

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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Part 1 - Introduction

1.1. Opposition to the Legislation

The Students Representative Council (hereafter the 'SRC') opposes the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005 (hereafter called the 'Legislation') in any form.

1.2. The SRC is a representative organisation

The SRC is a representative organisation of all undergraduates at the University of Sydney, and the work we do is fundamentally based on our ability to continue to be a representative voice for all students. The SRC favours universal membership because a fundamental part of the work we do is universal representation of students within the University and the community.

The SRC is the democratic representative organization for all undergraduate students at the University of Sydney. We have almost 30,000 undergraduate student members. The SRC at the University of Sydney is a separate organisation from Sydney University Sport (SUS) and the University of Sydney Union (USU). Whilst SUS and USU focus on sporting, catering and cultural services, the SRC is a support, representation and advocacy-based organisation.

1.3. Different forms of representation

Representation has many facets, and it is difficult to draw clear lines between the different forms of representative work done by the SRC and its staff. Although it is clear that some forms of representation are explicitly political and others clearly academic, it is difficult to define where these two areas separate. In some ways representation relates to the democratic election of students and the direct representation student representatives provide within the University. It also refers to the representation students receive through advocates and advisers, information disseminated through the SRC, a solicitor who provides legal representation, and through policy and lobbying work within the University and the community. It is also about the opportunity for students to have a voice through publications, and by joining together and campaigning in collective groups on a whole range of issues.

1.4. This submission

This submission forms part of the work of the SRC to highlight the devastating impact VSU will have on our organisation, and the provision of services to our members. It seeks to demonstrate the operations of the SRC and how they form part of the essential part of student life at the University of Sydney. It also aims to display how the Legislation will detrimentally impact the SRC and therefore students at this University. It uses primary source material as the basis for most of its conclusions, including the budget actuals of the SRC and direct student voices of our members who have used our services. This submission makes clear that the impact of VSU will be solely negative for students at the University of Sydney.

Part 2 – Dispelling the myths of VSU

2.1. That the University can take on the role of the SRC

During the debate on VSU, those involved in managing the finances of student organisations have highlighted the fact that the monetary impact of VSU will lead to a loss of essential student services that cannot be funded on a user pays basis. In response, some have suggested that any essential services currently provided by student organisations will be funded directly by the University. There are a range of problems with this argument.

The argument implies that universities have the wealth to fund student services at the same level as they are currently resourced. The University of Sydney has made it clear that this is not the case, and universities from rural and regional Australia will have an even bigger difficulty covering these costs. The cost of replacing services will not be cheap, and with predictions of a \$160 million hole in student services funding through VSU, it is unrealistic to expect universities to cover these costs.

Even if the University of Sydney were able to allocate funding to provide services currently funded by the SRC, we believe that the University, regardless of financial ability, cannot provide many of our services as accountably and effectively as we do. Much of the work currently done by the SRC involves representing students in disputes with the University around academic and administrative matters. The independence of the SRC is essential in this regard, and we believe that the University cannot take over this representative role. In certain circumstances the University has an outright conflict of interest. It is clear that independent representation, advocacy and legal work could not and would not be done by the University.

2.2 That membership is currently compulsory

One of the greatest misunderstandings relating to the current operation of student organisations is that membership is compulsory, and must be paid up-front in full upon enrolment. There has always been a provision to seek conscientious objection to membership – to opt out. We would continue to support the provision of opt-out clauses and flexible payment options for membership for students, and believe the provisions already available undermine many of the arguments used to support a voluntary system. The idea of coercive membership is already a myth, and the legislation seeks to provide a solution to a problem that does not exist.

Part 3 – The work of the SRC

3. 1. Overview of SRC work

Below is an overview of the operations of the SRC for the year December 2003 to November 2004. It shows where the fee goes and the proportion allocated to different areas. It should be noted that \$5.80 of the \$64 each student paid to the SRC that year went to the Commonwealth in the form of a GST.

3.2 SRC Expenditure in Relation to \$58 Student Compulsory Fees Collected

The chart on the next page shows the actual expenditure of the 76th Council (2003/2004) of the SRC based on an income of \$1,683,057 not including GST.

Compulsory Fee collected is \$58 not including GST

Welfare and Advocacy

\$2.99 Bursary and Assistance Fund

\$8.26 Welfare & Education Research Caseworkers

\$2.82 Welfare Liaison Officer (caseworker for affiliated campus sites at Mallet St- Faculty of Nursing, Cumberland College of Health Sciences, Sydney College of the Arts and the Conservatorium of Music).

\$1.44 Directs grants to affiliated campus representatives organisations (Cumberland Student Guild, Sydney College of the Arts Student Association and Conservatorium Students Association).

