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“The impact of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students”

UMPA SUBMISSION TO DEEWR

INTRODUCTION

The University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association (UMPA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review on “The impact of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students” and wishes to thank Minister Ellis for meeting and consulting with Association and other fellow student representatives in Melbourne on the 26th of February, 2008.

UMPA represents and provides key services for just under 14,000 graduate students at the University of Melbourne. It supplies quality targeted representation, advocacy, support, facilities, publications and services through a representative network and expert staff in collaboration with University services.

The Association was incorporated in 1994 and was recognised by University statute with the support of the then Vice Chancellor, Professor David Pennington. Professor Pennington was of the view that the “*Student Union was undergraduate in its culture and its interests, whereas graduate students have different interests and needs. There were neither the people nor the focus to help students reach across the disciplines to share ideas and explore things at the graduate level. It seemed to me that a collegial environment would be a big plus for graduate students and the University.*”

The representation of graduates by UMPA is facilitated and overseen by an annually elected independent, politically non-aligned Council accountable for pursuing the purposes of the Association, which are:

- (1) To advance the interests and welfare of postgraduates;

- (2) To represent postgraduates within the University and the community;
- (3) To promote academic and professional support services to postgraduates;
- (4) To foster a sense of community among postgraduates;
- (5) To promote free and accessible government-funded education; and
- (6) To promote the industrial rights of postgraduate students employed at the University of Melbourne.

Specifically, in addition to representation and advocacy, UMPA with the Melbourne School of Graduate Research co-manages and equips the University's Graduate Centre, providing facilities and services to graduates which include a bar and café, 3 computer laboratories, 220 lockers, 70 individual and group study spaces, a student lounge room, the Graduate Printing and Publishing Centre and a range of equipped conference rooms that are available to graduate students. A "collegial environment" is achieved through a range of social, cultural and community events, in addition to the funding of around 70 affiliated postgraduate groups within faculties, schools and departments. UMPA communicates with its members through a bi-annual magazine and a weekly on-line newsletter, in addition to publishing a referred journal for member contributions, an annual comprehensive postgraduate support guide and a thesis writing guide for members.

Background

Before the introduction of VSU, UMPA was largely funded by an Amenities and Services Fee that was levied on all University of Melbourne students and allocated according to negotiations each year between childcare services, Melbourne University Sport, the Student Union and UMPA. The Association had, and continues to have an additional revenue stream in the form of a postgraduate bar and bistro leased from the University, for which it currently receives rent and a proportion of the profit from the proprietors.

Since 2004, successive UMPA Councils have engaged and worked with an established management consultancy to strategically review and assess the probable impact of legislative changes, such as the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005* upon the existing UMPA business model; and to identify organisational change necessary and appropriate to maintaining the constitutional purposes of the Association.

Prior to the passage of the Federal Government's *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005*, activities at UMPA had not been unduly affected by the earlier *Tertiary Education (Amendment) Act 1993*, the "Victorian-model" of voluntary student unionism. The Act limited the range of student support services which universities could subsidise with fees collected from students and also ensured that students could "opt out" of membership of the student union. Activities outside the proscribed services such as affiliation fees and elections, staff training and operational expenses of the Publishing Centre were funded by commercial trading income.

However, with the impending introduction of this much more rigorous version of voluntary student unionism, extensive consideration was given to a number of

divergent business models, partnerships and alliances, as well as to the recommendations of the University appointed consultants, Phillips KPA.

The approach taken by UMPA to business sustainability has included -

- Introducing voluntary membership subscription fees;
- Identifying and exempting “core” or universal graduate support services;
- Introducing service/event specific charges on a differential basis for non-subscribers;
- Earning additional commercial income;
- Reducing costs through service delivery efficiencies and the consolidation of supply arrangements;
- Reducing costs through eliminating low priority non-core activities;
- Utilising limited financial reserves; and
- Negotiating transitional funding arrangements with the University.

