

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

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Introduction

The 'Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005' will have wide-ranging and detrimental effects on students' university experience and on the ability of students to access services and representation through their student associations. It will divert university funding away from quality teaching programs, increase prices for student association services, increase inequity within the Higher Education system and deter International students from attending Australian universities.

Monash University Gippsland Student Union (MUGSU) has operated as a student association for over 35 years in the Gippsland region and provides services, facilities and support to students, Monash University staff, local businesses, local government and community groups. In a regional community the student association provides essential and unique infrastructure, services and support to stakeholders. Continuation of even a core of essential services is in doubt under the form of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) being proposed.

Introduction of this legislation in its current form would be both short-sighted and damaging to the campus life which is so essential for the communities surrounding regional universities. We believe this is an ideological crusade driven by the federal Coalition government rather than a genuine attempt to offer students freedom of association or choice. A service fee must be retained in order to provide students with essential facilities and services. Without this we risk undermining our higher education system through diverting much-needed funds from other activities of our universities, diminishing the quality of student experience and creating barriers to some students accessing education at all.

This submission will explore the effects – many of them unintended – of the introduction of this legislation. Effects that include undermining the ability of Universities and student organisations to provide welfare support and services to students (including sport and recreation, academic rights, careers counselling, childcare, scholarships, clubs and societies and financial assistance); undermining the ability of Universities and student organisations to provide support and services to disadvantaged students (including those who are mature aged or part time, enrolled off campus, women, queer, from a lower socio-economic background, experiencing disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, International or from regional Australia); and eliminating services vital to the campus community at Gippsland and subsequently deterring students and eroding the quality of a university experience at Monash Gippsland Campus.

Experiences with VSU in Western Australia during the 1990s provide a warning against abolition of compulsory up-front fees with evidence student experiences and achievements were compromised under VSU. Student association membership levels under VSU in WA ranged from 6 – 36% of students and bore out expectations that students would not voluntarily pay membership fees and would suffer lack of representation and services in consequence.

The Victorian model of VSU demonstrated that students who are required to pay a compulsory upfront fee to support services of benefit to the whole campus community

are less likely to opt-out of membership. Continuation of the majority of essential services provided by student associations for the benefit of the campus and regional community resulted from this model.

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

MUGSU has been providing services and representation to students, staff and community members for over 35 years. If the legislation is implemented in its current form, and without any other consideration, the result will be over 70% reduction in MUGSU's operating budget. This reduction will result in the closure or significant reduction of support services at Monash Gippsland campus, including advice and guidance through advocacy, careers and employment, childcare, sport and recreation, clubs and societies, off campus student support, welfare, scholarships and food vouchers. Regional student associations have a key role to play in providing services, facilities and infrastructure to the campus and wider community. There is little doubt that regional universities will be more severely affected by the drastic reduction in student association funding consequent to the introduction of VSU than metropolitan campuses where service alternatives are available. For this reason local and state politicians of many persuasions including those in the Coalition are opposed to the form of VSU being contemplated.

MUGSU has a long and proud history of achievements which are at risk. These include: successfully advocating for thousands of students; developing and managing the Pooh Corner childcare facility; conducting the first successful campaign in Victoria to remove gaming machines from areas of low socio-economic status; largest distribution of a student newspaper to community members at 24 000 copies; ACUMA award for best student diary in Australia; ropes course funding contribution; outdoor education shed and equipment funding; contribution to building facilities on campus including the Union Lounge and Pooh Corner; \$500 000 contribution to maintenance and upkeep of Churchill Leisure Centre; and hosting the Open Universities Students Association of Australia for over 10 years.

The communal and cultural aspects of university and community life at Gippsland have been facilitated and supported by the work of the student association. The Campus experience for students and staff will be much diminished by the introduction of the legislation and make the university experience little more than going to classes and getting a degree. The opportunity for personal growth and development afforded to generations of Australian university students will be gone. The legislation must be amended in the Senate to allow Universities to continue charging a Compulsory Amenities Fee (CAF) to fund specific services.

