

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee

Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005

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Submission to Senate Inquiry from the Australian Student Environment Network

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(i) Summary

The Australian Student Environment Network, made up of all campus environment collectives and state cross-campus student environment networks, is completely opposed to the proposed Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill (commonly known as Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) or Anti-Student Organisation Legislation (ASOL)). This legislation would severely undermine students' ability to organise and make a difference on environmental and social justice issues. Both on-campus sustainability initiatives and the broader environmental movement in Australia would suffer. It is an attack on students' right to collectively organise, to stand up for students rights and for broader issues that matter to students.

(ii) How Student Organisations Support Environmental Issues on Campus, State and National Levels

Most student unions in Australia have an environment department, made up of an environment collective or committee, open to all students, convened by at least one environment officer (sometimes paid, sometimes volunteer). These groups organise out of and are resourced by their student unions, and play a vital role in sustainability issues on and off-campus. There are current active environment collectives/ action groups/ committees operating out of student organizations at the following Australian Universities (this list is not exhaustive). I have also provided a contact point from each group should you require information about a particular group :

University of Sydney – contact Dave Suttle ph: 0407 209 520
University of New South Wales (UNSW) – contact Nicky Ison ph: 0423 717 567
University of New England (UNE), Armidale – contact Tony Maslen ph: (02) 67715857
University of Newcastle – contact Naomi Hodgson ph: 0432 295 416
University of Western Sydney (UWS) – contact Shanu Antoine ph: 0425 218 598
University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) – contact Ho Yin 0415 301 738
University of Wollongong – contact Jess 0416 232 349

University of Melbourne – contact Bill Bretherton ph: 0422 378 989
Monash (Clayton) University – contact Melanie Skydzic ph: 0412 145 003
Monash (Gippsland) University – contact Tim Lamacraft ph:
Swinburne University – contact Pei Li ph: 03 9214 5440
La Trobe University – contact Daniel Nugent ph: 0407 407 051
RMIT University (Social and Environmental Action Group) – contact Jimi Cocking 0423 511 931

Griffith (Nathan) University – contact Nathan Keilar ph: 0413 381 270
University of Queensland – contact Miranda Gibson: 0414 535 164
Queensland University of Technology – Fiona Silke ph: 0431 726 648
Sunshine Coast University – Helle ph: 0400 121 418

University of Adelaide – contact Milijana Stojadinovic ph: 0412 987 499
Flinders University - contact Brett Thompson ph: (08) 8201 2670
UniSA (new group starting) – contact Tyson Kinane ph: 0417 801 321

Murdoch University – contact Fern York ph: 0411 576 276
University of Western Australia – contact Rebecca McIntyre ph: 0429 143 749
Curtin University (new group starting) – contact David Wheeler ph: 0405 775 761

University of Tasmania (Launceston) – contact Simon Curtis: email scurtis@postoffice.utas.edu.au
University of Tasmania (Hobart) – contact Lucy Crowley: email lcrowley@postoffice.utas.edu.au

Australian National University (ANU) – contact Julian Hay: 0408 443 155

Campus environment collectives are all part of their state environment networks, which in turn are made up of the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN) - see www.asen.org.au for more detailed information. Having these state and national networks, facilitated by the state branches and national office of the National Union of Students (NUS), allows campus environment collectives to communicate, organise co-ordinated training and events such as the annual Students of Sustainability Conference, and to co-ordinate national campaigns such as our current climate change campaign. Amongst other things, student organizations provide campus environment collectives with:

- the physical office space from which collectives are run and meetings are held
- staff to assist collectives in research and campaigns
- student papers in which to raise awareness of environmental issues
- resources for events, activities and campaigns (calico, paint, computers, printers, photocopiers etc)
- a budget for campaigns, events such as environment week, and sometimes a paid environment officer to run the collective
- an activist community in which to explore and develop political awareness and link single issues to broader political analysis
- the power of being part of a student organization, and consequent ability to reach out and involve students

(iii) How campus environment collectives and the NUS Environment Department make a difference on campus

(a) Sustainable University Campaigns

Australian Universities have a huge impact on our country's use of resources, and on the way we treat our environment. On the most obvious level, Universities use an enormous amount of resources themselves - especially electricity and paper. Without pushing, this massive resource use would go unchallenged at its currently extremely high level. Usually it is the environment department of the campus student organization that campaigns for sustainability on campus.

