



Submission to Senate Employment, Workplace Relations
and Education References Committee:

Inquiry into the provisions of the *Higher Education Support Amendment
(Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005*.

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Introduction

The Students' Association welcomes the opportunity to make comment on the provisions of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005*.

The Students' Association notes with concern however that recent public debate surrounding Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) has largely overlooked the important role of representation and academic rights advocacy performed by student organisations.

The Students' Association will only make some general comments about the actual impact of VSU legislation on the services we provide, as we are currently in the process of an organisational review conducted by an external consultant.

The Students' Association of Flinders University

What does the Students' Association do?

The Students' Association of Flinders University (SAFU) is a non-profit service-providing organisation. The Students' Association is the peak representative organisation within the university. When any student enrolls at Flinders University, they pay a nominal fee, levied by the University, which goes towards the operational costs of many service providing organisations, including SAFU, which gets less than 16% of the aforementioned fee.

For their money, the Students' Association provides the average student with the following core services:

- Representation
- Academic Rights advice and advocacy
- Free fax service
- Wholefood Shop
- Empire Times student newspaper and Empire Times Press

Impact of VSU on core services provided by the Students' Association

Representation

Flinders University supports the principle of universal membership of the student organisations and the practice whereby membership of the organisations is secured upon payment of a designated Student Services

Fee (SSF) to the university. This support is expressed in the university's policy on the Student Services Fee and in recent public comment.¹

The Students' Association has a good working relationship with the university, and the university values input from its students in decision-making, and recognises students' right to advocacy in dealing with issues that arise around their academic progress.

The Students' Association believes that student input into all levels of university decision-making plays an important and constructive role for the following reasons:

- Ensuring greater accountability by widening and improving access to information and facilitating feedback about the impact, effectiveness and implementation of policies and decisions from constituent groups.
- More informed educational decisions, made by those in a position to make judgements about educational processes, and decisions which are responsive to the needs of constitutive groups.
- Fostering a greater sense of academic community and co-operation, where students and staff feel that they can shape and influence decisions which affect their day-to-day work and study.
- Utilising the wide experience and expertise possessed by constituent groups, leading to more effective implementation of policy and decisions, and more effective strategic planning.
- Reducing disputation, as constituent groups are more informed of decisions taken, and are able to shape the outcome of decisions and policy changes.

¹ See: http://www.flinders.edu.au/ppmanual/student/SecF_fee.htm; Flinders University has issued a number of media releases stating its opposition to Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU). These have included statements in 1999 (*On Campus*, Vol 08 No 5 - April 5 - 18, 1999), in 2003 (Flinders University *Submission to Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Inquiry into higher education funding and regulatory legislation*, August 2003), and most recently on 25th April 2005 (*Student services vital to Flinders*, Media Release: 25 April, 2005).

Student representatives have seats on a number of decision-making bodies within the university. These include University Council, Academic Senate, Resources Committee and various other university sub-committees and working parties. The Students' Association also assists other student representatives on university, faculty and school committees and prepares training for student representatives on committees and Council members.

Resource support available to student representatives includes administrative secretaries, part-time (0.8) research officers and a part-time (0.8) academic rights officer. These staff also maintain extensive databases of material associated with Flinders University and higher education policy.

Impact of VSU on representation

The support provided by the Students' Association is necessary because student representatives participating in university decision-making face a number of disadvantages relative to staff and administration representatives. Students do not enter the decision-making structure with the same level of resourcing, time or expertise available to staff. Without adequate resourcing it is difficult to see how student representatives could perform anything other than a tokenistic role.

Moves to make membership of student organisations voluntary will not only strip them of resources, it will also fundamentally de-legitimise processes of representative democracy on campus. Student representation post-VSU may create a situation where unrepresentative but well resourced groups within the student population are able to position themselves as the 'voice of the students' despite the fact their interests may not coincide with the common good.

The capacity of students to provide an organised critical voice within the university will also suffer. If university admin and faculties are left to assume control of selection processes for student representation, student reps may be selected for their compliance with the short-term goals of administrators. Overall the process of policy formation within the university will suffer without adequately resourced student reps. These representatives will have very little sense of the history or context of student activism on campus, and; no ability to inform the student population as a whole about issues arising in uni decision-making. University administrators will lose their organic link with the student population (the Students' Association) that has provided them with constructive input in all policy decisions made affecting students.

Student representatives under this regime may find themselves on their own, unaware of who their fellow reps are and unable to access any common ground of exchange and resources. This will hinder the ability of the student body as a whole to identify and act on 'big picture' issues that affect *all* students.

Academic Rights Advice and Advocacy

The Students' Association advises and directly represents over 800 students per calendar year in issues relating to their academic rights. This includes (but is not limited to) students being precluded from University, accused of plagiarism, or simply requesting a re-mark of their work. This service is crucial for many students facing difficulties at Flinders University, particularly those who are encountering academic troubles as a result of their cultural background or economic conditions.

Students seeking advice and advocacy receive professional support from a part-time (0.8) Academic Rights Officer.

Impact of VSU on Advocacy

The Students' Association has not yet received from the university a commitment to fund an independent source of academic rights advice and advocacy. The independence of this service is undoubtedly an attraction for many students feeling intimidated by the prospects of directly raising issues with those in authority. The likely loss of this service under VSU will strip all students of a vital safety net.

Free Fax Service

One of the most popular services offered by the Students' Association is the free fax service. This service is used by countless numbers of students to submit Centrelink-related documentation, and provides a vital link between the international students enrolled in the university and their families. The introduction of VSU will mean the loss of this service and consequently more out-of-pocket costs for those who can least afford it.

The Wholefood Shop

The Wholefood Shop is operated by the Student Association. It sells a variety of goods, including grains, dried fruit, spices, nuts, cereals and sweets. Also hot food, homemade cakes, breads and a variety of dairy and soy products. The shop caters for Vegan and Gluten free diets. The Wholefood Shop is particularly popular because of its low prices, however its future under VSU is uncertain because it trades on a not-for-profit basis.

Empire Times Newspaper and The Empire Times Press

The Students' Association operates a free student newspaper, which informs students of their rights, the entertainment and news on campus, changes in University and Federal policy, upcoming campaigns, accommodation available, and the numerous services available.

It is difficult to see how the newspaper will be able to support itself and the resources required for its publication in a VSU environment. The loss of the student newspaper will be a loss for free speech and will create an environment for well-resourced but unrepresentative groups to monopolise the student media market.

The Empire Times Press is the commercial printing press of the Flinders University Students' Association. The Press was first purchased by Rod Boswell in 1968 to print Empire Times to circumvent the censorship laws of the day - the first student paper in the country to do so. It no longer prints the paper but now prints for student organisations, community groups and nearly anybody else. As this service is subsidised by the Students' Association the introduction of VSU will spell the end of its operations.

General comments and concluding remarks

The implementation of VSU will not only mean the loss of crucial representative and academic rights services – it will also lead to the loss of employment for the professional administrative, research and advocacy staff who run the organisation on a day-to-day basis

VSU might sound like a great hip-pocket idea, but the reality is that student organisations will be stripped of the funds required to administer their essential student support programs. Rather than giving students more 'choice' and 'freedom', VSU will actually work against the protection of individual rights and choice.

The removal of academic rights advocacy and representation will strip students of any independent means and resources to negotiate the university appeals and decision-making processes. The removal of these services will make it harder for students to support themselves when they are struggling financially. Under VSU, students will be alone in the higher education system, left with the right to choose the courses they want to enrol in and the right to pay for their education.