



Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association

**Voluntary Student Unionism Transition Fund for Sporting and Recreational Facilities
Department of Education, Science and Training
Discussion Paper
April 2006**

Representation, advice and advocacy are important services that contribute significantly to the recreational and sporting pursuits of all university students.

Student advice and advocacy services are integral in supporting students from a diverse range of backgrounds and in a broad range of study related matters. SUPRA's work includes supporting rural and regional students who move away from their family home to study as well as participating in policy development which aids elite athletes to arrange special consideration for interruptions to their studies as a result of their sporting pursuits.

Providing transitional funding to *all* services that have historically been reliant upon student contributions is the best way to ensuring a smooth transition to a voluntary membership environment.

The Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA) makes four recommendations in response to the Voluntary Student Unionism Transition Fund for Sporting and Recreational Facilities Discussion Paper.

It is our position that access and eligibility to apply for funding under the transitional funding arrangements should be expanded to include advice and advocacy services provided at universities. As such we recommend:

- 1. That the transitional programme objectives be expanded to include *all* student facilities.**
- 2. That the key priorities be expanded to include all student facilities that have been historically reliant on student funding.**
- 3. That the amount of transitional funding available be increased to accommodate the expansion of the objectives and priorities.**

A summary of the background to our recommendations follows.

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1. Programme Objectives

While the Programme Objectives may be practical or successful in terms of assisting institutions in adjusting to the changed funding environment under a voluntary membership environment, the limiting of this assistance to sporting and recreation infrastructure fails to recognise the important role that representation, advice and advocacy services play within universities.

Independent advice and advocacy services are also traditionally reliant upon fees paid by students. The need for these services to be provided with transitional funding to adjust to the new funding environment is equally as important.

The nature of the welfare and support services offered to university students is very much focused around university life and the academic, administrative and personal problems that students face.

The very nature of these services is such that a user pays model is particularly difficult to adjust to. Students often do not think they will need such services until they are already facing difficulties.

Continued provision of these services by organisations traditionally reliant on student funding to the community of students on a fee for service basis or user pays will also require the introduction of a membership billing and accounting framework that will require expenditure.

For many of the advice and advocacy focused organisations these costs will be prohibitive. The services will no longer be able to be provided and many students will be left without a range of important services that contribute to their well being while attending university.

As such it is our position that a review of the objectives is needed to accommodate the application of transitional funds to academic and welfare advice and advocacy services.

2. Key Priorities

The priorities set out in the discussion paper need to be refined and expanded beyond sports and recreation.

While we recognise the importance of the continuing provision of sporting and recreation facilities and the important role it plays in campus life, student advice and advocacy services are an equally important and essential part of the broader University experience.

The current priority areas as listed for sport and recreation may be valid and workable for these types of facilities but are not necessarily transferable to the provision of student welfare services.

For example, while professional staff and those involved in student welfare service provision will often collaborate, share information and be engaged in professional development it is not possible to have a student welfare service located within and provided by one institution for use by students of another. The regulations and circumstances surrounding the type of advice provided are almost always institution specific.

Academic policies and administrative procedures differ significantly between institutions and as such, knowledge of policy and process at different institutions is not easily transferable. This in

itself would require extensive expenditure on staff training and resources if one institution were to host such service for a number of others.

3. Connection between advice and advocacy services and recreation and sporting pursuits

Support for Regional and Rural Students

Many regional and rural students attend University in the major cities. Conversely many city students attend regional non –metropolitan universities. Those regional students who attend city or metropolitan campuses have as great a reliance on a wide range of facilities and services and support as students attending regional and rural campuses.

For many students, attendance at University is a life-changing experience. It is important that a full range of programmes and services be available to students to assist them.

SUPRA has assisted rural and regional students attending a metropolitan campus by providing advice and advocacy where they have experienced problems with such issues as rental accommodation and academic progress, and referrals to academic and social networks which have assisted in overcoming isolation, amongst a multitude of other enquiries.

SUPRA believes that all students should have access to appropriate independent advocacy, advice and counselling services while studying at University. The need for these independent services are also well recognised by a wide range of staff and administrative Units. Many students are referred from bodies such as the Financial Assistance Office, the Accommodation Service, and the International Students' Services Unit to seek confidential advice and advocacy from an independent body. Referrals are often made when staff of University services recognise they have a conflict of interest in assisting a student on a matter involving the University.

Advocacy for Students involved in Sporting Endeavours

While we recognise the benefits of sport and recreation programs in the university sector, we note that elite participation often creates the sort of difficulties that advice and advocacy services are designed to assist with.

For example, at the University of Sydney participation in sporting activities at representative and elite level in particular still require complementary services such as representation from other student bodies and access to and assistance with matters relating to Austudy, academic progress and other welfare issues.

Another example relates to SUPRA's involvement in the development of the University of Sydney's policy on *Special Arrangements for Examination and Assessment*. The policy was discussed and drafted by the University through its various academic committees, all of which had student representation.

The policy provides a framework for students who engage in sporting and other comparable activities at a representative level. Such a policy allows arrangements such as alternative academic assessments, varied dates for submission and alternative examination times and arrangements.

SUPRA was particularly involved in the development of this policy as a response to a number of cases where we provided advice and advocacy to members who were engaged in representative sporting activities that affected their academic workload and progression.

Prior to the adoption of this policy students engaged in representative sports were treated on a case by case basis if their sporting commitments interfered with class attendance, ability to sit examinations and submission dates for assignments. Without SUPRA's assistance, this could easily have resulted in some students receiving a fail for assignments and exams.