\$3.75 Redfern Legal Centre

\$19.27 Total 33%

Infrastructure

\$8.57 Administration

\$3.24 Operating Costs

\$1.33 IT Consultants

\$1.66 Other IT service costs

\$1.26 Capital Expenditure

\$16.05 Total 28%

General Activities

\$0.13 Second Hand Bookshop

\$0.39 Funding to Faculty Societies

\$0.81 Orientation Week Activities

\$1.33 Total 2%

Direct Representation

\$2.18 Stipend of President, Hon Treasurer, Ed Officer & Women's Officer

\$0.56 Funding for student conferences

\$1.58 Staff of President, Executive and Council

\$1.01 Operating Costs of President, Executive and Council

\$1.47 SRC Elections

\$5.62 NUS affiliation fee

\$0.28 Public Relations Dept

\$2.39 Activities/Campaigns of all students and departments of the SRC (largest expenditure on the Education Department)

\$15.08 Total 26%

Publications

\$0.03 General Publications (materials for campaigns and information dissemination)

\$5.88 Honi Soit (less \$1.17 it generates in advertising revenue)

\$0.24 Growing Strong (Women's Publication)

\$0.28 Undergraduate Counter-Course & Orientation Handbook

\$6.43 Total 11%

Welfare and Advocacy

3.3. Bursary and Assistance Fund

In recognition of the financial difficulties of being a student the SRC many years ago established a dedicated Bursary and Assistance Fund which allows the SRC to issue loans to undergraduates of up to \$750- and emergency loans of \$80-. This money is provided interest free to students to help them with study related equipment, help with bonds or rent if their income has been disrupted and other financial difficulties that occur within a student's time at University. The President and the Chair of the Academic Board are trustees of the scheme, and it requires a part-time employee to administer the scheme.

For many students this source of funds is a vital part of their continued ability to study. The President negotiates a realistic repayment schedule with the student after a formal application procedure. It is also different from most University and commercial sources of funds because the criterion is immediate financial need, and it doesn't require a strong academic record or perfect credit rating (something that can be difficult when students are struggling financially and need to spend time on paid work). The Bursary and Assistance Loan scheme has been the difference between continued study and failure to complete a course for many students. Already in 2005, the President of the SRC has recounted stories of students crying, laughing and dancing with joy after a successful application for a loan.

3.4. Caseworkers and Welfare services

There are 4 full and part time casework staff at the SRC - called the Welfare Research Officers, the Welfare Liaison Officers and the Education Research Officer. They provide confidential advice advocacy and representation to support and assist students. They help with problems and questions regarding the University, Government agencies, Centrelink, employers, and service and accommodation providers.

The range of work they do is broad and in a form not replicated elsewhere. Issue they deal with include; academic rights, academic appeals, course problems, fee problems, university administration issues (enrolment, credit, pre-requisite and admission), withdrawal, discontinuation and its consequences, special consideration request in case of hardship, student misconduct allegations and harassment and discrimination all from the perspective of the student. University staff can provide some information about these matters, but only the SRC can provide comprehensive representation for its members without conflict of interest.

The caseworkers are also students sole source of advice, advocacy and representation on campus for vital Centrelink matters - Youth Allowance, Austudy, Abstudy and Pensioner Education Supplement, Health Care Card Holders – and have a very high level of expertise in these matters.

We support students with appeals to the SSAT and the AAT. Along with the Redfern Legal Centre Solicitor, the caseworkers also provide advice on tenancy rights and representation with landlords and in the Residential Tenancy Tribunal. The University would find it difficult to commit the requisite time and money to these advocacy services.

The role of the Welfare Liaison Officer encompasses all of the responsibilities of the Welfare Research staff, but also extends to accommodate the students on the university's satellite campuses at the Conservatorium in the city, the Sydney College of the Arts at Rozelle, the faculty of Health Sciences at Lidcombe and the Faculty of Nursing. These students often face the added challenge of being away from the main campus facilities (eg, counselling, learning centre, etc) while still having the same academic and social demands. Some of these students receive little attention for the 'main' campus student administration. The SRC is committed to representing student away from main campus.

Caseworkers have most of their initial contact with students through personal interview. Assistance can vary from 20 minutes to 20 hours per student. In 2004 the caseworkers had contact with 968 new students, this is contact that affects lives and help keep students in their course to a successful conclusion. This is vital work at a time when the system seems to accept that the current 20% drop out rates in first year and 30% non completion rates across whole degrees is natural. The following case studies will give some flavour of the work the SRC does in this area. The 'voices' of the students themselves is documented in Part 4.

