

The Queensland Perspective:
A Brief Summary of the Key Issues Associated with VSU

*The National Union of Students Queensland Branch's Submission
to the
2005 Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee Inquiry
into the provision of the
Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-
front Union Fees) Bill 2005.*

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The Queensland Perspective

The National Union of Students Queensland Branch (NUSQ) is the peak student representative body in Queensland. Collectively, we represent more than 90,000 students who are members of affiliate campus student organisations. The affiliates of NUSQ are:

The University of Queensland Union - representing students from the St Lucia, Ipswich, Turbot Street, and Herston campuses.

The Queensland University of Technology Student Guild - representing students from the Gardens Point, Kelvin Grove, Carseldine and Caboolture campuses.

Griffith University - representing students from the Mt Gravatt, Nathan, and Logan campuses.

University of the Sunshine Coast - representing students of the Sippy Downs campus.

James Cook University - representing students from the Townsville and Cairns campuses.

In addition to NUSQ affiliated campuses, there are a number of other universities in Queensland:

Australian Catholic University;
Bond University;
Central Queensland University;
Southern Cross University;
University of New England;
University of Southern Queensland.

At each of the campuses, and at most of the smaller centres of learning or specialised study, there are student organisations or university organisations which are charged with responsibility of student (and often university community) service provision. These organisations are funded by universal student contributions in the form of a services or amenities fee.

The services provided by student organisations can be broadly categorised as follows:

Support and welfare services

Support and welfare services are those programs designed to combat or ameliorate difficulties of university life. Support and welfare services are tailored to address issues as broad as discrimination on campus, financial hardship, depression and loneliness, time management, stress, disability issues, accommodation issues, legal issues, employment issues, and so on. These services take the form of, for example, awareness programs highlighting the rights of students to not be discriminated against, emergency loans, crisis counselling and referral, academic time management seminars, disability advisors, accommodation services, legal services, employment services, and so on. Needless to say - without exception - these services are free for students.

Trading and commercial services

Trading and commercial services are those enterprises designed with the needs of students in mind. Trading and commercial services are tailored to address the particular needs of students that aren't addressed by the extra-university market and the needs of students on campus. These services take the form of, for example, medical bookshops with products specifically demanded by medical students, refectories and canteens that are open throughout the year, second-hand bookstores, general stores, and so on. In most cases, these services are heavily subsidised and generally run at a loss so as to ensure that, for example, there is food available on campus during "holiday" semesters (where the service cannot profitably operate).

Campus and community services

Campus and community services are those designed to specifically address the needs of the campus community. There is, in theory, often a degree of crossover between these services and support and welfare services. For example, clubs and societies could be loosely categorised as campus and community services, yet clubs and societies are routinely lauded as providing fabulous social networks to combat the ever-increasing trend of first-year loneliness and depression. Campus and community services include things such as cinemas, theatres, sporting clubs and facilities, clubs and societies, meeting and function rooms, common rooms, activities and events on campus, and international student networks. In most cases, these services represent significant expenditure for student organisations, and often, these services are the only such services provided in the particular region.

Representative services

Representative services are those that are designed to provide independent advocacy and representation for students in times of crisis or change. This can be on the smallest scale - whereby a student organisation may represent an individual student on a matter of appeal or exclusion, on a broader scale,

whereby elected student representatives convey the needs and interests of the student body to university boards, committees and decision-making structures, or on an even broader scale, whereby student representatives and student campaigns present the collective student voice to local, state, and federal governments, and the community at large.

The Key Issues

Campus student organisations and the National Office of the National Union of Students will address the terms of reference specifically and broadly. In this submission, we will aim to summarise the greatest issues of the legislation as a tool of reference for individual student organisations, university communities, and regional communities.

1. Government intervention into stable and competitive marketplaces

Some supporters of VSU claim that it is a system that will free the commercial services that student organisations manage from the shackles of uncompetitive, laid-back mismanagement, and that the non-profit services will benefit from increased efficiency and productivity demanded by the imperatives of the market.

