

Submission

to

Department of Education, Employment and
Workplace Relations

Review of Australian Higher Education

Submitter: Ms. Leslie Anne Schmidt

Organisation: Monash University Gippsland Student Union

Address: Northways Road, Churchill, VIC, 3842

Phone: (03) 5122 6248

Fax: (03) 5122 6593

Email: mugsu.president@general.monash.edu.au

Review of Australian Higher Education

Monash University Gippsland Student Union Submission

Presented by
Leslie Anne Schmidt
President, MUGSU

Prepared by
Sarah Elston
Education Research Officer, MUGSU

Introduction

As a regional student association, MUGSU Inc is committed to the improvement of both access to higher education for all and the support of those undertaking higher education. As such, the key items addressed within the submission are:

- The improvement of access to higher education – particularly for mature aged, low SES and Indigenous individuals
- The financial support of students who are studying a higher education degree – including improving Centrelink
- The implementation of quality assurance Nation-wide
- Provision of adequate funding to student organisations and Universities to ensure students receive the level of support and representation they require whilst completing a higher education degree
- The problems associated with the proposed “teaching only” and “research only” higher education institutions model
- The importance of Off Campus Learning as an alternative educational path.

Section 3.1 Meeting labour market and industry needs

Are there impediments to the higher education sector being able to innovate in the development of courses and programs? What are these impediments and how could they be removed?

A greater flexibility and discretion of how student places are decided by Universities is needed to enable the higher education sector to develop courses and programs in a way that caters for skills shortages. Particularly in regional and rural areas, the process and requirements of admission for students must be flexible as the nature of such demographics shows that on a general basis, individuals in these areas and of these demographics usually have a reduced access to support and resources which transfers into a reduced ability to obtain prescribed entry requirements. Also, metropolitan campuses must be more flexible in their approach to admissions for students from rural and regional areas for reasons as highlighted above, as often study at a metropolitan campus is the only option for certain individuals.

Such flexible enrolment systems have been implemented at several regional and rural campuses and should be further investigated as means for improving rural and regional student access to higher education Nationally:

- Monash University Gippsland campus has implemented the Diploma of Tertiary Studies (DoTS) which was formerly named Diploma of Foundation Studies. The alternative entry pathway allows students who have achieved lower enter scores than those required by their chosen course the opportunity to enter University. Students undertake several units from their chosen degree, paired with several units that explore the fundamentals of independent learning at University. Students then continue with the course from this point with knowledge of effective study techniques and an equal opportunity of finishing their degree with their peers.
- Charles Sturt University has a Koori Admissions Program (KAP) which offers students the opportunity to stay at the University for a few days to attend classes to learn some skills essential to success at university, find out about university life and meet staff in a supportive and caring environment. Participants are tested on some of the skills they are taught and this forms the basis of a possible offer of enrolment in a course of the student's choice. Also, this program doesn't contain any fees, with travel and accommodation being covered by the Department of Education, Science and Training. Such a Government Funded initiative should be implemented on a broader scale.

What are the appropriate mechanisms at the national and local level for ensuring higher education meets national and local needs for high level skills? What is the role of state and territory governments in this area?

There is a need for more teaching and nursing places particularly in regional areas as it is a logical flow on that regional campus places will lead to greater regional professional retention. Off Campus learning is an additional focus as it allows for greater flexibility and thus encourages individuals who may not ordinarily be able to attend campus, obtain tertiary qualifications.

Are there particular examples of good practice where you can demonstrate either rapid response to skill shortages or successful initiatives to improve generic skills?

Monash University Gippsland runs the “Co-op Program” which aims at pairing academic development with work experience in local industries. The program has been based on a variety of similar programs that have been effectively running in Canada for several years. The program allows students from Faculties of Arts, Art and Design, Science, Engineering, Business/Economics, Information Technology to participate; with a \$17,000 incentive provided to students throughout the program. Over the first year duration of the program, students experience professional development sessions and focus on developing effective study management techniques with the assistance of their academic advisor (designated person within the faculty that co-op students liaise with). The second year of the program consists of a 5 week placement, \$7,000 payment and completion of academic studies, whilst the final year of the program consists of a 6 month placement, \$10,000 payment along with the ongoing professional development sessions. The key industries the program has identified as in high demand of program participants are accounting, finance, environmental sciences and engineering.

