

Friday, 17 June 2005

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Dear Secretary (Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee),

Please find attached a submission from the Griffith University Postgraduate Student Association (GUPSA) into the likely effects and consequences of the proposed Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005.

GUPSA welcomes the opportunity to provide this information, as the Bill will directly affect GUPSA if and when it becomes legislation. Should this bill become legislation it is anticipated that only 10-12% of students will join and therefore with less income GUPSA will not be able to maintain the current level of service with respect to employing permanent and casual professional staff, office rental and ongoing office consumables. Essentially GUPSA will be forced to close its doors, obtain corporate sponsorship, become very clever marketers or be absorbed by the university. There are problems with all of these options, which the attached submission addresses.

Should you require further information please do not contact me personally via mobile telephone on 0414-281-771 or via email on gupsa-admin@griffith.edu.au. An invitation is extended to any member of the committee to visit our office to assure you that we are a hard working team of individuals doing the best that we can for the benefit of postgraduate students.

Thanking you
Elaine Pidgeon

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

Assessment of the likely effect of the legislation on the provision of student services, and related consequences

1. ASSOCIATIONS WILL HAVE LESS INCOME → CANNOT EMPLOY PROFESSIONAL STAFF

The most obvious ‘likely effect’ of this proposed legislation for the Griffith University Postgraduate Students Association (GUPSA) is that it will have less income¹ and will be unable to employ the professional staff currently on our payroll including:

- Office Manager 5 days per week
- Statistician 1 day per week
- Research Methodologist 1 day per week
- Editor 2-3 days per week

Currently GUPSA receives approximately \$170,000 annually from collected student fees and the Association puts this money to good use. Around 75% of GUPSA’s membership fees are spent on the salaries of professional staff and when professional development of staff and work related travel (between campuses to provide services) are added this comes to a staggering 87.5% of our membership fees.

GUPSA could not operate as efficiently and effectively without the presence of our wonderful, competent and professional staff. We employ three part time and one full time people. To attract and retain professional and competent people for the positions, appropriate and realistic market wages must be offered. Our staff must be worried about the security of their jobs in the face of VSU legislation. Associations should be worried about whether they have funds set aside for possible redundancy packages.

GUPSA cannot survive and operate at the same capacity as it currently does if VSU goes through. The services we provide, the professional staff we employ, the office from which we work—these cost money and without money these items will have to be drastically reduced or cut altogether.

¹ It is expected that only 10-12% of postgraduate students will actually join the Association based on the Western Australian experience.

2. ASSOCIATIONS MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO RETAIN AN INDEPENDENT OFFICE

Without the funds to pay for rent the GUPSA office might need to close. Without a full time Office Manager (because we wouldn't have money to pay for one) the office could not be left open and unattended anyway for fear of equipment being stolen. At best it might become a part time operation.

GUPSA is a friendly, independent source of assistance for any postgraduate or honours student, including those students currently undertaking any graduate certificate or diploma at the University.

3. ASSOCIATIONS WILL NOT BE ABLE TO OFFER PROFESSIONAL SERVICES TO POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

A range of services provided by all and available to all! The practice of collecting student fees from all students is an equitable and workable way that all students can have access to a range of services that are essentially provided by all should the need arise during the course of their studies. It is understandable that an optimistic and financially challenged student might choose not to join an association at the beginning of their studies. It is also predictable that for some students everything will not go according to plan and they will need support in some shape or form to enable successful completion of their studies. The big issue is, at the beginning nobody knows who will necessarily be the ones to need support and students not becoming a member of the association may find themselves in a difficult situation without support or the financial resources to pay the full cost of this support at a later date.