Regional Considerations

MUGSU is the second largest employer in Churchill and district with 19 permanent staff and 50-60 casual staff with approximately \$850K in salaries each year going into the local economy. The current proposed Federal VSU will cause significant job loss of up to 15-16 permanent staff positions and the majority of casual positions which currently provide jobs for students working to support themselves through university.

Pooh Corner is the only long-day childcare centre in Churchill and district. Pooh Corner began 23 years ago with very humble beginnings due to a need recognised and addressed by the student association. Today Pooh Corner has the highest accreditation

level possible and has expanded to a 45 place facility that has reserved places for students and staff of Monash. Pooh Corner usage statistics of 60% community use and 40% staff and students of the university demonstrate just how vital this service is not just to students but to the local community.

As one of the largest businesses in the Churchill area MUGSU expends around \$700K through purchase of goods and services each year within the local economy. This is a substantial amount of business for our region; elimination of this financial activity from the local economy would have many flow-on impacts upon an area which already suffers one of the highest youth unemployment rates and where access to higher education is one pathway out of a cycle of poverty.

Monash Gippsland Campus offers local students an opportunity to access higher education and improve their employment prospects. A supportive community atmosphere is present on Campus largely through the efforts of the student association to engage with and support students and staff in a co-operative and collaborative manner. Without the services and programs operated by the student association to support students, transition and adjustment to university will be much harder and student outcomes will consequently suffer.

With its country campus atmosphere, community participation programs, location convenient to both mountains and sea and collaborative support services many International students find the Gippsland Campus an attractive option. Currently revenue from International students contributes \$161M in income to Monash University each year. Eliminating services and support provided by the student association would negate many of these benefits. There is a real danger that International students will no longer find Australia a preferred destination for higher education and study in the English language if support services funded by a compulsory fee are no longer provided. In virtually all other countries in the OECD including USA, Canada, UK and New Zealand universities charge compulsory fees to provide student support services. Australia would be the exception if the proposed legislation is passed and would potentially alienate a very important export market.

Support services and activities currently provided by the student association are vital to attract, assist and retain students to the region. Without them our young people and those seeking to gain further professional qualifications are more likely to leave Gippsland for Melbourne. The ability of regional communities to participate within our society is dependant upon equal access to educational and cultural resources. Universities and the economies which result are essential for regional areas. An examination of Churchill demographics will show that a large proportion of residents within this town attend the Gippsland Campus. Monash Gippsland has been a leader within the local community and promotes community members accessing higher education. If there was no student association to support students studying within a regional area then it would be realistic to expect that the level of students choosing to attend a regional area would reduce. International students would likewise be less likely to come to Monash Gippsland. The detrimental effects this legislation will have on universities and regional campuses in particular within Australia will be unprecedented and change forever the culture of University life.

Service Provision

We anticipate a dramatic reduction in all services and activities; the closure of the childcare centre; an end to the scholarship and community grants programs and a diminishing of the student experience at university. Student association commercial services would continue to operate albeit at much higher costs to users but essential advice, support and representative functions would be lost.

Non-profitable services will cease including representation and advocacy, welfare and support programs and services to students. Free lunches, the food bank, health and well-being campaigns and representative efforts on behalf of students' welfare would receive no funding in a post-VSU environment.

Academic rights and advocacy are currently one of our most important services to students. The effect of this legislation would be that if academic rights & advocacy services existed at all they would be on an informal basis without the support and legitimacy of professional staff. Advocacy offers students access to trained professionals with a detailed knowledge of policies and procedures of the University. Advocates empower and assist students to address their complaints or concerns. The absence of any formal advocacy services would contribute to a greater incidence of formal grievances against universities, litigation undertaken by students, decreased student satisfaction levels, difficulty in canvassing student opinion, additional burdens on overworked university staff to cover a service gap where advocacy staff currently provide counselling and pastoral support to students in formal university processes.

