

# 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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Dear Senate Committee Members

Please find attached our submission to the 'Inquiry into the Provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005'.

Should you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact the Swinburne Student Union.

The Swinburne Student Union would welcome the opportunity to speak to its submission at the Committee's public hearing.

## Executive Summary

The Swinburne Student Union Inc. (SSU) provides a critical representative voice for the diverse student population at Swinburne University of Technology (SUT). Providing representation and services to over 40,000 students, it is governed by a Council of elected student representatives and supported by professional and committed staff. Under Victorian VSU students can opt-out of being a member of the SSU. At present the SSU provides a range of services and representation across six SUT campuses, *should this piece of legislation be passed the SSU's ability to operate would be severely diminished.*

The SSU's primary source of income is the General Service Fee (GSF), a non-academic fee collected by SUT. Our 2005 monthly budget is forecasted at \$227,273.00. The SSU is externally audited each year and the auditors have met the independence requirements of the Australian professional ethical pronouncements. The audit is in accordance with Australian Accounting Standards, mandatory professional reporting requirements and other authoritative pronouncements of the Australian Accounting Standards Board. The external audit also verifies that the SSU has used the GSF in accordance with Victorian legislation aimed at regulating student organisations.

The SSU provides services and representation to students not dissimilar to the way a local council operates. Without funding from students, the quantity and quality of services provided would be greatly diminished. This will then provide a less attractive option for voluntary membership for students who will be thus less inclined to involve themselves in their student community. Below is a full list of services that will not exist if the current piece of legislation is made law.

1. Academic advocacy
2. Representation in University forums
3. Budget Meal Deals
4. Vehicle Hire
5. Locker Hire
6. Microwaves and cooking facilities for students to heat their own meals
7. Emergency financial loans
8. Material aid
9. Lab coat hire
10. Free tea and coffee
11. Free printing in SSU student computer laboratories
12. Student radio broadcasting
13. Student Newspaper and broadsheet
14. Student television
15. Mature age Students support services
16. International students' association (SISA)
17. Postgraduate students association (SUPA)
18. Lunch time and evening entertainment
19. Free food and drinks at breakfast, lunchtime and in the evenings
20. Free breakfasts
21. Casual employment for students within the Student Union
22. Student spaces
23. Shower, baby change and toilet facilities

24. Women's rooms
25. Queer lounge
26. Clubs and societies
27. Orientation for International, Undergraduate, Post graduate and TAFE students respectively
28. Social events for students with Intellectual disabilities
29. Women's self defence classes
30. Night safety bus
31. Cheap cafeterias and catering
32. Free Computer labs
33. Games facilities
34. Funding for class initiatives
35. Mentoring
36. Study groups
37. Student insurance
38. Mediation in students to student conflict
39. Free legal advisory service
40. Volunteer programmes such as Orientation Hosts

Much of the opposition to the current funding arrangement of student unions is based on the contention that students are currently paying for services and activities and in particular political ones which they do not engage in or derive any real benefit from. The SSU does not agree with this argument. The SSU believes that the role of a student union is also to have an independent political voice for students. Student representatives are democratically elected and traditionally student unions have tended to provide a voice for social dissidents and critical thinkers. Student unions encourage students to think beyond the conservatism of University teaching and Government policy and question and challenge the conventional norms of society such as heterosexism and the nuclear family, racism and militarism. This can only be considered an asset for society, as graduates take their values and morals into other social spheres.

It is clear from the Western Australian experience that voluntary student unionism will destroy student organisations across Australia. This will not only destroy infrastructure and employment for many but will also change the nature of the student experience to a significant degree. Under voluntary student unionism, universities will struggle to provide a sense of community for students and will also face the repercussions of the demise of many welfare and aid services which student unions currently provide to all students, mostly free of charge. The good work that student unions do on behalf of all students (often behind closed doors through boards and committees and meeting participation) will be greatly diminished, with the educational rights currently enjoyed by students significantly at risk. Further, it is liked that some of the most disadvantaged members of our student community will struggle to establish their place on campus with a significant impact on their ability to successfully complete their studies and fully appreciate the benefits of the educational experience.

The SSU strongly objects to the legislation put forward by the House of Representatives and urges the Australian Senate to reject the implementation of voluntary student unionism.

