

Professor James McWha
Vice-Chancellor
University of Adelaide S.A. 5005

1 April 2004

Dear Professor McWha,

Re: Invitation to comment on the Higher Education Reforms

The Adelaide University Postgraduate Students' Association welcomes the opportunity to comment on the decisions that the University of Adelaide faces regarding possible increases to student HECS contributions and to work closely with the University to achieve the best possible outcomes for the institution, its staff and students. Whilst any increase to HECS fees for courses shall have minimal direct impact upon postgraduate students, the implications for resources, staffing and class sizes are of direct concern to the AUPGSA. At this stage, the AUPGSA supports the position of the Students' Association of the University of Adelaide in objecting to immediate HECS fees increases.

In the email that was sent to all students on 19 March 2004, you suggest that the issue of raising fees is linear in nature, in that a reduction in the quality and level of facilities and teaching shall occur if fees are not increased, and that increased fees shall guarantee improved facilities and teaching. The AUPGSA does not believe that the issue of resources and teaching quality that can be addressed so easily or so directly. As you are aware, almost all postgraduate coursework students pay substantial course fees as a consequence of the deregulation of postgraduate coursework fees in the late 1980s. However, despite paying large course fees that can be up to \$30 000 annually, the level and quality of resources and teaching to which students have access varies considerably across the University. In some instances postgraduate coursework students do not even receive basic facilities to which all undergraduate students are entitled, such as a free printing quota. The University is now taking steps to address such concerns, and the recent Postgraduate Coursework Working Party has compiled a list of excellent recommendations that should be adopted. However, concerns about the quality of some postgraduate coursework programs demonstrate that simply increasing fees is not a guarantee for improving the quality of teaching and resources and reducing class sizes.

A particular concern of the AUPGSA about any fee increases to undergraduate HECS fees is the potential impact on postgraduate study at the University. The AUPGSA is worried that fee increases to undergraduate programs may lead to a smaller number of students continuing their education in postgraduate programs, because of concerns about the size of the debts that they have already incurred at the undergraduate level. Such concerns may be especially acute for students from equity groups – and especially those from lower socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Whilst HECS fee increases may provide the University with extra funding for scholarships, it is very unlikely that the resulting increase in the number of scholarships available would be able to assist all the students with concerns about the size of the debts that they incur whilst studying.

The AUPGSA believes that alternate methods of improving teaching quality, the level of resources provided and reducing class sizes should be examined and, when suitable, implemented before HECS fees are increased. Such alternatives may include attracting corporate and private support of programs and facilities, the examination of alternative technologies and the modification of University practices to reduce expenditure in certain support and administrative areas. Whilst the University is aware of the possibilities for adopting such methods as a way to improve the level of resources and the quality of teaching to which undergraduate students have access, the AUPGSA is of the opinion that the University should thoroughly investigate such methods and implement the promising ones before considering any increase to HECS fees. The University's close relationship with SANTOS is just one example of the way such arrangements can be beneficial to both academic institutions and the private sector.

Should the University choose to proceed along such a path, it shall be a most challenging endeavour and will require significant changes to best practice procedures in some areas. The AUPGSA would like to take an active role in supporting and assisting the University in implementing changes that would benefit students and staff of the University and would avoid HECS fee increases.

Please do let the AUPGSA know if you would like further comment or wish to involve the AUPGSA more closely with the issues discussed in this response.

Regards,



for
Pierre-Ablingüe Ahouré
President, AUPGSA