



# University of South Australia

## Submission to Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee

17 June 2005

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## Introduction

This submission from the University of South Australia (UniSA) will address only the first of the committee's two terms of reference:

- assessment of the likely effect of the legislation on the provision of student services, and related consequences.

The University of South Australia is opposed to the proposed Higher Education Support Amendment which it believes will have the effect of greatly reducing services available to students both on and off campus, since so many of these services are provided by its Students' Association.

## Approach at UniSA

The University of South Australia has for several years separated the provision of services to students and membership of the Students' Association. All students are charged a Student Amenities Fee (SAF). The SAF is determined annually in consultation with the service providers, currently the University of South Australia Students' Association; is approved by University Council; and is calculated on a sliding scale which is dependent on the number of courses a student undertakes. The SAF for international onshore students is built into the overall international student fee; transnational (offshore) students pay no SAF. The SAF paid by students whose study is fully external is substantially less than that paid by students who study on campus.

UniSA's current preferred provider of services is the University of South Australia Students' Association (the Association). Over more than ten years the University administration and the Association have worked closely together to ensure that the services provided by the Association match the University's priorities for its students. Consultation occurs through a sub-committee of University Council's Finance Committee. The sub-committee is chaired by a member of the Senior Management Group and brings together the President and General Manager of the Students' Association, and the Directors of four of the University's key service units: Student and Academic Services, Finance, Property and Services. Successive student presidents have commented that they are envied by colleagues at other institutions because of the high level access and collaborative approach they experience. The Association Budget and Accounts are a standing item on the agenda. The Association's Audited Financial Statements are scrutinised by University Council and its Finance Committee.

The decision to select the Students' Association as the preferred provider is quite deliberately taken. In food and beverage provision, for example, the University has, in the past, awarded tenders for cafeterias to external providers. Being a multi-campus university, UniSA has been able to compare student satisfaction with cafeterias across campuses. Analysis of feedback in student satisfaction surveys has led the University to progressively move cafeteria operation from large and well-known providers to the Association. Association-managed cafeterias rate better on value for money, opening hours, and cultural sensitivity in food and beverage provision. Indeed, in the refurbishment of our Mawson Lakes campus, the University and the Association were joint partners in the redevelopment of the cafeteria and retail premises.

Payment of the Student Amenities Fee is, as its name indicates, for the provision of student amenities and services. It is not primarily a payment for membership of the Students' Association. However, current practice, while the Association is the provider of services and amenities, is that on payment of the SAF students become members of the Association, unless they indicate their wish not to do so. Such notification can be made at the time of enrolment; however, the SAF must still be paid. Thus, at UniSA, membership of the Association is voluntary, while contribution to the range of student services is not.



### **Likely effects**

UniSA believes that if legislation makes payment of student amenities fees voluntary, there will be an immediate effect. Fewer students will pay these fees, not because they do not value the services provided but because most students have very little money, as the Committee previously found in its Enquiry into Student Income Support.

Government politicians have expressed the view in the media that if students value services such as childcare, dental services, sexual abuse counselling, etc, they will pay market price for them. Our view is that students cannot afford to pay market price for such services, because their studies limit their capacity to earn income. This is why student associations have chosen to provide such services: because

- (a) there is clear need among the student body, and
- (b) similar services in the community are financially out of reach for students.

Thus, student associations subsidise these services for those who need to make use of them. It is plainly true that not all students use all services, but it is very likely that every student uses some of these services. In the same way that not all citizens use all government-funded community services, this principle of the common good governs the provision of subsidised services and amenities across a wide range of fields to meet a broad spectrum of needs. All students benefit at an annual cost which is minimal when compared with community charges for the amenities provided.

Activities and services provided by student associations do include some that are attractive only to minorities but more importantly they include the many services and amenities from which all students benefit.

### **Effects at the University of South Australia**

Despite UniSA's service provision being separated from Association membership, we understand that the amended HESA legislation will prevent the University from charging a Student Amenities Fee to replicate the services currently provided by the Association with these funds. The University would need to divert funds from teaching, learning, research and infrastructure (the annual SAF income is approximately \$4 million per annum) to provide even some of the currently available services. In 2004 the UniSA Students' Association provided discounts to students of approximately \$76,000 through its pricing differential programs.