Adam lived in a rented house and wanted a smoke alarm. His landlord refused to pay for it and also refused to allow him permission to put one up on the wall. Adam asked an SRC caseworker for some advice. The caseworker advised him that according to the Residential Tenancy Act the landlord was not required to give permission for the smoke alarm, but he could apply through the tenancy tribunal (consumer trading and tenancy tribunal) to be given special permission. Adam was reluctant to go through this much fuss and expense. Instead the caseworker wrote a letter to the real estate agent on his behalf. The agent treated the request like it was "official business" and allowed Adam to put in the smoke alarm.

Sharon suffered from chronic anxiety, which made it extremely difficult for her to complete simple tasks like attending classes, emailing lecturers about assignments, dealing with her landlord and organising stuff for Centrelink. She saw a caseworker who undertook to be her "buddy" for the year. The caseworker helped her to get special conditions through the disabilities office, extensions on assignments through her academics and arranged appropriate Centrelink payments. She still suffers from chronic anxiety but is able to concentrate on her health and the content of her course rather than worrying about the bureaucratic requirements. Sharon also feels a great deal of support from the SRC and feels that simply having a regular appointment makes it worthwhile to continue trying to finish her course.

Betty was accepted in Vet. Science because she had achieved excellent results in a bachelor of agriculture course. Because she was over 25 years old, she was not officially eligible for an Austudy payment for what Centrelink considered her second-degree course. She saw a caseworker to see how she could appeal this Centrelink decision. We ended up taking it to the SSAT arguing that because vet science was an unusual course there were actually 4 different "usual" ways to be accepted into the course – not just through UAC. Consequently she was approved for Austudy and this payment made it possible for her to complete the degree. The following year another student came with the same situation. The previous case made it much easier to argue the same situation. That student was also granted an Austudy payment and backpayed for the previous months that she studied without any wage.

Alex was a reasonably good student in his first and second years at uni. However, his third year saw lots of absences from class and poor assessment marks. After failing most of his subjects the university asked him to "show good cause" as to why he should be allowed to

continue studying that course. He had previously not spoken to anyone about the difficulties he was having because he felt they were unapproachable. However, he came to a show cause workshop and felt that the SRC caseworker was someone he could trust because she was independent from the University. After a couple of meetings with the caseworker he finally revealed that his mother had died during the summer break and his grief was so overwhelming that he was not able to concentrate. He felt weak that he was so affected and as such did not want to tell anyone his personal business. The SRC caseworker was able to help him with his show cause letter so that he was allowed to complete his course. She was also able to put him in contact with a grief counsellor so he could work through his emotions. She was also able to claim a HECS remission so that Alex did not have to pay for the subjects that he did not seriously attempt.

3.5. Redfern Legal Centre

The SRC currently funds a branch office of the Redfern Legal Centre with a solicitor being on campus 4 days a week to provide undergraduate students with free legal advice, representation in courts and a referral service. The solicitor can assist and protect the rights of students with a wide range of legal issues such as University complaints, criminal law, domestic violence, employment law, credit and debt, consumer complaints, victims compensation, discrimination and harassment, tenancy law, administrative law (e.g Centrelink).

In 2004 the solicitor assisted approximately 240 students. Almost half of the more complex cases that required action beyond advice were International students – a particularly vulnerable group in this context and a group who are unlikely to easily access alternatives.

The solicitor represents students in some court situations. Universal fees allow students to have access to this legal support, where a private solicitor would otherwise charge from \$300- to \$400- a day and a Barrister would charge \$700 – to \$1000- a day, amounts well beyond the reach of most students.

The solicitor has the capacity to work in a range of fields and to work on issues that young adults face, such as exploitation by landlords, in their causal work or in dealings with insurance companies or with motor vehicle cases. The solicitor also has specific knowledge and skills relevant to protecting students' rights in the University environment.

3.6. SRC Second Hand Bookshop

The SRC runs a second hand Bookshop that is widely utilised by students. We buy and sell textbooks on campus according to course demand. There is also a flexible scheme of leaving books on consignment to gain a slightly higher return. We do so to meet the educational and material needs of students. Students benefit materially both by being able to make some money from their old books and by getting current texts more cheaply. In 2004 the bookshop had contact with almost 10 000 students either buying or selling. Many of those who used the Bookshop are strapped for money and greatly appreciated even occasionally small returns on old books.

3.7. Student Representation

One of the most important roles of the Sydney University SRC is the representation it offers to students. Representation accounted for 26% of the total budget for the 76th Council (2003-04). The following is a brief explanation of some of the different component parts of the representative work of students in the SRC.