Students unable to access advocacy would suffer in their dealings with the University because of the power differential and in consequence students would find their concerns going unaddressed and some would withdraw from their studies. Monash University has acknowledged that without the support of advocacy staff in discipline, academic progress and other university procedures there would be more incidence of appeals, increased workload for Monash staff in supporting students, overload on the counselling services provided by Monash which are already stretched to the limit and a much higher attrition rate for students.

Sport and recreation clubs along with sporting facilities and equipment would no longer be offered or supported. On a regional campus where recreational activities are mainly provided through the student association this would be a significant loss. In addition to this a very successful community grant scheme – providing funding to local sporting and recreational clubs to ensure there are adequate sporting opportunities – would close. This scheme could not survive the introduction of VSU and would limit sporting and recreational activities for students both on campus and in the local area.

Sporting trips would not be undertaken. MUGSU sponsorship of athletes to attend regional competitions, Southern University Games and other major events would cease. Students would miss out on having these opportunities to compete at national levels. If the current level of sport & recreation support from MUGSU ceased this would provide a disincentive to students excelling and achieving in the sporting field. At the Gippsland Campus several prominent athletes such as Lauren Hewitt are enrolled by off campus mode and therefore need all the support the student

association provides to continue their studies. Beyond that in a climate of obesity and poor health within Australia closure of these services would end promotion of sport, recreation and healthy living to the local communities and Monash Gippsland with activities designed to cater to all backgrounds and student interests.

Social and cultural activities would cease. Students would miss out on important transition support, networking and a sense of connection with a community of students. A survey completed by RMIT Student Union has shown that students who discontinue their studies more often do so because they have not made fulfilling and supportive connections within the university environment than for academic or other reasons. Take away the important function that student associations provide in assisting students to make those connections and the attrition rate will increase.

Those activities that did continue would incur much higher fees to access services. Activities such as art exhibitions, dramatic or cultural performances would not continue. In a regional area such as Churchill there is not the sponsorship or funding available to support such activities outside of the student association. Local artists and performers would no longer have the exposure or experience associated with having these opportunities. The activities that would survive such as limited musical or comedy performances, would attract substantially higher prices for participants to access them.

MUGSU short courses which enable students and community members to obtain a wide variety of employment or personal development skills would no longer be viable. Therefore courses such as Responsible Serving of Alcohol, Safe Food Handling; First Aid and the Student Leaders Program would no longer be offered in the Churchill area.

Careers counselling and employment services would no longer be available. Students would no longer be able to access casual or regular work while studying through this service, engage with local and interstate businesses and explore career opportunities through a Careers Fair. In an economically depressed region such as Gippsland removal of the liaison and opportunities provided by the Careers service would have a decided negative impact on graduate outcomes and short-term work prospects. A work placement program to provide students with professional experience and income while studying would no longer be offered. Students would also miss out on workshops and individual counselling sessions to empower students to improve their interview, resume writing, cold calling and other essential skills for successful job hunting.

Pooh Corner Childcare Centre would close. A quota of places are reserved to ensure that students and staff can access childcare facilities through Pooh Corner. Even if an alternative childcare provider chose to open in this area the system of reserved places for the convenience of students and staff of the University would not remain. The current service made available for the use of students benefits a much wider pool of community members. Planned new developments to integrate the Childcare Centre into an Intergenerational Hub with pre-schools, local government services, neighbourhood house and other community involvement would be abandoned. The student association is a partner in many such initiatives to develop and expand the

local community in Gippsland but could no longer continue with these tasks without the financial support of the student body.

Financial assistance programs including scholarships, food vouchers, emergency loan schemes and others would cease. Off Campus students in particular would suffer through the removal of the scholarship programs which currently distributes up to 20 scholarships per year to enable students in financial difficulty to continue their studies. Students experiencing financial crisis would no longer be offered food vouchers to assist them through times when they cannot afford to eat. MUGSU would be unable to provide funding support to emergency loan and housing assistance schemes leaving students requiring those types of assistance and advice out in the cold.

