



**Submission To Department of Education,  
Employment and Workplace Relations  
Review of Australian Higher Education**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The University of Canberra Students' Association (UCSA) was established through a 1969 decision by the then Canberra College of Advanced Education (now University of Canberra) Council when it "agreed to assist wherever possible with the establishment of a Students' Association". A group of students then resolved to establish an Association shortly after. In June 2000 the University of Canberra Students' Association became an incorporated association under the Associations Incorporation Act 1991 (ACT).

In 2009 the UCSA will celebrate its 40th anniversary. Since its formation, the UCSA has served and defended student interests. The primary function of the UCSA is to represent student interests within the University of Canberra (UC). The UCSA is also active in the wider community by being the voice of UC students in matters of government policy and other issues affecting higher education.

In conducting its operations within a changing and modern University environment the UCSA:

- Provides effective and responsive services to students to enhance and assist their education, including:
  - A parenting room, a women's room, and a queer space,
  - Photocopying, printing and fax services,
  - Free condoms and sunscreen;
  - A student lounge;
  - Meeting rooms for student groups, and quiet

individual study space;

- A limited range of food and beverage items provided at low prices for students.
- Conduct campaigns and provide up-to-date and effective information for students on issues pertinent to students and their rich and varied lifestyles;
- In a fair and equitable manner, represents students in cases of academic appeals and grievances against unfair conduct by University staff;
- Ensure and maintain student access to University services and educational resources; and
- Promotes the good management of the university, and works to ensure an adherence to policy and procedure across the university community.

The UCSA remains 100% student controlled, and continues to be committed to providing student focused advocacy, representation, support, and services. The UCSA believes that universities should be more than places of instruction. Student organisations and their affiliated organisations not only provide a vehicle for advocacy and representation, but also for developing the student experience.

## **STUDENT CHOICES**

We see no evidence of a “perfect market” existing amongst school leavers seeking admission into university. While it seems clear that there are some judgments made by school leavers relating to the perceived value of institutional reputation, there is little real evidence to show that differential HECS-HELP has modified purchasing decisions.

We are concerned, however, at the increasing number of niche courses provided by institutions that seemed to have been designed to attract students based on the latest fad. It would be quite easy to mount an argument that television ratings have a greater impact on the undergraduate market than pricing.

Note the explosion of forensics programs offered at universities (including the University of Canberra) following the success of the television show CSI. At UC the Forensic Program occupied lab space that had previously been dedicated to the Conservation of Cultural Materials program.

Of course one wonders how many real positions there are for 21 year old forensics specialists, and whether the community was better for having a world leading conservation program, or another ballistics lab – but put crudely, university officials were convinced that the target audience were more interested in blood splatter, than museum pieces.

Of course, universities like UC, that are focused on professional programs will always encounter these difficulties – the need to attract students means the chasing of fads, but with it comes the risk of

obsolescence.

# **PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

## **Low SES Participation**

The Students' Association believes that there should be a national approach to attracting students from a low SES background to participate in Higher Education. It has been the experience of the Students' Association that the institutional attempts to address low SES participation have been at best haphazard, and at worst, embarrassingly misdirected.

It appears to us that too often the institution focuses on meeting the targets specified by government for Low SES (or for that fact any other equity group) participation, thus looking for quick wins, and avoiding substantial work on actually increasing access and participation.

We have for a long time been concerned that the chasing of these targets means, in the case of UC:

1. The exclusion of ACT students from low-SES equity schemes; and perversely.
2. A fascination with "the region", where the "low-SES" students attracted are sometimes the children of professors at the ANU, or the children of senior public servants.

Of course, the ACT has particular issues around low-SES participation, the design of Canberra has spread low-SES families around the city, so instead of creating identifiable postcodes of low-SES families, instead they are hidden amongst the relatively affluent population on Canberra.

We believe that the appropriate role for universities in dealing with the recruitment and retention of Low SES students starts well before scholarships are awarded. It begins in primary schools by making the idea of a university education a realistic one in the minds of students and families.

It is easy to wander in to a community and pick one or two students to give a scholarship, it is much harder to work with a community and build a relationship.