The hard work of student association's environment departments has already significantly reduced resource use at many Australian universities, through successful campaigns such as convincing University Administrations to set up environmental positions within Facilities Management and other administrative bodies, such as the Green Transport Office at Flinders Uni, ANUGreen at ANU, and the Green Office Program at UNSW. This work is supported by the National union of Students Environment Officer, who provides campuses with information and assistance in running these campaigns. For example, in 2001 the NUS National Environment Officer produced a kit called "Sustainable Universities Campaign Kit: Meeting the Needs of Today's Students without Compromising the Future" which continues to help many

environment collectives achieve a greener campus.

Case Study: Sydney University Environment Collective Wins an Environment Position in the Facilities Management Office

S.U. Greens, the environment collective at Sydney University, has a long and active history. In 2002, one of the collective's priority campaigns was sustainable universities. A long-term problem in achieving change within the University Administration on this issue was the fact that there was no University staff member solely responsible for environmental issues; instead there was one position within Facilities Management for Environment and Heritage. Being a "sandstone" university, most of this staff members' time was taken up with the heritage-listed buildings. After the environment collective learnt that the staff member in this position had retired, they ran a short lobbying/ letter – writing campaign to have a new position created of Environmental Manager within the FMO. This was successful and soon the position was created and filled. As a result, this staff member has worked and is continuing to work with students on initiatives such as the Greensteps Program, and other practical energy and waste reduction, and educational programs, on campus. The S.U. Greens Collective continues to work on creating a more environmentally – friendly campus, in conjunction with staff group Towards a Sustainable Campus (TASC) and the FMO. This year they are focusing, like many other campus groups, on a campaign for more green electricity on campus. The cross-campus environment network of the NSW state branch of the National Union of Students has been an integral part of the Sydney Uni sustainable unis campaign.

Case Study: The Three South Australian Uni Environment Collectives Combine to Work Towards Recycled Paper on Campus

This year, the Flinders University Environment Action Group, Adelaide University Student Union Environment Committee, and the University of South Australia Student Union environment officer are working on a joint campaign in conjunction with the Adelaide Branch of the Wilderness Society. So far they have conducted research into paper suppliers and the origins of the major Australian paper brands, and are confident of changing many faculties, and eventually the entire Universities', paper supply to recycled. The National Union of Students National Environment Officer is assisting with this campaign, to put pressure on the University Administrations and assist with media and strengthening the existing campus groups.

Case Study: Nation-wide Campus Green Energy Campaign

As part of the ASEN climate change campaign, reducing energy use and purchasing green energy (electricity created from renewable sources like solar and wind) on campus have become goals for many campus environment collectives. This campaign has been inspired by the success of a similar campaign in the United States, where it should be noted, universal student union fees are much higher than in Australia.

So far this year, the environment collectives at the the University of Sydney, University of NSW, Monash (Clayton) University, and Melbourne University have prioritized climate change as an issue. After working on this campaign for only a few months, already many new students have become involved, informational material on the University's impact on climate change has been researched and distributed, and negotiations begun with some University Administrations.

For example, the Melbourne University environment collective found out earlier this year that the University energy contract was being renegotiated. They launched high-visibility snap campaign calling for at least 10% green energy, up from the previous amount of 2.5%. They collected over 2000 signatures on a petition in two weeks, as well as meeting with the University administration and doing a call-in campaign and academic sign-on. After this campaign and a motion passed by the Interim Student Union, the University agreed to increase the amount of green energy purchased to 5% and committed to more stringent energy reduction. Now students are working together with the administration to reduce energy, looking at putting the money saved from this into purchasing green energy. This partial victory for the environment would not have happened without the Melbourne University Student Union Environment Department and thus would not have happened under VSU. Like the previous case studies, this campaign was heavily assisted by the National Environment Officer of the National Union of Students.

Conclusion: Sustainable universities campaigns such as the case studies above are organised through student associations and co-ordinated and supported by the National Union of Students and the Australian Student Environment Network. They would not be possible without universal student unionism.