ELECTIONS

Each year the SRC holds elections where its membership may vote on the direction of the body for the following year. In order to ensure that as many students have the opportunity to have a say in the running of the organisation, elections are held over two main days of polling, with nine polling booths spread over the main campus and affiliated campuses of the university. Pre poll and postal voting is also available for those unable to reach a polling booth on the main days of polling. The annual elections allow students to choose three main elements of the SRC: The President, forty-seven members of the Council, and up to ten editors of the student newspaper *Honi Soit*. Whilst voting is not compulsory, voter turnout is considerable, with 4000- 5000 students voting annually. This represents a significant proportion of undergraduate students on campus on the days polls are open.

COUNCIL

The Council is the supreme governing body of the organisation and with forty-seven student representatives, the wide variety of student views and concerns have a chance to be voiced. On council, students have the opportunity to bring any concerns to the attention of the SRC and the University. Any approvals of major payments must be made through council and it is a forum where officers and the executive of the SRC can be questioned and made accountable to the student body.

PRESIDENT

The President of the SRC is the Chief Executive Officer of the organisation and in this role may authorise actions and payments within the policy of the Council. All such authorisations must also be reported to either the executive or council for ratification. The President also sits on a number of University committees including the SRC-Senate Liaison committee, the Academic Board of the University, the Learning and Teaching Committee, the Undergraduate Studies Committee and various ad hoc working parties of the University. In this role the President provides a student perspective to the running of the University, which is crucial as many decisions of these bodies directly affect the lives of students. The University appreciates this student perspective. The President is a full time paid position at approximately \$12/hour, a wage lower than students can earn at the local café. This enables the President to meet the heavy responsibility to students of running their organisation and adequately advocating the concerns of students to the University and other relevant bodies.

RECENT ACTIVITIES

The SRC has achieved real results for students in recent years that simply could not be provided under a user-pays model. The price of course readers has been an area of concern for many students at Sydney University and last year we were successful in having the University significantly reduce the costs of these for many subjects. Because of this, more students can now afford to purchase course readers and hence improved their understanding of their units of study and their degree as a whole. The SRC also recently successfully lobbied the University to provide a security bus for students at the Cumberland College of Health Sciences. This important safety issue would have been ignored if not for the SRC.

On a broader level, the SRC has consistently advocated the views of students on a state and federal level in issues of tertiary education. In line with this, the SRC is an affiliated body of the National Union of Students. The SRC, along with the NUS, responded to student concerns over the higher education reforms of 2003 and ran a strong campaign around that issue. These campaigns are run because students have voted for students for support running them in the

democratic elections that are held every year. The SRC ensures that the government and other relevant bodies hear the views and concerns of students.

3.8. Publications

Honi Soit

The SRC produces a weekly student newspaper called Honi Soit, and has done so for many, many years. Previous editors of Honi Soit who have gone on to make a significant contribution to Australia's literary and journalistic tradition include Germaine Greer, Clive James, Laurie Oakes, Donald Horne, Robert Hughes, Les Murray, Bob Ellis, Paddy McGuinness and more. Today Honi Soit continues to make an essential contribution to the alternative media, and offer students and young people a chance to have their voice heard. 10 editors, elected annually by the student body, are wholly responsible for the production of Honi Soit, and it offers them, the student who contribute, and those who read it, invaluable experience in expressing themselves. With a weekly print run of over 5000, Honi Soit is very much part of the tradition and history of the University of Sydney. The SRC Executive predicts that with the introduction of VSU, Honi Soit will be one of the first things to be cut. It is provided free of charge to students, and runs (like the rest of the SRC) completely not-for-profit. It cannot be sustained on a user-pays basis, and the SRC will not have the funds to support it under a voluntary system.

Orientation Week Handbook

The SRC also produces an annual undergraduate students orientation handbook. Distributed to first year students during Orientation Week (another service for students threatened by VSU), it offers them an essential insight into the University and its complex bureaucracy. Written by students for students, it is one of the only sources of information for new students in a language they understand. Under VSU there is no way the Orientation Week Handbook can be sustained, and therefore newly enrolling students would lose this vital guide to the University, and the orientation process would be severely diminished.

Other Publications

The SRC also publishes a number of other publications written and edited by students. These include Growing Strong (the Women's Handbook), an Environment Handbook, a Queer students handbook, the Counter-Course Handbook and more. All of these publications provide information to students that assist them in completing their degrees, and give them a chance to develop their voice in an independent way. It benefits all of society to have articulate young people who are comfortable expressing themselves, and who have something valuable to contribute. The publications of the SRC and other student organisations are a vital part of this.

PART 4- Student Voices

4.1. 2005 Survey of Undergraduate students

Students at the University of Sydney support the continued existence of an independent and viable SRC. In a survey we conducted at the start of 2005 of over 1000 Sydney University undergraduates, we asked questions about support for an independent SRC in the context of moves such as the Legislation. Independence means an SRC that is not controlled or reliant on the University or outside bodies. A viable SRC is one in which the current level of support and service provision continues to be possible. An overwhelming 88% of valid responses supported an independent and viable SRC.

