

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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The Effects of Voluntary Student Unionism on NSW Universities

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Prepared June 2005

The state of NSW is home to the largest university student population in Australia. There are currently eleven public universities in NSW with more than thirty campuses and training facilities across the state.

In addition to the large number of campuses in NSW, most universities have multiple student associations, each focusing

on playing a different but equally important role in the extension of university life beyond lecture halls and tutorial rooms. These associations can largely be categorised in the following ways:

- **Representative associations, providing advocacy services, welfare services and student representation on campus.**
- **Service orientated associations that provide cultural and commercial services such as clubs and societies and subsidised retail outlets for students.**
- **Sports Associations that provide and maintain sports facilities, run support services for sportspeople, and coordinate sporting teams at university.**

Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) will affect each campus, and its student associations, differently, however there is not one campus where students are expecting these effects to be of a positive nature.

In general student associations expect to face huge revenue losses, serious membership retention issues and a significant drop in the level of advocacy, services and representation compared to what is currently provided.

Many associations are revenue neutral, not-for-profit, service based organisations that exist purely to provide support and services for students on their campus.

In general it is the representative associations that are affiliates of the National Union of Students (NUS), not the service or sports associations, and as such this briefing paper will focus more on the operations of, and expected impact of VSU upon representative bodies. VSU will affect the universities of NSW in myriad ways. None of the outcomes of such destructive legislation will be positive, and as is shown by the campus-by-campus breakdown of services and projected impact that I have provided many services that are crucial to Australia's university students will almost certainly be lost.

This paper will address a majority of campuses in NSW, with the intention of highlighting the different service and representation structures around the state. As such some campuses that have similar structures to others have been omitted.

Southern Cross University

Southern Cross University (SCU) has one major campus and two smaller campuses in NSW. The largest being SCU Lismore.

SCU at both campuses has a dual association structure. There is a Students' Representative Council and a Union.

The following is a sample of what the Students' Representative Council provides to the student community:

- **Student Dental Clinic - the only bulk billing dentist in region**
- **A subsidized Copy and Print Shop**
- **Student Rights Advocate, who services the Lismore, Tweed Heads and Coffs Harbour campuses**
- **Student magazine 'Pulp'**
- **Free computer tutorials**
- **Free food events (currently three events weekly)**
- **Emergency food and necessities supply**
- **Child care subsidy for parent students**
- **Links to community service providers (such as ACON)**
- **Student kitchen**

The Union provides the following services and facilities, as well as many more, for students and the community:

- **Sporting teams and Intramural sport**
- **A Bistro and bar**
- **A gym**
- **Newsagent/stationary store**
- **Noodle and Juice Bar**
- **Free student safety shuttle bus on Lismore Campus**

Under VSU both organisations expect to face significant revenue losses and anticipate that their ability to provide these services, as well as provide significant employment for the local community, will be called into question.

There is potential for the loss of over 150 jobs across the two associations, as well as a serious impact on local industry through the following losses:

- Losses to approximately 400 local businesses who supply products or services to both organisations
- If the Student Union shuttle bus shuts down, there will be a significant loss of business for local clubs and pubs who depend on the shuttle bus to deliver their patrons
- Loss of revenue and business to local printers who publish the student magazine
- The Student Union currently provides catering for a number of annual local events as there are very few big catering operations in Lismore, many organisations will be left in the lurch without union catering

For students at these campuses the loss of both representative and commercial services is of serious concern. For welfare services in the local community the price of VSU may simply be too much, as they will be forced to stretch their already limited resources to provide what the student associations no longer can.

SCU Students' Representative Council President Megan Harris also considers the probable job losses in the Lismore area to be potentially devastating.

"Lismore already has one of nations highest unemployment rates and Welfare system dependant rates. Over 150 job losses, and the loss of student organisation welfare service provision would place an extra burden on job agencies and the government welfare system."

For students at SCU, whose student fees equate to roughly \$1 a day, the price of VSU will simply be too high.

The University of New England

The University of New England is located in Armidale and the Students' Association, Union and Sports Association have significant and vital links with the local community.

Some examples are as follows:

- **The local radio station Tune FM is funded by the Students' Association**
- **The only cinema, and one of the bars in the town are funded and administered by the Union**
- **There is both a bulk billing doctor, and a dentist on the UNE campus, which are provided by the students'**

association

- Sports are a vital part of the community with many local clubs from surrounding areas using the university's facilities, which are administered by the sports association, UNE Sport.
- The Union provides a range of retail outlets on campus.
- UNESA assists students with accommodation placements when relocating to Armidale from other areas.
- UNEPA provides scholarships, welfare and advocacy services and facilities for postgraduate students on campus.
- UNESA similarly provides welfare and advocacy services for students and, like UNEPA, employs staff to fulfil this important role.

