

# Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
Legislation Committee

## **Inquiry into the provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005**

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## **QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio**

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**Inquiry into the provisions of the Higher Education Support  
Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees)  
Bill 2005**

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## **Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer students**

### **QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio**

#### **Executive Summary**

The QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio provides vital services that directly and positively impact the lives of thousands of QUT Students. We aim to assist students in coming to terms with their sexuality and fighting homophobia. The QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio also provides much needed representation for students whom identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer. It is very well documented that people who identify as LGBTIQ suffer additional hardships other than 'normal' student pressures, like study, work, welfare assistance, living away from home etc. LGBTIQ people must live in a society that on a whole does not accept them for example access to the same civil liberties as heterosexual people, like marriage. The QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio supports students in coming to terms with their sexuality. We work closely with the Universities Equity Section through the Ally Network. The Ally Network is collaborative program that is made up of queer and queer friendly staff at QUT. QUT also recognises the additional support that is needed for its LGBTIQ students.

The impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on students who identify as a minority or disadvantaged group such as women, queer, indigenous, people with a disability, people from non-English speaking background, people of colour, cannot be forced to access a user pays system, (ie voluntary student unionism) for support and equality in a society that fundamentally oppresses them. The following submission examines the impact of VSU on LGBTIQ students.

## **Introduction**

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people, coming out is a process of understanding, accepting, and valuing your own sexual orientation and identity. Coming out includes both exploring your identity and sharing that identity with others. It also involves coping with societal responses and attitudes toward LGBTIQ people. LGBTIQ individuals are forced to come to terms with what it means to be different in a society that tends to assume everyone to be heterosexual and that tends to judge differences from the norm in negative ways. The coming out process is very personal and different for everyone. This process happens in different ways and occurs at different ages for different people. Some people are aware of their sexual identity at an early age; others arrive at this awareness only after many years. Coming out is a continuing, sometimes lifelong, process.

While some anxiety related to sexuality is common among high school and university students, the problems facing LGBTIQ people are often more difficult than those facing others, because positive LGBTIQ role models are often difficult to find. LGBTIQ people may feel alone and unsure of their own sexual identities. Fear of rejection is greater among LGBTIQ people due to the prejudices in society against them.

## **QUT Student Guild**

The QUT Student Guild exists for two distinct purposes. First and foremost it exists to represent all of its members. This great responsibility incorporates acting as an advocate for the students in any academic issues that relate to their life as a university student while studying at QUT. There are many different portfolios within the Guild, which are conducive to representing all students. These include Education, Women, Queer, International, Indigenous, Welfare, Sport, Activities, environment and disability.



The second distinct function of the Student Guild is to provide services for its members that will either aid or benefit them during their time at QUT. These include such things as the Fitness Centres, Aquatic and Squash centre, the Guild Bars and the Campus Shops. As well as services such as the shuttle buses and the childcare centres, the Parents rooms, the Queer spaces, the Women's spaces and the International Room.

### **QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio**

The QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio exists to represent queer students at QUT, as well as providing support and educational services on sexuality issues. The Queer Portfolio is run by the queer collective who decide, what kind of political campaigns and social events are needed. The Queer Portfolio recognises that the queer community exists beyond the walls of pubs, bars and nightclubs and provides space for social and intellectual interaction.

We aim to provide students with the opportunity to learn and grow through encouraging debate around all kinds of issues. We will make sure that the voices of students are heard in our own community and throughout society, and stand up for the rights of queer people all around the world.

Currently the queer portfolio, the entire Student Guild and all student unions and organisations in Australia are under threat from VSU (voluntary student unionism), which the federal government will shortly attempt to legislate for. We are under no illusions, if a student didn't have to pay a fee they wouldn't. A majority of students struggle to make ends meet, let alone afford another fee.

However, paying student union fees is important. Not only does it allow for students to have their voices heard but it also allows for the provision of other services such as portfolio's like Queer, Women's, Indigenous, Welfare, Education, Sport and Activities and Disability. Many student organisations like the ours provide other services such as campus shops, pools, gyms, childcare

centres, bars, refectories, information centres and second hand book stores. If you are having problems at university the first point of call is your student union.

If Australia sees the introduction of voluntary student unionism, it is most likely that students will have to still pay a fee for the provision of essential services though a services or amenities fee to the University, which the University will also run.

In all cases we will see the loss of all of the important portfolios mentioned and students voices will be silenced.

Students could pay for support and services offered by professionals when the time arises but the cost would be far beyond what the average student could afford, as they comprise one of the most economically disadvantaged groups in Australian society.

University is a time when students can explore their identities and challenge the way they think about and react to the environment around them.

## Service Provision

The QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio provides essential support and information with regards to Queer issues for all students, particularly Queer students, on campus.

We play a crucial role in helping to break down all forms of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia on campuses. This helps to create a supportive environment for queer students on campus, which is essential in enabling them to complete their time at university with the least amount of trouble possible.

Queer students, particularly those in first year, often come from environments, such as schools, where they have had to deal with homophobic attitudes from fellow students, staff, and even other parents within their school community.