In October 2005, UMPA undertook the actions necessary to implement these strategies. Specifically, over a five-week period UMPA:

- Negotiated a redundancy agreement with the NTEU;
- Negotiated a redeployment agreement with the University;
- Negotiated an “in-principle” agreement with the University on future transitional funding;
- Declared all except two positions at UMPA redundant;
- Restructured the staffing profile, reducing the original number of positions by half (to 10 positions);
- Negotiated a new enterprise agreement with the NTEU;
- Held a Special General Meeting of members which approved 25 resolutions and 40 consequent amendments to the UMPA constitution;
- Capped office bearer honoraria; and
- Replaced the paid General Secretary office bearer position with an honorary Treasurer position.

Further, in 2006, in response to the introduction of the VSU legislation and after extensive investigation of membership and contributor systems existing at the University, most of which are outsourced, UMPA Council decided to make a significant financial investment in its future and in a membership/client management system. This system provides for a membership register and tracking system, on-line subscriptions, on-line event bookings, an advocacy case management system, and a facilities management system.

1. THE IMPACT OF VSU

Despite prudent management from its incorporation as an independent association in 1994, the University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association had limited reserves at the time of the introduction of VSU. At the behest of the University, UMPA had utilised the greater proportion of its funding allocation each year on the services and support that it was committed to provide to graduates. Thus, it was required to face the challenges of the legislation with reduced financial support from the University and not much more than sound strategy for managing the transition from compulsory fees. Nevertheless, the Association has managed to keep all of its representational

activities and almost all of its services operating in some form with the assistance of continued University funding. However, VSU has taken its toll on staff, student Councillors and office bearers and has affected the way in which many of these services are provided.

Financial Impact

Reduction in income related to pre-VSU

The Association is now largely reliant on the funding pool provided by the University for the provision of student services. This pool is currently subject to an annual round of negotiations with the predominantly undergraduate Student Union and Melbourne University Sport and is also required to provide an allocation for childcare services. The commitment from the University to fund student organisations to deliver these essential services and representation is indicative of the esteem in which UMPA and other student service providers are held. However, the Association has had a substantial overall reduction in funding from its pre-VSU levels. This reduction is compounded each year as staff salaries and operational costs associated with facilities management, among others, increase, but thus far the pool available for student services has diminished or at best remained constant.

UMPA's income derived from the Amenities and Services Fee prior to the Federal Government's introduction of VSU was just over \$1.4 million. In 2005, its total income was \$1.6 million (including rent and a percentage of gross sales from the Graduate Centre's bar and café, bank interest, publication sales, receipts from the Graduate Printing and Publishing Centre, advertising, and service agreements). The total income for UMPA in 2007 was \$1,137,200, comprising in part \$890,000 in University funding (with \$90k allocated to capital expenditure) and \$61,459 in subscriptions.

Financial Issues

- **Compatibility of Universal Service Provision with Membership Subscription**

From the outset, a strong recommendation of the University's consultants and the University was that the student service organisations should in part seek to fund their activities from voluntary membership subscriptions. To fulfil funding requirements, UMPA instituted a "subscriber" fee, which is set at \$66 per year (for either full-time or part-time students). "Subscribers" receive discounts on events and publications, priority and discounted access to lockers and are eligible to win frequent giveaways of movie tickets etc.

However, as a condition of the funding provided by the University to UMPA, the Association has also been required to offer the majority of its facilities and services to all graduate students free of charge. There are some cost differences for non-subscribers on items such as locker hire and tickets to paid events.

The requirement to seek financial contributions from graduate students for "subscription" (or what is commonly referred to as "membership") to the organisation

has not been compatible with the former requirement. That is, UMPA continues to—and contractually must— provide most services, publications, events and group funding to all graduate students regardless of whether they have become a “subscriber”. This requirement, while perhaps a barrier to increasing the number of financial subscriptions, is nevertheless strong evidence of the University’s recognition of the essential nature of these services, as provided by a student association to graduate students. It must also be said that UMPA Council itself supports the provision of these services to all graduate students despite it being a significant disincentive for graduates to subscribe.