As it is still in its first stages, only 10 students have completed the program thus far, with a further 65 currently participating in the program. The program is currently undergoing a review and will no doubt identify key areas of improvement as well as current strengths within the program and what it is achieving for the Gippsland skilled industry development. Changes have occurred within the program since its beginnings in 2006 with students completing their Diploma of Tertiary Studies (a program that allows students with lower enter scores to complete an initial year of basic university studies before continuing with their chosen degree) being allowed to participate in the program in 2008.

How effectively are Australian higher education institutions responding to demographic change, especially in providing lifelong learning to meet the challenge of the ageing population and the need for upgrading of skills and re-training?

Australian higher education institutions must be assisted nationally to improve services provided to mature aged students who are increasingly accessing higher education. As many off campus students are also mature aged students, MUGSU Inc argues that the focus on off campus support staff and teaching excellence nationally should also be improved.

In addition, scholarships provided to students must incorporate this change in demographics of students accessing higher education, as their ability to apply for and maintain merit-based scholarships is greatly reduced. For example at Monash University, the majority of scholarships offered require full time enrolment in a course and many mature aged students are not able to enrol in this mode for a variety of reasons including carer, family and work responsibilities.

Section 3.2 Opportunities to participate in higher education

Should there be a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success in higher education?

MUGSU Inc is supportive of a National approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation in higher education. However, an approach of this nature must also consider the local differences that occur throughout the country and allow specific higher education institutions and their relative local communities a large degree of flexibility in the types of support and programs that are undertaken at a local level. It is only through specific and targeted local approaches to improving access to higher

education to Indigenous and low SES individuals that effective change is to occur. The commitment of Monash University to address Indigenous disadvantage was recently highlighted by the Vice-Chancellor Professor Richard Larkins where he stated “In the spirit of the ‘sorry statement’ and the commitment to address Indigenous disadvantage, there must be more attention to Indigenous access and success at University”¹.

The Centre for Australian Indigenous Students (CAIS) at Monash Gippsland has obtained funding for a “Koorie footprints to higher education” program. The program consists of a funded program coordinator role and specific program funding. The program aims to encourage Koorie students at Secondary Schools to consider accessing higher education. The program has seen the beginnings of a systemic change occurring within the campus, where positive perspectives of the local Koorie community towards higher education are continuing to develop, as well as the University community developing its awareness of and celebration of the Gippsland Koorie culture.

The footprints to higher education program coordinator has found that the main barriers Koorie youth see towards attending University are a lack of flexibility, cost and the perception of University as being more ‘formal’ than a TAFE setting. Such programs as this must be funded in a National approach where the improvement of both access to higher education and support at higher education institutions is provided to both Indigenous and low SES demographics.

The implementation and funding of such strategies as the footprints program must also be paired with such strategies as the currently funded Wannik Koorie Education strategy where Koorie Youth are provided with support and encouragement throughout their schooling.

Funding such as scholarships and bursaries should be provided to students who are of low SES or indigenous backgrounds to encourage students to access higher education as well as supporting these students throughout their time at University. Such a paired approach should be implemented nationally.

If you support a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success how do you see it being structured, resourced, monitored and evaluated?

A national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation must allow local areas to cater for local student’s needs and challenges as various areas throughout Australia require differing types and degrees of support. A national approach must include support to Universities to incorporate Systemic Change into their systems. An awareness of and consideration for the cultural differences that exist between Koorie and non-Indigenous students must be incorporated into any National or State strategy as this is key to the effectiveness of improving access to higher education for Koorie individuals.

What institutional initiatives have proved successful in increasing low SES or Indigenous participation and success? (Please provide information about outcomes as well as activities.)