Students at UNE are very concerned about the potential impact of VSU on their community. It is anticipated that the services and representation provided for students at UNE, and indeed to the local community, will be in serious jeopardy under VSU.

The UNE Union is the second largest employer in Armidale, after the University itself, and it is anticipated that many of these jobs will be lost.

UNEPA President, Amanda Williamson, is concerned about the prospect of VSU and its impact on students. *"When you employ staff to provide services such as welfare, advocacy and other advisory roles for students with specific needs, you cannot rely upon ad hoc funding from individual students. People do not generally anticipate needing such services and are reluctant to pay for them up front, so under VSU by the time a student needs such services they simply won't be available."*

The University of Western Sydney

The University of Western Sydney covers the greater western Sydney with six campuses located at Bankstown, Campbelltown, Blacktown, Parramatta, Hawkesbury and Penrith. The ethos of the university has always been based around the belief that all people should have access to a quality tertiary education, no matter their location in western Sydney and their socio-economic background.

In 2003 approximately 70% of UWS students were the first in their family to attend university, and UWS has one of the highest rates of mature aged students in Australia. UWS is available and accessible to many people who would have never

considered themselves able to attend university, or to return to retrain or forge a career after having children.

In an environment such as this, students require a great deal of support in order to complete their study. Students who are the first in their families don't necessarily have someone in their family who they can turn to for advice about receiving help while studying, and unfortunately UWS has a very high attrition rate as people may slip through the cracks of the system. The UWS Student Association (UWSSA) covers all six campuses of UWS and makes welfare and representation its main focus and strives to help those who need it.

The services that are provided by UWSSA are as follows:

- **Welfare Case Workers**
- **Student loans**
- **Food vouchers**
- **Text book vouchers**
- **Support for collectives**
- **Autonomous Spaces**
- **Student Diaries**
- **Wall-planners**
- **Survival guides**
- **Activities and entertainment**
- **Clubs & Societies**
- **Oweek activities**
- **Free assignment binding**
- **Shuttle buses between campus and train stations**
- **Childcare subsidises (\$125 000 per anum)**
- **Student Publications - The Western Onion (UWS wide)**
- **Student Radio - Radio Neptune**
- **Free BBQ's**
- **2nd hand books**
- **Bike co-op**

Students at UWS stand to lose the following under VSU:

- **Support for collectives**
- **Student Diaries**
- **Wall-planners**
- **Survival guides**
- **Activities and entertainment**
- **Clubs & Societies**
- **Oweek activities**
- **Shuttle buses between campus and train stations**
- **Childcare subsidises (\$125 000 per anum)**
- **Student Publications - The Western Onion (UWS wide)**
- **Student Radio - Radio Neptune**

- **Free BBQ's**
- **Budgets for student representation**

The UWSSA also employs over 20 staff and would stand to lose about half of them under a voluntary fee structure.

As well as the services and representation provided for students by UWSSA, there is also a sport and commercial services body; UWS Connect.

Connect is responsible for all sports, sporting facilities and commercial outlets on UWS campuses and also oversees a sports scholarship program for students.

UWS Student Association President Amber Jacobus said *"VSU will have a massive impact on the students of Western Sydney. If UWSconnect cannot continue to operate on campus, students will have to drive (if they are lucky enough to own a car) at least 15 minutes in order to get food, or they will have to eat chips out of a vending machine. If Brendan Nelson wants to talk about walking off campus to get a sausage roll, he should come to UWS, it's a hike, not a walk. If our Student Association bus service stops operating, students living at the Blacktown campus will have to walk half an hour just to do their shopping or get from the train station to campus. Why will students come to UWS is they find it so difficult to even get to class, let alone eat after it."*

The University of Sydney

Sydney University (USYD) has three main student organisations. They are:

- **The Students' Representative Council**
- **The University of Sydney Union**
- **USYD Sport**

It has been widely reported that USYD has the highest student fees in the country. The fee for continuing full time students at USYD in 2005 was \$481. For first year students there is an additional \$100 building maintenance fund, because the Union has the responsibility of maintaining the largest student spaces at an Australian University, with two such buildings being almost one hundred years old.

The fee is divided with the largest amount going to the Union and the smallest to the SRC.

Currently the SRC fee is \$66, the Union \$271 and USYD Sport \$144.

