



Adelaide
University
Overseas
Students'
Association

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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1. Introduction and Executive Summary

The Overseas Students' Association (OSA) is an affiliate of the Adelaide University Union, which is the student organization of the University of Adelaide. The OSA is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005.

This submission will assume that the funds currently raised by the universal student services and amenities fee will be greatly reduced if this legislation passed. The reasons behind this assumption are fully elaborated in the AUU's submission to the committee. This submission will concentrate on the effect that this legislation will have on OSA members, that is to say international students currently studying at the University of Adelaide.

Universities in Australia are bound by the Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 (ESOS Act 2000)¹ to provide a level of duty of care for international students. Under The National Code, which is legalisation established under the ESOS Act, the University is charged with providing certain support services to international students. It is the AUU and the OSA that provide the services that enable the University of Adelaide to that meet certain requirements imposed by the National Code, namely articles 45, 48.1 and 48.2 which direct universities to provide dispute resolution procedures, promote the successful adjustment of overseas students to life and study at an Australian institution, and assist students to resolve problems which might impede the timely completion of their studies.² The services provided by the AUU and the OSA that assist the University to comply with the ESOS Act are currently open to all students and are paid for by all students through the amenities and services fee. The effects of the legislation under consideration by the committee will be that university will have to provide certain services to international students in

¹ http://www.dest.gov.au/esos/

² See Appendix 1 for the relevant legislation



lieu of the AUU and the OSA. In light of financial considerations, it would appear likely that these services would be offered uniquely to international students. It is the OSA's view that were international students to retain access to services that local students are deprived of, this will create division within the student population and may result in acrimony as international students would be deemed as receiving preferential treatment. As will be seen, alienation and isolation remain major concerns for international students studying in Australia and any action that escalates these feelings would be deeply regrettable. Furthermore, there remains considerable doubt as to how the University can provide an independent dispute resolution procedure that deals with complaints against itself. The University cannot independently advocate against itself.

This submission will provide a background to the current situation for international students at the University of Adelaide, with a particular emphasis on the difficulties these students face. Life can be hard for international students studying in Australia. They are far from home and family support networks in a country with a foreign language and strange customs. This submission will then highlight the activities undertaken by the OSA and the AUU to assist international students in overcoming these difficulties.

2. Background: Internationalising the University of Adelaide and the problems faced by international students.

The University of Adelaide has made internationalisation a priority. Currently there are approximately 3000 international students studying at the University of Adelaide from over 70 different countries, which is more than 15% of the total student population.³ The University's *Strategic Plan (2004-2008)*⁴ highlights the University's intention to further internationalise and to substantially increase the number of international students. By 2008 the University aims to have more than 4000 international student EFTSU. However, the University is aware that internationalisation is much more than increasing international student numbers. The process of internationalisation means "integrating an international / intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service of an institution".⁵ The University's vision is to be "internationally focussed" and it aims to support cultural diversity. To achieve a student focus the University aims to "[r]ecognise that students come from diverse backgrounds and consequently have differing needs, capacities and learning requirements, and continue to develop support services which protect students' health, welfare and safety, and meet their learning needs".⁶

For internationalisation to be truly successful at the University it is important the whole University community is committed to the ideology and show this in their

³ Correspondence with the International Student Centre, February 2005.

⁴ University of Adelaide. *Future Directions. Strategic Plan 2004-2008*.

⁵ Knight, J. and de Wit, H. 'Internationalisation of Higher Education in Asia Pacific Countries', Amsterdam: EAIE, 1997, 8, cited in *University of Adelaide Internationalisation Plan 2003-2008* (Draft Version 10, 7th February 2003), p.2.

⁶ Ibid. p.15.



policies and practices. This includes being informed by an awareness of the challenges and issues facing international students and ensuring that these issues are addressed. These students accept the challenge of leaving behind their family, support, culture and familiar ways to study in another language and culture because of the opportunities it affords.

While international students are far from a homogenous group, they face many common challenges. Many students have preconceptions and expectations of their time here that do not meet the reality of linguistic, educational and cultural adjustment. A great deal of the problems that international students experience are the same as those facing local students: fear of failing, a lack of confidence in their academic ability, nervousness, financial pressure, and managing the demands of study.⁷ However, these problems are felt more profoundly because of the added challenges international students face. One study found that the level of study stress found in international students is markedly higher than that found in local students.⁸ For students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) the language barrier can make it hard to communicate in all spheres of university life across the four major skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. The educational differences that students, especially those from Asian countries, experience in Australia can include an emphasis on deep comprehension, and critical and analytical thinking, which are often skills not prioritised at home. Cultural adjustment requires international students to come to terms with values, attitudes, behaviours and practices that do not necessarily fit in with their own norms.⁹ Additional common problems are alienation, loneliness, misunderstanding, xenophobia, discrimination and coping with family pressure to do well. Moreover, mixing between nationalities is limited in Australian universities.¹⁰ The inability of international students to develop relationships with local students is a cause of loneliness and stress and a hindrance to the kind of language development and cultural adjustment that would enable international students to participate more fully in university life.