¹ Monash University (2008) *Monash Magazine: Jubilee Edition*, Monash University; Issue 21; p.23.

The Monash Gippsland Koorie footprints to higher education program referred to above, has been highly successful in that it has already met all stated outcomes and is successfully integrating the broader Koorie community in Gippsland into the campus. The program encourages students to access higher education through an interactive 'hands-on' approach, incorporating the use of the Visual Arts area for screen-printing classes that are run as a part of the program. Such effective programs as this rely on an on-going level of funding in order to be effective and must be considered carefully as they provide an alternative approach to improving a situation within the demographic of low access to higher education that has been present for many years.

What evidence is available from institutions about the impact on individuals or groups of either failure to gain income support or the inadequacy of income support?

As a representative and supportive student body, MUGSU Inc strongly opposes the current levels of income support provided to students accessing a higher education. A large majority of the students who access our services suffer financial stress as a result of inadequate income support. In a recent study of off campus students (who represent approximately 70% of the total campus student population) it became clear that over half of the respondents listed financial hardship as a challenge they face whilst studying. Of the same group of respondents, over 70% stated that they do not receive any form of income support from both the government and the University².

The current levels of income support provided by Centrelink are grossly out-dated and sit below the stated Henderson poverty line for the December 2007 quarter. Currently students are entitled to as little as 31.3% of the stated poverty line, with maximum benefit payments providing students with an income only 72% of the stated poverty line. As a result of low income support provided to students, an increased level of employment is undertaken to allow students to cover costs of living and quite often supporting dependents whilst studying. MUGSU (2008) found that 55% of respondents work over 30 hours per week. Considering the same survey found that 73% of respondents are not receiving any income support or scholarships; this is not surprising.

These issues of the need to gain an income whilst completing a higher education degree have been recorded by MUGSU over many years. MUGSU (2004) found that 88% of respondents were not receiving financial assistance from the government whilst studying. In conjunction with this; over a third of respondents to the same survey worked between 21 and 40 hours per week, while a further 29% worked in excess of 41 hours per week of paid employment. As an example of the affect financial hardship has on students, it is estimated by the Monash Gippsland Retention working party that of the current 1251 (full time equivalent) students enrolled in an Off Campus mode; statistically just over 500 will complete their course. MUGSU (2008) survey data suggests that 52% of total students will face financial hardship and is a primary driver of non-completion.

The youth of Australia have been recorded by the Democrats recently as viewing the current state of income benefits and government support to students as grossly inadequate. The survey found that 76% of respondents are not receiving youth allowance or a scholarship, and that 55% of respondents believe that the Youth Allowance age of independence should be 16 – only 3% believed it should be 25 as it currently stands. The levels of student assistance provided by the Government currently were viewed as inadequate by 49% of the youth poll respondents. In

² MUGSU (2008) Off Campus student experience survey

support of the above figures, Universities Australia (2006) Australian University Student Finances report showed 12.8% of total undergraduate students surveyed (over 10,500) had their application for income support rejected, which equates to over 1,300 respondents with rejected applications Nation-wide.

Monash University Gippsland offers a wide range of scholarships and bursaries to students, however often the students who really require financial assistance do not fit the selection criteria. For example, students who are studying part time are often automatically excluded from eligibility for many scholarships. As this is often the only realistic mode of study a student can enrol in due to other demands such as family commitments, financial commitments and carer responsibilities, this automatic exclusion seems to almost defeat the purpose of offering such scholarships – particularly Equity scholarships. This requirement to study part time for students also excludes them from being able to receive income support from the Government; which acts as a strong barrier to students attempting to gain a higher education degree.

Tertiary Institutions seem to allocate much financial support to those students who achieve well academically with a lesser allocation of funding attributed to areas pertaining to equity. Scholarships and bursaries provided by Tertiary Institutions need to reflect the needs of the students attending University, as well as potential students. The government needs to look into ways of encouraging and assisting Tertiary Education providers to financially support higher education students – particularly in regional and rural areas.