- **Real Cost of Subscription**

At this early time in the academic year, UMPA currently has 927 financial subscribers (1180 in 2007), which includes a corporate subscription from one Faculty and some minor agreements with other areas. This faculty-based model of attracting fees is the most efficient way to derive subscription income. The staff time, administrative requirements and promotional expenses necessary to attract and administer individual financial subscriptions draw upon a significant proportion of the subscription fee received, making it an unviable method in the long-term to fund more than a small percentage of the Association’s costs. Staff time on subscription activity also arguably diverts energy from the core services of UMPA. Moreover, the requirement to provide most services free of charge to all students makes attracting more financial subscribers difficult.

After the initial promotion and sign-up period brought a critical mass, subscription has, however, remained relatively consistent across the 18 months of VSU being in effect. As the experience of VSU in Western Australia indicated, it is possible that there is a limit on the percentage of students willing to voluntarily contribute to their student association or that the financial limitations on marketing and service development have also combined to negatively affect subscription levels. The perennial analogy of Council rates or taxation is appropriate, as while most would agree that the services provided by the compulsory payment of rates or tax are essential (even though individuals may not use all of these services personally), very few people would contribute these same amounts if contributions were voluntary.

- **Limitations of cost recovery with a “user pays” service approach**

In addition to subscription, a “user pays” approach has also been adopted to some degree, in that subsidies for events have been scaled back so that many, including the postgraduate ball and daytrips, operate on a cost-recovery basis. The prices for some publications have also been increased for non-subscribers to attempt to recoup printing costs. UMPA is committed to ensuring that advocacy services remain accessible to all students.

Students who are not subscribers are entitled to basic advocacy consultations and are then encouraged to pay the \$66 subscription fee if they require continued casework or appeal assistance (student loans can be used for this purpose). Notwithstanding, UMPA’s priority is to ensure that students in difficult situations receive the highest level of support when they are in need of it and has not withdrawn support from any student as a result of their subscription status.

As mentioned above, approximately ten percent of students have paid the subscription fee to UMPA. Events that have had their subsidies scaled back and cost to students increased have still been well attended. However, most other services have still been provided free of charge. Some services, for instance a staffed reception desk that provides thousands of students annually with information and referral, cannot operate on a cost-recovery basis.

With limited funding, the ability to promote and enhance UMPA's services and facilities has been constrained (for example, the graduate magazine is now only produced twice per year instead of four times). The postgraduate group scheme, which supports seventy discipline-specific graduate groups across the University, has been restructured, resulting in some reduction to the funds available to each group to host academic and social events. Funding incentives have been introduced to encourage group members to become UMPA subscribers.

The wider impacts of VSU

Staffing Restructure:

- **Reduction in total positions, flat structure and multi-skilling**

After the passage of VSU legislation, UMPA was compelled to make all except two staff members redundant. This was necessary not only to ensure that staff members received all of their entitlements and that UMPA cleared its financial liabilities, but also to streamline the organisation for existence post-VSU. The substantial drop in income caused by VSU necessitated a reduction in UMPA's permanent staffing complement by half, with ten contract positions created. These roles had new position descriptions, requiring staff members to be flexible and necessitating the development of new skills. For example, UMPA's Graduate Advocacy Service now includes one full-time Advocate, but is supplemented by three other staff members who have been trained to undertake casework and assist in meeting the increasing workload. Paid student office bearer positions were also reduced in number (the full-time General Secretary position was replaced by a voluntary Treasurer position) and their honoraria capped.

Management positions in advocacy, communications and facilities have been removed. UMPA now has a flat reporting structure and a single team approach to the provision and delivery of services. Operations have been streamlined such that there is only one staff position remaining that can be classified as "back-of-house" support, the Business Systems Coordinator (finances).

