

SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN SENATE: VOLUNTARY STUDENT UNIONISM
LEGISLATION AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENT PUBLICATIONS

1 Introduction

With the exception of student association elections, the humble student publication is the most ubiquitous reminder of the community that is afforded by a system of universal student unionism (USU). Unlike student associations, student publications ought to be immune from accusations that they gestate politicians, and are hence antithetical to the ideology underpinning voluntary student unionism (VSU) legislation, and should be seen as the service to the university community that they are. The following exegesis details the benefits of student publications, and outlines the reasons why student publications would not exist under a system of voluntary student unionism.

2 Benefits

It is a moot point that the time spent at university is supposed to be a time of personal, intellectual and spiritual growth for the individual. As a moot point, while these facts are undeniable, their implications deserve analysis.

2.1 Proudly Published by Penguin, ‘HIST1001 for Dummies’.

The non-academic side of a university education constitutes the subject matter of some of the most timeless titles in the Western canon of literature, including Evelyn Waugh’s ‘Brideshead Revisited’, F Scott Fitzgerald’s ‘This Side of Paradise’, W Somerset Maugham’s ‘Of Human Bondage’, and Matthew Arnold’s ‘The Scholar Gypsy’. Recent Man Booker Prize winners (Alan Hollinghurst’s ‘The Line Of Beauty’) attest to the timeless nature of society’s interest in the opportunities for personal fulfilment afforded by a holistic tertiary education. These titles do not survive history through their unique portrayal of the joys of an anatomy lecture.

Indeed, the historical foundation of the tertiary education sector was in fact not academic but personally spiritual. The world’s first universities, Oxford and Cambridge, were established on explicitly religious grounds, where students were to learn not only the Scriptures of the Bible, but about the world in which their knowledge was to be used. Universities were designed to be at the confluence of, and enable the distribution of, the strands of knowledge needed to be responsible citizens and leaders, which involved study of the opinions of all, as provided by student press.

2.2 Frank Sinatra sings ‘I Did it My Way’.

The opportunities for individual fulfilment afforded by contributing in a visible and tangible way to a community are undoubted; esteemed members of the Australian judiciary can attest to this as the *raison d’etre* behind the practice of sentencing offenders to community service. The vehicle for the opinions of students that is provided by student publications serves this purpose. Additionally, the leadership abilities and work experience that are so desired in today’s university graduates are incubated in the team environment, deadline-focussed and democratically-selected student publications of Australian universities. The fact that many Editors are students of media and that their experience on a student publications complements their degree, while an outlier statistic, is relevant to the debate.

2.3 Shannon Noll sings ‘What About Me?’

The benefits derived from student publications by the university community are subordinate only to those derived by society at large. The university community is cohered by the university press; such is why every university in the *Times Education Supplement* hosts a student-operated press. Why Australia (none of whose universities enjoy a position in the top 10 of the *Supplement*) believes shutting down the presses that have generated its most internationally well-known graduates, including Germaine Greer, Les Murray and Clive James, is a positive step seems prima facie anathema to either logic or reason. The Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee has stated time and again the benefits they perceive their graduates and their campuses to gain through involvement with the student press. Society gets multi-skilled graduates with a nuanced education and established networks. In the vernacular, it's a win-win situation for all.

3 Through the Looking Glass: USU or VSU?

The benefits detailed above are not available under a system of voluntary student unionism; student publications require the structure provided by student organisations to operate effectively. In the absence of university involvement, they require the electoral process to be funded by student organisations in order to run democratically. They require the sense of belonging and ownership derived from students' contributing in a monetary capacity. They require independence to exercise the editorial freedom expected and currently enjoyed by student publications. Any claims of unfair bias and the propagation of certain political ideologies by student press is unfounded; in much the same way as mainstream media, only individuals, organisations and governments that do something stupid can expect to be lambasted by the student press.

4 Summative comment

Student publications are unequivocally the most tangible example of the benefits of student unionism. They are also the most obvious example of the value for money that is provided by USU and that is unavailable under VSU. They should be nurtured and protected, not destroyed.