

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee

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

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1. Introduction

RMIT University welcomes the opportunity to comment on the provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005 which is the subject of this Inquiry.

RMIT believes that student organisations play an essential role within university communities and this role is likely to be significantly and detrimentally affected by the changes to the Higher Education Support Act contained within this Bill.

Students' expectations of post-compulsory education are high. Students are increasingly sophisticated consumers and hold high expectations influenced by increases to the cost of education and comparisons to standards in other Universities and social institutions. These expectations are shared in many instances by the families and sponsors of students at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

In addition to student's expectations of education, a range of government policy and societal pressures influence student's experiences. Students are working longer hours to support themselves whilst undertaking full or part time studies.

This has led to students who:

- Need and expect campus life and student communities (discipline and social) that are culturally diverse, supportive and socially reflective;
- Need and expect both formal support (learning support, advocacy, legal and financial advice), and informal support (linking with peers and potential employers, sharing experiences with people from different cultures and communities) to successfully face a range of challenges.

Student organisations at RMIT, and across the country, play an invaluable role partnering with Universities to meet these needs and expectations.

In addition, business, community and industry expectations of university graduates are high. Students are expected to not only acquire specialist skills in the course of their studies, but to demonstrate a broad range of graduate capabilities. Student organisations facilitate the development of capabilities beyond the frame of a student's formal program of study and provide students with the opportunity to develop leadership and teamwork skills whilst broadening their areas of interest. Examples of programs that foster the holistic development of students include leadership programs that recognise volunteer activities and participation in events and activities organised by faith based clubs and societies. RMIT is proud of its reputation for producing work-ready, well rounded graduates and recognises the valuable role student organisations play in the student experience at RMIT.

2. Assessment of the likely effect of the legislation on the provision of student services and related consequences

2.1. Background

RMIT has two student organisations and, in accordance with Victorian legislation (Tertiary Education Act, 1993 (Vic)), gives students the option of whether or not to join either or both organisations upon enrolment. RMIT levies a Compulsory Non-Academic Fee ("**CNAF**") and disburses the fee to RMIT Union (the student organisation that provides the majority of services) and the Student Union Council (whose activities relate mainly to student representation and advocacy and is run 'by students for students'). The University retains a small proportion of the fee (roughly 3%) for the delivery of some services. There is provision for this compulsory fee to be waived in exceptional circumstances.

The Tertiary Education Act governs the payment of CNAF by students within the higher education sector in Victoria. The Act permits the charging of CNAF to students enrolled in higher education to cover expenditure for the direct benefit of the University or its students.

RMIT levies a CNAF to all higher education students and all international onshore fee-paying students. CNAF is also charged to all non-State funded students in TAFE courses.

CNAF is charged for each semester on a rate per credit point basis up to a maximum of 50 credit points per semester (48 credit points for distance and online programs). International onshore VET students paying CNAF are charged on a per student contact hour basis. The maximum student contact hour charge is 750 student contact hours per annum.

Domestic State government funded students within the TAFE sector are charged a Student Services and Amenities Fee ("**SSAF**"). The charging of SSAF is regulated by the Ministerial Direction on Fees and Charges (Victoria). This fee is charged according to enrolled hours per year and the maximum fee varies depending on student category.

Both RMIT student organisations, in accordance with the Tertiary Education Act, submit their audited accounts to RMIT and these are reported in the annual financial statements of the University.

RMIT University works closely with RMIT Union to ensure that the services and facilities align with the goals and strategies of the University.

2.2. Likely effects at RMIT

RMIT believes that if this Bill is passed in its current form there will be short and longer term effects on the range of student services and activities on offer from 2006. The experience in Western Australia under a similar model of voluntary student unionism showed that at some universities as many as 70-80% of students chose not to pay the non-compulsory fee.

