

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

Submitter: Jordy Silverstein

Organisation: Women's Department, Interim Student Representative
Committee, University of Melbourne

Address: 1st Floor Union House
The University of Melbourne VIC 3010

Phone: 8344 6958

Fax: 03 9347 1945

Email: j.silverstein@union.unimelb.edu.au

To whom it may concern,

I write to you as one of the Women's Officers in the Interim Student Representative Committee at the University of Melbourne. The Women's Department has existed since August 4, 1992, when 90% of those present at the Student General Meeting voted to inaugurate a women's department, and is a part of the student union which was hard fought for by women (and men) on campus. Since then, the Department has provided political representation, advocacy, activities and a refuge, within a proudly feminist framework.

Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) threatens the existence of the Women's Department. The experience of VSU in Western Australia demonstrates that Women's departments, and autonomous women's spaces, are often the first attacked—funding is cut, space is taken away and women's rights are no longer a focus of student unions or universities. This is absolutely unacceptable. The existence of Women's Departments is fundamental to university life. Below I will discuss the role that the Women's Department at the University of Melbourne plays; the anticipated impact of VSU on the Department; and the anticipated impact of VSU on women students.

1. The role of the Melbourne University Student Union's Women's Department

The Women's Department of the Student Union was founded, and continues to be based on, feminist principles. This means that it is completely woman-centered. Women students stand at the forefront of actions taken by the Department. All women students are encouraged to participate in the activities of the Department, and we attempt to involve and represent as many women, from all manner of diverse backgrounds, as possible. We attempt to cover a wide range of activities, offering things as diverse as guest speakers, circus workshops, theme weeks, feasts, bands and discussion groups. The Department also facilitates a Women's Room—perhaps the only women only, autonomous, space on campus. The women's officers also facilitate a Women's Action Collective—an absolutely integral part of the Department—thereby demonstrating the power of collective organising, not just to the women involved, but to all students on campus.

The Women's Department is built around the principle of autonomous organising, and therefore provides a model for women on campus to learn particular ways of socially and politically mobilising. We actively foster and encourage the development and implementation of feminist ideas and actions. This is demonstrated in the forums we organise and the campaigns we run, such as mobilising for greater safety for women on campus. Without a women's department, the particular rights and needs of women would not be looked after.

The Women's Department also fulfils the role of providing political representation for women students within the University. The Women's Officers sit on committees, and meet with members of the University to advocate for women's interests. This is a role which can only be provided by an independent, student run organisation.

The Women's Department is one of the only places on a university campus which is entirely focused on women. It is therefore an essential space if we are to continue in the fight to develop and enhance women's position within society.

2. Anticipated impact of VSU on the Women's Department

The experience of the women's departments in student associations in Western Australia under VSU shows a very clear pattern—essentially, VSU brings the downfall of these departments.

We anticipate that, should VSU come in, there will be a significant loss of income to the Student Union, which will mean that resources will be lost. As there is often a deprioritising of women's departments, and as the WA experience demonstrates, we believe that VSU will mean the devastation of more

women's departments. The loss of money which comes with VSU will mean that activities will be cut and resources lost.

There will not be the money available to provide a proper honorarium for women to hold the office bearer positions on a full time basis. Office bearers provide an extremely valuable resource—providing time and energy to organise activities, campaigns, to act as a referral service for women on campus, and to advocate on behalf of women to the university and wider community—and to not have them properly funded will mean that the Department is unable to perform its full function.

It will also potentially mean the loss of the space that the Women's Room uses, and certainly the loss of the funds to provide facilities within that Room.

3. Anticipated impact of VSU on women at universities

The potential effect of VSU on women on campus will be profound. The Women's Department of our Student Union provides such a fundamental role within campus life that to lose it will mean a decrease in the quality of university life for many women.

Firstly, as stated previously, the Women's Department provides a space in which feminist thought and organising can bloom. Many young, and not so young, feminists have begun their political journeys in campus women's departments, and it is student activists who have been at the forefront of pushing feminist agendas within the broader political and social society. Losing the space to think about and practice feminism will mean that the campus will become more hostile to the myriad ideas feminism has to offer.

Secondly, if there is not the ability for women specifically to be represented within the university structure, then women's interests will not be looked after or respected. Women, once again, will be silenced—in essence, a return to the days in which there was no recognition that women have special needs, wants and rights that must be acknowledged and respected.

The loss of this representation will mean that there will be no platform for the expression of women's interests; it will mean that particular issues that women face including, but certainly not limited to, breastfeeding requirements, access to childcare and safety on campus will potentially be deprioritised, thus making it more difficult for women to access a university education. Certainly, the loss of an amenities and services fee, which subsidises childcare currently, will make access unaffordable for a number of students, thereby making the decision for parents to study a very difficult one.

Thirdly, if our student unions were to be devastated it would mean the loss of the social space created by the individual departments. This is even more so the case for women's departments, as women often face hostility within the male dominated and controlled space of the university, whether that be in the pub, at colleges, in class, or on the lawn. The Women's Department provides a valuable space in which women can come together, adjust to university life, make friends, and explore and develop themselves.

Women's rights and interests come under attack in so many sectors of our society, and it is thus fundamental that we do not lose our Women's Department, a powerful political force working to further women's interests.

While this submission applies to the experience of women on university campuses, Voluntary Student Unionism profoundly negatively effects all students. The loss of political representation, spaces in which to politically organise and run activist campaigns, and vital student services together mean that a university without a vibrant and functioning student union will be a barren and hostile space. If there is no support for students, if there is no avenue for expressing dissent (or approval) within the University and broader society, then universities will become places to get through on the way to getting a job, rather than sites in which to learn, engage and develop. In essence, VSU will mean a radical shift in the

way students experience Australian universities—which will be to the detriment of the Australian, and international, community.

Fundamentally, student unions exist to ensure the right of students to determine and control their own affairs. They are also founded upon a belief in the importance of society and community—that individuals should support each other. To attack the very existence student unions is to attack our community, and to assault the principle of groups determining their own needs and futures.

Yours Sincerely,

Jordy Silverstein, on behalf of the Women's Department
Interim Student Representative Committee
University of Melbourne