4.2. Comments on an independent SRC

Students do have a sense of the SRC as an independent voice for them in the University and beyond. We received many comments on this – a selection is reproduced below.

I believe having an independent SRC contributes to the level of democracy within the university and society in general. It places students in a better position to make demands of the university administration or the government. It gives students experience in making decisions rather than letting other people make decisions on their behalf. It generates a more politically aware student body - given how privileged many university students are, this means they may be more likely to act in a politically responsible way and to identify and fight against inequality.

I very strongly support the existence of an independent SRC, because the students need a voice.

Despite the fact that the SRC is often caught up in the bureaucracy of the university, it is vitally important to maintain a relatively impartial and separate body to the university hierarchy so that students' opinions can be heard in situations where our fees are being raised, etc.

How can we demand the education we're paying for unless we have an independent body to ask these things through?

Student representation is the most important aspect of campus life, to make the most out of our uni experiences and to improve uni for everyone.

4.3. Comments on the role the SRC.

We also asked the students surveyed an open ended question about what role they believed the SRC should play. Again, a selection is reproduced below

The SRC should continue to promote tolerance.

The SRC is active on VSU, and assists with the incorporation and harmony of the diverse minorities on campus who otherwise might not end up having a say.

I don't think the union will work if only some people are in it, it has to be universal to be representative.

I think the SRC's first priority should be to campaign on issues which directly influence students' lives on areas which other groups will not campaign about - for example, HECS, ancillary fees, youth allowance, childcare on campus. Finally, I think the SRC needs to be a part of wider social/political/economic justice campaigns as many students are concerned about these issues but do not have any avenues to pursue their concerns. By campaigning on these issues, the SRC enables students to participate, to a greater degree, in the political life of Australia. This contributes to democracy

The SRC should focus on helping international students because there are, really, a lot of unfair things happening to them. I also hope the SRC can get a bigger office and can reach as many students as possible in campaigns of political awareness.

It was awesome the way the SRC helped the nursing students in protecting their rights. Action on the rights of international students needs to happen. They deserve more services and facilities as they pay unreasonably expensive fees compared to local students

I think the SRC should campaign for student input into their courses. Also the hardest thing to understand in university is the system of administration, so more guidance on what options are available in courses would be helpful. I believe the SRC should also look at the university's environmental impact. For example, we could do a lot more recycling around uni. I know we have a few recycling bins around, but all the rubbish seems to get mixed up together

The SRC addresses student funding issues, advocates keeping the university system equitable, and fights for issues of social justice.

I think the SRC should concentrate on voicing student's opinions and views, seeing how students and young people are continually ignored in state and federal government and politics.

The SRC works on everything that effects students. I think they do a fine job in organizing the student body in responding to social and political developments - especially the recent fee changing process. They made sure students were well informed and participated

I support the right and ability of students to protest and have their say. Once the student body becomes inactive, then it is in the university's power to do whatever it wants. This would be bad for students.

4.4. Members Experiences of the SRC

In a separate project we ask students we had had contact with to tell us about their experience of the SRC. A range of some of the responses we received from students from many different Faculties is provided below.

Phuong, Architecture

(The SRC is) ... a space where the Sydney Students Food Co-op can use to organise organic fruit and vegetable boxes.... (It is also a) space where knowledge is shared from different angles (where mainstream media may not fully cover or oppose) and a place where you can meet great people who give a damn about life, university and other people.

Victoria, Arts

The SRC is a vital part of my life. I really feel like I'm represented and like there is someone looking out for my interests as a student. And the SRC is like an insurance "safety net". I know that if I am unjustly failed or asked to show cause my SRC will ALWAYS be there for me. Let me keep my SRC.

Patrick, Arts

I used: legal aid, Centrelink advice and the representation the SRC gives. Students will always need those services and they couldn't possibly be impartial if not independent of the uni or government.

Amir, Arts

I've used all these services over the past few years and it has helped by academic career a hell of a lot. Without financial assistance and help with show cause, I wouldn't be able to finish my degree at all.

Lisette, Arts

Basically, the SRC showed me what an important and integral role they play as an independent body on campus. They are sincerely interested in student issues and assisting students whenever they need help. The SRC is a strong voice for each student and their help highlighted to me that they really make a difference.

Lucy, Arts

I struggle to pay rent, pay for food and day-to-day living expenses, but, each year, on principle, I would happily pay \$500 for the services of the SRC. I woe the day these services become user-pay and the collective support is lost. I love my SRC.