MUGSU Inc is aware of several cases where students have resorted to living in cars on campus, living on such things as noodles and tea, and sharing accommodation with a high amount of other students. This may be due to several factors including: high costs of living, increased petrol prices, ineligibility for Centrelink benefits or unavailable accommodation. The impact these conditions of living have on students' ability to perform academically is extremely high and must be taken seriously.

Section 3.3 The student experience of higher education

How can the quality of the student experience within Australia's higher education institutions be monitored nationally? Is there evidence that declining student: staff ratios have impacted on the quality of the student experience?

MUGSU Inc contends that the declining student: staff ratios adversely affect the student experience to a high degree. Students who approach MUGSU Inc for support in this area are often quite confused and unsure of what support they are able to receive from the University and their lecturers/tutors in particular. At the beginning of each semester it is not uncommon to be approached by many students – mainly off campus, regarding a lack of contact they have received from their lecturer. As off campus students are often subjected to feelings of isolation and detachment from the University; such experiences greatly affect the confidence a student has in their ability to finish their studies successfully.

The concern with declines in student: staff ratios are not restricted to student organisations either. The Monash vice-chancellor Richard Larkins himself has raised concerns in the recent Monash Magazine surrounding the decline in student: staff ratios – “The increased number of students has not been accompanied by a parallel increase in staff numbers so student: staff ratios have risen in our universities from

14 to 1 to 20 to 1, a dismal ratio even when compared with the best universities in Asia let alone the elite universities in the USA and the UK.”³

Decreases in available face-to-face time of lecturers for their students (both on and off campus) affects the students ability to do several things: raise issues they are having with their coursework and studies, seek support and guidance from teaching staff and understand what is required and expected of them by their teachers. MUGSU (2008) found that 83% of respondents rated ‘receiving support from lecturers’ as either ‘highly important’ or ‘important’ and around 95% of respondents found efficient assignment return and constructive feedback provided on assignments to be either ‘highly important’ or ‘important’. These results are an example of the level of reliance students have on teaching staff to contribute to a positive student experience.

The question of quality assurance in regards to the student experience is extremely pertinent as it relates directly to the processes by which governments and higher education institutions ensure that the courses, support and experience they provide is of an adequate and acceptable standard. Key questions that have been suggested, which must be asked of both the Government and Higher Education institutions to discover what is going wrong with the process of quality assurance within Australia are:

- Is it ineffective implementation of the policies or a misunderstanding of the importance and the role of the current mechanisms?
- Is it that the power struggle to control the offshore market has led to policies that were useful only on paper but are rendered ineffective in governing the actual quality of the offshore degree?
- Or is it a problem due to a lack of Understanding quality assurance communication among the various stakeholders thus resulting in a narrowly focused solution to quality assurance
(Kayrooz et al., 2005 in Choon & Lim, 2008)”. P.129-130

Although the above questions are in reference to the Internationalisation of Higher Education, the fundamentals of each question directly relate to the specific quality assurance of the higher education sector within Australia. The effectiveness of current systems such as AUQA and LAN audits was also explored by Choon & Lim and it was found that over 60% of respondents to their study believed that the audits are not particularly effective in governing quality of higher education, believing it to be a ‘surface audit’ that has become part of the games for the industry.

How can the quality of learning outcomes in Australian higher education be measured more effectively? How do institutions measure the quality of their learning outcomes and how do they know they are nationally and internationally competitive?

A national evaluation of the effectiveness of practices undertaken by Universities to develop and improve the student experience doesn’t exist. MUGSU agrees with the findings of Choon & Lim (2008) that AUQA (Australian Universities Quality Assurance) does not fulfil this purpose as it focuses on process not quality standards.

The quality assurance responsibilities of both the Government and individual institutions are present as the student experience extends to the quality of learning that a student experiences at their institution, and the support they receive as a part

³ Monash (2008) Monash Magazine – Jubilee Edition; Issue 21 (May); p.23

of this. For demographics that are challenged by various barriers to higher education such as regional, rural, Indigenous and low SES students; a quality educational experience is paramount to the students' success at University. A quality assurance body responsible for focusing on the quality standards would ideally make recommendations to Universities on ways that improvements could be made to the student experience.