This claim is delivered despite the fact that the systems of student support, services and representation provision have organically developed over more than a century and are pursued by students and university communities universally. Almost without fail, every university in the world levies the student community universally in order to fund the provision of support, services and representation.

The proponents of VSU fail to recognise a number of basic truths about contemporary systems of universal student organization membership.

First, the system has organically developed and is not regulated to exist anywhere (in other words, the system is already at the whims of the market and is pursued both by the producers (universities) and the consumers (students)).

Second, intervening in one aspect of higher education is not justifiable if those principles cannot be applied to all aspects of higher education. In other words, if the Federal Government is willing to target student organisations, they need to be willing to apply a user-pays model to the library, or to tutorials, or to the Vice-Chancellor's annual bonus. The user-pays parable makes no sense in any aspect of university governance, yet with regard to student organisations it is moderately palatable due only to a sustained campaign of rhetoric and hyperbole. NUSQ will not campaign for students to be able to voluntarily opt-in

to membership of the University Library, and we don't believe that the Federal Government ought to either.

2. The persecution of student activists and representatives

The passage of this legislation has seen proponents of voluntary student unionism freely vilify and persecute the activities of generations of student activists and representatives. We have been subjected to tirades about our waste of space, our damage to the economy, and our self-indulgent hobbies (which seem to mostly be Marxist reading groups and destroying detention centres).

But much of the advocacy for VSU has been based on claims of political activity and militant communism that do not reflect the great proportion of student activism and representation. What some proponents of VSU have done is use their public profile to generate much negative attention regarding student representatives.

They have not discussed the lives that have been saved by student organization crisis counsellors. They have not discussed the tireless hours that unpaid student activists and representatives have devoted to building campus communities and raising awareness of issues that are likely to affect students (such as the recent HECS increases, which the Minister for Education delightfully describes as "changes"). They have not discussed emergency loans, subsidised food, or advocacy for students facing exclusion or discipline.

Student representatives get involved in representation and student activism because they have a sense of community and they care about their peers. NUSQ believes that it is disgraceful that the Federal Government would be willing to turn the bashing of community representatives into a spectator sport. It asks serious questions of the Australian democracy if a particular group or characteristic can be exploited and vilified in the pursuit of electoral gain or ideological warfare.

3. Service provision and representation on campus

The most serious questions of this legislation have nothing to do with the Federal Government's ideological agenda or the manipulation of the Australian democracy. The most serious question in this whole debates remains utterly unanswered:

How can services, support and representation continue to exist on the adequate scale that they currently exist if the organisations responsible for the provision can optimistically expect to receive approximately one third of their current revenue in future?

This is a question that has obviously concerned Senator-elect Barnaby Joyce, members of the Queensland Nationals, and notable Liberal Party dissidents around the country.

4. International competitiveness

The Minister for Education routinely trumpets his goal of elevating Australian universities to internationally competitive levels. Yet this government seeks a policy that will put Australian universities at odds with the best universities in the world. Australia will be the only country in the world with a system like this, and our academic reputations will not cover-up our bland, sterile campuses. This legislation will make Queensland's universities an international laughing stock.

5. Democratic participation

The passage of this legislation has highlighted that supporters of VSU can be reasonably limited to members of the Liberal Party of Australia, and a small section of the community. Opponents of the legislation seem to comprise members of every other political party, every higher education sector, every student organization (except those run by Liberal students) and every community group that has made public comment on the issue. If this policy is so vehemently supported by the Liberal Party, and so vehemently opposed by every other sector organization and community group, what questions does it raise if this legislation proceeds unamended?

In summary, NUSQ's position is that the legislation is untenable, ideologically-driven, and extremist. It seeks not to address the problems that have been raised and allegedly exist. The legislation bears no correlation to the ideological pillars that supposedly underpin it. The legislation has no broad community support, in fact, the legislation is quite obviously broadly resented. This legislation cannot proceed unamended, and any legislation of this kind is intrusive, wasteful, and destructive. VSU is an anachronistic symbol of a political culture that the Australian democracy needs to shed. Instead of setting out to destroy Queensland student organisations, the Federal Government should be seeking to address the real issues in Australian society.