

# 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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Monash Postgraduate Association Inc.

(MPA)

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

June 2005

By  
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## **Summary**

Postgraduate associations are an integral part of the university community and of the postgraduate experience. As a community, we expect to contribute to the provision of core support services such as health care, education, transport and the services provided by local councils. This is because we acknowledge that they are essential if we are to function as a community, regardless of whether or not they are of direct personal benefit.

In the same way, it is reasonable to expect the postgraduate community to contribute to the provision of core support services for postgraduates. It is clear that for the Monash University postgraduate community, the Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) is a provider of many of these core support services, and as such, should continue to be funded. However should the HESA bill be passed, the existence of associations such as the MPA would be jeopardised.

## **MPA Services**

The Monash Postgraduate Association Inc. (MPA) at Monash University in Victoria has one of the largest enrolments of postgraduates at an Australian university. The MPA represents postgraduate interests and provides services and support to approximately 14,500 postgraduates across Victoria.

The MPA receives approximately \$36 per postgraduate from the amenities fee collected by the university on behalf of the student associations and other service providers. With this funding, the MPA employs four staff members (FTE) to provide postgraduate-specific services and activities across all six Victorian campuses of Monash University, as well as at several off-campus locations such as the Alfred Hospital complex and the Monash Medical Centre.

The MPA services extend across all faculties and are provided in direct response to the needs of both coursework and research postgraduates.

These services include:

- provision of advice and advocacy to postgraduates with problems
- administration and support of postgraduate representatives
- academic orientation programs
- social events
- seminars and workshops
- dissemination of information to the postgraduate community
- postgraduate publications
- postgraduate-specific website
- weekly email news bulletins
- research on postgraduate educational issues
- liaising with the academic and administrative community to improve postgraduate facilities and resources
- English conversation classes for international postgraduates

## **MPA Operations**

To ensure that the MPA is able to properly represent the interests and needs of the postgraduate community, the MPA seeks continual feedback from the postgraduate community in the following ways:

- Postgraduate forums are conducted at each campus every semester to allow postgraduates the opportunity to inform the MPA about issues of concern relating to central, faculty and departmental university operations as well as concerns specific to that campus. Those concerns are then followed up by the MPA with the relevant bodies in order to achieve a positive outcome for postgraduates.

- Evaluations are conducted at every orientation session and selected seminars run by the MPA, offering the opportunity for feedback on the events. Suggestions for improvement are put into action at subsequent events.
- Postgraduates are encouraged to provide feedback through the MPA weekly email news and website.
- Through the provision of advice and advocacy to individual postgraduates, the MPA is in a unique position to identify emerging areas of concern, and to use that information to work with the university to address those issues.
- Reports from postgraduate representatives on university committees and boards are posted on the MPA website. The MPA committee, MPA staff and postgraduate community provide information and support to postgraduate representatives on university committees to ensure that the postgraduate position is considered when university policies and procedures are developed.
- The MPA seeks the views of postgraduates through surveys on topics such as satisfaction with facilities, satisfaction with supervision and satisfaction with services funded by the amenities fees.
- The MPA conducts research on postgraduate-specific issues, for example, a recent report *Modelling Quality Experiences for Women in Research Higher Degrees: recruitment, retention and completions*, surveyed and analysed data on women undertaking higher degrees at Monash. The report identified strengths and weaknesses in university policies and procedures, and made recommendations for improvement.
- Social events are also used to provide information to, and seek the views of, the postgraduate community. Apart from lunches and coffee clubs being an important venue for social interaction and networking for postgraduates, the MPA seeks feedback at these functions to ensure that they stay abreast of the most current issues concerning postgraduates. Issues of space, resources, intellectual property, academic support in the form of seminars and opportunities for social networking to combat isolation are common issues for postgraduates. This information is then acted upon by the MPA feeding the information back to the appropriate areas of the university for action.

In summary, the MPA plays an integral role in working with the university to ensure the provision of relevant postgraduate services and to ensure that university policies and practices are developed in line with postgraduate needs.

