



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

**Inquiry into the provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment
(Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005**

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1. This submission, on behalf of the University of New England Students' Association, addresses the first of the two matters of interest to the Committee to the Bill:

Assessment of the likely effect of the legislation on the provision of student services, and related consequences.
2. The UNE Students' Association whole-heartedly supports the Bill in its current form. In this submission I shall address:
 - a) Impact of the Bill on student services;
 - b) Impact of the Bill on external (distance education) students;
 - c) Impact of the Bill on rural and regional services;
 - d) Impact of the Bill on the University community; and
 - e) A response to claims from the University of New England.

Impact of the Bill on Student Services

3. The current Student Council of the UNE Students' Association believes that suggestions about supposed damage to student unions that the Bill will do are not of themselves an argument against voluntary student unionism.
4. Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) will require Student Unions to reform and reposition their organisations and the services they provide. Student Unions are notorious for their waste, inefficiency and irrelevance generally to the student body. Student Unions are usually under

the control of sectional interest groups that position the student union to serve their needs rather than the needs of the mainstream student body.

5. The UNE Students' Association has worked hard this year to reposition itself to make itself relevant to the study body at the University of New England. The slashing of wasteful spending; reprioritisation of spending to areas of greater need and relevance to the student body; and delivery of services and representation that appeal to the majority of students and not sectional interests.
6. Student unions should not be exempted from the need to demonstrate to a potential membership base why membership is relevant has its advantages. Student Unions and their leaders have an extreme obligation to deliver true value for money to students.
7. Too many student unions give lip service to delivering to their members, but fail to provide real and meaningful services.
8. The UNE Union (another student union at the UNE) established and operated a brasserie and function centre at the UNE from 2001 known as The Booloominbah Collection. The Board of Directors at the time of planning failed to undertake a proper business case. Had they, they would have found that there was not sufficient student demand for the service. Instead sectional interests amongst university staff members pushed for the establishment of the venue as a 'staff club'. Since establishment The Booloominbah Collection has lost between \$180,000 and \$200,000 each year. This represents nearly 20 cents in every dollar paid to the UNE Union out of the compulsory student union fee.
9. Voluntary Student Unionism will force student unions to properly plan and deliver their services. This will make services more relevant and delivered in a more efficient manner.
10. The net effect on student services of Voluntary Student Unionism will be a general improvement in services for students. Irrelevant, wasteful, and inefficient services will be lost, and they will be replaced by services that the students demand in a cost-effective manner.

Impact of the Bill on External Students

11. At the University of New external (or distance education) students make up around three-quarters of the student population.
12. The compulsory fees paid by external students make up around half of the total fees collected by the university for distribution by the University.
13. External students by the very nature of their study are not required to study at the UNE campus in Armidale. External students visit the Armidale campus only for a few days each year. Many external students will go their entire degrees never visiting the UNE campus.
14. Despite their large number and large contribution to the pool of funds from the compulsory student union fees, external students receive very little in return for their compulsory fees.
15. The attempts to provide services to external students by the UNE Union, Sport UNE, UNE Postgraduates' Association and the UNE Students' Association over recent years can be described as tokenistic at best.
16. Voluntary Student Unionism will force student unions to either deliver better services to external students or lose their funds.

17. Why should an external student living in Melbourne or Perth be forced to pay for the Gym, Uni Bar, Rugby Fields, Cafeteria and Second Hand Bookshop at a campus in Armidale if they never visit the campus?
18. Voluntary Student Unionism will create a financial imperative for student unions to service these much neglected members, instead of using them as a 'cash cow'.

Impact of the Bill on rural and regional services

19. The UNE Students' Association believes that the Bill will not have a negative impact on services in rural and regional areas.
20. The University of New England has often been cited as a university that has a high degree of integration with the local community.
21. The student unions at the University of New England play a far greater role in the day-to-day life of our students, and so it is highly likely that UNE students will choose to join the student unions in a voluntary environment.
22. Where we loose students as members it will be upon the UNE student unions to improve our services to attract back students.
23. The UNE Students' Association believes it is improper for students (low income earners) to be funding the provision of services and facilities for our entire community when the general service fee is not even means tested.
24. The introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism will not damage the provision of services like the local cinema, and in-town student union owned pub. The UNE Union has often been fearful of a second operator opening up a cinema in competition to the student union owned cinema. This is hardly evidence of a cinema struggling to make ends meet. In fact it smacks of monopolistic behaviour.
25. Armidale has over 10 drinking establishments in a town of 25,000 people. A hotel operated by the student union should be able to operate on commercial terms in competition with the other hotels and clubs in Armidale, otherwise it is not a viable venture and a waste of student funds.
26. The sporting facilities of the UNE need not suffer if Sport UNE (the student sports union) and the University could get their spending priorities in order. If the entrenched management of Sport UNE stopped trying to build up personal sporting empires and focused on managing the sporting facilities students actually wanted then they would have the necessary cash to maintain sporting fields.
27. The University of New England recently spent around \$1 million redeveloping the central courtyard at UNE. This is despite the fact that there is other major capital maintenance around the campus desperately needed. The UNE is also a recipient university of the Federal Government's generous regional loading. Why doesn't the UNE redirect funds away from unnecessary beautification projects on the campus and use it to invest in the up keep of sporting facilities they own, instead of expecting students to fund it.

