



Speech by

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VOLUNTARY STUDENT UNIONISM

Mr REYNOLDS (Townsville—ALP) (7.15 p.m.): The Federal Government's decision to implement voluntary student unionism is a cowardly effort to silence students. Despite the attempts to mask VSU behind the rhetoric of choice and freedom of association, it is nothing more than a desperate attempt to crush opposition.

It has long been acknowledged that the real motivation behind voluntary student unionism stems from nothing more than the desire of dogmatic, ideologically driven zealots within the Liberal Party who were spurned and rejected by student unions over 20 years ago. Their bitterness will bear a mammoth cost. However, the cost will not be borne by them; it will be borne by the tens of thousands of struggling students throughout Queensland as well as thousands of workers in the tertiary education system throughout the State, who already are pushed to the wall as a result of savage attacks spanning the life of the Howard Government.

As a member whose electorate encompasses a regional university, voluntary student unionism causes me considerable concern. The James Cook University is a vital part of the community in Townsville and Cairns. It is also an institution of which we are immensely proud. The James Cook University Union is inexorably a part of that institution. The services that the union provides are truly amazing, not simply for their variety but also for the crucial role that they play in keeping students at university. The union assists students with academic appeals and assessment reviews and it represents students on a number of university committees as well as outside bodies. It is there to assist students in interpreting complex university rules. It is there every step of the way to defend the quality of their education.

In a time when many people cannot afford the cost of being a student, the union is on hand to provide students with information and assistance with qualifying for the youth allowance and other forms of income support, as well as instituting a student emergency loan scheme and finance management advice. A free legal advisory service is provided as well as support for students who are renting accommodation. A scheme to provide information, advice and assistance relating to tax also exists, as well as the student employment service. A community child-care centre operated by the union offers 40 places for children from four weeks old to pre-school age.

It is in services such as these that the VSU will have a dramatic effect on the lives of ordinary students. The James Cook University Union, through these services, relieves individual students of burden after burden, when just studying full time and working part time to support oneself can be harrowing enough. As well as making, in many cases, the difference between staying at university and dropping out, or eating one week and not the next, the union makes an irreplaceable contribution to campus life. Studying at university offers students the chance to meet and interact with a wide array of people with different backgrounds, stories and viewpoints.

The union stages a variety of programs, from the annual O'Week to Campus Bank Competitions, free movies and market days to encourage students to broaden their horizons. The union also sponsors a huge number of sporting teams, both social and competitive, that also greatly add to the experience that a student is entitled to at university. The sporting facilities that are provided by the student union are also used by the wider community. Not only that, but the union provides work

for 56 members of the local community. For many communities, particularly those in regional areas, 56 jobs can have a marked impact on their economic health.

No-one really wins with VSU. In fact, not one organisation, with the obvious exception of the Liberal Party and the Australian Liberal Students Federation, has voiced its support for VSU. Meanwhile, every significant body within the university sector, including the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee, the National Tertiary Education Industry Union, the National Union of Students, the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, the Australian Campus Managers Association and the Australian University Sports Federation, has expressed its opposition to VSU.

I call on members of this House to express their opposition to voluntary student unionism. Dr Kemp will try to promote VSU as being in the interests of students. It will save them money, so he says. What hypocrisy we hear from Dr Kemp. If the Federal Government were really interested in saving the students money, it would not have introduced up-front fees, it would not have increased HECS, it would not have introduced the youth allowance and it would not have abolished Abstudy. This initiative will not give students greater choice. It will starve students of the choice to participate in a unique and challenging environment. It will deprive students of access to subsidised essential services and it will lead to a reduction in the choice available to university students when searching for a quality education that is suited to students and the community.

Voluntary student unionism is a negative for this country, a very strong negative for Queensland and a very strong negative for regional Queensland. I implore members on both sides of Parliament to strongly oppose voluntary student unionism, which is being introduced by Dr Kemp and the Federal Government.