## MPA Achievements

The MPA is a responsive, innovative and effective body. Where an identified need cannot be met by the university or relevant body, the MPA makes every attempt to 'fill the gap' in order to demonstrate to the university that there is a particular need. In this way, the MPA has been responsible for initiating a number of schemes now being run by the university as core support activities.

Some of the achievements of the MPA include:

- negotiating to provide and improve **facilities, resources and space for postgraduates** on Clayton campus resulting in the creation of postgraduate-specific areas such as the Postgraduate Centre and the library annexe.
- together with Monash Research Graduate School, being responsible for creating the first supervisory Code of Practice at Monash University and for many of the subsequent inclusions in the Code of Practice that supported a professional and harmonious **student-supervisor** relationship.
- successfully negotiating with the University to increase the MGS scholarships by 4%, in order to stay in line with increases to APAs when GST was introduced.
- providing the first postgraduate-specific seminars on all Victorian campuses, leading to the subsequent development of the Expert seminar series by the Monash Research Graduate School.
- successfully negotiating with the university to provide and improve **facilities, resources and space for coursework postgraduates** on Caulfield campus resulting in the University providing the **first postgraduate-specific lounge area and computer lab on Caulfield**. In addition, the library increased its evening and weekend hours of operation to cater for the large part-time, evening coursework postgraduate population on Caulfield, and catering outlets' hours on campus are currently still under review.
- conceiving and (in conjunction with Monash Careers and Employment Service), conducting an annual Postgraduate Careers forum, the first of its kind in Australian universities, an idea and format later taken on as a national event, run by the Australia-wide network of university careers advisory services.
- successfully negotiating with the university to allow part-time research postgraduates access to candidature extension time in parity with time available to full-time candidates.

## Postgraduate Perspectives

The services provided by the MPA are not only an avenue for academic growth but also personal growth. Through the advice and advocacy provided by the MPA, over 300 postgraduates per year, who otherwise may have given up their studies, fulfil their desires of a higher education. Their issues range from feelings of isolation and loneliness to intellectual property concerns or supervision problems. As one international student put it after MPA intervention on their behalf, "I look forward with a beaming smile for a bright future."

Another student spoke of the loneliness and isolation that they felt when they first arrived in this country and how after a few months they had decided to just 'give up and head back home'. Once again, MPA support in the form of a social event, (a free lunch), gave this postgraduate the opportunity to meet other international students and realize that he was not alone. This student is now a happy and productive member of the postgraduate community and the academic life of the University. He has had articles accepted in academic publications and is now planning to remain in Australia and become a citizen. All of this because of one lunch.

Other students speak of the seminars coordinated or presented by the MPA and how beneficial they were to their academic endeavours.

"It (*an MPA orientation seminar*) gave me the confidence to begin the seminars in my course, and made me aware of the facilities and assistance available at the University. I later attended a class about presenting seminar papers, also run by the MPA, and this was extremely valuable to me in continuing my course with confidence. I am extremely grateful for the MPA for the initial seminar and helping me to ease back into university life and study."

Another student spoke of how the MPA helped her maintain desire to finish her degree by distance learning.

"... the Internet and mail contact (*from the MPA*) goes a long way to alleviating the feelings of isolation inherent in distance learning. This may seem unimportant, but believe me, it has had a significant effect in maintaining my sense of connection with Monash and postgraduate communities, especially during long periods of when I feel I could just give up. I hope this has provided another insight into the importance of the MPA to the emotional health and academic success of postgraduate students."

One student voiced how the MPA has helped her and empowered her, through her involvement with the MPA, to help others.

"...personally, the MPA has helped me become involved with student life on the campus by giving me an opportunity to participate in the postgraduate coursework subcommittee on a de facto basis and has given me guidance as to the services available to postgraduates on campus and advice about how to deal with my concerns."

A research postgraduate with a problem accessed the MPA's advice and advocacy service and spoke about her experience.