The QUT Student Guild exists to support student through their university years.

It is very well documented that same sex attracted youth are six times more likely to attempt suicide than the population as a whole according to *Victorian Government Department of Health Services*. (online) 22 January 2002. Available at: <http://hnb.dhs.vic.gov.au/web/pubaff/medrel.nsf/> (accessed 30 April 2003), Howard J, Nicholas J, Brown N, Karaca A in Same-sex attracted youth and suicide. In: Rowling L, Martin G, Walker L (Eds). *Mental Health Promotion and Young People: Concepts and Practice*. Sydney: McGraw Hill, 2002; 215-226 says their study found that 28.1% of the 57 same sex attracted youth sample had attempted suicide. This was consistent in the same study that reported 18% to 42% of same-sex attracted young men aged 15-24 years had attempted suicide at least once.

The Student Guild Queer Portfolio saves lives. If our funding is taken away by VSU the support and education the Student Guild provides will be lost. And



with only a small handful of other support groups of the same kind in Brisbane it is very possible that suicide rates of same sex attracted youth in Brisbane will increase.

Homophobia takes many forms - from a gay joke, to a casual anti-gay word, to outright anti-gay violent behaviour.

Its sad to say but homophobia still exists on and off campuses around Australia. Only recently the Queer Space at Adelaide University was vandalised in a hate attack. According to the Adelaide Advertiser's article 'Outrage over gay hate vandal attack' by Laura Anderson March 28, 2005, 'Slogans including "*all fags must die*" and "*kill all fags*" were scrawled across the walls and doors this month in one of the worst vandalism attacks against homosexual students in the student associations' history'.

At QUT the Student Guild also still deals with sexuality discrimination cases, referrals from counselling and the Universities equity section every week.

Queer people are often discriminated against in a work environment, and particularly in a general context in everyday life, simply by doing things that heterosexual people are privileged enough to be able to do simply because they're straight. It is therefore paramount that university unions, guilds and student representative councils provide Queer Students with access to information so they can collaborate and help to break down homophobic attitudes on campus.

The Student Guild recognises that queer people not only need representation but space to organise and rally around injustices that exist in society.

Queer Spaces are open to all 40, 000 QUT Students as long as they are queer or queer friendly and respect what the space is there for. Queer Spaces are provided and maintained at Gardens Point, Kelvin Grove and Carseldine campuses as 'safe' spaces on campus. The Queer Portfolio provides





education materials on coming out, safe sex, drug information and other resources that assist queer people to come to terms with their sexuality and coping within societal barriers.

In addition the QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio provides cheap and safe events for students to not only provide a well-rounded university experience but, as an alternative to the social problems that exist in bars, pubs and nightclubs, such as substance abuse, violence and rejection for those who might not seem 'normal'.

Queer people live in a world that still does not entirely accept them and at university through the Student Guild the Queer Portfolio goes a long way in addressing some of the inequalities that exist in the wider community.

QUT itself recognises the additional hardship that LGBTIQ student's face. In 2005 the QUT Student Guild and the QUT Equity Section launched the Ally Network. The Ally Network is part of a range of new services, events and support initiatives for staff and students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ) at QUT. The Ally Network is made up of LGBTIQ staff and LGBTIQ friendly staff.

Allies are trained to understand sexuality and gender issues and to provide 'safe zones', support and referral for staff and students who identify as LGBTIQ. Allies are not identified as any particular sexuality or gender identity but represent a commitment to promoting QUT as a safe, inclusive and diverse university. The Ally Network acts as a referral service for the QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio. Allies refer students onto the Queer Portfolio for guidance, support and education.

## **Impact of VSU**

If VSU is introduced in Australia it will have a detrimental effect upon the lives of LGBTIQ people. Already services to LGBTIQ people are well below the levels of what they should be. In Queensland already we have seen 50% cuts to the Queensland Aids Council and the closure and under resourced community LGBTIQ organisations. If Student Unions have voluntary membership, areas like Queer will be lost because they do not have mass appeal to students. It is quoted that at least 10% of the population is same sex attracted. At QUT that equates to over 4000 students whose academic study could be affected by the introduction of VSU and the loss of queer services.

If services provided by Student Unions like the QUT Student Guild Queer Portfolio are affected by voluntary student unionism, it will impact upon the lives of thousands of students at QUT. QUT Student Guild provides essential services to the LGBTIQ students of QUT.

Voluntary Student Unionism will cost the lives of young Australian University students.

## **Conclusion**

Making Student Union Membership voluntary will mean the de-prioritising of non-essential services because of a decrease in funds from student membership as was seen in Western Australia under VSU. Every student union Queer Portfolio in Western Australia had their funding cut back to \$0. If this is allowed to happen again, but this time to every student union in the country, it will have catastrophic consequences upon the lives of thousands of LGBTIQ students and the LGBTIQ community.

It is estimated that the current level of funding in 2005 to 44 Student Union queer areas of over \$600,000 will be completely lost. The QUT Student Guild provides vital services that impact upon LGBTIQ people and heterosexual people's lives ensuring that our community embraces its diversity.