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**Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN) and
National Union of Students (NUS) Environment Department**

***Submission to Higher Education Legislation Amendment
(Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bills
2009***

February 2009

Position Statement

The Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN) and National Union of Students (NUS) Environment Department both strongly oppose the fundamental tenets of the *Higher Education legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009* for several significant reasons.

We have previously written submissions to the Federal Government outlining our concerns with the state of student affairs under 'Voluntary Student Unionism'. The proposed amendment does not alleviate our concerns, but further compound threats to students' rights to independent representation and advocacy and student control of student services.

In particular, we believe the *Higher Education legislation Amendment (Student Services and Amenities, and Other Measures) Bill 2009* will further remove student control of student affairs, cripple existing membership programs, and make student organisations reliant on university administrations for their major

source of funding. It will be a major barrier to advocacy for student rights, exerting pressure on universities to make positive changes, or exposing problems on campus: student unions will be forced to maintain a positive relationship with their major or sole funders (the university) and have their role further limited to providers of minimal services and social events. It will actively prevent spending collected student services fees for vital student political advocacy and activism.

We do support the introduction of a cap to the General Service Charges that Universities would be permitted to charge; one that balances the interests of funding requirements, affordability and equity. We believe this cap needs to be set through consultation student organisations. We also support the availability of a HECS-style arrangement for disadvantaged students who would otherwise find it challenging to pay the charge.

Both the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN) and National Union of Students (NUS) Environment Department urge the Federal Government to introduce legislation that will act to support independent student service provision, including representation and advocacy. We believe these are central to a positive and quality education experience as well as being integral to democratic participation in Australia.

What are ASEN and the NUS Environment Department?

The Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN) is an incorporated not-for-profit association, made up of over forty campus environment collectives, five state student environment networks and hundreds of student organisers on almost every university campus in Australia. ASEN supports and intends to continue to support organising and campaigning for universal student unionism, environmental justice, and real action on climate change. ASEN provides resources and support to collectives and state networks across the country and to facilitate the cross fertilisation of skills, resources, ideas and campaigns. As a national network ASEN is largely financially self-reliant, however campus environment collectives rely on funding from student organisations.

Currently, an ASEN candidate is elected to the position of the National Union of Students (NUS) National Environment Officer, their role being to represent University students' issues, concerns and interests relating to the environment.

The importance of student organisations to the student environment networks

Student organisations provide environment collectives with:

- A democratically elected environment officer and convener of the environment collective
- Access to resources: computers, internet, printing, space for meetings and events
- An opportunity for dialogue and policy development on environmental issues within the student council
- An opportunity for outreach to more students
- Financial support: Environment departments/ collectives receive funding from student organisations. This is often targeted to specific activities /events. Honoraria for Environment Officers under VSU are between \$0 and \$4000 a year and campus collectives are receiving a small budget in the range of \$0 and \$3000. Pre-VSU environment departments were funded up to \$20,000 per annum for on campus programs, education, conferences, events and activism.

The importance of student environment networks

- Our generation is facing a future of dangerous change – of sea-level rise, extreme weather patterns, drought, food insecurity, poverty, and the displacement of hundreds of millions of climate refugees. Climate change is the social, human rights and environmental issue of our generation. It is our future at stake, and we need student unions to support strong youth and student organising to build new alternatives for the future. We need universal student unionism.
- State and National networks, such as ASEN, facilitate youth and student education on environmental and social justice issues. These networks also empower and activate students around environmental issues of concern to them, for example, climate change.
- ASEN engages with high school students and is actively helping create high school environment networks to promote environmental education and youth participation in environmental dialogue and action.
- Student union environment collectives have fostered, trained and produced many prominent people within the environmental and political sphere through on campus collectives, campaigns, and as organisers of Students of Sustainability conferences and within student unions.

Universal Student Unionism for strong democratic participation

For decades, student unions have provided important representation on issues of concern to students - not only at an internal university level but also at community, state and national levels. Student unions are an important part of civil society in Australia and a dominant vehicle through which young people across Australia engage in its political landscape. The importance of student representation at state and national levels on issues that directly relate to the quality and accessibility of education, welfare, public transport in

Australia cannot be underestimated, as they directly impact on the student experience at Australian Universities.

As Australian youth (a majority of University students are youth, though not to discount the experiences of mature age students) university students have high stakes in the future of our country. Having means to participate in dialogue on issues of concern to us is a crucial aspect of maintaining a healthy and just civil society into the future. Particular areas in which students have traditionally organised include Environmental issues, Women's Rights, Gay, Lesbian and Trans-gender Rights, Workers Rights, Indigenous Solidarity, Peace, Refugee Rights and Anti-nuclear. Active student participation and action is an important thread in Australia's rich and diverse social fabric and student involvement in these issues has affected the course of history. Much student organising on these issues has been supported directly and indirectly by the presence of independent Student Unions across Australia through the provision of a space for dialogue and policy formulation, access to resources and some financial support for targeted use. Without Student Unions, these youth movements and crucial aspects of Australian civil society will be (and in some cases already are) crippled.

