



The University of Sydney

Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005

Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace relations and Education Committee

This paper is a response to the proposed Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005. The University of Sydney is totally opposed to the proposed legislation and supports all three elements (sports, cultural and social support, representation) of the student experience currently funded by Union fees. Similar proposals have been considered in 1993, 1998 and 2004 and on each occasion the Senate of the University has taken a position in total opposition to VSU, most succinctly at its meeting in July 1998 at which it resolved as follows: “Recognising the immense contribution of student organisations to the well-being of the University, Senate endorses universal membership of and the mandatory payment of fees to student organisations”. At its meeting in November 2004 Senate resolved “to express strong support for doing all that it could to bring about the continuation of universal membership of such student organisations and to make known its views, including the benefits of such membership to the University, to all students and to the community, wherever such opportunities arose”.

The attached article, published in the Sydney Morning Herald last year, sets out the University’s argument in favour of the various services funded from compulsory student fees.

In particular it should be noted that student union fees at the University raised over \$17 million in 2004 which cannot be replaced from other University sources of funds. The absence of that income stream in the future must inevitably lead to the degradation of campus facilities and support mechanisms built up over many years. This will both reduce the attractiveness of this and other Australian universities in the very competitive international student market (and international student fees contributed \$124 million to the University of Sydney budget in 2004) and reduce the value of the University experience for Australian students in the future.

The University already has in place an opt-out option for students who object to joining the Union and through which the fee that they are then charged, equivalent to the Union fee is dedicated to other purposes and it should not be impossible to extend that option further to meet the Government’s objection to compulsory unionism without the devastating effects of the currently proposed legislation.

1. SPORT

In 2004, \$3.375 million was provided from student fees for sporting activities. While we are proud that the University of Sydney contributed 16 athletes and a coach to the Australian teams at the 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Athens; that we won this year's NSW (open) 1st grade cricket competition; and currently lead the 1st grade rugby table, it is, nevertheless, more important to note that we have over 14,000 undergraduate students (plus as many more postgraduate students, staff and others) actively participating in individual and team sporting pursuits. At present student fees help provide gymnasias, swimming pools, ovals, and 415 staff, including coaches and trainers.

2. CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

The bulk of student fees are spent on cultural activities, health and student welfare. In 2004 over \$2 million was provided to clubs and societies supporting theatre, debating, music and other social and cultural activities; and \$4 million was spent on other services such as food outlets, student publications, and Orientation Week activities. Such funding provides a vibrant student life and campus atmosphere which attracts students to study at the University of Sydney, while providing educational and other important experience outside the classroom. Without this campus life, the University would have difficulty attracting full-fee paying international students, who provide over \$2 billion of export revenue to the Australian economy, helping to support the education of Australians. This revenue will be put in jeopardy once it becomes clear that there is no longer the funding for the maintenance of services and cultural activities that have attracted them to Australian Universities in comparison to what are becoming strongly competing alternatives.

3. HEALTH, WELFARE, STUDENT ADVOCACY AND REPRESENTATION

In 2004 over \$6.2 million of student fees were spent on assistance and representation for students. \$2.6 million of this was spent on the health and welfare of students including childcare support, academic appeals, show cause advice and academic assistance; \$3 million provided computing and other study assistance. Much of this money supported the SRC (Students' Representative Council) for undergraduates and SUPRA (Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association) for graduate students as well as the independent student organisations at the Sydney College of the Arts and the Cumberland campus. All of these engage in advocacy on behalf of students, collectively and individually. Only \$0.75 million was spent on what could be described as political activity. This included campaigns organised by students about issues such as anti-discrimination, equity, indigenous student activity and safety on campus, which provide vital input to University policies.

4. CONCLUSION

The University of Sydney is firmly convinced that each of these elements provide critical support for the total student experience of a university education both within and beyond the classroom. It is the unanimous view of the Senate of the University that the legislation

currently proposed is totally unacceptable. It is also the unanimous view of this Senate that modification of the currently proposed legislation is imperative and can be achieved in a way that will still satisfy any legitimate concerns of government as regards the use of the money raised by the current fee. Ultimately, the merit of the modified legislation will be judged by the degree to which the quality of the student experience at this and other universities is safeguarded.

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