"MPA's support was vital in several ways:

- 1) Professional Advice – They were familiar with Monash's policies and hence were able to provide sound advice which otherwise may not be easily available, especially at a critical time.
- 2) Care – When my friends (other students) advised me to take a "don't rock the boat" and "suffer in silence" attitude because of fear, I felt that the only appropriate people to consult was MPA. The assurance of confidentiality was not only professionally beneficial, but more importantly, a clear sign of the measure of care the association adopts. Very thoughtful indeed."

These are the voices of postgraduates at Australian universities. They are Australian or they are one of many of the international students who choose to study here in Australia. These individuals represent not only the future of Australia but the future of numerous other countries. (See Appendix 2 for a detailed international postgraduate's perspective).

### **The effects of HESA on Monash postgraduates**

Under the proposed amendment to the legislation, many of the services and activities offered by the MPA to postgraduates would be jeopardised. The MPA would be forced to charge individual postgraduates for every service and activity in which they took part. There would be no publications, no free lunches, no advice and advocacy.

Without the ability to employ staff, even the basic functions of representation and communication would rely on the availability of postgraduate volunteers. For the postgraduate cohort, many of whom juggle family responsibilities, childcare and professional full-time jobs, there is a heavy reliance on employed staff to carry out the functions of the MPA. The ability of postgraduates to influence and direct university policies and regulations, to lobby for improved conditions and to participate in the university decision making processes would be greatly diminished.

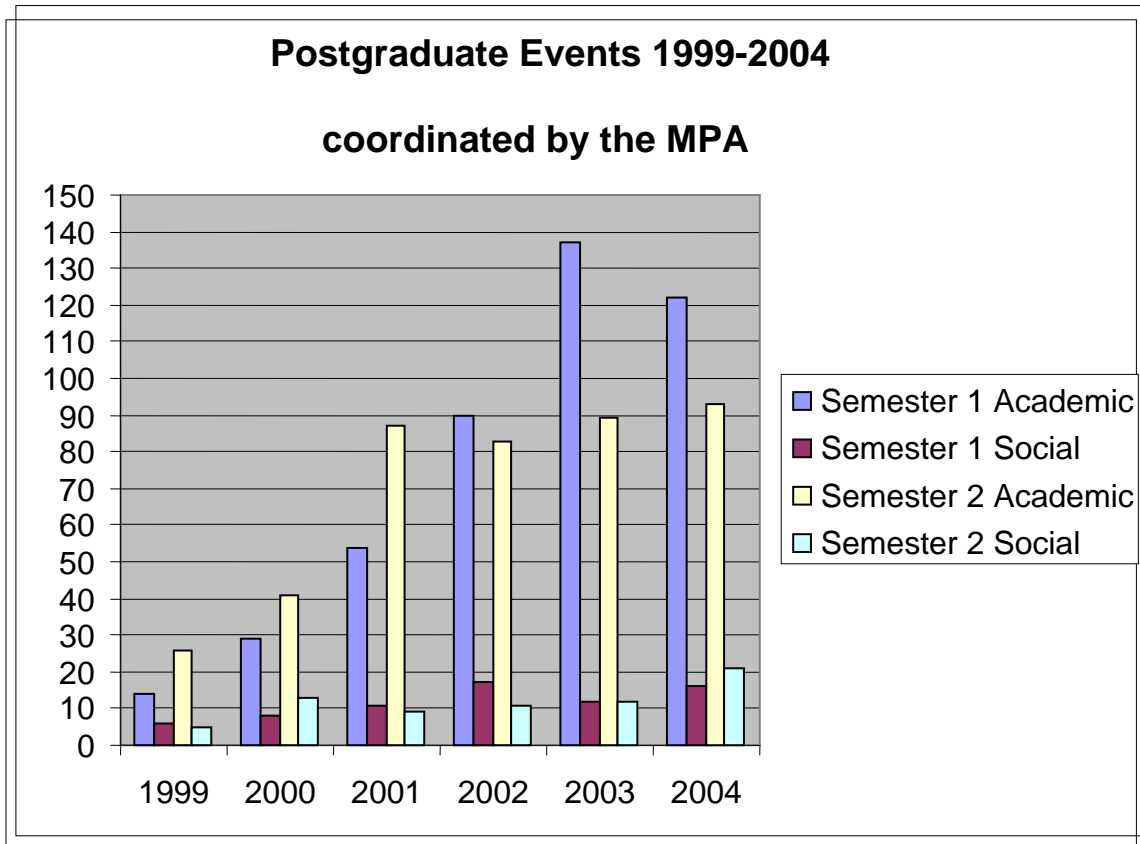
Without a secure base income, many services would not be able to sustain operations and would close down completely. To argue that students could pay to use the services when they wanted them, misses the point that when students needed a service (such as advice and advocacy in a dispute, or orientation services), the service may no longer be offered.



