

THE REAL FACTS ON SPORT AND THE VSU LEGISLATION

The impact of the Federal Government's legislation on sport and recreation at Australian universities is at odds with its publicly stated policies.

1. Participation in Sport, Health and Fitness

"We (Liberal Party of Australia) remain committed to: Building healthy and active Australia communities through sport, Encouraging greater numbers of young people, to participate in community sport, Ensuring Australian athletes have the benefit of a national sporting system that enables them to continue to perform successfully in international competition, Fostering excellence in Australian sports management..." (Liberal Party of Australia website Election Policy - Building Australian Communities Through Sport page 2)

Of the \$58 million directly invested each year by University sporting bodies in sports facilities and services, \$40 million is derived from student fees. It is expected that only 20% will be recoverable by voluntary payment of sports fees and increasing user pays charges. This will result in a loss of over \$32 million annually in investment in facility access and services to both the university and broader community.⁽¹⁾

By causing the withdrawal of over \$32 million of investment in sport at the tertiary level, the Federal Government is jeopardizing its recent investment of \$90 million to encourage schoolchildren to take up sport. Surveys show that the greatest drop-out rate from sport is between the late teens and the mid-20s – the university years. The legislation also contradicts the Coalition's election policy document 'Building Australian Communities Through Sport', which states that the Government is *"determined to restore the capacity of sport to contribute to building active, healthy Australian communities ... We recognise that the capacity of local communities to participate in sport is determined, in large part, by access to facilities and equipment."*

2. Elite Sport Level

"Through record investment, and by supporting efforts at all levels, the Coalition Government is committed to strengthening community sport and building on Australia's success in the international arena" (Liberal Party of Australia website Election Policy - Building Australian Communities Through Sport page 2)

"Future Australian sporting success at elite level also depends upon more people taking an active part in community sporting activities...Benefits include increased activity and enhanced fitness levels, reduced obesity, learning values that apply beyond sport, and the development of world class athletes" (Liberal Party of Australia website Election Policy - Building Australian Communities Through Sport page 4)

In 2004, 1,388 athletes received over \$2.6 million in sports scholarships from Australian universities. Support for Olympic and Paralympic sports such as rowing, basketball, swimming, hockey, athletics and water polo will be decimated in the lead up to Beijing in 2008. The University of Sydney alone provided 17 athletes and one coach for the Athens 2004 Olympics and Paralympics.

Australia's fourth most successful sport at the Athens Olympics, rowing, will suffer a particularly heavy blow, with Sydney University, the University of Technology Sydney, Queensland University and Melbourne University jointly spending more than \$1.5 million a year on their rowing programs. Compare this with Rowing Australia's annual high performance club grants total of \$210,000.

3. The User Pays Myth in Sport

In 2000-2001 the three levels of government provided a total of approximately \$2.2 billion in funding for sports and physical recreation; 60.8% was to fund venues, grounds and facilities⁽²⁾. University sporting facilities or programs are essentially excluded from this funding.

It is inconsistent for the Federal Government to require the university sector to implement a user pays system when sport, health and fitness in all other sectors of Australian society are substantially subsidised by taxes levied by governments.

Why should the provision of these essential services in tertiary education communities be devastated or alternatively be passed on to already strained University budgets?

4. Healthy Communities

“From a Government view point it is reported that if an extra 10 per cent of the Australian population undertook regular, moderate and effective exercise an estimated \$500 million could be saved from the health budget each year.” Australian Sports Commission Strategic Plan 1998-2001

Nearly half a million students and community members utilise university sporting facilities and programs. The legislation will increase the costs and decrease the availability of these facilities and programs, thus discouraging physical activity when obesity is recognised as the greatest threat to community health in Australia.

5. International Education Market

Sport, health and fitness facilities are major selling points in promoting the “complete campus experience” and are essential in competing with the US and UK university systems for the overseas education dollar. The legislation threatens the capacity of Australian universities to continue to deliver as major export earners. Currently, Australia’s export earnings from education exceed \$6 billion per annum. Has the Government given any consideration to the long-term effect of its legislation on these vital earnings?

6. Regional and Suburban Centres

Many regional and suburban communities are dependent on the sporting and fitness facilities provided by University sporting organisations. The development of these facilities and their availability to regional communities will be severely diminished following the legislation. Will the Federal Government fill this void?

7. “The Athlete Friendly University Network”

In October 2004 the Federal Government, through its agency the Australian Sports Commission, requested and received the commitment of Australia’s universities to the “Athlete Friendly University Network”.

This program recognised that for too long Australia’s talented sportspeople had to choose between achieving sporting excellence and seriously pursuing tertiary education. This “Network” uses as its template the Athlete Services Program at the University of Sydney which, without any support from public funding, commits annually over \$750,000 to 250 elite athletes studying at the University.

There is a very real contradiction in that the proposed legislation will withdraw the capacity of our universities, through their respective sports bodies, to provide the substantial resources required to develop a system that, for the first time, would adequately equip athletes for life after sport.

8. Community Leaders

Many leading Australians in a broad range of fields, including business and industry, the arts, sports and government, have benefited by developing their skills through university extra-curricular activities, especially sport. The skills and expertise that students gain from their involvement in university sport include teamwork, co-operation, communication skills, leadership and initiative. University sport in its present form is a training ground for community leaders and sporting administrators whose expertise benefits all Australians. Curtailing opportunities for this training seems a remarkably short-sighted and ill-advised policy.

Notes

1. Statistics quoted on Australian university sport expenditure and participants collected from the 2004 Australian University Sport Membership Survey and Census.
2. A.B.S. – Sport and Recreation: A Statistical Overview, Australian 2003