The benefits of having international students and a focus on internationalisation at the University extend beyond financial gains. Students at the University are able to make international connections and to have a cross-cultural learning experience that allows all students the opportunity to broaden their minds by encountering different opinions, cultures, worldviews, and religious beliefs. The culturally literate graduates that result are able to foster awareness and understanding whilst challenging stereotypes and reducing ideological and cultural barriers.

3. The role of the AUU

⁷ Mullins G., Qunitrell N, Hancock L. 'The experiences of International and Local Students at Three Australian Universities', *Higher Education and Research Development*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1995.

⁸ Burns, 1991, cited in Rambruth, P. *Internationalisation of Education: Implications for Student Learning and Social and Cultural Implications*. Paper presented at the 15th Australian International Education Conference 25-28 September 2001, UNSW.

⁹ Briguglio, C. 'Language and Cultural Issues for English as a Second Language Students in Transnational Educational Settings' *Higher Education in Europe*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2000.

¹⁰ Briguglio, 2000.



The Adelaide University Union (AUU) aims to provide “essential, non-academic services on campus, for the effective representation of all students, and for the creation of a campus community and culture.”¹¹ In terms of international students, the AUU accomplishes this in two ways. International students access the services available to all students, such as Student Care, the Sports' Association, the Food Outlets, the Studio, the Computer Resource Centre, the Employment Service, and the Clubs' Association. In addition, the AUU provides the Overseas Students' Association, the peak representative body for international students at the University of Adelaide, with financial and administrative support to enable it to achieve its aim of supporting and maintaining the educational and welfare needs of international students.

International students are heavy users of the AUU's 24-hour computer suite. They do not usually have their own computer facilities and rely on the computer suite to undertake their studies and keep in contact with home via email.

International students are also heavy users of the AUU's Employment service. As soon as international students have found accommodation and organised their course, then for many finding employment is the next priority, and this can be a struggle. Adelaide is a tough job market and for international students, who compete with local students for jobs, the extra challenges include limited English skills, work experience and a reliance on public transport.¹² Also, international students do not have the connections to access unadvertised jobs, which constitute the majority of casual and part-time positions. Some international students find that their employees do not follow workplace regulations and they are exploited in terms of work conditions, hours and pay.¹³ This has been the subject of controversy in the past year and has gained the attention of the *Advertiser*, Education Adelaide and Workplace Services SA. International students like the Employment Service and find the staff member there friendly and helpful. They are grateful for the assistance that is offered and would like to see this service expanded to further help them in finding employment.

International students are attracted to Australian universities in part by the non-academic services and facilities that they provide and the vibrancy of the campus culture. Many international students choose to study in Australia because they wish to experience different cultures and further their English skills. International students join sports and cultural clubs to improve their English and establish supportive social networks. Being involved in clubs and sporting teams organised by the AUU can aid international students by allowing them to set up networks of support and become more fully involved in the community.

¹¹ <http://www.union.adelaide.edu.au/about/>

¹² Phillips, S. *Working in Adelaide*, 2004.
<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/osa/information/working.html>

¹³ Phillips, S. The Job Scene in Adelaide in *The OSA Times*, February 2004.
Takeda, K. and Peiris, S. Students Share Job Stories in *The OSA Times*, February 2004.
<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/osa/publications/newsfeb04.pdf>



These are just a sample of the services and activities provided by the AUU which are open to all students at the University of Adelaide and are regularly used by international students. It is these types of services that assist the University in meeting the *ESOS National Code* requirement 48.1, i.e. "Promote the successful adjustment by overseas students to life and study at an Australian institution." By compromising the ability of the AUU to offer these services, VSU will hamper the University's ability to meet this requirement. Furthermore, by depriving international students of the chance to improve their English and form support networks through clubs and sports, this legislation will diminish the experience of international students studying in Australia and will impact directly on their learning experience, which in turn, affect the international reputation of Australian universities making them less attractive to international students.

The AUU also further helps the University meet the legislative requirements of the *ESOS National Code* by providing grievance handling / dispute resolution through the Education and Welfare Officers. The Education and Welfare Officers aid the University in helping international students to adjust to life in Australia and resolve problems which might interfere with their academic progress by providing assistance in navigating the rules and regulations of their new country.

4 The role of the OSA

The OSA itself plays a pivotal role in helping international students to adapt to life in Australia. The OSA provides information to members, facilities for members, social activities and events, and representation and advocacy. The OSA is governed by a 25-member council that is elected by members of the association. The OSA also currently employs a part-time research officer to assist with reports and submissions, such as this one, and helps to co-ordinate the OSA's activities and publications.