## Appendix 1

**Figure 1 Postgraduate Events coordinated by the MPA at Monash University**

**Victorian Campuses 1999-2004**



Based on 'The MPA Guide to Graduate Programs' Semester 1 and 2 1999-2004.

## **Appendix 2: An international postgraduate's perspective.**

As an International PhD student, I arrived at Monash University in early 2003. Before that I was working in my country as a lawyer. A sudden change to academic life and a new country was something unusual to me. Unlike coursework students where you meet other students from different backgrounds thanks to regular classes, I felt a loner as a researcher in my first days. It was harder for me, relative to others, given that back in my country, I had a full-on life as a corporate lawyer, always busy either with my clients or attending court matters. The loneliness and isolation on arrival at Monash gnawed me to such an extent that within a few days after my arrival I made up my mind to give up my studies and head back to where I came from and, carry on with my previous life. Then suddenly one day while I was warming my food in the tea room of my faculty, I saw a notice from Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) about its upcoming free lunch. A 'free lunch' and an opportunity to meet new Postgraduate (PG) students was something I thought should be given a try before I would leave the university.

On the day of the MPA lunch I attended the event and realised that there was such a large population of international PG research students in the university whom I had never met before. It was also surprising to find that many of them were from my country. I was greeted and warmly accepted by one and all and it took us hardly any time to become friends. The thought of going back to my country was no longer in my mind. That day I made up my mind that I will be pursuing my research and will not be heading back home as a loser. From that day on, more than two years have elapsed and I have never felt lonely and friendless, all thanks to that MPA lunch.

Free lunch is not the only event organised by MPA. There are other regular events that they organise such as seminars, photo exhibition and other social activities such as the coffee club which meets fortnightly and which happens to be my favourite. Coffee club, run by MPA every fortnight, is a place where PG students can meet informally and share their views. I have made many good friends through MPA's coffee club. We have also set up a small social club amongst ourselves and through emails we organise fun filled and sport activities on a regular basis other than the MPA-run events. We also provide help and motivation to each other in our research. Whenever we write an article or a chapter we seek constructive critical comments and suggestions for improvement our peers. I must admit that thanks to my friends, few of my articles have been accepted for publication. The MPA also provides advocacy advice and some of my friends have received adequate advocacy service from there. Had the MPA not been there they would have had to spend a lot of money from their pockets.

These days when I hear about VSU, I wonder why the government is trying to stop associations such as MPA which has always been beneficial to students such as myself who would have gone back home had the MPA not been there. Don't they realise that associations such as MPA are a boon to international students who come here to study but feel awfully lonely and isolated. Associations such as the MPA and activities run by such associations help them socialize and feel surrounded by friends. Without the MPA I

reckon many new overseas students would face the same problem of loneliness and isolation that I felt in my initial days and, most probably give up their studies and leave. They will go back home because there will be no such organisation like the MPA to help and support them. I also firmly believe that implementing VSU will undoubtedly reduce the number of overseas students coming to Australia for higher education. I wish the VSU is never realised because students like me will be the most disadvantaged.

AS, PhD candidate, Monash University