The important role of clubs and societies would be lost to the campus. Many students develop extracurricular skills and interests while they study and this often leads to career and social opportunities. Activities and clubs in particular play an important role in allowing students to network, develop skills and engage with the campus community. The student association would no longer be able to act as facilitator and provide professional expertise to support these clubs. Consequently many of them would fail and others would experience financial and other difficulties through not being given developmental support, funding or having access to adequate advice.

Publications of the student association which are so essential in promoting student engagement and a student voice would be in danger of closure. As for services such as the student diary these would probably attract a retail price; the service would not survive unless significant numbers of students choose to purchase the diary. Journalism and creative writing students who currently produce a range of publications would no longer have access to professional and technical expertise to support them in producing publications. These students would not have an outlet to practice their professional skills and develop their contacts and experience in the industry. Many prominent and first class journalists in Australia began their career through the opportunities of involvement within their student unions newspapers. The MUGSU website would no longer have frequently updated content as no technical support would be available to maintain the system. Off Campus students would lose a vital link to the day to day activities of their fellow students if this website was no longer active.

Disadvantaged students would suffer most significantly as the representative and advocacy functions of the student association would be largely lost. MUGSU is regarded on the Gippsland campus as a key stakeholder in gaining the input of students. We provide advice on student needs and represent the interests of students at all levels of the university management structure. In particular we support and advocate on behalf of students who have special needs including those who are mature aged or part time, enrolled off campus, women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, International or from regional Australia. Advocacy efforts on issues such as women's body image, activities to assist International and domestic students interact, campaigns to acknowledge and respect indigenous issues and customs which form an integral part of what student associations do would not continue. These functions are vital in giving many students a sense of belonging and of building acceptance which produces a harmonious and productive atmosphere for students to study within.

The introduction of this legislation in its current form would be disastrous to the Gippsland campus and the community in the surrounding area. The elimination of many essential and beneficial services to the campus and wider community of Gippsland will be detrimental to community collaboration, student experience and to a diverse and vibrant range of programs of events and campaigns. It will deny students access to required services and remove many of the benefits they currently receive through their student association.

Effect on Off Campus Learning

The majority of students enrolled at Monash Gippsland campus study via Off Campus Learning attendance mode. These students may be located anywhere within Australia or in a variety of other countries to undertake their studies. External students are in a particularly vulnerable situation if student associations are no longer able to operate as these bodies play an important role in voicing student concerns and expectations and supporting students who do not have access to the usual range of services because of their study mode. Under this legislation MUGSU would not be able to support a sizable representative structure representing the interests of diverse groups of students including those studying off campus. The Vice-President position on the MUGSU Board currently designated for an Off Campus student and supplemented by a committee of Off Campus students could be lost due to the costs associated with representation at a distance. Elected students on this committee from all around Australia would no longer have the opportunity to advocate for the benefit of students and improve service provision.

MUGSU believes student association activities are essential to Off Campus students. This is because without support there will be nothing to prevent off campus students from becoming alienated from the University, suffering difficulties or experiencing disadvantage as a result of not being located in close proximity to campus.

MUGSU publications specific to Off Campus students including an introductory CD ROM detailing essential support and service information as well as the wallplanner and student diary would cease. Regular newsletters & e-newsletters sent to Off Campus students to promote a sense of belonging within the student community and provide an important reinforcement would also cease. Production and distribution of the MUGSU newspaper editions specifically aimed at Off Campus would no longer occur. There would be no professional or technical support to maintain an Off Campus section of MUGSU website.

There are many barriers to Off Campus students accessing support. In a University environment a surprising amount of information is socially transferred as opposed to being written. There are sometimes huge gaps within these students knowledge of how to proceed within University guidelines. The pro-active approach taken by the student association is the main way Off Campus students currently access or are referred to the services they require. Under VSU this function would be lost.

Without the Union funded freecall service Off Campus students would incur additional costs through regular contact with the University at STD telephone rates. Funding of the freecall number to access Monash University Counselling Services

would no longer be available nor would the MUGSU freecall advice line. Students who currently access advocacy through this phone service would no longer be able to gain the support they need to continue studying.