Guy, Arts

SRC helped me obtain my Bachelor of Arts Degree after I was told that my BA Honours studies could not be completed or salvaged into a Degree after I was unable to resume part time studies in the early 1990s. I now live Canberra and, from a suggestion from an academic, submitted a detailed appeal about the matter via the Welfare Research Officer at Sydney SRC. SRC's Welfare officer was able to take on and assess my case and, liaise professionally with the Faculty of Arts on my behalf. The result is that I have now been graduated Bachelor of Arts. SRC could help me even though I hadn't been studying at Sydney for many years and, provided a vital link for an interstate negotiation. It can be difficult to negotiate with university administration and the SRC proved a very good intermediary. I think the SRC still needs to exist and should receive some support.

Jess, Arts

DONT TAKE OUR SRC AWAY!!!

One day I had to talk to Centrelink regarding my options for youth allowance (GOVERNMENT SUPPORT) as I have recently returned to full-time study after working full-time for two and a half years and previous years of study as a part-time student.... (I was) VERY RUDELY spoken to by a Centrelink telephonist who was very opposed to listening about my somewhat unusual circumstances. Feeling helpless, pissed off, desperate, and unable to believe that I was not able to get support as I no longer work, live out of home and my timetable commitment made it extremely difficult to find suitable part-time employment, in tears I turned to the SRC.... I spoke to someone straight away who was approachable, friendly and actually wanting to know my circumstances to help me, NOT to mention treating me like a person not as if I was trying to rot the system of entitlements-ENTITLEMENTS!!!!!! What I really want ... (is) to say is that I believe that student support is vital and more importantly vital as an independent body!!!! PLEASE PLEASE LEAVE OUR UNION ALONE!!! This is just one small example of the numerous times I have had to immediately call on SRC and student services.

Rizal, Economics and Business

The SRC has been very, very helpful to me since I've been an undergraduate student at Sydney University. The services that were helpful to me in these few years were show cause letter, exclusion hearing, advice on adjusting life in overseas, advice on preventing culture shock, etc.

Mafula, Engineering

The SRC has helped me in a number of ways. Firstly they have a loan system, which is easily accessible in times of need. They have helped me cope with settling in Sydney, which can be hard for an overseas student. They have also allowed me to know my rights when it comes to university matters, as well as in other arenas of my university life. I can't see any new system doing this better than is already being done.

Anon, Health Sciences

The SRC was of great support to me twice when I desperately needed help. At the commencement of my course I did not expect that I would need this help. The service was provided to me without delay as I was determined to continue and successfully complete my degree. I strongly believe that without their support my enrollment would have already been cancelled. Desperate students like me need this service so please keep them on Campus.

Thalia, Law

The SRC has provided me with a strong and independent voice to defend my rights as a student, encompassing fees, Youth Allowance, university governance and democracy.

Anon, Law

I am currently undertaking a combined law degree at the University of Sydney. So far, the SRC has provided me with invaluable practical assistance as well as awareness regarding my rights not only as a student but also as a tenant and a citizen in general. When I first started my course, I was not aware that the SRC even existed. However, as time went by I came to truly appreciate their presence, particularly when I needed assistance with Centrelink payments as well with negotiating alternative arrangements to academic tasks given my physical disability.

Anon, Law

It would give me tremendous peace of mind to know that the SRC will continue to exist as an independent body, providing priceless support to all students, particularly those who face barriers due to disability and financial need.

Ronit, Nursing

Back in 2000 I started my nursing degree expecting to finish in 2002. Halfway through I had a problem and resulted in my graduation and completion being deferred till 2003. In December 2003, 2 days before I was due to complete my degree and register, the faculty of nursing had stopped me and cancelled all paperwork sent in to the registration board. Not understanding the problem or the reason behind this cancellation, and in a desperate bid to solve this issue quickly I had consulted the Sydney Uni (SRC). They have been helping me for a yr and a half, and even though I still haven't solved it, they have helped me write letters and tell me all the possible avenues I could take if I wasn't satisfied with the faculty's decisions/responses. They have even helped me with legal advice.... Luckily all this service and help I am currently receiving (and have been the entire time) is free of charge, due to the fact that I am financially unable to seek a private lawyer (or maintain the cost for this long period). I am extremely grateful for their help, support, and free service, especially when I didn't expect to use it. I hope the services continue to be run to help other unexpected students needing this service. They have saved my life, and given me a whirlwind of information.

Sue-Zen, Pharmacy

I am an international student and am currently pursuing a course in Bachelor of Pharmacy. I have been to the SRC a few times. They have been extremely helpful in providing me with specific and handy information on what I needed to know about appealing for special consideration and writing a show cause letter. They assisted me in writing a show cause letter and even wrote a support letter for me. I personally think the SRC provides excellent guidance for students who have questions or problems but do not know where or how to look for the answers.