Overwhelmingly, participation in student unions, collectives, the National Union of Students National Days of Action, and National Student Conferences are decreasing under VSU. Coupled with the comprehensive privatisation of universities and fee increases, the introduction of VSU is threatening the future of political engagement, dialogue and action in Australian universities.

The effects of VSU on Student Organisations

Since the implementation of VSU, unions have been implementing severe budget cuts. Historically, environment departments have been one of the first to go. This was true of the Western Australian experience of VSU during the mid 1990s. By 1999, two of the four student union environment departments in Western Australia had been lost, and the remaining ones were much less active.

In 2008, only a few environment collectives had honorariums for Environment Officers (\$1000 - \$4000 a year) and a small budget (\$300 - \$3000). Many have no such funds at all. This has seriously hampered the education of students on environmental issues, student environment campaigns and vibrant environmental events on campuses across Australia. The future viability of campus environment collectives, like student organisations themselves, is currently very fragile and reliant on ongoing university funding or the presence of reserves. Clearly this is not a long-term solution.

Most student unions have secured minimal funding from universities – many less than 10% of the operating budget – which is mostly tied funding dedicated to service provision (such as caseworkers) and minimal

administration. Some student unions have dissolved or amalgamated. Most staff, and nearly all research officers / activist support staff, have been made redundant. Some university administrations have been openly hostile to the ongoing existence of student unions, withholding student fees collected compulsorily before the introduction of VSU, threatening to evict student organisations from their buildings, aggressively taking over their services or insisting on university control of governance structures (evidenced at Charles Darwin University, Griffith University, Wollongong University, James Cook University, Swinburne, and the University of Canberra).

In 2003 there were over 900,000 university students studying in Australia, 650,000 of which were full-time students. **The erosion of student organising will reduce the role our entire generation can play in influencing positive social change: through our contributions as young people to progressive social campaigns; through engagement with an entire generation of university students; and through loss of training of individuals who go on to be influential in the fight for environmental and social justice.**

By implementing the proposed amendments, the welfare of the majority is neglected as services will be lost even more; representation and advocacy further crippled; student life destroyed; and social and environmental rights are abandoned.

Student organisations are the lifeblood of the university community and a leading force in movements for a just and sustainable future. Without them, universities and the broader community would suffer; there will be one less force in society holding corporate and government power to account. Destroying student organisations is a direct attack on democracy in Australia, as it aims to cripple student agency, and often dissent, to government policy on student issues and , more broadly, on issues of justice and sustainability.

Response to the Proposed Amendment

Despite current VSU legislation, student organisations are still able to collect membership fees from students who wish to support them. Many student organisations have worked hard since the introduction of VSU in 2006 to build a broad membership base and diversified funding sources. The proposed legislation would undermine, if not completely destroy, the membership programs of student organisations and capacity to fundraise. Students would be far less inclined and less able, to pay two different of service charges. These amendments will have the effect of further crippling autonomous student organisations.

The proposed legislation specifically prohibits the Minister from requiring universities to fund student organisations. Of course this legislation does not prohibit universities from voluntarily funding student organisations. However, a

student organisation which is fulfilling its duties, advocating for student rights and pressuring universities to change, is unlikely to attract funding from the university or have existing funding reduced or completely withdrawn. Further, securing a funding agreement from a University that is not required to fund student organisations paradoxically requires the student organisation to already be strong, well resourced and established in order to persuade a decision in their favour.

The proposed legislation has the ability, and even the intention, of silencing independent student advocacy and representation in a way the Howard Government was unable to do through VSU. ASEN and the NUS Environment Department are both strongly committed to student unionism and students' right political advocacy.

We believe it is essential that funding for student political advocacy and activism is included – not actively excluded – for the use of collected student services fees.

The amendments propose university administrations gain complete control over funds collected through the General Service Charge. Effectively this means students have very little ability to have input into the distribution of these funds to services that they deem as important. This is in direct opposition to the situation that existed under Universal Student Unionism, in which democratically elected student boards made such decisions. We believe that students are best-placed to determine what services they require and that student control of student money is integral.

Our suggestions

In valuing the contribution of student unions to student life and to the vitality of the broader Australian community, ASEN recommends that the current government **reinstate Universal Student Unionism** as soon as possible. ASEN recognises some general service charges previously charged to students under Universal Student Unionism were costly and possibly inequitable. We believe that a cap, based on the income needs of student organisations/service providers and on student levels, should be instated to ensure the charge is not exuberant. Universities are not businesses and it is not possible for student unions to be financially self-reliant. We suggest the creation of a government and university funded scheme whereby students who are economically disadvantaged can apply for a subsidised universal general service charge with the shortfall to be covered by this newly created fund.

Whether or not Universal Student Unionism is reinstated, student unions require secure, on-going funding that ensures the continuation of autonomous operating, including the funding of democratic

elections, office bearer honoraria, administration costs, advocacy staff and office space, resources and facilities.

ASEN values students' rights to organise politically and recognises it as a crucial aspect of university culture and the creation of active citizenship in future Australia, including political engagement in Australia's representative democracy. We see this as being of equal, if not more importance, than funding of student sports, clubs and societies.

Universal Student Unionism and independent Student Unions are essential for the continuation of democratic participation, engaged communities in Australia, and a sustainable future for all.

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