Section 3.4 Connecting with other education and training sectors

Does the movement between the sectors of students with credit need to be improved? If so, in what ways?

MUGSU is supportive of a national equivalency database, where appropriate credit transfer options between providers is recorded to enable students within the sector more flexibility of movement, and to provide staff with the knowledge and technology to provide consistent advice to students. Monash Gippsland's Faculty of Business and Economics has established a small-scale version of such a database for its staff to use in determining what credit transfers can be achieved.

Section 3.5 Higher education's role in the national innovation system

By what mechanisms should research activities in Australian universities be supported?

A higher degree Postgraduate support is extremely necessary. The main forms of support that MUGSU Inc and its Post Graduate Association (GAPS) want to see increased are:

- An increased financial support through scholarships to post-graduate students. Quite often scholarships available at Universities are not open to post-graduate students as there is a focus on supporting all individuals to finish their first degree. Whilst this is understandable, the value of research that institutions and Government holds currently must be reflected by such financial support. Many postgraduate students suffer financial stress as the study requirements are quite high, reducing their ability to work whilst studying.
- The Gippsland Association for Postgraduate Students (GAPS) in particular see a strong need for National and State postgraduate conferences. Particularly at regional and rural campuses, conference attendance (largely International currently) is quite difficult to arrange and fund; and as a result of this the amount of postgraduate students who do not get this level of educational experience and exposure as research students is quite high. To quote a member of the GAPS:

"It would be good to have better ways to engage or attend conferences with different Universities within Australia. Even if students from same Universities could come together in conferences, see what others have done and attend their presentations, it would be helpful. I know poster exhibitions are there but conferences on a national level would be good, given that our chances to attend International conferences are narrow and issues such as tight submission deadlines and the cost involved make it challenging. So I think a national conference in different states will be great."

The relationships that higher education institutions have with external bodies such as the one Monash holds with Oxfam; and commercial partnerships enable a higher level of engagement with industry and its needs.

Do you believe there is a place in Australia's higher education system for universities that are predominantly 'teaching only' universities? If so, why?

MUGSU Inc does not support the concept of 'teaching only' universities within the higher education sector, as the concept is wrought with many potential implications such as: potential implications on the funding and perceptions of 'teaching only' universities; research only institutions would conversely not highly value teaching practices of their counterparts.

The continuous cycle that currently exists within the Higher Education sector where innovative research feeds into teaching practice is beneficial to both aspects of a University's purpose. Separating out the two key aspects of this cycle would damage the aims and objectives of each as the two aspects – teaching and research – compliment each other intrinsically.

Section 3.6 Australia's higher education sector in the international arena

Are there any unintended consequences of the current approach to internationalisation of higher education in Australia?

The student rights and welfare departments of MUGSU Inc support a higher level of international students with issues relating to their studies both on and off campus via Monash Gippsland, comparative to the proportion of international students. Two key issues that International students within Australia face as a result of the Internationalisation of higher education within Australia are:

- Poverty - an issue for international students who have limited income support.
- No government financial support

As a representative body to the students of Monash Gippsland, MUGSU Inc sees a high level of International students throughout the academic year. As an example of how the Internationalisation of higher education has affected the students involved in these international corporate agreements and relationships, below is key data to explore this issue further:

- 31% of Gippsland students in 2006 were international – considering the majority of these students are not eligible for government support or University scholarships yet must pay thousands of dollars in University fees annually, this is an extremely potent recipe for ongoing financial hardship.
- Approximately one third of the students who were requested to attend an Academic Progress Committee hearing (exclusions process of the University) were international students either studying at Monash University Gippsland on-campus, or off campus (many of these off campus students study via the TMC campus in Singapore).
- International students made up roughly 90% of cases where MUGSU assisted students with allegations of academic misconduct. The effects this process has on International students' welfare, ability to study effectively and their visa status (if suspended or excluded from the university) are quite devastating to those students involved.