Peter, faculty anon

If you have a problem with the University, who do you go and see? The University? Lecturers do not listen to students all the time, they do not have time for them when they are the ones on the other side of the argument. The SRC makes sure that the University staff listen, they inform them of what the University policy is and remind them that students have rights. The SRC is an invaluable part of University life. Once again ... thank you for your help; you definitely made my life at University easier.

Anon, faculty anon

Before this year I didn't really know what the SRC was all about, so it was a little unexpected and surprising when I found myself in a position where I needed their help. Earlier this year I was in disagreement with my faculty over a decision they had made regarding my enrolment. I believed I had been given misinformation on the same, which resulted in adding a year to my degree. I was not happy about the initial decision and wanted independent advice on the matter. A friend suggested I see the SRC. The contact I made there ... (a caseworker) gave me an unbiased opinion and I believe - put my interests first. Together we went through options that could keep me full time and subsequently maintain Centrelink payments. He accompanied me to a further meeting with the faculty, where we had a chance to discuss our matters of concern. It was comforting to have someone with me at the meeting, as I felt a little intimidated. Further,

to have someone present who could see both points of view was a bonus, as he was able to better explain the situation to me. I have no doubt I would not have come to such an amicable compromise with my faculty had the SRC not intervened on my behalf.

Alana, faculty Anon

I have been at uni for over six years and up until recently did not think that compulsory student unionism was a good idea. It didn't occur to me that every time I had lunch at Manning or Wentworth (buildings at) uni or needed help with a counsellor or spent time in the sports centre, which this was paid by student fees. In fact I thought I had never benefited from compulsory student unionism. The reality is that all students benefit from paying union fees - regardless of whether they realise it or not. It seems nonsense to enact VSU when all students benefit from such services. In my personal experience, the SRC has been of great help to me recently. They have provided advice regarding a senate appeal and have been invaluable to my understanding of what is expected of me. It would be unlikely that this service would be available if VSU were pushed through.

Mischa, faculty anon

In 2000 my family suffered some financial devastating difficulties after the death of my father in 1997 from cancer. During 2000, I was forced to sell the family home and received no guidance from my mother (as she had suffered a nervous break down), and as I have no other family in Australia, was completely on my own. As I was only 19 at the time I was obviously out of my depth. The only help I got was from the SRC. The bank tried to foreclose 6 months sooner than they should have, this was avoided due solely to the free legal advice I was given. This gave me the opportunity to deal with the issue. I also was given financial assistance during this period to help me continue studying as I was suddenly and without warning no longer receiving any money from my family for my studies. Without this financial assistance helping me for a couple weeks, until I was able to get a job and get my first pay check, I would have had to drop out 4 weeks before the end of second semester, 2nd year. Had I have had to drop out, I probably would not have returned to uni, wasting almost 2 years of study towards a 3 year degree.

Anna, faculty anon

The SRC welfare advisors have assisted me on a number of occasions giving me advice on Youth Allowance payments, scholarships and tenancy law.... (They) ... are excellent and have a great knowledge of social security law. Without them, I do not believe I would have had my payments restored in 2001.

Anon, Conservatorium

Every student enters university with a lot of dreams, aims, ambitions and goals. It is a new chapter in ones life. It was in mine too. Getting a place in the prestigious faculty was a happy event for my family members and me. Unfortunately my pathway as a student in Sydney University wasn't as smooth sailing. During one component of the final year exams, which involved the usage of some instruments, my instrument broke. I did not have a spare set and faced a lot of time pressure and stress at that point in time. I had passed all the other components of the final year exam except this part. I reported the incident right from day one of it. However none of the teaching staffs took much note of it. I sent countless mails to all the faculty members and the dean. However none of them were answered. I was asked to repeat the whole year because of this. However as an international student there was no way I could get extra loan from my financier and on top of it, the condition of his loan was that if I do fail any part of the course all his loans to

be issued to me will be cancelled and I will have to repay whatever he had given me from the very moment. I sincerely did not want to give up my studies over something that was not a proof on my competency. Having done a similar exam before, around midyear I had passed the exam without much difficulty and I had also passed all the other more difficult components at the first trial. Out of the year, about 70% failed the anatomy exam but I was one of those 30% whom passed the exam. I had tried putting these messages across to the faculty but no one even replied to my mails and messages. The associate dean kept say that there is nothing she can do and she doesn't know anything about my case. My faculty did not treat me in a fair manner however I had no one to turn to for help. I was left in despair. I could not tell this to my family who sacrificed their home for my education. I could not continue my studies either. I was running out of time as well. The faculty were fully aware of my situation and my case. However not even a single faculty member introduced SRC to me for their own selfish reasons. I got to know SRC through one of my friends whom also went to SRC for help and SRC had a great impact upon her life.