- **Loss of research capacity in the organisation**

Representation for graduate students provided by UMPA has largely continued in its pre-VSU format in that student representatives have continued to contribute to all relevant University committees and working groups and the Council of graduate students has continued to function. However, UMPA's representation is operating with bare bones administrative and research support. Prior to the introduction of VSU, UMPA was sufficiently funded to engage staff members to conduct several research

projects on an annual basis. These projects were sometimes large and of general benefit to graduate student associations and student organisations Australia-wide, or were targeted at providing information specific to Melbourne University for the information of UMPA student representatives. The reduction in advocacy staff members and subsequent training of other staff members to cover the caseload has not allowed for any major research projects to be undertaken by UMPA staff members since the introduction of VSU.

- **Increased workloads, uncertainty and diminishing morale**

While the dramatic changes described above were well planned and conducted as smoothly as possible, they have had a lasting effect on staff workload and morale. Staff members have been exhausted, not only by the years of working against the threat to UMPA's continued existence posed by VSU prior to 2006, but also by the increased workload required to continue to operate UMPA's core services on a reduced budget without compromising the standard of service provision. Student office bearers and unpaid members of the graduate student Council have been required to assume a greater workload to lead and support research, structural advocacy and lobbying activities as well as community building initiatives. The loss of an administrative staff position has required the division of these functions between office bearers, particularly the President, and the General Manager. Indications are that, in the longer-term, these additional workload strains may induce burnout and increase staff and Council turnover.

- **Capacity to respond**

Finally, although unrelated to the introduction of VSU legislation and specific to the University of Melbourne, the transition to the "Melbourne Model" of degrees (whereby Law and Education will be comprised solely of graduate students) has resulted in a major increase in committees and their associated workload and will also have a flow-on effect in casework among students placed in difficulty by the transition. This major cultural shift has further compounded the already stretched resources at UMPA.

Facilities

As stated earlier in this submission, UMPA successfully co-manages the facilities in the Graduate Centre with the Melbourne School of Graduate Research, which includes administering student carrels, meeting rooms, maintaining and staffing a Printroom, Publishing Centre, multiple student lounges and computer labs (including providing student IT support). If VSU remains in effect in its present form, the long-term viability of operating the Printroom and Publishing Centre and providing student IT support is questionable under current circumstances where operating costs, particularly salaries and equipment replacement costs, continue to rise and University funding remains stagnant (and could be further reduced in future, if the University maintains its intention to gradually reduce the overall amount of "transitional funding" given to student services each year).

Fortunately, spaces in the Graduate Centre for graduate students, such as lounge rooms, study rooms and IT laboratories, have been maintained to date. Usage of these

facilities, along with the Printroom and Publishing Centre, is growing, particularly as the number of graduate students is increasing. International students in particular benefit from access to study spaces that may be lacking in their student accommodation. Under the “Melbourne Model” degree structure, which predicts that graduate student numbers will increase, the demand for graduate student facilities will only rise dramatically in the future. Under VSU in its present form, it will be extremely difficult for UMPA to maintain or extend its facilities to cater to the needs of this expanding cohort.

Services

Since 2004, successive UMPA Councils and staff have participated in strategic reviews in order to determine how best to restructure the organisation while maintaining its constitutional purposes. This included a process of evaluating which UMPA activities were indispensable (advocacy and important governance measures such as elections), of medium priority and able to operate on small subsidies (large social events), and of low priority and not essential to its core business. Core items of expenditure for UMPA include statutory obligations such as salaries, rent and utilities, insurance, the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) affiliation fee (required by the UMPA constitution), election costs, audit and infrastructure costs, and those of ongoing services such as the publication of the graduate student magazine. Services that were considered to be of importance, but which could still be operated on a full or near to cost recovery basis, have had their financial subsidies lessened.

- **Loss of Outreach Officer**

A major loss under VSU is the staff position of “Outreach Officer”. While remaining staff and office bearers perform “outreach” to students not located on the Parkville campus and perform dozens of departmental inductions each semester, they are unable to provide the same level of support and “on-demand” seminars as a full-time staff member dedicated to servicing the specific needs of these students. This year UMPA Council has nominated Councillors to be “Faculty Shepherds” as an initiative to assist with the outreach service function, but with their increased committee and other responsibilities, it is hoped that this additional responsibility will not prove too onerous.