Impact on the University community

28. The UNE Students' Association believes that the Bill will improve the University community.
29. Voluntary Student Unionism will introduce greater accountability and responsiveness to university communities.

30. When students are given a choice in whether or not to participate in a student union they have a greater sense of ownership. To compel a student to contribute does invoke any sense of belonging by a student.
31. Not all students wish to be part of an 'academic community'.
32. Many Vice-Chancellors, academics and student politicians argue that VSU will destroy their 'community of academia'. However many students (especially external and part-time students) are at university to get a degree for the purposes of employment. They have no interest in being involved in a wider community. Why should these students be compelled to take part in something they don't want to be involved in?
33. Many community groups (eg. Rotary, Ex-Serviceman's Clubs, Parents & Friends Associations) all do important work for the community and provide valuable and essential services yet the voluntary nature of the membership of these organisations does not damage their services. In fact most community members would be outraged to be forced to join such an organisation. Students should be given the same rights.

Response to Claims from the University of New England

34. Claims by the University of New England that voluntary student unionism will damage the provision of childcare on the campus are misleading. No student union at the University of New England funds the provision of childcare. Further to this by far the majority of parents using childcare at the University of New England are university staff not students.
35. The UNE has claimed that the campus is too isolated from the CBD and poorly serviced by public transport for a student to exercise choice in selecting a venue to purchase lunch from. The reality is that buses depart the campus every half hour, not every hour as the UNE has claimed. Further most students at the UNE own cars or have networks of friends with cars. Making the five minute drive into the CBD to visit shops/cafes in town is not a barrier to choice for students, as UNE would have the committee believe.
36. Claims from the UNE that the UNE Second-Hand Bookshop, security bus and other welfare services (all services provided by the UNE Students' Association) would have to close under VSU are incorrect. In preparation for VSU, the UNE Students' Association has and will reform its spending priorities and business practices to ensure the continuation of such services. The UNE Second-Hand Bookshop current trades at a break-even level. Such a bookshop will need on some reform to operations to ensure longer-term viability.
37. Claims that other retail services such as banking, hairdressing and a post office all closed due to a lack of viability suggest that only with a student union can these services be provided. The reality is that all such services are provided in the township within a 5 minute drive. Claims that somehow this points to disadvantaging students, should the student unions not be able to provide them, is misleading.
38. Claims by the UNE that medical services at UNE will be lost under VSU are incorrect. No student union at UNE provides a medical service to the students. This service is provided to the students through university-controlled funds.
39. Claims that a dental clinic will be lost are inaccurate. The UNE Students' Association does provide a dental clinic to students, with many basic treatments without charge. Assuming that membership dropped (and the UNE Students' Association does not concede this point) the service would become unviable under its present business model. However, it should be kept in mind that the dental clinic has frequently not been in operation over the last few years given the inability of the UNE Students' Association to find a dentist to work in the facility. It

should also be kept in mind that the arguments about VSU on this issue also fail to consider modifying the business model of the dentist to make it a viable operation.

40. As mentioned above, the UNE in 2004 spent an exorbitant amount of money on a beautification project for its central courtyard. UNE does have the financial capacity in the face of any diminishment of student union membership to continue to provide services it feels important.
41. The student unions at UNE, particularly the UNE Students' Association, have frequently been required to pick up the slack when UNE will not properly fund even its own primary educational activities. The UNE Students' Association has over the years funded part of a library telephone help line for external students to call after hours. This enables many of the working external students to pursue their studies after business hours away from their full-time job.
42. Generally, the claims by the UNE are unnecessarily alarmist and are symptomatic of university administration out of touch with students. As previously mentioned, the student unions of UNE play a larger role in the day-to-day life of UNE students, than some other metropolitan students. Under VSU it is highly likely that many UNE students will exercise their free right to join the student union.

Conclusions

43. The UNE Students' Association strongly encourages the committee to support this Bill.
 44. The UNE Students' Association believes that Voluntary Student Unionism will force immediate reform by the student union industry so that they become relevant and responsive to the students they serve. Students can only benefit from a refocusing of student unions to services that their membership truly want.
 45. Voluntary Student Unionism is not simply about allowing students a choice in whether they support political student unions, though this is an important point.
 46. Voluntary Student Unionism will allow students to pick and chose the services on their university campus that they want and don't want – a right they enjoy the moment they walk off the university campus into the real world.
 47. It is not up to Vice-Chancellors, academics and student politicians to decide what constitutes an 'essential service'. That right should and must fall to students exercising their right to join or not to join a student union and use or not use the facilities offered by the student union.
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