4. POTENTIAL NEGATIVE IMPACTS - ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

GUPSA offers programs which assists postgraduate students to achieve high academic outcomes. Should these programs cease, there is a potentially adverse affect on academic outcomes such as course completion rates and research outcomes. For example, GUPSA runs an **Editor-in-Residence Program** and a **Statistical and Research Methods Program** which are free to members. These services are patronised by internal, external and off-shore postgraduate students. Many postgraduate students could not afford access to these types of professionals if they had to source them on the open market (let alone other issues related to sourcing such professionals). As a sole parent with no family support network I could not afford such assistance. The Editor service is widely used by international students while the other programs are mostly used by research higher degree students who are predominantly domestic students. Course completion rates may drop if these services are not provided. Please visit the GUPSA website on <http://www.griffith.edu.au/centre/gupsa/> for evidence of the services and communications we offer free to our members.

GUPSA also runs Work-in-Progress conferences for students to get practice at presenting papers in front of a helpful friendly audience. Only a person who has been

through this can truly understand how these types of services are needed by those who have the need for it at the time that they need it.

A bursary assists those in academic need. GUPSA offers bursaries of \$300 to one member from each campus per semester to postgraduate students whose submission is considered most worthy. GUPSA has also a budget for 'student support' where upon application and approval funds are available for purposes related to a study need such as the purchase of fridges, coffee machines, photocopier hire, printers, sofas and the like for postgraduate student offices or spaces. Just for the record, GUPSA Executive Committee members are constitutionally prohibited from submitting an application to GUPSA for a bursary or to be employed by the Association.

5. POTENTIAL NEGATIVE IMPACTS – SOCIAL OUTCOMES

GUPSA presents their services to new students at induction programs and in doing so reassures them that they have an independent friendly association to which they all belong and from which they can receive assistance from should the need. At these types of presentations any upcoming social function is also promoted in an attempt to nurture a welcoming and friendly atmosphere for new students. This is especially important for international students but can also be important for otherwise isolated postgraduate students. These social activities and outcomes have subsequent impacts on the experience and academic outcomes for postgraduate students.

GUPSA organises one large orientation function at the beginning of each year and a smaller one during the second semester (\$5,000 per year budget for both). These events provide the opportunity for other postgraduate students to get to know other students, aiding the process of settling in and belonging to the university community. This has important academic ramifications if the student has other students as friends or can identify with other students living in similar circumstances. Sometimes the stretch becomes more tolerable.

6. ADVOCACY ROLE AND UNIVERSITY FEEDBACK MECHANISM TO IMPROVE THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

We also act as grievance officers and provide feedback to the Dean of Graduate Studies or other sections of the University as issues arise. Our advice does not fall on deaf ears and our Association assists and enhances the postgraduate experience. We have an excellent co-operative working relationship with Griffith University. However, the true value and success of this relationship lies with the fact that we are independent and therefore student feedback is presented in an honest yet confidential manner.

7. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS FOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Should this legislation go through GUPSA might have to close its doors or obtain alternative financial support but such options pose their own set of problems as follows:

- Obtain corporate sponsorship → potentially lose independence and subject to conditions set by overriding sponsor. These conditions at times might conflict with the objectives of GUPSA. Confidentiality of clients' might be threatened.
- Become very clever marketers → this process/responsibility detracts current staff and/or volunteer committee members from performing duties associated with normal association business, i.e., servicing the needs and interests of its members. As postgraduate students our time is precious and therefore our work as volunteers is the best that we can do in the time available. If we have another task to attend to just to keep operational this really puts the pressure on for the survival of such associations.
- Be absorbed by the university → potentially lose independence and subject to conditions set by university. Client confidentiality might be threatened, whether real or perceived, the outcome might mean that postgraduate students are reluctant to divulge details relevant to their case/issue to a university-dependent service. Furthermore, the university would miss out on valuable independently provided yet non-identifying feedback on where and how services can be improved for postgraduate students. Although the university and GUPSA have an excellent working relationship it is important to maintain this independence to assure that this effective working relationship is not compromised either now or in the future. Postgraduate students need an association that is independent to the university to which they are enrolled.

Thank you for taking the time to read this submission.

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