- **Reduced number of publications, loss of “Student Initiative” funding scheme and reduced Council Projects funding**

Other popular services have been scaled back out of financial necessity. For example, while the graduate magazine (which graduate students have ranked as highly useful in surveys) is still produced and mailed to all students, it is now produced only twice per year rather than quarterly.

The student initiatives scheme, which funded student conferences and journals, has ceased to operate in its previous incarnation, with some of these activities being funded through groups funding (also reduced). The discretionary amount available to the UMPA Council to fund projects throughout the year has also been reduced. In the

past, Council Projects funds have been utilised to pilot initiatives that, once tested, have been taken up by the University.

Impact on the experience of students and the quality of their time on campus

UMPA believes that the graduate student experience at the University of Melbourne remains a rewarding one, with innumerable opportunities for engagement with academic social communities and support provided by UMPA and other enrichment activities offered through areas such as the Melbourne School of Graduate Research. UMPA's continued involvement in University decision-making processes works to ensure that procedures are fair and that the quality of courses and research higher degree supervision remains high. When issues of concern do arise and are raised by UMPA, its ability to work closely with the University to ameliorate them benefits both the students directly affected and the University itself. The advocacy casework that UMPA performs on behalf of individual students regularly results in long-term change that assists students in the future and spares the University itself from increased work in relation to grievances, as well as avoiding potentially costly litigation.

Nevertheless, VSU in its current incarnation has limited how far UMPA's activities can extend due to the way in which the organisation has had to be restructured and downsized to ensure its survival. This is a matter of concern when the number of graduate students at the University of Melbourne is set for massive future growth. While direct funding provided by the University for student services clearly demonstrates an institutional commitment to and appreciation of UMPA, it is likely to be unable to keep pace with rising demand. As we shall detail in the following section, other models of funding need to be sought to enable student associations to prosper at the work they do best rather than being required to divert their attentions to ongoing lobbying for funds and fighting for their very existence

2. ADVOCACY AND REPRESENTATION

Introductory Comments

At the meeting with Minister Ellis on the 26th of February, it became apparent during the discussion that perhaps the language and terminology used by student organisations, such as "advocacy and representation" may have been confused with political activity.

UMPA is concerned by the possible misconception of student advocacy, and seeks to clarify the understanding of advocacy and representation so that Ministerial advisers and Department officials are fully informed on the importance that the University and the Association places on the provision of representation and advocacy in its funding and broader relationship.

Democratic and independent representation for graduate students

Representation

UMPA's representation of graduate students is enmeshed in its comprehensive strategies for membership engagement and feedback. Each year through a postal ballot conducted by the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC), 17 graduate students are elected in September for the following year's UMPA Council. In the New Year at the Annual General Meeting, two additional Councillors are elected, ostensibly from the ranks of newly enrolled graduate students. Office bearers are then elected from this pool of 19 Councillors, to represent distinct equity and study mode cohorts, such as women, queer, international, research and coursework students. A Councillor is also appointed to each Faculty as a "Faculty Shepherd" for liaison and contact with members and staff within the Faculty. UMPA also supports a Graduate Student Network for wider discourse and feedback on issues of common interest and draws upon the elected officials of the 70 Postgraduate Groups to communicate on issues within each Faculty and School and to consult with its own membership.

UMPA Councils have considered and reviewed many electoral methods but, as UMPA found in the external research it commissioned on its membership preferences in 2001 and confirmed with internal surveys at later times, its disparate (and often working) membership prefer postal ballots. Last year 1379 ballots were returned in the annual election which represented 10.10% of the roll. The cost for this election was \$21,702. (UMPA has invited other electoral service providers to tender for the elections but has not received quotes less than those of the VEC, irrespective of the ballot mode.)

