

HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT AMENDMENT (ABOLITION OF COMPULSORY UP-FRONT UNION FEES) BILL 2005.

SUBMISSION BY CURTIN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY TO THE SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

Current Arrangements

Curtin University of Technology has levied a compulsory Amenities and Services Fee (ASF) since 2003.

This is a University fee, not a Guild membership fee, and is payable by all students studying at a location within Australia irrespective of whether the student is a member of the Student Guild or not (unless specifically exempted from payment by Council).

In 2005, fees are \$110 (Full Time) and \$70 (Part Time) at a Campus, \$70 (Full Time) and \$45 (Part Time) at an Education Centre, and \$45 for External/Distance Education students.

Under the Curtin ASF legislation (which is similar for the four WA public universities), all students automatically become members of the Student Guild on enrolment, but may elect not to become a member of the Guild at the time of enrolment, or may resign at any time thereafter.

Amenities and Services Fees collected by the University from students who are members of the Student Guild are transferred to the Student Guild (less an approved administrative charge) to be spent on services and amenities for the benefit of students.

Amenities and Services Fees collected by the University from students who are not members of the Student Guild are retained by the University to be spent on services and amenities for the benefit of students as agreed between the Student Guild and the University Council.

Appropriate use of ASF funds by the Guild is controlled through a Statute. The funds may only be used for services and amenities for the benefit of students and the Guild is required to provide an annual written report to University Council on how the funds received from the University have been applied to provide services and amenities under the broad categories defined in the legislation. In addition, the Guild is required to provide quarterly income and expenditure reports to Council as well as an annual financial statement, audited by an external auditor approved by University Council.

These provisions came into effect from 2003 with the passage of the *Acts Amendment (Student Guilds and Associations) Act 2002* (WA) by the Western Australian Parliament in December 2002.

From the University's perspective, these arrangements have been very successful and benefited students.

Very few students have elected to "opt out" or resign from their Guild membership and approximately \$2m in funds has been provided to the Guild in each of 2003 and 2004 through the transfer of ASF monies.

This has enabled the Guild to significantly improve and extend services to students, including increasing services to remote and rural students.

Curtin's Prior Experience with VSU

Prior to 2003 for a period of 8 years (1995 to 2002), Curtin was subject to the provisions of the *Voluntary Membership of Student Guilds and Associations Act 1994* (WA) passed by the then Liberal State Government. This Act enforced "VSU" at WA Universities and made it illegal to require students to be a member of a student association or pay a compulsory Guild membership fee. Before this Act was passed, payment of a Guild membership fee was compulsory.

The impact of this legislation was significant.

Prior to the implementation of VSU in 1995, membership of the Guild was 24,720 (1994 figures) and total fee revenue was approximately \$3.263m.

In 1995, membership dropped to 1586 and total fee revenue dropped to \$11,020.

As a consequence, significant cuts were made to Guild services.

In subsequent years, Guild membership levels rose and income increased, however the impact on the range and quality of services able to be offered by the Student Guild as a result of VSU remained significant.

Particularly affected was support for regional and remote students as services became focussed on the main Bentley campus where the majority of the students were enrolled.

In the three years prior to the repeal of VSU, membership levels levelled off at approximately 30% of Bentley students. Membership levels for other students (other campuses and distance education) were virtually nil.

2000	5588 members	2001	5357 members	2002	6456 members
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Improvement in Guild Services since Introduction of ASF in 2003

Since the introduction of the ASF in 2003, the Guild has used the funding to significantly expand and improve its services to students. Support for clubs and societies, including sporting clubs and International student clubs has increased significantly, as has support for remote and rural students and postgraduate students.

Student ratings on the Guild's student support services (financial support, assistance dealing with Centrelink, support for appeals etc) has risen from 57% in 2002 to 72% in 2004.

Guild participation and the representation of clubs and societies during "O" Week (Orientation) and Open Day has increased significantly enhancing the University experience for our students.

Potential Impact of "VSU" in 2006

The impact of the new legislation in 2006 is likely to be similar at Curtin to our experience in 1995.

While many the services currently being offered to students by the Student Guild are valued by students and will be missed if withdrawn, the danger is that through apathy or a lack of understanding of the implications, many students will not "opt in" and join the Guild immediately.

In this scenario, support for rural and remote students is likely to be a major casualty, as is support for International students and students in minority groups.

A very real danger is that a significant cut in services by the Guild, rather than providing a reason for students to become members so that funding can be provided to keep services going, will have the opposite affect. Many students may perceive the lack of services as a failure on the part of the Guild or a reason why becoming a member is not worthwhile. If this attitude prevails, it becomes very difficult for the Guild to recover its membership base as was evidenced in 1995.

The potential impact of all this on the quality and range of services able to be provided to students is therefore significant. Some services, currently provided by the Guild, will cease to be provided altogether, or will be reduced significantly. In some cases, the University will need to step in to fill the gap, increasing pressure on already stretched University budgets.

Summary

The impact of the introduction of VSU legislation in WA in 1995 was significant and at Curtin, had an immediate adverse effect on services provided to students.

Since 2003, Curtin's experience with the ASF under the "WA Model" has been very successful.

This model does not force students to be a member of the Guild but it requires all students, irrespective of whether they are members or not, to contribute towards the cost of services and amenities that benefit all students. In effect, it is essentially similar to ratepayers paying rates. Not all services may be accessed equally, but everyone pays a set fee which enables the service to be made available and used as required.

Curtin believes the "WA Model" is a reasonable and workable arrangement that is ultimately of benefit to the University and to students, and supports its continuation.

The introduction of the VSU legislation as currently drafted, will have a very significant effect on the range and quality of services able to be offered to students at Curtin by the Guild as evidenced by our 1995 experience. This will put increased pressure on the University to fill the gap.

This is a major concern in the current environment. With the current focus on services and support provided to International students, now is not the time to be reducing services. The level of support able to be provided to remote and rural students, which has significantly increased in the three years of the ASF at Curtin, would also be under threat.

While Curtin and the Curtin Student Guild survived the introduction of VSU in 1995, and can do the same again, it will not happen without a lot of pain. For some Universities (those in the East with a much higher dependence on ASF income), the pain could be severe.

This submission is supported by the Academic Board
Curtin University of Technology
June 2005
