



The Wellingtonian

Students caught in the middle

University students seem to be the meat in the sandwich in a battle between universities and the Government.

From 2010 Victoria University student levies are to leap to \$649, following a 94 per cent rise in the student services fee.

The reason for the fee rise, from \$275 to \$510, is that the university has withdrawn its subsidy.

Victoria is not the first to do this. The University of Canterbury did so in July, meaning that from next year its students will have to pay a total levy of \$533. Other universities are making similar mutterings and it seems only a matter of time before all follow suit.

These huge rises hit students hard. Already the average student loan is probably nearing \$40,000 (it was recorded at \$28,000 and rising fast in 2007).

The last thing students need is another big hit. It seems especially hard on part-time students, who cop the full levy.

For students, the laid-back, less financially demanding time of the 1970s and 80s seem a long time ago. People who passed through university before 1990 should be ever-

grateful they were not subject to today's vastly more financially exacting environment.

The huge escalation in university fees, and the introduction of the student loans scheme in 1992, has changed the landscape for students.

Certainly, more people now have the chance to go to university.

However, the odds are they will emerge with the sort of debt that will be an obstacle to further life choices, such as overseas travel, starting a family and buying a home.

This latest surge in student costs could be seen as the universities' way of emphasising to the Government that they are under-funded. Their case, though arguable, has some validity.

There has been an on-going dispute over the recent decision to cap enrolments. Above the capped number, the universities have to meet the entire cost of the students themselves.

Facilities, staff wages and research are all undoubtedly expensive and becoming more so.

No-one denies this, but successive governments have

been reluctant to accede to university funding requests.

The universities have made the point often enough. Perhaps they feel that if they hit the students hard, the students' subsequent protests will strengthen their case.

Following the relaxing, then removal, of interest on student loans in recent years, there is probably less sympathy for students. They are a juicy target and universities, while making all the right noises about "great reluctance" in imposing higher levies, are hammering them.

There seems one likely consequence of the universities' latest hard-line stance on levies for students. Sir Roger Douglas' Education (Freedom of Association) Members Bill may prove extremely appealing to students.

Sir Roger argues that student unions are one of the few remaining organisations in New Zealand that can compel membership.

Given this latest rise in student levies, it would not be a surprise if students leapt at the chance to reduce at least some of that amount – the union fee, which for Victoria University students will be \$139 next year.