## **Organisational Background**

The SSU employs 40 full time staff and also has in its employ 59 casual staff members (many of whom are students). They are employed in the Services Department, Student Rights Department or in the Food Services Department. There are twenty-one student representatives on the SSU Council and two standing committees which are the Swinburne International Student Association (SISA) and the Swinburne University Postgraduate Association (SUPA).

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### **(1) Assesment of the likely effect of the legislation on the provision of student services and related consequences.**

At present the SSU provides a range of services and representation across six SUT campuses, *should this piece of legislation be passed the SSU's ability to operate would be severely diminished.*

## **Student Representation**

At the SSU we have an extraordinarily level of student participation in University decision making with many students from the general student body sitting on boards and committees which involve themselves in decisions that have far reaching consequences into the educational experience of Swinburne students. Such decisions include:

- Course accreditation and re-accreditation
- Changes to policy regarding Special Consideration and Unsatisfactory Progress
- Student feedback surveys
- Fees and charges
- Intersectorial initiatives

The SSU also differs from many other Student Unions in that its members have a direct influence and impact on the academic future of many students. Elected students sit on Faculty and University committees which are convened to decide the future of students who have not achieved satisfactory progress or have been accused of academic misconduct. The role of the student on such committees is to be a spokesperson for all students, not an advocate for the student being interviewed. Through such a role, elected students are responsible for ensuring that decisions made which reflect and benefit the student body as a whole. Here in the SSU, elected representatives work hard to ensure that they are in line with the view of the diverse cohort of students at Swinburne University across the 6 campuses. Each campus has a Committee and Campus Chair. Students receive regular emails, questionnaires and surveys about their

experiences at Swinburne. Student representatives also set up regular information tables on campus and speak to students regarding a wide range of issues. Student Representatives have an open door policy and speak at the beginning of classes each semester to commencing students.

### **Student Rights Department**

The SSU employs 5 full time professional student rights staff to represent student rights in all areas of their complexity. This can mean anything from advocating for a student who has been accused of plagiarism, providing a written response to proposed University policy changes, training student representatives in campaigning and initiating campaigns such as Mental Health Day and Body Image Week. Student Rights Officers work hard to ensure that students are aware of their rights and responsibilities as a student, and work in a manner which encourages students to be proactive; aiming to empower students with skills and strategies to resolve their problems successfully. These are skills which will benefit students at university and beyond. Under full VSU much of this work would not be able to go ahead.

One of the many programs which run through the Student Rights Department is *LinkEd*. This program gives students the opportunity to run one-off events that are course related, educational, special interest or social. Through *LinkEd* students are provided with the resources they need to get the event 'linked' and running. For example, undergraduate business students run an event through the SSU as a part of their studies. This year business students ran a Swinburne Idol competition, Breast Cancer awareness day, Beyond Blue and Depression Awareness Day and a multicultural event. With the support of SSU staff and student representatives, students utilising LinkEd are able to gain experience in event management and working within a team (all valuable graduate skills), whilst assisting in building a positive campus culture at SUT and in educating the student body about issues of importance such as depression.

The Student Rights Department also runs a series of workshops which are open to all students to attend. Some of the workshops that have been run to date include:

- Examination Discipline / Plagiarism / Progress Review and Appeals Training
- Being a Good Leader
- Study Skills
- Self Defence for Women
- Mental Health
- Effective Negotiation
- Interaction with Swinburne University of Technology
- Pragmatic Approach to Issue Resolution
- Traditional Indigenous Basket Weaving
- Negotiation skills

### **Services Department**

The Services Department encompasses campus based activities officers, the media unit and clubs and societies officers.

## Activities

Our wonderful activities officers organise on campus entertainment and events. There are many opportunities for student interaction and participation in cultural activities and events of an educational nature. The SSU offers a wide variety of activities throughout the year, including free breakfasts, lunches and dinners, national and theme days, competitions, regular lunchtime and evening gigs. We have attached some pictures taken during campus activities to highlight to the committee the type of services that we provide.

## Clubs and Societies

Clubs and societies play an active role in building campus culture, minimising loneliness and a feeling of isolation for international students and students from rural areas. Student involvement in clubs and societies sees members gaining skills in administration and finances, chairing meetings, event management and promotion. Such skills are particularly beneficial for those enrolled in courses which have less vocational outcomes. Currently clubs and societies gain much assistance from the SSU through the involvement of paid staff (Clubs and Societies Officers), grants and access to administrative support. Whilst some receive limited funding from community groups, this level of funding and sponsorship is insufficient for them to exist under full VSU.