(b) Educating Students and Raising Awareness

Student Unions' environment departments also have a more indirect, but perhaps even more important, role in protecting Australia's environment, by spreading the message of sustainability to students while they are still forming their views of the world. Through articles in student media about environmental issues, regular debates, forums, guest lectures and workshops, students from all faculties are exposed to environmental ideas. A recent study by the Australia Institute revealed that young people who have grown up under the Howard government care less about the environment than past generations, despite environmental problems being more pressing than ever¹. Student Associations disseminate information about environmental and social justice through events such as environment weeks, stalls, leaflets, posters and one-on-one conversations.

The NUS National Environment Department, in conjunction with the Australian Student Environment Network, produces a number of broadsheets on major environmental issues to distribute to students at o – week, the union environment week, and throughout the year. This awareness spreading and student education outside of class-time contributes to well-rounded graduates with an understanding of issues crucial to Australia's future.

(iv) Campus environment collectives and NUS Environment Departments' role in the community

(a) Students of Sustainability Conference

The national student environment conference, Students of Sustainability (SOS), attracts from 800 - 1000 students, academics, activists, representatives from

¹ Dr Richard Denniss, *The Attitudes of Young People to the Environment*, The Australia Institute. The report is based on data collected by Roy Morgan Research from 56 344 respondents aged 14 and over across Australia.

community organisations, and Indigenous elders for a week of lectures, plenaries, debates, and workshops on a broad range of environmental issues. As well as the hundreds of new students who become inspired to get involved in sustainability issues, in recent years SOS has also expanded to include high school students. It moves to a different campus every year, and is organised entirely by students from student organisations' environment collectives, with assistance from the NUS National Environment Officer.

Much of the funding for this conference comes from campus student organisations, and most of the work is done by campus environment officers. The state cross – campus environment networks usually pool together the money they receive from their student organizations to subsidise registration and travel costs for rural and regional students, indigenous students, and students in financial difficulty. Without student organization funding, it is highly probable that the Students of Sustainability Conference would not be viable. If it still was, most students would not be able to afford it anyway because the registration would not be subsidized by student organisation funding. This would be a tragedy for student environmentalists and for students wanting to learn about environmental issues, as well as for the broader Australian Environment Movement, which relies on students being mobilised around various issues as a crucial outcome of the conference. For more on the conference and its importance, please see the website www.sos2005.org.

(b) Broader Environmental Justice Campaigns

The environment departments of campus student associations and NUS play a vital role in broader community struggles for environmental issues, social issues and indigenous rights. Student associations are in a unique position in society to create change. Students have more disposable time (we are generally not working full time jobs), fewer dependents and obligations to family, often live in close proximity to one another, and are experiencing a time in our lives when exploration of society and their role in it is encouraged (except by the Howard government, that is!). These factors contribute to the fact that many students seek out and get involved in their student organizations in order to work towards progressive social change.

Historically, students have been at the forefront of social change movements and this is still true today. Students need a national representative body to support campus student associations and do federal-level lobbying and campaigning for student rights, and other issues that students care about. For example, thousands of students are not enrolled to vote. This is why NUS last year ran an 'enrol to vote' campaign. Students and young people deserve and have a right to a body such as NUS. Whilst the Liberals may not agree with some of the causes supported by NUS, such as the rights of asylum seekers, the need to address climate change, and womens' liberation, these causes still need to be heard.

It is important to remember that historically the campaigns run and supported by students, often seen as controversial and anti-establishment at the time, are now considered courageous struggles in upholding the rights and dignity of human beings, such as the student anti-apartheid campaign and the student-led campaign against the

Vietnam War. It is well known and widely accepted that VSU is essentially designed as an attack on student organizing. What has perhaps not been considered is that this attack, coming in the context of broader anti-union laws, is actually an attack on students' ability to dissent to government policies. It is thus an attack on democracy itself, because it aims to destroy organizations that play an important role in holding governments to account. Student organizations are important 'watchdog' institutions in the Australian community, as they campaign against abuse of government power and for a more just society.

We hope that this submission has gone some way to broadening your understanding of the role of student unions, even just a relatively small aspect of them (environment departments). Please ensure that the core of student organisations - their ability to involve students in collective organizing on issues of concern to students and broader society - is protected.

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On behalf of the Australian Student Environment Network, made up of the State Cross- Campus Environment Networks and campus environment collectives around Australia.

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