Off Campus students often need additional support to that offered through the University. As a result MUGSU has developed a mentoring program to provide students with the levels of support necessary to increase retention. We consider from experiences found at other universities that this service is pivotal in enhancing student experiences. If the proposed legislation is passed we expect this will remove the possibility of this essential program continuing. It is only through the efforts of student representation that the needs of students such as those studying off Campus are taken into account.

Without the Monash University Gippsland Student Union many Off Campus students would have greater difficulty accessing support services and continuing their studies. The services, advocacy and sense of community we promote for Off Campus Students is essential to the survival of the Gippsland Campus. Without Off Campus Learning programs Monash Gippsland Campus would not have sufficient enrolments to remain viable. Off Campus enrolments constitute 70% of all enrolments at the Gippsland campus, if student association advocacy services were removed and the quality of teaching programs and support services deteriorated there is a possibility that Monash University would pull out of the Gippsland Campus and decimate the educational, employment and other opportunities for all in the region.

Misconceptions about Student Associations

The functions undertaken by student associations in the past were markedly different to the activities and services which are currently provided. Prevalent ideas about the majority of student organisations being rife with cronyism, radicalism, corruption and mismanagement are not reflective of the true picture.

At Monash Gippsland Campus MUGSU is part of a body known as the Campus Service Council involving senior campus administration, where the range of student services to be offered is determined and the level of amenities fees set. A contract exists between MUGSU and Monash University for the provision of set services to students and we are accountable to this body as well as to the student populace for the expenditure of funds in a responsible and efficacious manner. We are conscious of providing our members with value for money and have a significantly discounted fee for external and part-time students.

Student associations in regional areas particularly do not fit into the portrait of radical student activism which is a common misconception. Student representatives are elected in a democratic and regulated manner and therefore are reflective of the will of the student body. There are conservative student leaders as well as more liberal or radical elements. One of the possible consequences of defunding student organisations is that without a service arm these organisations will become a rallying point for radical activism without the professional and expert guidance of staff with longer-term consequences in mind. In addition the accumulated professional knowledge, research and expertise generated by student associations will be lost.

Contrary to popular perception student associations in Victoria already have opt-out membership systems in place. There is an erroneous presentation in the media of students as consumers of services which they will pay to access if they are sufficiently valued. Participation in the Higher Education system demonstrates a desire for betterment and improved employment opportunities. Students often struggle financially to complete their studies and are very focussed on course outcomes. There is little prospect that large numbers of students will choose to join their student associations to access services no matter how beneficial they may be if their focus is on completing academic studies.

Accountable, Representative, Beneficial Student Organisations

MUGSU has an annual \$1.6M dollar turnover, \$1M of which derives from amenities fees. As an Incorporated Association under the Victorian Associations Incorporation Act (1981) MUGSU is governed by an elected Board comprised of: nine Office Bearers, representatives from International Students, Student Residents, Postgraduate Students, Monash staff, community, Alumni and the Pro Vice Chancellor of Monash.

Under the Incorporations Act MUGSU is audited annually by a registered auditor. MUGSU also submits annual budgets and expenditure reports to Monash University Council and through them to the State Government. Financial controls, guidelines and procedures are in place to ensure accountability to all stakeholders. These stakeholders are: students of the Gippsland Campus; Pro Vice Chancellor and Staff of the Gippsland Campus; International Students Association; Gippsland Association of Postgraduates; Student Residents Association; and local community members.

Current statistical data produced by the student association demonstrates the effectiveness and benefits to students of accessing MUGSU services. Positive outcomes are reached in the vast majority of advocacy efforts. Students who have successful interactions with student association services in one area are more likely to access other services. MUGSU supports over 30 clubs, associations and collectives. Few of these would survive the introduction of this legislation. The students affected, who are participants of these groups, number over 1000.