## Student Diary

The SSU through its Services Department (Media) designs and prints the annual student diary. It is an invaluable organisational tool for students and also includes discount vouchers to local retailers. The SSU runs a competition giving budding designers an opportunity to design the student diary front cover. The design competition gives students an opportunity to gain hands on skills. Over the past few years SUT design students have had the competition weaved into course curriculum as academics have found it to be a fantastic way in which to not only teach design skills to students but also provide them with an opportunity to see their design in print.

## Legal Service

The SSU provides a free legal service to all students. A qualified lawyer is employed through the Fitzroy Legal Service and comes onto campus to assist students each week.

## Student Spaces on Campus

The SSU provides student spaces on each campus. There are student lounges, women's spaces, indigenous spaces, student media spaces, clubs and societies offices, queer spaces and a variety of student friendly eating areas equipped with microwaves.

## Student Loans

The SSU provides emergency (same day) interest free student loans to students to the value of \$200.00. Students can also apply for amounts over \$200.00 but these take a few days to process. The loans are for purchase of text books, course related equipment, assistance in meeting living expenses.

### Night Bus Service

The night bus service provides students who are on campus in the evenings, with a safe way to get to their car or local public transport.

### Free Printing in SSU Student Laboratories

In addition to the student computer laboratories maintained by SUT the SSU also maintains its own student laboratories. Whilst SUT charges students for printing in their laboratories the SSU allows students to print course related material for free.

### Student Media

The SSU provides funding, equipment, spaces and professional support to Tabula Rasa (student magazine), 3SSR (student radio) and SwinTV (student television). Student media allows students to voice their opinions on a range of issues and also allows students to gain experience in a wide variety of media and communication processes and applications. Students would not be given this opportunity through mainstream media outlets and as such student media is an important element to student life.

### **Political Representation**

Much of the opposition to the current funding arrangement of student unions is based on the contention that students are currently paying for services and activities and in particular political ones which they do not engage in or derive any real benefit from. The SSU does not agree with this argument.

The SSU believes that the role of a student union is also to have an independent political voice for students. Student representatives are democratically elected and traditionally student unions have tended to provide a voice for social dissidents and critical thinkers. Student unions encourage students to think beyond the conservatism of University teaching and Government policy and question and challenge the conventional norms of society such as heterosexism and the nuclear family, racism and militarism. This can only be considered an asset for society, as graduates take their values and morals into other social spheres.

### **The Student Experience**

Much has been made of the value of being involved and active in a student community. From the day students commence their post-secondary studies, the SSU is active in ensuring that their time at University or TAFE is a memorable, meaningful and rewarding one. The SSU undertakes specific initiatives such as O Hosting and Peer mentoring to reduce the student attrition rates and incidence of isolation and loneliness. Specific cohorts are targeted, such as International students, students with disabilities and those from rural areas. Concerted efforts are made to elicit the needs of Swinburne students and respond to them accordingly rather than simply impose predetermined events and activities.

Little has been detailed as to the future experience of TAFE students under the proposed VSU. TAFE students can be considered a different student cohort in their relationship with the Student Union. A considerable amount of Swinburne TAFE students are enrolled under the VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Adult Learning). The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) has been designed as an alternative to a standard VCE which is focused on hands-on learning and vocational training. The majority of VCAL students are under eighteen. SUT also has a number of students enrolled in comparable programs such as certificates of General Education and English as a Second Language.

This cohort consists of possibly some of the most disadvantaged students derived from non English speaking backgrounds and low-socio economic backgrounds. Many are disenfranchised from the conventional secondary school system and have higher incidences of family breakdown, unemployment and violence than other groups at Swinburne. They also make up the majority of Swinburne students registered with mental health and intellectual disabilities. The SSU makes a concerted effort to engage with these students in meaningful ways, acknowledging that their typical under age status makes traditional interaction with the SSU a challenge.

The SSU has recently lobbied for basket ball courts and suitable outdoor spaces and facilitates targeted entertainment such as ten pin bowling, scavenger hunts and young women's self esteem work shops for TAFE students. Free regular breakfasts have been implemented on all TAFE campuses, an acknowledgement of the significant demand for material aid being experienced by the Student Union. The SSU also works closely with the TAFE sector of SUT, providing training to sessional teachers on dealing with difficult students and issues such as Occupational Health and Safety and preventing sexual harassment and bullying. There is a code of goodwill and collaboration which would be sadly lacking without a funded SSU particularly as TAFE students are amongst those least likely to voluntarily join the SSU.