The University of Canberra attracts a large percentage of students who are the first in their family to be tertiary educated. Through talking to potential parents and students, we are often surprised at the lack of knowledge that they have about costs of studying, the availability of financial support, and the capacity to work while studying. In many ways, the views of Australian parents about Higher Education have been informed more by American movies about Ivy League universities than by any exposure to the Australian system. If people believe that degrees cost \$100,000 then of course they will elect not to participate in them. They also believe that you need to study full time, and that universities are full of rich kids totally unlike them.

The only real way to solve these perception issues is through appropriate outreach by institutions.

Of course, the best way to support Low SES students once they have moved into the higher education system is by supporting them appropriately. It is no longer acceptable that we have some

expectation that as a “right of passage” young people will live without heat through winter, or that they exist on a diet of 2 minute noodles.

If we are serious about contemplating an Australia of the Mid 21<sup>st</sup> Century that is not reliant on resources or manufacturing to compete on the world stage, we need to make attending University a real and competitive option compared to leaving school and going to work.

Increasing Student Income Support to a level beyond the Henderson Poverty Line would be an appropriate first step in dealing with retention of students in higher education.

### **Indigenous Participation**

The Students’ Association believes that there should be a national approach to improving Indigenous participation in Higher Education. In recent years, the number of Indigenous students participating in Higher Education has decreased significantly. Like Low SES participation in Higher Education, Indigenous participation needs to be addressed before University.

Indigenous students need to be informed that that University is an option open to them during primary and secondary education. Developing educational skills at these earlier levels will encourage a higher rate of Indigenous participation in Higher Education.

Addressing Indigenous participation in Higher Education needs to consist of more than just offering scholarships. Indigenous students

need to be supported through cultural support centres, study support centres and adequate income support while at University.

## **STUDENT INCOME SUPPORT**

Currently student income support is inadequate. For students to gain the most out of higher education they need to be able to afford to support themselves whilst studying. Students need adequate financial support while at University to encourage more students to enter the Higher Education sector, and for Australia to have an educated population. Income support, and the poverty that students must survive through while at University is one of the main reasons that young people are choosing employment over further education.

For students who are lucky enough to qualify for income support, the amount received is currently inadequate. The cost of living continues to rise, and yet income support remains well below the poverty line.

Student income support needs to be increased to at least the poverty line. Many students at the University of Canberra come from regional areas and are required to move to Canberra for their education.

Currently a student receiving the full amount of Youth Allowance and Rent Assistance would only be able to afford to live in on campus catered accommodation if they didn't have any other costs – including textbooks.

As a result of inadequate student income support, students are having to undertake paid employment, which is a deterrent to their studies. More than half of students at the University of Canberra currently partake in employment while studying, and many often miss class due to work commitments. Inadequate income support is contributing to students taking longer to complete their degrees. Paid employment also significantly cuts income support payments.

The age of independence needs to be reduced from 25 to 18. Most students become independent when they move away from home to attend University. At the University of Canberra, a huge percentage of students come from regional areas. Currently students ability to access income support is tested off their parental income. While the Parental Income Threshold is currently set exceptionally low (a maximum of \$68,361 for both parents total income) this only takes into account parent's ability to afford to support children and not willingness.

Income support for students need to reviewed taking into account the cost of living, and young person independence from parents in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. Adequate, inclusive income support encourages participation in higher education and creating an educated society.

## **THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

We believe that the biggest impact on the student experience is formed out of the need for students to work full time (or significant part time) jobs in order to fund the cost of being a student.

If you need to work, there is less time for study, if you need to work as well as deal with family commitments (which is certainly the experience of many part time and mature age students at a university like the University of Canberra) the “Student Experience” may actually be listening to podcast during your commute to work, and attending night time tutorials.

Voluntary Student Unionism has also had an impact on the Student Experience – if we accept that attending university is about more than attending class, the passage of the VSU legislation has impacted students capacity to develop leadership and teamwork skills, has lessened social activity, and created a more ad-hoc approach to participation in student life.

The casualisation of University workforces, and declining student: staff ratios have also had an impact. Lecturers are getting harder and harder to find, meaning that the only time for many students to engage with their lecturer is during scheduled classes, and that for some students the lecturer may be little more than a voice contained within an iPod – this is certainly different to the traditional approach of university teaching.

Different students want different outcomes from their “university experience”. What students expect from university, and their feedback on the way that individual campuses are currently operating needs to be investigated in a deeper way than just a survey on satisfaction at the end of a semester. It needs to take into account what the student wants from their university experience and how the university is currently benchmarking against their expected outcomes.