Consideration of the experience of universities and students where legislation has been adopted to regulate student unions, such as in Victoria and Western Australia.

We believe that student associations operate more equitably and effectively through universal membership of the student body. Payment of an amenities fee can be likened to a council tax where everybody contributes to provide infrastructure, representation and services for the community as a whole. Not everybody accesses all the services but they are offered for the benefit of the community. The experience of student organisations such as ours who currently operate under the principles of Victorian style VSU has been reasonably positive, and we would not be opposed to the introduction of legislation similar to Victorian style VSU if overwhelming public opinion were in favour of VSU. Public comment on this matter in the press has been overwhelmingly biased towards support of student organisations and the decided advantages the current systems hold for students and other beneficiaries of union services.

Victorian VSU legislation regulates student associations so that students can opt-out of automatic membership, compulsory amenities fees are charged and collected by the university and before the list of acceptable services was amended there were limitations regarding which services amenities fees could be channelled into. Monash University passes on the CAF generated from Gippsland Students to MUGSU to provide a wide range of services and activities, and to maintain and develop a number of facilities in much the same way Local Government charge rates then provide services to the community.

Introduction of VSU in Western Australia had devastating effects on campus life reducing voluntary membership to between 6 and 36% of students and as a result decimating service levels. WA style VSU involved: opt-in membership, payment of amenities fee for membership, drastic reduction in capacity of student organisations to provide non-profitable services such as welfare support, health education campaigns or sport and recreation services. The WA VSU legislation was consequently repealed in 2002 with wide support from the Higher Education community because of the damage to student experiences and cost to institutions of providing essential services themselves.

Under WA style advocacy, VSU publications, welfare services, advice and support services ceased operating or were drastically reduced. Services that did not generate incomes or were not self-sufficient were those that did not survive the introduction of VSU legislation.

Some universities in WA provided financial assistance in recognition of the essential services provided by Student Unions and effectively propped up these services until the legislation was repealed. This would be a drain on university resources and in the current funding climate of high demand for additional funding would be untenable for the majority of institutions. The state government also provided Student Organisation Support (SOS) funding for two years which greatly lessened the impact of VSU in WA for a significant period of time. The proposed legislation would force a situation

upon universities and student associations where there was no funding for essential services and representation.

To preserve these services a service fee must be charged. Whether this is administered by the university through compulsory competitive tendering or through contracts between institutions and student organisations is of less importance than the fact that one is charged. If an amenities fee were not levied, students will no longer be able to enjoy a campus experience on a par with that which students have enjoyed for the past three decades at Monash Gippsland campus. The impacts as outlined are widespread, serious and threaten the viability of many aspects and services we value within our local community.

Conclusion

This is a point of no return for the higher education system. To go down the road that introduction of this legislation sets out upon will be to take irreversible steps towards a user-pays system in our tertiary sector; the cost to individuals will rise, university experiences will suffer and students will be at much greater risk of attrition. Regional universities and their surrounding communities would particularly suffer as the support necessary to attract regional students would no longer be in place.

The vital role that student unions can play in a regional community would cease. Essential services currently provided to students including international students, off campus students, publications, advocacy, crisis support, sports & recreation, welfare programs, activities and careers counselling would no longer exist. A university without these essential programs would be a barren and inequitable institution substantially inferior to an equivalent university in any other OECD country. For a country that prides itself on levels of education and accessibility the removal of this essential pillar in the support of students is inconsistent with those aims.

We beseech the Senate not to support this legislation in its current form. A Victorian VSU model would achieve the government's stated aims and would ensure that a fee was levied to fund those essential services which could not continue to be supported by student associations with reduced incomes and which universities have indicated they do not have the capacity to fund. To pursue this legislation unamended will lead to substantial impacts not just on student organisations but on the whole tertiary sector and its viability in appealing to the International student and to an extent the domestic student markets. Substantial job losses will be experienced, sporting facilities, artistic endeavours, recruitment prospects for local businesses will all be lost if the Senate allows this legislation to pass without amendment.