UniSA hopes that the number of students who decide not to pay the SAF will be small, and supports the information campaign currently mounted by our Students' Association to remind students of the many amenities from which they benefit but which they may take for granted.

Some specific services that are threatened include:

#### ***Cafeterias and bars***

As explained above, the management of cafeterias and bars has been progressively moved from external providers to the Students' Association. The quality of food and the value for money is agreed to be superior under Association management. Students need to be able to purchase both healthy and fast food at reasonable prices on campus, particularly as some campuses are not close to commercial outlets. UniSA does not believe that it should divert its attention or finances from its core business in order to manage food outlets and supports the Students' Association taking on this role, with support from Student Amenities fees.

#### ***Advocacy for students***

Student Advisory Officers (SAOs), employees of the Students' Association, have a critical role in supporting students' rights. If students need to appeal against a decision of the University, SAOs are available to help them prepare the appeal. It is not possible for any person employed by the University to take on this student advocacy role, because of conflict of interest. Outsourcing such a service is an unsatisfactory solution; much of the value of the SAOs support and advocacy lies in



their on-campus location, easy accessibility, familiarity with university policies and procedures, precedents and personnel. For UniSA the loss of these positions, were amenities fees not to be charged, would be one of the most significant, since the University itself could not fund a replacement service without eating into already allocated funds for teaching and research.

### ***Clubs and societies***

UniSA strongly supports the philosophies behind student clubs and societies. Affiliated with the Students' Association are 63 societies which are:

- faith-based (Baha'i, Christian, Buddhist, Lutheran etc)
- nationality-based (French, Malaysian, Vietnamese, Indian students, etc)
- profession or program-related (Podiatry, Maths, Psychology, Sculpture)
- or general interest-based (cuisine, Rostrum, Japanese animation, disability).

In addition, there are 25 sporting clubs, some of which practise less common sports that students are likely to have little opportunity to experience in the community. The Association supports students from within these clubs, and those who participate in sports and athletics externally to compete nationally and internationally in University Games. As has been frequently pointed out, the University Games provide a valuable source of athletes for Olympic and Commonwealth Games.

The University believes that the friendships, comradeship, teamwork, challenges and intellectual stimulus available through memberships of clubs and societies provide a valuable and necessary balance to a life of study. They also prepare students for the broader aspects of leadership and management that they need in their lives outside university and that we want them to carry into their employment roles. We support their continuation and our examination of Students' Association accounts indicates that the funds they receive are both reasonable and responsibly spent.

### ***Student representation***

UniSA places high importance on student representation on Council, committees, some selection panels and other relevant working groups. The Association has good processes in place that have ensured high quality representation over many years, by which the University has been well-served. Should the Students' Association not exist, such representatives will be considerably more difficult for the University to recruit.

There are numerous other services for students which the Association provides and which the University values:

- a subsidised gymnasium
- trips to the snowfields and outback
- film nights for students and families
- concerts and other events
- welcome events during Orientation Week
- an information-rich diary
- student radio and newspaper
- employment services and training.

### ***The broader role of universities***

It is our contention that not everything that is important about a university education take place in the lecture room. Many of the skills which prepare graduates for career success and leadership roles are learned outside the classroom and the curriculum. A vibrant university community, with strong debating clubs and other societies interested in ideas develops in students ways of thinking and behaving which serve them well in later life. It is the environment from which many current politicians of all persuasions have developed.



Clubs, societies, sporting activities, cafeterias, bars, provide the context for cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural interaction that complements interaction within programs. These are of particular importance to non-metropolitan students who come to university without their local support networks, and for international students who come to Australia to learn about our country's culture as well as the content of their chosen program.

### **Conclusion**

The University of South Australia contends, in conclusion that:

- Our arrangement with the UniSA Students' Association serves both students and the University well, provides a broad range of affordable services for students, and permits the University to focus on its core business.

In addition we submit:

- Student associations serve a critical function within universities providing both practical services and an essential social context in which education takes place.
- UniSA cannot within its current funding allocation replicate the services currently provided by the University of South Australia Students' Association.
- Universities should be permitted to charge students an amenities fee for the provision of services which cannot be provided within the Commonwealth Grants Scheme.
- Universities should be permitted to select students' associations as providers of some or all services and amenities where close scrutiny of association activities shows that funds are being used responsibly and in accordance with the universities' strategic directions and priorities.