Some of the services provided by the SRC include:

- Welfare and Advocacy casework
- Free Legal Advice
- Democratic student representation
- Student Publications (*Honi Soit*, the weekly newspaper and various one-off publications each year such as the women's handbook *Growing Strong*.)
- A second-hand bookshop
- Interest free student loans

And the Union:

- Clubs and societies program
- Cultural and creative grants
- Student Publications (The monthly magazine, *UR* and other annual publications such as *Tangent* and *Hermes*)
- Subsidised food and beverage outlets
- Oweek program
- Free concerts
- Theatresports
- Student spaces
- Theme weeks
- *Verge* - the Union's cultural festival

In addition to these services the sports union provides scholarships and support programs for athletes, maintains sporting facilities on campus and co-ordinates the university's sporting teams.

The SRC collects roughly \$1,600,000 in student contributions, and as the organisation is wholly not-for-profit, all of this money is invested in the running of the organisation, and the administration of services to students.

Under VSU the SRC would face serious financial hardship and it is expected by the SRC's independent auditors CM Pitt & Co that the organisation would be in serious financial trouble and would almost certainly have to cut back on services and make staff redundant.

The Union is a different case, with revenue coming not only from student contributions, but also from commercial services. Under VSU it is expected that the Union would have to make significant structural changes to the organisation, and potentially see the loss of many services that students currently depend upon, as well as the closure of some student space. It is also likely that if the effects are severe, there will be potential job losses in the Union also.

SRC President Rose Jackson sees the future under VSU as quite dire for the SRC.

"Under a voluntary membership program, students at the University of Sydney would experience a dramatic fall in the provision of all of these services. Areas that would be forced to close or downsize include independent student advocacy on welfare and academic matters, student publications, representation and more. Without a universal membership fee, the University of Sydney SRC is going to be unable to continue to offer these vital services to its members. The effects will be devastating."

The University of New South Wales

The University of NSW (UNSW) has four undergraduate student organisations. They are:

- **The Student Guild**
- **The Sports Union**
- **The Union**
- **The College of Fine Arts Students' Association**

An example of the services that the Guild provides are:

- **Clubs and societies**
- **Student Publications (A fortnightly paper *Thurunka*)**
- **Welfare and advocacy services**
- **Democratic Student Representation**
- **Research officers**
- **Free Legal Advice**

The UNSW Union provides similar services to the USYD Union, with the exception that at UNSW it is the Guild (the representative body, much like the USYD SRC) that provides clubs and societies, not the Union.

Similarly the Sports Union at UNSW fulfils the same functions as its counterpart at USYD.

Like USYD the Student associations at UNSW expect to suffer significant losses to revenue, ability to provide top quality services on campus for the student body, and also job cuts.

The UNSW Guild projects that under VSU their revenue will drop from \$1.6 million in student fees, to around ten percent of that, just \$160,000.

With no outside revenue sources, the guild is looking at some serious cuts to programs and possibly also staff under a voluntary system.

Like all student associations that are revenue neutral, the Guild is looking to make practical cuts that will try to ensure the functioning of the organization post VSU.

UNSW Guild President Manoj Dias-Abey said "Our priorities are the maintenance of clubs and societies, advocacy officers and campaign budgets. What is likely to go under VSU is honoraria for student office bearers, administrative staff, research staff, subsidies for clubs and societies and the much smaller campaign budgets"

The University of Wollongong

Wollongong University has an active Students' Association with a budget of roughly \$600,000 which is almost entirely dependant on the contribution of student fees.

WUSA provides a comprehensive range of services for students which include:

- **Second-hand book bank (5 days a week)**
- **Free BBQs every week**
- **Free Student magazine every month (*Tertangala*)**
- **Free bands on the lawn every week**
- **Student spaces: GlassHouse lounge, Womyn's space, Queer space**
- **Cheap photocopying & faxes**
- **Childcare rebates**
- **Short term emergency loans**
- **Clubs, societies and collectives**
- **Tenancy, legal & centrelink advice**
- **Representation & advocacy**
- **Free bike repair workshop every week**
- **Free student planner**
- **Theme weeks**
- **Support reps, groups and spaces for minorities**

WUSA also employs five full and part time staff that help to facilitate the running of the association, and provide assistance to students at Wollongong University. It is expected that under VSU the association would have to review the number of staff it employs and possibly cut back.

WUSA Education Officer Jenna Machonachie said "We anticipate only a 10-30% membership rate. This means a significant reduction in our current budget."

