

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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SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

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

1 *Rabelais* on campus

1.1 *Rabelais* as a service to La Trobe University

Rabelais is the student magazine of La Trobe University Bundoora. The magazine provides opportunities for students to publish, debate and reflect. With an open editorial policy, youth focused content and student editors the magazine is one of few opportunities for students to publish while they are still honing their journalism or creative writing skills. *Rabelais* enables information to be reported directly to the student body, including details of university changes, important dates and events, social gatherings and other campus life information.

Published 10 times throughout the academic year since it's inception in 1967, the magazine offers a wide range of opportunities to La Trobe students. In addition to the regular editions of *Rabelais*, there are also five special editions particular to various departments of the SRC. These are *Rebellious* (Womens), *Rebel Q* (Queer), *Green Rab* (Environment), *Indig Rab* (Indigenous-Australian) and an election edition. These special editions are co-ordinated and produced by the relevant collective on campus, with the assistance of the *Rabelais* editors.

Rabelais is also responsible for producing the *New Students Handbook* at the start of each academic year, a publication that provides important information to incoming students about their SRC, Union and University life in general. In past years this has been called the *Alternative Handbook*, offering an alternative information source to the official University Handbook. The *Rabelais Friendly Handbook* is now the only comprehensive publication for incoming students, detailing all services, areas and organizations on Bundoora campus including those from the university, union, SRC, LUPA, SARA and other departments.

In addition to the printed magazines produced by *Rabelais*, a website operates to archive and display student's work online. www.rabelais.org.au was launched in 2003 and has grown in popularity and usage, both as a folio example for students and as a communication method between the editors and the contributors. *Rabelais* is also responsible for producing any promotional or informational publications for the SRC council, such as pamphlets, flyers, posters etc.

1.2 *Rabelais* as a source of opportunity for student writers

In conjunction with the ever-growing media department of La Trobe University, not to mention further writing subjects offered in other departments, *Rabelais* is the most accessible arena for young writers and editors to learn the practical application for theoretical skills they are studying.

This forum allows writers to leave their time at La Trobe a more rounded writer, editor, poet, designer, photographer or artist. While classes teach young media makers the theory required in employment for their fields, *Rabelais* is their first step in participating in this process.

With many media personalities getting their start in student media, the benefits of first publishing opportunities, building a folio to present to potential employers and learning about the editorial process are obvious for writers.

1.3 *Rabelais* as a method of communication for, with and between students

Rabelais has an average print run of 3,000 copies per edition. This figure is only limited by the publication's printing budget, and rises with special editions such as the New Student Handbook, of which 4,500 editions were printed for new students in 2005. Hundreds of student writers also contribute to the magazine per year.

Given these figures, it is clear that *Rabelais* is one of the most utilised services on campus, and it is the only communication between students about upcoming events. It fills a vital role by allowing an extensive reflection of campus life, allowing students to submit and read detailed opinion pieces, articles about campus events and issues based content which relate to a variety of people.

2 VSU and *Rabelais*

2.1 Loss to student life

Without a service like *Rabelais* in place, student writers will not have an independent place to voice their concerns and opinions without fear of prejudice. For readers, losing campus-centric content, as well as the opportunity to hear the voices of fellow students, will mean less access to media unbiased by the need to create revenue or please advertisers.

Much like a club or society, *Rabelais* also has a very active group of students who participate in the making of the magazine, meeting frequently on campus to decide the direction and application of the editions. It provides an opportunity for likeminded students to meet, make friends and form professional relationships.

Without *Rabelais* as a form of expression, there will be less debate, reflection and creation of a campus environment. Services such as student magazines, newspapers and radio stations will be directly affected by the loss of income from the general service fee. While Brendan Nelson is encouraging universities to pursue commercial opportunities on campus as a new kind of 'freedom', in truth it will limit opportunities for the people most affected here – students. If more commercial aspects are introduced to our magazines, focus shifts to corporate dollars and the ability to be an unaffected voice is lost. The major concerns will be the influence of advertisers, not the opinions of students who want to write or read.

2.2 Loss to educational practice

Without independent media on campus there is no outlet for students to learn and grow in practical application. Students still in the process of completing their degree cannot get published in the mainstream media, both because their writing is not up to standard and because without a folio they cannot get a foot in the door.

Rabelais is a first step to gaining practical experience as a writer, and published pieces make a solid start to a folio. Tutors, especially in the media department, encourage their students to write for *Rabelais*, noting that it is one of few opportunities to publish about subjects (especially creative writing) that would not be given space in more commercial environments.

Previous editors and writers from La Trobe have been able to transform their experience with the publication into employment at organisations such as AC Publishing, Beat Magazine, In The Mix, Triple J, Girlfriend Magazine, The Age and the ABC.

2.3 Loss of link from student body to outside community

Each edition of *Rabelais* is sent to a wide variety of people and organisations off campus including all student media across Australia, newspapers such as *The Age*, the *Herald Sun*, *The Australian*, other media such as various ABC departments, *Triple J*, *Crikey* and *The Chaser*, independent journals such as *Arena*, *Meanjin* and *The Monthly*, writing organisations such as Express Media, the Victorian Writers Centre, arts organisations such as Arts Australia, Arts Victoria, ACMI, festivals (for which we provide coverage) including the Melbourne Festival, the Melbourne International Comedy Festival and the Melbourne Fringe Festival, interested individuals including Melbourne writers Barry Dickens and Arnold Zable and for archiving at the State Library of Victoria.

Sending the editions out to these people, many of whom have specifically requested to receive the magazine, is our way of showcasing the work of La Trobe University's emerging writers. Many of our writers have gone on to be re-published in some of the

above areas because of their exposure in *Rabelais* and have gotten their invaluable first start in the wider media.

As well as providing further publishing opportunities, sending *Rabelais* to a wide variety of people across Australia illustrates the vibrant, active campus we are part of. It ensures that people are aware of our students, their concerns, issues and experiences as part of the La Trobe University community.

3 Recommendations

Rabelais Student Media recommends that further investigation be taken into the impact on student media makers if the proposed legislation be passed. The main implications we see deserve further research and consideration are:

- Lack of early workplace exposure for undergraduates students
How will recent graduates fit into existing media structures without exposure to real examples of media practice?
- Standard of graduates vocational knowledge when only theory is covered in class
If class sizes are rising, university courses are over-enrolled and increasingly theoretical, how will students convert the theory they are learning into the practice required within industry?
- Graduating media students requiring further grants, private industry and government support for early work opportunities and further training
With further deregulation of media laws, our media spectrum is smaller than ever. New media makers will find less employment for opportunity without folios, work experience or exposure. Either through government grants or private industry training these gaps will need to be filled.
- Drop in standards of media throughout the industry
If students take longer to gain practical experience, we can expect media outlets to be inundated by a more diluted pool of graduates. How will employers cope with a less qualified and experienced incoming workforce?

3 Summary

Student services such as Rabelais are vital to La Trobe University. Without independent media on campus there is no outlet for students to learn and grow in practical application. Journalists just don't get work unless they have been published – the Howard Government don't seem to want to face the consequences of services such as ours falling by the wayside.

Rabelais Student Media, on behalf of the student writers, photographers, poets, journalists, artists and designers of La Trobe University implores you to reconsider introducing this bill in its current form.