In the research referred to above, UMPA's membership clearly values and regards independent elections as a necessary feature of its representative activity. However, given the cost of such an election, very few similar student associations would be in the position to offer this type of electoral ballot. Thus, as a possible indicator of organisational relevance to a constituency, as a basis for funding it does pose real limitations. UMPA has also found that elections themselves don't necessarily indicate or provoke interest; rather, it is an outcome of the prevailing issues at the time.

Despite the Association's commitment to independent and preferably postal elections, the cost is an issue of real concern for future budgets and has been a dilemma since the introduction of VSU.

Advocacy

UMPA provides impartial and non-politically aligned advocacy for its constituency through a comprehensive suite of delivery mechanisms, including engagement and feedback through social and academic events which, in turn, inform and support:

- a. Public advocacy relating to the representation of structural student issues on over 40 University committees;
- b. Representation of student interests through membership on statutory committees convened to hear student allegations, appeals and grievances as specified in the University of Melbourne Act (Vic) and University policies;
- c. Collaboration with the University in the planning and delivery of graduate student orientation and inductions;
- d. Support for Graduate School student groups to ensure effective representation and peer support provision at a Faculty and Department level;

- e. Involvement in the development of policies and services for graduate students at the University;
- f. The provision of a Graduate Advocacy Service that employs professional advocates to assist individual students with academic and administrative problems through the provision of information, submission assistance and attendance at University hearings relating to issues including, but not limited to:
 - Coursework quality issues;
 - Academic misconduct allegations;
 - Unsatisfactory progress allegations;
 - Intellectual property disputes;
 - Authorship disputes;
 - Allegations of IT misuse;
 - Quality of supervision problems;
 - Enrolment issues;
 - Scholarship appeals;
 - Assessment disputes;
 - Concerns about facilities.

Under VSU, UMPA, with the support of the University and a “user pays” approach to some services, has maintained the majority of its services, facilities and publications for graduate students. Most importantly, it has protected the provision of a **free** advocacy service to all graduate students, which not only supports the graduate student lodging a complaint or presenting their position at a tribunal hearing, but also benefits the University by enabling it to address such problems as they arise.

Conversely, if independent student advocacy is not properly funded and cannot continue it is anticipated that a significant proportion of students will not only struggle to complete studies but also present an increased risk of litigation and possible bad publicity for the University. Students approaching UMPA for advocacy assistance provide anecdotal evidence to support this contention.

The following two examples are illustrative of the types of issues handled by UMPA’s advocacy service.

Student A was an international postgraduate research student who came to see UMPA about an authorship dispute within his research team. He was extremely angry that his thesis had been recalled from examination at the request of staff member from the cooperative research centre where he had conducted his research. The thesis was recalled due to an allegation of inappropriate attribution of data arising from a heated disagreement between the staff member and *Student A* about the latter publishing his findings. A formal allegation of research fraud lodged by the staff member ensued and *Student A* left the country distraught and enraged and determined to sue the University and ruin its reputation overseas. At the student’s request UMPA investigated the situation, established that the allegation was unfounded, that the student and staff member had not been advised of their intellectual property rights and responsibilities and an authorship agreement was negotiated through the University. *Student A* subsequently passed and was relieved and happy and the University introduced measures to improve processes for postgraduate students in consultation with UMPA.

Student B was an international coursework student who had had her enrolment terminated due to a plagiarism allegation. She was extremely distressed, saying that she could not live with herself as her parents had borrowed a large amount of money through a high interest loan and the news would kill her father. She felt deeply ashamed as she was a diligent student and said that she had not intended to plagiarise and did not understand how it had happened. UMPA investigated the issue with her consent and established that the student had undergone three hearings in relation to different aspects of academic misconduct, and did not attend the first two as she did not understand the content of the letters of notification. Without any representation or defence she received a guilty verdict twice, thus forming the basis for the recommendation of termination at the third hearing. At the third hearing the student cried and apologised profusely despite the fact that she did not understand the nature of the allegation. The UMPA Advocate assisted the student to lodge an appeal and refer her to appropriate resources for academic writing support. The appeal was upheld by the University, and the student was reinstated to complete her last remaining subject.