- Many students experience such challenges to their studies:
 - homesickness,
 - isolation,
 - family pressures to succeed,
 - financial difficulties, and
 - issues with the application for permanent residency in Australia without adequate systems in place to support them.

The issue that is present here is the disparity between International students' and their parents' perceptions of studying at an Australian University and the actual student experience they have during their studies. Many students feel highly pressured by their families to succeed as the perceived prestige of the University also holds with it great responsibility of students to do so.

The concern MUGSU Inc holds is the effects the internationalisation of higher education in Australia has on the welfare of the students themselves. Therefore, MUGSU Inc contends that government MUST explore possibilities of providing some level of consumer protection to International Students who enter the country on a student Visa. Too many counts of students being exploited by such bodies as landlords and real estate agents have occurred for this issue to be ignored any further. Australian Universities must be made responsible for ensuring international students are given at least the same quality of care as domestic students; if not higher care (particularly in the first month of their studies in Australia).

What is an appropriate role for government in assisting the Australian higher education system to internationalise? On what principles should this role rest and what purposes should it serve?

MUGSU Inc strongly believes that the higher education sector should be lead by Government to identify and access research funding from global organisations. This will promote an effective global focus on key global issues such as climate change and innovative technologies within the higher education sector. Without this global focus, the higher education sector is restricted in its ability to develop, and to contribute positively to the Australian society.

Can you provide any examples of good practice in encouraging local students to undertake study in other countries?

Monash University has a Prato program where students are given a chance to study at the Monash University centre in Prato, Italy for a set amount of time. Some of the programs that students are able to participate in are:

- Art Education study tour to Italy
- Company Law
- Marketing Law
- Italian Studies
- Law semester program
- Photo-media Program
- Industrial Design studio
- Fine Arts semester program
- Theory Unit: concept and creativity
- Higher Degree by Research programs
- Practical CGE Modelling
- Theory/Drawing program

With around 21 programs available for students to participate in, the encouragement of local students to participate at Prato is quite high. The benefits of the program are largely a furthering of learning and knowledge in area of study and are not necessarily supported financially. This potentially prevents many students from seeing study abroad as a viable option.

Section 3.7 Higher education's contribution to Australia's economic, social and cultural capital

Do you believe that knowledge transfer and community engagement are legitimate and appropriate roles for contemporary higher education institutions? If so, how do you see this additional role for the higher education sector blending with its traditional roles and are there limits to these additional roles?

The concepts of knowledge transfer and community engagement are highly important roles for higher education institutions to undertake. The benefits higher education institutions have within society are diverse. From innovative research to community involvement in key programs; Universities provide much to society. Also, University graduates have the ability to contribute to community leadership, innovation and development.

In addition to this, student organisations that are associated with respective Universities also provide a high level of benefit in terms of community engagement to society. In particular, the role student organisations play in encouraging and empowering students to participate in political activities and take an interest in the future of both small communities and the broader Australian society must be seen as valuable and supported by the higher education sector and government.

Section 3.8 Resourcing the system

What incentives or unintended consequences are there in the current arrangements for higher education funding?

MUGSU Inc maintains that the Federal Government's decision to implement Voluntary Student Unionism has devastated the ability of student organisations – particularly in regional and rural areas – to provide support and advocacy to students.

The financial impact of VSU on the operations of MUGSU has been significant. It has been offset mainly by the support, approach to implementation and funding grant negotiated with Monash University. MUGSU's essential role in representing the needs and interests of external students has been greatly limited, MUGSU has reduced access to off campus students and cannot effectively advocate regarding their concerns. Currently, as a result of the implementation of VSU, off campus students are supported by one student representative and .5 of one MUGSU staff member's time allocation.

The financial need to rationalise staffing has left student representatives with more operational responsibilities and less time to perform their main function of representing students. Existing staff have more duties and more diversification within their roles with a consequent reduction in the support they provide to advising students on representation and advocacy. The level of specialised knowledge within student organisations has significantly reduced due to staffing restructures.