I contacted (the caseworker), a representative of SRC. She understood the urgency of my matter and agreed to see me immediately at the shortest notice. I had only talked to (her) for half an hour and she understood my situation perfectly well and contacted the faculty the very moment to discuss my case. The faculty that couldn't be contacted for months suddenly came alive out of nowhere. (She) did all she could to help me. The faculty gave me about a day's notice to see the dean to discuss this matter. (The caseworker) agreed to come with me despite the short notice. She fought for me throughout the meeting. I was very much intimidated by the academics in the room and definitely would not have been able to fight for my rights without (the caseworker's) help. Even until today (she) has always been checking if I still do need help with my situation. I would not have had got some justice without (her).

Like myself, most student do not realise the existence of SRC until they need the help. I can't imagine where I would be today if not for SRC. Whatever happened to me today can be the plight of another student tomorrow. SRC definitely needs to maintain its existence for many more students like me. SRC activities have to be promoted further as a lot of students like myself are left in despair and have no one to turn to for help. I still need SRC's help and would strongly support their existence.

Kirstin, Photomedia

[The SRC caseworker] helped me to understand the complexities of my case and offered great support in my ongoing correspondence with Centrelink. [Her] knowledge of the law and the social security system in Australia was invaluable to me. She was approachable and supportive offering me a bank of up to date knowledge clarifying issues I previously had no knowledge of or no understanding of.

At the beginning of my ordeal with Centrelink, I was both confused and intimidated. Set back after set back, I even considered letting my case go. As a representative of an independent body, (my caseworker's) unbiased advice and continued support gave me the confidence to pursue my case with Centrelink. Toward the end of 2004 my appeal with Centrelink, which dated back to July 2003, was finally overturned. There is no doubt in my mind that were it not for the practical and emotional support of (the caseworker) I would not have even proceeded with my case let alone have it settled in my favour.

The continued existence of independent groups such as the SRC is vital to student support. My battle with Centrelink has not only been self-affirming but has also given me the confidence to pursue other matters in my life as a student where bureaucracy has the tendency to intimidate into submission. Students need an independent body that they can turn to when problems arise.

Many students, myself included, may go about their university life without needing the assistance of the SRC. Having said this, when problems do arise, and invariably as a student they do, the SRC is an invaluable resource that students cannot afford to lose.

The University of Sydney's SRC is easily accessible and the staff are friendly, professional and efficient. When dealing with them I felt like a person and not just a number. I felt like my case was taken on personally and that there was a genuine interest in helping me to succeed.

Without the work of the SRC the outlook for students finding themselves in situations like myself is very bleak. I know that without the assistance and support of the SRC I would not have succeeded and I would hate to think that any student in a similar situation would have no where to go. Sadly, this is the reality if we were to lose the SRC.

Part 5 – Conclusion

5.1. Predicted impact of VSU on the University of Sydney Students' Representative Council

It is predicted by the Council of the SRC, its Executive, and its independent auditors CM Pitt & Co. that VSU will have a devastating impact on the SRC and its services. The SRC is entirely dependant on student contributions, and runs as a not-for-profit organisation, funneling all income it receives straight back into representation and services for the benefit of its members. The SRC believes that the University does not have the resources and independence to fund its activities, and we do not believe we can restructure in order to make ourselves dependant on commercial activity or a user-pays model. The SRC asks the Senate to consider the impact VSU will have on all the services of the SRC, and how the students who utilize our support and advocacy programs value our work. The SRC cannot operate on a user-pays basis. We require a universal contribution in order to support the work we do for those most disadvantaged within the University. Without a universal fee, students will find that the support of the SRC is not there when they need it most, and even at that point if they wished to pay a fee for service they will find that they have no choice because the SRC will already have been forced to make its welfare staff redundant. The SRC does not predict it will be able to support close to half or one-third of its current activities under VSU.

5.2. SUMMARY

The SRC provides students with the ability to have their say in the running of the University, and the broader direction of tertiary education in Australia. Democratic elections are held every year to ensure the SRC is run in the way students want it to be run. As an independent body, it is able to effectively, and without hindrance, put forward the views of students to the University, the government and other relevant organisations. Under VSU the ability of the SRC to perform this function would be severely limited and the views and concerns of students would go unheard. We believe VSU would lead to a lower quality of tertiary education in Australia because students would have no way to contribute to the policy-making process.

The Legislation would also force the closure of the essential services of the SRC, including academic and welfare advisory work, student publications, the Second-Hand Bookshop and more. The SRC urges the committee to consider the impact of the legislation not only on student organisations (many of whom would be forced to close their doors), but also on University students themselves, many of whom rely so heavily on the universal availability of the services of the SRC in order to complete their degree. This Legislation is bad not only for student organisations, but for all Australian university students.