

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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Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005

Introduction

The proposed VSU legislation will eliminate the majority of the student services provided by the Tasmania University Union (TUU). The TUU has operated on behalf of students for over 100 years. It has maintained accountability and good governance over this period together with an excellent relationship with the University of Tasmania.

The University of Tasmania charges students an annual Services & Amenities Fee of \$264 for a full time student (the rate is proportional to study, e.g. a part-time student would only pay \$132 per annum). The University then passes on this amount, less a collection levy, to the student bodies.

The TUU provides funding for projects which fall under the governance of the following areas:

- Student Representative Council
- Postgraduate Council
- Sports Council
- Societies Council
- Board of Management

The University Ordinance caps the allocation to the Student Representative Council at 17.5% of fees received. As such, claims that Student Unions spend exorbitant amounts of money on political campaigning do not apply to the TUU. The 17.5% of funding allocated to the SRC covers portfolio budgets, awareness campaigns and student activities (sporting, social and academic). Very little of this 17.5% goes towards any kind of political campaigning and/or lobbying.

VSU - Fees projection

Based on our research of Western Australian Student Associations under VSU conditions, fee revenue would decrease by 90% due to the lower membership levels and a lower fee amount.

Estimated reduction

Current fee revenue	\$1,800,000
Estimated VSU fee revenue	\$180,000
Estimated reduction in fees	\$1,620,000

As a result of the reduction in fees most of our services would have to be closed, scaled down or run at increased cost to students (probably costing them more individually than the S&A Fee rate).

Student Services to be eliminated

Many of our services simply cannot be run on a 'user pays' model as it is the current core infrastructure of the TUU which allows the services to be managed at such a low

financial rate. This is because a loss of income from S&A Fees would result in a loss of core structure, which in turn would destroy the basic economics of scale that allow the TUU to minimise the costs of our services. As a result many services simply could not be run at all as they do not exist to generate their own income; other services would have to have their convenience and student focus diminished while also raising the cost to use the service. Some such services are listed below:

Advocacy and Welfare:

We provide Academic Grievance Support and Formal Complaints advice for our members. We believe that neither of these services can adequately be offered by any other body, as the University is the only organisation with staff knowledgeable enough about the governing Ordinances but they can be held in a conflict of interest in the event Academic Misconduct and Complaints hearings.

The student who sits on the panel deciding matters of Academic Misconduct or Complaints is also drawn from the TUU; the President or Vice-President, as official representatives of the TUU, add a student perspective to the three-member panel and, due to their positions, are also able to be held accountable for their decisions.

Without this service students have nowhere to turn for advice, assistance and advocacy in Academic and Administrative issues and complaints, except the body who is accusing them/they are complaining against. Such a situation simply would not be equitable.

The TUU also provides Student Accident Insurance; if a student is accidentally injured (even if off campus and not due to negligence) they are covered by our Accident Insurance. Such a service cannot be provided under a 'user pays' model. Such insurance must be taken out as a group and the TUU will not have the funds for such a scheme if the current amendment the Higher Education Support Act is passed.

Sports and Societies:

The TUU funds a wide range of sports and physical activities on several levels. The most comprehensive of these is Public Liability Insurance, which, if sports clubs had to fund this themselves and individually would lead to either many clubs folding or a dramatic increase in membership fees which would lead to many (probably most) students not being able to participate.

The TUU also covers the cost of ground and clubroom maintenance and hire, as well as providing funding to supply uniforms and equipment.

Even if a sports club can increase membership costs to afford its uniforms and equipment, without Public Liability Insurance they simply cannot play. As for alternative funds, there is not enough industry in Tasmania to financially sponsor insurance for all of our clubs. They exist solely because of the funding the TUU is able to provide.

In addition to the many sports clubs operating at UTas the TUU also funds many Societies. These fall into three main categories: Faculty based (e.g. Tasmanian University Law Society), Cultural (e.g. The Malaysian Society), and Arts (e.g. The Tasmanian University Music Society). Again, without the financial and administrative

support of the TUU these groups would have to increase their membership levy to cover costs (similarly to sports this would limit the number students who can take part in their activities) or fold.

There is considerable evidence that participation in a broad range of extra curricular activities play a significant role in the personal development of our students.

Cultural Events and Services:

In addition to the Societies funded by the TUU, we also fund other areas which have a cultural focus, these include, but are not limited to: International Students Officer, Multicultural Week, Orientation Week and TUU Day. These events do not only focus on 'culture' in the traditional, multi-national sense of the term, they also explore the culture shared by the students at the University of Tasmania.

Academic Support:

The TUU offers several levels of academic support to its members. These include two Research Officers (one of which deals specifically with Post-Graduate issues) who, among other duties, collate information on academic policies and standards, both within the University and Nationally.