### **International Students**

The SSU has a significant number of international students who derive great benefit from their involvement in the SSU and the services it delivers. The SSU is an important means for fostering social interaction between local and international students and ensuring that student have a complete university experience which goes beyond their classroom studies. Loneliness, culture shock and isolation can be a common experience for international students, and through peer support administered by fellow international students the SSU ensures that such issues are addressed in a lasting , meaningful way, rather than simply viewed as 'problems' which need to be counselled away. Through involvement in the SSU many international students make lasting friendships and connections. Whilst this sounds somewhat trite, the reality cannot be underestimated. Students Rights officers hear reports of international students who fail group assignments through not being connected with an assigned group, or those who are fearful of seeking help from their faculty in case of negative consequences (See Appendix One for a first hand experience by a Swinburne International student).

### **Life Under Full VSU**

The SSU provides services and representation to students not dissimilar to the way a local council operates. Without funding from students, the quantity and quality of services provided would be

greatly diminished. This will then provide a less attractive option for voluntary membership for students who will be thus less inclined to involve themselves in their student community. Below is a full list of services that will not exist if the current piece of legislation is made law.

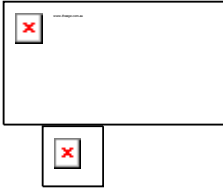
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## **Conclusion**

It is clear from the Western Australian experience that voluntary student unionism will destroy student organisations across Australia. This will not only destroy infrastructure and employment for many but will also change the nature of the student experience to a significant degree. Under voluntary student unionism, universities will struggle to provide a sense of community for students and will also face the repercussions of the demise of many welfare and aid services which student unions currently provide to all students, mostly free of charge. The good work that student unions do on behalf of all students (often behind closed doors through boards and committees and meeting participation) will be greatly diminished, with the educational rights currently enjoyed by students significantly at risk. Further, it is liked that some of the most disadvantaged members of our student community will struggle to establish their place on campus with a significant impact on their ability to successfully complete their studies and fully appreciate the benefits of the educational experience. The SSU strongly objects to the legislation put forward by the House of Representatives and urges the Australian Senate to reject the implementation of voluntary student unionism.

*This submission was researched and written by Ms Catherine Lawrence (SSU Student Rights Officer) and Ms Vasiliky Kasidis (SSU Education Vice President).*

## Appendix One

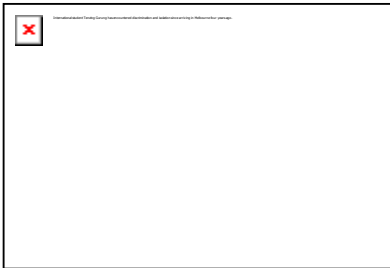


### The loneliness of the long-distance student

By Chee Chee Leung

Education reporter

June 15, 2005



International student Tenzing Gurung has encountered discrimination and isolation since arriving in Melbourne four years ago.

Photo: *John Woudstra*

Swinburne University student Tenzing Gurung can still remember the solitary days when he arrived in Melbourne from Nepal four years ago. With few friends, when he wasn't studying he would stay home and watch television, or ride trains and trams by himself to become familiar with Melbourne. "When I got here I didn't know much. In Kathmandu it's a totally different environment," he said. "I was so lonely and it's really hard to find your own country people."

The 23-year-old estimates the cost of his education in Australia - including university fees and living expenses - will total around \$80,000. But Mr Gurung, who will finish his accounting and finance degree this year, stressed that international students were not all wealthy. His father had to sell some land to finance his education, and Mr Gurung works part-time in a fast-food store to help meet his daily expenses. He said more than 50 per cent of the international students studying in Melbourne were struggling. They were not members of wealthy families. "Their families have to work harder and eat less to save the money so their son or daughter can study."

Besides financial difficulties, Mr Gurung said overseas students also faced discrimination. He said there were cases where tutors or lecturers would ignore questions from international students because they did not understand them. His concern about the disadvantages faced by foreign students led him to become involved in the university's student union and international students association. This year, he represented a student who says he failed a subject because he was unable to find a study partner among the predominantly local students in his class.

While Mr Gurung believes support services have been increasing, he said the growth had not matched the rising enrolment numbers. He would also like to see cultural workshops for academic staff, and more activities aimed at bringing local and international students together. "There is a perception that international students are taking places of local students. We don't steal the places - we actually fund the places for the local students," he said.