentioned include the support of International Students through FISA, sporting clubs, employment and accommodation services, tax help, financial counselling, emergency loans, accident insurance and minor services such as cheap and free photocopying, faxing, organic food co-operatives, courses, leisure activities and discount movie tickets.

### **Student organisations' role in campus life**

In addition to the key services provided by student organisations, and supported by the Student Services Fee, these organisations play a significant role in enriching the educational experience of all students by creating a vibrant campus culture. A rich and welcoming campus life has many benefits. Key amongst these include easing the transition to university for students from all backgrounds, ensuring students' engagement with the university community, which improves student retention rates, and better balance between study and leisure, encouraging better mental health for all students.

The work of student organisations is often trivialised with the glib description of it being about "beer, bands and barbeques", and some advocates of student organisations may avoid discussing these matters as a major part of student organisations business. A calendar of social events which include orientation activities, opportunities to meet with other students, culturally sensitive social events for international students and culturally and linguistically diverse Australian students, as well as gatherings for those who live in campus housing and rural students, ensures that students are less isolated when they make it to university. Students who feel engaged with the university community are less likely to be overwhelmed by the burden of study, and more likely to be aware of, and access, available services when they need help. Such support can only be of assistance in improving university retention rates, and bettering the mental health of students, who are a vulnerable group in our community.

Similarly, the Women's Department at SAFU brings women together through the Women's Action Group, women specific social events, and extra-curricular projects such as conferences and dramatic performances. We also run awareness campaigns about issues of relevance to female students, particularly based around health issues and women's rights.

Integral to the success of these programs is the fact that they apply to all students. Universal student union membership ensures that students are not excluded from these events based on a decision they made at the beginning of the year, inevitably on financial grounds. The variable nature of the study load across the university year means that student involvement in such activities rises and falls, and universal membership ensures that they can engage with SAFU and other student organisations when and how they want to.

## Concerns of the Women's Department of SAFU

The SAFU Women's Department is exceptionally concerned about the impact of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005 on students at Flinders University and around the country. This drastic change to the way student organisations are funded, and this change in their membership, will have significant impact on their effectiveness and may threaten their existence. The inter-relationship of student organisations and universities in Australia will see a huge hole left by any reduction in services. The role that student organisations has played, throughout their existence, is one of pastoral care, ensuring the wellbeing and support of students, while universities can focus on their education. Integral to the strength of these organisations is the concept of universal membership, to ensure two things, our integrity as representatives of students, and our accessibility.

In relation to the matter of ensuring accessibility to services for all students, we predict that upon enrolling at university, students may have trouble making the decision about whether or not to voluntarily join their student organisation. No student imagines that they will at some point in the future face an unfair marker or university decision, or that they may need to access our accommodation service, upon finding themselves homeless. In that sense, compulsory membership of their student organisation is a form of insurance, protecting them from unexpected adversity. In the same vein, this universality of membership shares the cost of supporting students across the student community. In his support for this bill Federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson has posed the question "Why is it that a single mother training to be a nurse should pay for the canoeing or mountaineering club when all she wants is a degree?"<sup>1</sup>. The simple response to this is that the members of the canoeing and mountaineering club are paying for her child care, to ensure that she can come to university, and all parties are supporting a system which ensures representation of all students, and services which they may or may not access while at university.

Looking at our integrity as representatives of the student body, it is imperative in a wide variety of our roles that we can say we speak for every student enrolled at Flinders University. We provide representatives to university governing bodies such as University Council, Academic Senate and Equal Opportunity Committee who hold these positions by virtue of being elected from the student body, in elections in which every student had the opportunity to vote. Similarly, when our Academic Rights Officer stands before Student Appeals Committee arguing for

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<sup>1</sup> Press release: *Slashing Up-front fees for students – Voluntary Student Unionism Legislation Introduced* 16 March, 2005 available at [www.dest.gov.au/ministers/nelson](http://www.dest.gov.au/ministers/nelson)

justice for a particular student, he can confidently say that he has the interests of all students motivating him.

Arguments in support of this Bill have raised the issue that students will pay for their membership if they feel it is important to join student organisations. This shows a lack of understanding of the circumstances of students on campus. At the beginning of the year, overwhelmed by the cost of text books and the impending return to classes, students will make a purely financial decision on whether they can afford a Student Services Fee, regardless of whether they support the student organisation or not. As it is, buoyed by the universal membership and compulsory fee, the student organisations at Flinders are able to offer payment of the fee in instalments, helping students for whom this is too great a financial burden and students happily enter into this arrangement. Few people will choose to pay a voluntary fee when so cash strapped, but this is no assessment of their support for student organisations, more a reflection of the financial decisions students need to make every day.

One of the final concerns for the SAFU Women's Department is that many services provided at Flinders by the student organisations are essential for students on campus, and are funded completely by the Student Services Fee. Were these organisations not able to provide these services any longer, we would ask the university to take over, which will add to the cost burden for the university, and would take money away from teaching, research and course provision.

In conclusion, the Women's Department of SAFU urges the committee to recommend against the implementation of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-Front Union Fees) Bill 2005 and support universal, compulsory membership of student organisations. By doing so, the Committee may be able to avert a situation which would see many students without the support and representation that they need to reach their full potential at university. The devastating effect that the success of this Bill would have on campus culture, representation, advocacy, opportunities and services for students would be irreversible, and not only students, but universities and the wider community would be the poorer for it. Our society is enriched by the success of well supported, well represented graduates who have had every opportunity. Student organisations at Flinders University and all around Australia help make this happen, and are only enabled by the financial support and strength of position provided by universal student membership.