To what extent are the current funding models adequate to secure the future of Australia's higher education sector? If there are better models, what are they?

MUGSU Inc maintains that Government should provide public funding to universities, and in turn to fund student organisations with some contribution from universities; private funding for universities is largely generated by student course fees and in Australia students are paying more towards the cost of their education than most developed countries. Furthermore, funding should be provided direct to student organisations. If funding comes to student organisations via universities, there must be a mechanism to ensure the funding flows on to student organisations. In either case, provisions should be made to ensure funding provisions are not eroded through universities applying administrative charges and overheads. The direct funding of student organisations by Government ensures their independence and avoids the “don’t bite the hand that feeds you” scenario that currently exists.

Are the current institutional arrangements for determining relative funding between higher education institutions appropriate? If not, what changes should be considered?

The current institutional arrangement of funding determination is not appropriate as it creates winners and losers through the focus on research quotients and outcomes. MUGSU Inc highly values teaching within the higher education sector and believes teaching and learning outcomes should be used as one of the main benchmarks for the allocation of funding to higher education institutions. In order to combat this situation, an increased level of funding from the government is required within the sector to further increase the student numbers within Universities.

Section 3.9 Governance and regulation

Is there more that could be done to improve university governance? How should this be done?

MUGSU Inc believes that University governing principles appear to be applied poorly. Such issues as consultation with students as important stakeholders in most university processes, is often an afterthought or occurs haphazardly. As a result of this observation, MUGSU Inc contends that student organisations, as the bodies that university statutes nominate as the representative organisation for students, need to be more directly involved in the decision-making processes of their university. Furthermore, student representation on decision-making bodies is not well promoted, and as a result does not occur enough currently. As an example, MUGSU is often not made aware there is a vacancy for representatives on School or Faculty boards and is not informed when an appointment is made.

In particular, student representation is essential when the governing bodies of the institution are considering matters with a high impact on students such as policies of the institution or award structures; as without this representation quite often the potential affect decisions may have on students are not explored fully.

Additional information specific to Monash Gippsland:

Table 1: Key issues faced by students at Monash Gippsland – a snapshot. Data was collected over a three week period in July 2008 by the counselling service on campus (Health, Wellbeing and Development).

Study Issues	33%
Depression and/or anxiety	30.7%
Relationship issues	23%
Loss/grief	11%
Identity/self esteem	11%
Miscellaneous	8%

Self-rated Academic impact - Regardless of presenting issues, 58% of student clients reported that their studies were AT LEAST Moderately affected. (Moderately + Severely + Completely unable to study).

In comparison, below highlights the difference in ability to identify affect an issue has on an individual's ability to study effectively. Often students are unaware of the entire impact an issue they are facing will have on their studies.

Counsellor Severity rating - Regardless of presenting issues, counsellors rated the severity of impact on student clients' global functioning:

Mild - 12.1%

Moderate - 48.1%

Severe - 39.8%

Anonymous student submissions of experiences at University...

"I just wanted to let you know so you can take it up within the union, that students are all talking about not being able to attend uni as many days, and perhaps not at all, because of the cost of fuel and the lack of cheap alternatives" – sent to the MUGSU Inc Student Advocate and Support Coordinator from a Monash Gippsland Lecturer recently.

"I have many friends who find it really hard to get through uni. They have to attend classes, but can't afford petrol so they work. When they work they can't study as well and sometimes fail their classes. I also have friends who cannot receive Centrelink because their parents apparently earn too much money or they haven't earned enough to be declared independent. These friends are all self-sufficient and their parents are not able to afford to support them while they study at uni". – Experience of a 4th Year Education student at Monash Gippsland.

"I heard about an International student last year who had been living off tea for a few months because he couldn't afford to eat. He ended up fainting on campus and had lost around 20kg's as a result of this. He didn't have any income support and was studying full time as a fee paying student. Why can't International students get the support that we [domestic students] get?" – 2nd year student who lives at Monash Gippsland Residence.