Without this significant level of funding (estimated to be \$8.5 - \$9 million in 2006) the richness and diversity of the student experience at RMIT is threatened. The University will be challenged to respond to this legislative change not only by seeking to provide services and facilities in its own right but also by facilitating substantial student leadership programs and the range of student activities that combine to provide a diverse, rich and memorable student experience. Our ability to do this may have far reaching effects on perceptions of quality. There is already anecdotal evidence that international students are choosing countries other than Australia for their post-compulsory education because of an anticipated decline in the level and quality of student services in Australian universities.

2.2.1. Specific impacts

Academic Services and Support

Student organisations currently provide a range of services and activities which support the academic experience of students and the successful completion of their studies. These include:

- *Academic Advocacy and Advice:* The Student Union Council employs Student Rights Officers who provide support and advocacy for students who wish to appeal a decision of the University, particularly around assessment.
- *Student Orientation:* Organising and running non-program orientation activities across all RMIT campuses.
- *Student leadership training:* Training and supporting students involved in representative activities in different communities on a volunteer basis.
- *Provision of academic services:* Including bookshops on campus, copy centres and binding services.

Campus Community

Student organisations contribute to campus life by providing services and facilitating the development of discipline and social student communities. These contribute to a positive student experience, a sense of place and belonging, and respond to diverse interests and needs. They include:

- Social, cultural and national based clubs and societies,
- Art galleries,
- Cinemas, theatres, lounge spaces,
- Childcare,

- Student radio and television,
- Student newspaper,
- Sporting facilities,
- Equipment hire,
- Activities and events,
- Student employment.

Student Wellbeing

Student organisations provide professional support services which contribute to student wellbeing, including:

- Dental Service,
- Legal Service,
- Taxation Service.

Student Representation

RMIT values the important role student representatives play in the decision making structures of the University, including RMIT Council, university committees and working parties. The Student Union Council plays a valuable role in electing, nominating and training student representatives at all levels of the organisation to participate in policy development and decision making processes and bring the perspectives of students to these processes and their outcomes.

The above activities and services will be significantly affected if the Bill is passed.

3. Consideration of the experience of universities and students where legislation has been adopted to regulate student unions, such as in Victoria and Western Australia.

The model of Voluntary Student Unionism introduced in Victoria in 1993 sought to limit the activities of student organisations to the non-political arena and made membership of student organisations voluntary. The legislation proscribed the use of fees for non-political purposes only. In contrast to the situation in Western Australia the introduction of VSU legislation in Victoria did not prevent the collection of Compulsory Non-Academic Fees by universities. Students could opt out of membership, but were still required to pay a non-academic fee. Universities are required to negotiate funding agreements with student organisations to ensure compliance with the Act.

At RMIT there are two student organisations, one whose role is to provide facilities and services for students (RMIT Union) and the other which is a representative organisation, undertaking a combination of representative, advocacy and entertainment activities (RMIT Student Union Council). RMIT Union's activities were not significantly affected by the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism in Victoria. However the Student Union Council's activities were affected and it was no longer able to use student fees to pay its affiliation fees to the National Union of Students, fund political campaigns or the student paper (Catalyst).

The list of approved activities under the regulations was expanded to include student publications, clubs and societies for students, student elections, and other research and activities concerning student welfare on the election of the Bracks Government in Victoria in 1999. Subsequently, an amendment was made to the Tertiary Education Act (2000) (Vic) replacing the list of approved activities with a broad statement enabling the use of compulsory amenities fees to provide facilities, services or activities of direct benefit to the institution or students at the institution; an opt out provision for student membership; and a requirement that a financial statement regarding the use of the fees is included in a university's annual report.

4. Conclusion

The student organisations at RMIT University serve students and the University well, and provide a broad range of support, services and facilities for students. They serve a crucial function within universities in fostering the essential social and cultural context in which education takes places.

RMIT University cannot replicate the services currently provided by RMIT student organisations within its current funding allocation.

Universities must be permitted to charge students an amenities fee for the provision of services which cannot be provided within the funding levels of the Commonwealth Grants Scheme.

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