

IMPACT ON REGIONAL CAMPUS SPORT

The following is a copy of a letter to the editor of the Armidale newspaper

STUDENT SERVICES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND (UNE)

I am writing on behalf of a community leadership team working in partnership with Sport UNE to raise funds to upgrade Sporting facilities at the University of New England for the benefit of Students and members of the local and regional communities. Our Committee which is comprised totally of volunteers from the regional business community is extremely concerned that the Federal Government's Voluntary Student Union (VSU) legislation will undermine the provision of services by student organizations such as Sport UNE.

Our fundraising initiatives have already been compromised by regional concerns over VSU with potential benefactors being unwilling to commit funds to the University if Sport UNE will be unable to manage and maintain facilities as an outcome of the VSU legislation introduced into Parliament last week by the Federal Government

Sport UNE is a service provider that has developed Sporting facilities that are widely recognized as being amongst the finest in all Australian Universities. These facilities provide a significant attraction for students to study at a regional University. The facilities which have been developed by Sport UNE over the past 50 years (with no financial support by the University or State or Federal governments) now form an integral part of the sporting facilities within the New England Sporting Community.

The services provided by all four of UNE's student organisations (Sport UNE, UNE Union, UNE Students' Association and UNE Postgraduate Student Association) are important for the students at UNE. We are extremely concerned that if these facilities and services are not maintained UNE and Armidale and indeed all regional universities and their communities will suffer. I therefore urge the support of your readers in ensuring they are maintained on an ongoing basis. Sport UNE is organizing a Forum on the VSU issue to be held at Lazenby Hall, UNE at 7pm on Wednesday 27th April. Speakers for and against the VSU legislation will be presenting their views on how the legislation will impact upon students and the wider community. I invite your readers to attend the VSU Forum to become better informed on the issue.

Like many regional universities, UNE is challenged by the need to provide commercially viable, yet quality services to the relatively small number of students who require them, with internal students only on campus for around eight months each year. In the past, external residential schools have filled some of this gap, but these numbers have steadily declined in recent years. Despite the low numbers, for students and their families the availability of services is an essential component of their decision to attend UNE. While their availability may not directly influence their decision to attend UNE, the lack of these services may well push them towards the well serviced and resourced metropolitan universities. Over the past few years, UNE has lost the on campus travel agent and real estate agent; and but for the intervention of the UNE Union in taking them over, would have lost the on campus Post Office and Hairdresser. Without the ability to subsidize these services, it is unlikely they will ever be financially viable in their own right. Already, financial constraints from the likely introduction of VSU have prevented UNE student organizations replacing staff who have resigned, and the VSU legislation is creating considerable anxiety and tension amongst staff who are rightly concerned about their future employment.

UNE's student organisations provide employment each year for 60 fulltime staff and up to 175 casual staff, contributing 4 million dollars to the local economy in salaries and wages alone. Almost \$1 million of this figure is through the provision of student employment opportunities

(where up to 160 casual jobs are specifically earmarked for students). Without the support of UNE's student organisations there would be limited opportunities for UNE students to gain casual employment in Armidale. For many students the lack of local employment options can be a deciding factor in selecting a university, again disadvantaging regional universities such as UNE against metropolitan universities.

As well as directly benefiting the students of UNE, facilities are available for the use of the wider university and Armidale communities, helping the region and the university to attract and retain qualified staff and their families to live and work here. Within a VSU environment, facilities and services such as student advocacy and maintenance of playing fields which by their nature generate very limited revenue, yet require a high level of resources to maintain will either fall to the University to fund, or will result in the decline in facilities and increased pressure on those provided by the local council, welfare organisations or Armidale sporting clubs.

For many years, UNE's student organisations have employed professional managers and core staff in order to ensure that a balance is maintained between the ever increasing cost of wages and risk management within a university environment and the need to provide a range of genuinely valuable, financially viable services and facilities for students.

At UNE, students have a real and vibrant community, supported by well managed Student Organisations, who for many years have provided exceptional services and facilities for UNE students, the University and wider community. The breadth of the non academic services offered help UNE achieve a 5 star rating for graduate satisfaction and compete against the larger and better resourced metropolitan universities. It also saves the Armidale Council and its ratepayers considerable costs through the provision of the facilities utilized by local schools, sporting clubs and the community.

I therefore urge readers as concerned as my fundraising team is about the impact VSU will have on UNE, to raise your concerns directly with the Federal Government, in an effort to amend the current legislation. VSU legislation needs to recognize the value and essential nature to students and the regional community of the services provided and include a funding model that allows as many of these services as possible to be maintained in the future for the benefit of UNE students and the wider Community. I look forward to seeing you at the VSU Forum at Lazenby Hall on 27th April.

Gerard Stephen
Chair,
Armidale Community International Sports Precinct Fundraising Committee

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