The OSA communicates important information to its members through a series of publications, including the *International Student Handbook*, which provides valuable information and advice on life in Australia, covering such topics as Australian politics, history, customs and culture. The Handbook is also a valuable source of information on the practices of Australian Universities. Many of the articles are written by international students and consequently other international students find them easier to relate to than official University publications. The OSA also publishes a Year Book and a quarterly magazine to keep its members abreast of events and developments within the University and the wider community. International students have particular concerns and interests that are not met by any commercial publications. For example, international students greatly appreciate tips on topics such as "How to Make Aussie Friends." The OSA also has a website at www.adelaide.edu.au/osa which keeps up to date news and information that is relevant to international students. Before the introduction of Anti-Spam legislation, the OSA also sent its members a fortnightly e-bulletin.

Currently, the OSA has an air conditioned lounge equipped with comfortable couches for students to relax in between classes, a kitchenette to reheat lunches, books



of various titles. This space is well patronised and provides a hang-out zone for international students.

The funds received by OSA from the AUU are also budgeted for numerous student activities organized by the Association throughout the year. A central aim of these activities is to bridge the gap between students from different nations. These activities include the following:

- **OSA Orientation Activities:** 17th, 19th and 26th February
- **University Orientation Week:** 21-25 February
- **Pizza Eating Competition:** 10 March
- **Social Gathering:** 24 March
- **M-Week:** 3-5 May
- **Skirmish:** 21 May
- **Sports Day:**
Waite Social Gathering: 28 July
- **Social Gathering:** 4 August
- **OSA Soccer Cup:** 20 August
- **OSA Elections and Annual General Meeting:** 14 September
- **Impressions Dinner and Dance:** 17 September
Social Gathering: 6 October

It appears that one of the main purposes of VSU is to ban student organisations from using fees to fund political campaigns. The termination of the compulsory union fees under the VSU plan aims to reduce funding to student organisations so that student representative councils are not able to function effectively. The OSA is one of three student representative bodies on campus which provide an important mechanism in the consultative process between University administration and the student community. The prospect of VSU inhibiting the ability of the OSA to represent international students is particularly disturbing, as these students face many unique challenges and are already marginalised and underrepresented at a Federal, State and University level. Without the administrative and financial support of the AUU the level of representation for international students will greatly diminish given that these students must be full-time, often hold part-time jobs, and are away from their support structures. International students are then left with no coherent voice and are open to exploitation.

5. Conclusion

Voluntary student unionism is the abolition of the compulsory student services fees that flow into the Adelaide University Union (AUU) and help fund all the non-academic services on campus. The proceeds are used to fund a range of services including the Food Outlets (i.e. Rumours, Mayo, Signatures and Backstage cafés), clubs, sports, welfare services and student organisations (i.e. OSA, SAUA); that constitute the cultural life and identity of the University. Hence, any move by the Federal Government to dictate the purposes for which student services fees may be



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collected and used will interfere in the autonomy of the University of Adelaide and damage the character of the cultural, social, sporting and learning environment of the University. In addition, the introduction of VSU would leave the University of Adelaide to pick up the costs of some services.

Furthermore, the OSA represents international students needs and perceptions both within the University and externally. The OSA believes that the services it offers international students are very important and therefore it is strongly against the introduction of VSU. The OSA cannot continue to cater to international students' needs at the current level without receiving a proportion of the student services fee via funding from the AUU.



Appendix 1.

National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students (The National Code)

Student support services

45. The registered provider must have in place appropriate support services and be able to demonstrate the advice provided to intending overseas students on these services. These must include appropriate arrangements for independent grievance handling/dispute resolution, which are inexpensive and include a nominee of the student if the student so chooses. The procedures must allow for prompt resolution [\(10\)](#) having regard to the duration of the overseas student's stay in Australia on a student visa.

46. The registered provider must ensure that upon arrival, overseas students have access to information or counselling services in the following areas:

46.1 Orientation

46.2 Academic progress

46.3 Further study

46.4 Accommodation

47. The registered provider must discharge their responsibility under DIMA requirements to approve accommodation/welfare arrangements for overseas students under 18 years of age.

48. The registered provider must appoint a suitably qualified person as student contact officer, and ensure that the officer is aware of their



responsibilities. The registered provider must advise commencing students of the contact details for this officer. The officer will be responsible for provision of support services to overseas students, including counselling, which will:

48.1 Promote the successful adjustment by overseas students to life and study at an Australian institution.

48.2 Assist students to resolve problems which could impede successful completion of their study programs. ¹⁴

¹⁴ ESOS National Code - Part C: Registered provider obligations
http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/international_education/publications_resources/other_publications_resources/esos_national_code/registered_provider_obligations.htm#top