The TUU also runs workshops on thesis writing and research, as well as a thesis back-up service to ensure no valuable research and writing is lost.

Business Services:

Financially, our Business Services budget to break even, i.e. they are non-profit. Should a service produce a surplus this money goes back to the TUU to subsidise areas within the Business Services portfolio. For example, if our Refectory or cafes exceed their budgeted expectations, the money is used to further subsidise the food sold there to ensure that we can make this service as affordable as possible for our members.

In addition to catering outlets the TUU manages a Housing Scheme which provides affordable accommodation to our members. The tenants within the TUU Housing Scheme also have access to residential services not provided by agents or private landlords (e.g. free garden maintenance and furniture hire).

Publications:

The TUU produces several publications throughout the year. These include *Togatus*, a magazine dedicated to student issues, writing, artwork and reviews. *Togatus* provides students with a form of print media to express themselves in a format not produced by mainstream media. *Togatus* is also produced in a format compatible with software for the vision impaired.

The TUU also prints an annual Student Diary and Survival Guide which provides students with dates and information about UTas, the TUU and supporting organisations as well as a list of businesses which the TUU has coordinated into a Student Discount Club for our members.

Through the Student Representative Council the TUU also produces a number of brochures, posters and pamphlets to inform students on issues surrounding Higher

Education, health and well-being and upcoming events which may be of academic or social interest to students.

Off-Campus Services:

Students who are studying some or all of their subjects off campus and are concerned that they will not receive 'full benefit' for their Service and Amenities Fee are often granted a discount. The TUU also offers many services which are relevant to all students, whether they study off campus or not. These include Student Accident Insurance; advocacy, support and advice in the event of a Misconduct Hearing or Formal Complaint; Lazenbys on Liverpool; Sports and Societies (many games, excursions, camps and events are run off campus on weekends or outside normal study hours) and Publications.

4. Provision of infrastructure & essential services

The TUU provides many infrastructure & essential services that could not be funded under VSU conditions. These include: the provision of the examination centre; public area maintenance; student toilets; student public liability and accident insurance.

5. Related Consequences

The University of Tasmania would inherit the buildings and grounds currently maintained by the TUU. These include administration offices, sporting grounds and clubrooms. The maintenance of these areas is estimated to cost \$300,000 pa.

International Students frequently use the services and facilities provided by the TUU. The services we provide are often a major component of international marketing and recruitment campaigns. The services play an important role in bringing International Students to Australia. The fee income that they contribute is an important income source for our University & country.

There is considerable evidence that participation in a broad range of extra curricular activities play a significant role in the personal development of our students. Some of these programs and facilities include sports and recreation, meeting and social facilities, student leadership development courses, a broad range of clubs and a range of community service projects.

Many leading Australians in a broad range of fields including business and industry, the arts, sports and community services have benefited by developing their skills through University extra curricular activities, most of which are provided through the TUU.

Again there is considerable evidence that the development of social networks and friendships at University is an important factor in students remaining at University and being successful. The programs and facilities offered by University service organisations are designed to facilitate these outcomes and have proved very successful at doing so. Retention rates at the University of Tasmania are well below national averages, further supporting the requirement for our services.

VSU would bring many retrenchments to our organisation. Several members of our staff have been employed for many years and would find it difficult to find alternative employment. The unemployment rate in Tasmania is significantly higher than the Australian average.

We also provide an avenue for students to be employed on-campus, which is convenient for their studies.

Past experience has shown that the effect of funding cuts will have a dramatic impact on small and regional campuses, such as the University of Tasmania, as the viability of essential services is marginal. Funding reductions to larger institutions often results in reduced hours of operation, whereas at smaller campuses essential programs will be cut entirely. Similarly, non-Tasmanian Universities may suffer less, as their students' financial resources are more stable.

We believe that the notion that if there aren't enough students to financially support a service or our organisation as a whole that it shouldn't be run at all is simplistic and de-values the work involved that benefits all students but which may not return a material reward to each and every member. Many of our services do not make any money because they are designed to provide support to students, not provide them with sausage rolls. Put simply, what our members do not receive from their S&A Fees in material gain they receive in invaluable advice and support. *That* is why our organisation can fund so many areas: because we provide what can't be bought under 'user pays' systems.

The Tasmania University Union is not a political lobby group. It has only engaged in such activity secondary to its other services and only when our members will be directly affected. Our main goal is to provide a wide range of sporting, social, cultural, academic and welfare services to our members that are not provided by any other body.

Student Organisations and the Government of the day have not always seen eye to eye, but we believe that our organisation acts ethically and in a way which supports *all* of our members.

Emma Catchpole
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