"Living on student residences I see a lot of students struggling with the upkeep costs of a car. With the rise in fuel prices they're being forced onto public transport as much as possible, but in real savings terms in an area with public transport not viable for a bulk of the student population, students are still shelling out the costs of upkeep,

registration, insurance, repairs, and even fuel for those trips that they just have to take. Until public transport is a much more viable option, students are only going to be able to take desperate, interim measures like swapping out a few drives a week with buses to keep them eating and paying the bills" – 3rd Year student who lives at Monash Gippsland Residence.

"I am a current 4th year student studying a Double Degree in Psychology and Social and Community Welfare. My final semester consists of a 60 day placement which is recognised as a double unit work load. Due to this my enrolment details have changed from Full time, which is at least 3 units, to part time. Because of the changes to my enrolment I have been cut of Austudy which has caused extreme hardship as I am doing my placement Full time hours and have had to give up my part time job to meet the requirements of placement. I now at present have no income but still have the same financial commitments". – 4th year Mature Aged student who also has a family to support in addition to study requirements.

"It's been really difficult to find a compulsory work experience placement at the same time as all of my class mates. Then I'm expected to do this without pay and fit in work, study and everything else – it's near impossible. Monash needs to provide more support throughout the whole process" – 4th Year Social and Community Welfare student

"I am a Masters student that has given up a full-time job to come back and study. Apart from my studies I work 3 casual jobs to try and cover my bills and living costs. If I was to go and receive money from Centrelink I would have more time to put towards my studies however, I would not be able to even come close to being able to pay my bills. Not enough money or support for Post-grad students". - Masters of Education student

"I was recently living on Residence and while on 'rez' other students and I often experienced stress because we were unable to pay the rent so often a cut down of food and petrol was needed. As for myself I have jobs and still study and I'm sometimes unable to make the rent and I'm unable to get Centrelink because my parents earn too much". – 3rd Year Bachelor of Nursing student.

"I've just recently moved out of home. I'm not eligible for Centrelink assistance because my parents earn too much, even though I don't receive financial assistance from them. I work almost full time hours but still earn just about \$200 a week. The time I spend working has meant that I have failed all my classes this semester. My income is enough to cover rent and food but two weeks ago I had an ear infection that kept me up all night sobbing in pain. I needed antibiotics but couldn't afford them. I had to borrow money from Health, Wellbeing and Development (University department)". – 3rd Year Visual Arts student.

Conclusion

As a representative student organisation in a regional area of Victoria, MUGSU Inc strongly states that the following changes should occur to increase the access to higher education for all Australians and support individuals during their studies within the higher education sector:

- 1) A realistic increase in government income support to students must occur.
- 2) Government must explore possibilities of providing some level of consumer protection to International Students who enter the country on a student Visa, and Australian Universities must be made responsible for ensuring international students are given the same quality of care as domestic students.
- 3) A national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation in higher education should be implemented. This approach must allow for local areas to cater for local students' needs and challenges and must include support to Universities to incorporate systemic change into their systems.
- 4) University governing principles must include the incorporation of student representatives onto relevant decision-making bodies; this must also be supported by Government.
- 5) Government should provide public funding to universities, and in turn to fund student organisations with some contribution from universities. Funding from government to student organisations should be provided directly, not via Universities.
- 6) Government must assist Australian Universities in improving services provided to mature aged and off campus students. Incorporated in this service improvement must be a national focus on the promotion of teaching excellence to off campus students.
- 7) The improvement of access to higher education through alternative admissions programs must be supported by Government – particularly for mature aged, low SES and Indigenous individuals and those from regional and rural areas.

References:

Choon, F. & Lim, B. (2008) Understanding quality assurance: a cross country case study, *Quality Assurance in Education*, (16)2; pp.126-140

MUGSU (2004) Off Campus students Survey, unpublished.

MUGSU (2008) Off Campus students Survey, unpublished.

Universities Australia (2007) Australian University Student Finances 2006: Final report of a national survey of students in public Universities, Accessed via www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au on 13/05/08.