"In this case we will have to reduce spending. It is unlikely that we can offer free weekly BBQs, club funding, free bands, childcare rebates and free products (library bags, student planners etc) at theme weeks and orientation, among other things (we have not devoted much time or thought to these aspects yet!). Office bearer budgets will also be reduced."

"In terms of our ability to operate to provide services and defend the rights of students, we will really only exist in name only."

The University of Newcastle

Last year the University of Newcastle had over 23,000 enrolments, an EFTSU of 16,057. Of these 12,631 were women, 4,851 were postgraduate students, 2,411 were external, 321 were indigenous, and an EFTSU of 2,039 were international students. Around 60% of students tend to come from the local area (ie. Newcastle, Lake Macquarie or the Central Coast). Around 45% are mature age students (a little less than half of these being postgraduates). The University, for all intents and purposes, is still a regional university, despite recent government classification to the contrary brought into effect by the Higher Education Support Act. It is the major employer in the region, along with Hunter Health. The detrimental effects of being one of the largest regional universities in the country, while being refused the funding eligible to recognised regional universities, are beginning to show as the University looks at staff cuts as a means of recouping costs. Figures vary, depending on who you ask, but on a good day the University is \$15 million in the red.

The University, for the most part, has a split student organisations structure, consisting of the Newcastle University Students' Association (NUSA), the Newcastle University Postgraduate Students' Association (NUPSA), the University of Newcastle Union (UNU) and Newcastle University Sport (NUSport).

NUSA provides a wide range of much appreciated services for students (\$81,400), that are either heavily subsidised or free.

- **Free food (all day cereals and toasts, weekly barbecues, a self-sufficient fruit and vegie co-op),**
- **Condoms, sunscreen, insect repellent.**
- **Cost price bus tickets and passport photos,**
- **Subsidised course readers, computer and printing services.**
- **A student newspaper (*Opus*)**
- **Student Loans**
- **Clubs and Societies**
- **Advocacy and representation**
- **Student Spaces**

The purpose of these services is not to compete with the other service providers on campus, but to genuinely offer alternatives for cash strapped students, and some relief when there can be days when scraping enough money together for the

bus fare can be difficult. These services and others would see price increases and other effects with the introduction of VSU.

The UNU's main role is that of service provider.

It provides:

- Catering and entertainment
- Second hand book shop
- Stationery shop
- Post office
- Computer and printery services
- Academic dress hire
- Venue hire
- Leases space out to a dentist, travel agency and hairdresser's.

To compensate UNU may need to make price rises or cuts to services. The UNU currently employs around 200 staff, and redundancies may need to be considered. All this is without factoring in the possibility of Brendan Nelson's vision of tendering out services to private commercial providers.

NUSport currently has a \$5.1million loan with the University. Repayment of the loan could be adversely affected by the introduction of VSU, however NUSport has recently entered into a service level agreement with the University, which should provide security.

NUSport offers a range of programs such as yoga, pilates and first aid, which demonstrate that it is about students staying fit and healthy while studying.

NUSport is in partnership with the Forum Sports and Aquatic Centre. The services the Forum provides, such as the gym and the olympic pool, are for the wider community as well as for students.

NUSport's portion of the General Service Charge allows it to provide discounts for students to enjoy these services. However, the decrease in membership under VSU may mean that they would have to increase fees in order to maintain these discounts. As with the social clubs provided for by NUSA, sporting clubs could also suffer cutbacks under VSU. As membership decreases, there is a danger that NUSport and the Forum may become more and more community focused, and less interested in the physical welfare of students.

Conclusion

As you can see the effects of VSU on these campuses, and indeed all universities across NSW will be devastating, not

just to students, but also to the communities that exist around our universities.

The government must reconsider this legislation because it does not achieve the aims that the government insists are the reasoning behind it. VSU will not give students choice, it will limit their choices. Currently Australian universities allow students to 'opt out' of being a member of their student organisation if they need to, or in most cases even if they simply want to. The number of student who do this is negligible.

VSU is not creating a fairer or better system in our universities. It is a certainty that all this legislation will achieve is massive job losses in regional Australia, a lack of academic and welfare support for struggling students on their campuses and an end to campus culture and community Australia wide.

There will be no choice to join the UQ Lego club - it won't exist. There will be no choice to buy a sausage roll on campus - no one will be there to sell you one. You won't be able to go rock climbing with the uni club - there won't be one. And I doubt that Seven Eleven and Bakers Delight will want to set up shop at SCU Lismore when for a decent chunk of the year they'll have to be closed because there are no students to sell to.

Students want their clubs and societies, their academic assistance and their democratic representation. That is our choice.