The advocacy and promotion of student interests is not to be conflated with political activity. UMPA has a representative function that operates individually through advocates and structurally through student representatives. The aim is to work with the University to ensure that the quality of the student experience is maximised and that quality graduate education is accessible to a diverse range of consumers. As these objectives are shared with the University, UMPA has developed a range of collaborative operations, including management of University facilities, joint contributions to orientation programs, joint publications and complementary social events. UMPA also responds to requests from University faculties to provide targeted support for graduate programs.

UMPA recognises the importance of the independent student advocacy, and believes it provides the following benefits to the University:

- The representation of student issues through an independent service averting and/or minimising inherent conflicts of interest in complaint handling processes;
- Effective management of the risk to the University of potential legal action and negative publicity by dissatisfied consumers through expert complaint handling and individual advocacy;
- The provision of independent and consumer-driven quality assurance through effective feedback mechanisms;
- The facilitation of peer communities through targeted events, student group support and orientation and induction programs;
- Assistance with retention and completion rates through support and advocacy;
- Significant cost saving through advocacy for students with complex needs who may otherwise consume substantial amounts of time for decision-makers and staff involved in complaint and appeal mechanisms;
- Enhancement of the graduate student experience through the dissemination of essential information and involvement in policy and practices relating to graduate students.

The importance of student advocacy cannot be underestimated in the delivery of quality higher education in Australia. Student associations provide essential services that support the effective delivery of education and maximise the quality of the student experience.

3. MODELS FOR SUSTAINABLE SERVICES

Together with other student representative organisations and service providers, UMPA has had the opportunity to discuss with representatives of the University of Melbourne models and principles for the sustainable provision of student services. UMPA welcomes and supports the University's declared key principles argued to be central to reform of the legislation, viz.:

“The importance of independent and strong student representative organizations as an essential part of any Australian university.

Legislative measures that provide governance and funding stability for student representative organisations

Development of a funding model that removes financial barriers to student participation in non-academic activities

Incentive for the development of enduring partnerships between student representative organisations and universities in the delivery of services.

Capacity, within the legislative framework, to proscribe funding for the provision of core identified services”

UMPA would further contend that this is an opportune time to broaden the engagement and participation of student stakeholders in the structural provision of higher education, as well as ensuring the accountability of student representation by enhancing the above key principles with the following additional principle:

Promotion of a fair and constructive exchange of student feedback on institutional performance through the development of an annual student stakeholder evaluation statement or mechanism

UMPA also concurs with the University's support for the introduction of a HECS-style scheme to impose a compulsory levy on all domestic students, within guidelines stipulated by the Minister and administered by the universities in consultation with their student organisations. However, UMPA would further suggest that such an approach would require or benefit from the addition of an external dispute resolution or appeal mechanism to mediate on fee collection or service provider issues.

The Association also accepts that the collection and distribution of fees could be limited to a defined set of services, provided that such a set includes the administration and provision of student representation. Representation has been a key feature of the current funding agreement between UMPA and the University which proscribes the services that are to be provided. UMPA would also contend that the set of services needs to reflect the culture, organisational complexity and limitations of

each campus and may need to be negotiated at each university. A legislatively defined set of services would need to be sufficiently broad to accommodate differences. UMPA also believes that the set of defined services should not preclude student associations financially contributing reasonable fees to their respective “peak” associations. These “peak” bodies have provided invaluable support to students at many university campuses since the introduction of VSU as the capacity of local organisations have diminished or disappeared.

In respect of some reservations expressed by the Minister at the meeting on the 26th of February, it should be noted that as with the “Victorian model” of voluntary student unionism, the imposition of a compulsory fee does not equate to compulsory membership of a student association or union, rather it simply constitutes a service provision levy.

On behalf of the University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association, I would like to thank the Minister for inviting student associations, and other representative organisations to contribute to the Rudd Government’s early consideration of an issue vital to the wellbeing and future success of university students and their representative associations.

Tammi Jonas

PRESIDENT

University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association