

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

Submission from the Melbourne University Environment Collective

Background

The Melbourne University Environment Collective (henceforth 'Environment Collective') is the main student-based environment group on campus at the University of Melbourne. It is open to all students interested in environmental issues and meets once a week during semester. The Environment Collective is facilitated by the Environment Officer/s in the Melbourne University Student Union. The Environment Officer/s is/are student office-bearers elected to the Student Union to represent students' views and concerns on environmental issues within the university and wider society.

The Environment Officer/s facilitate/s the ongoing existence of the Environment Collective in three main ways. First, by undertaking responsibility for the administrative aspects of the Environment Collective – i.e. room bookings, publicity and member contact lists. Second, by maintaining a weekly Environment Collective email newsletter, received by over 600 students, which contains information about upcoming environment-related events and activities both on and off campus. Third, by coordinating and funding Environment Collective events and campaigns, including environment theme weeks ('Green Week'), free breakfasts for students who use sustainable forms of transport, revegetation projects and campaigns for improved bicycle parking and more renewable energy on campus.

The impact of VSU on the Environment Collective

The Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005 (henceforth 'HESA Bill 2005') threatens the ongoing existence of the Environment Collective. The reason for this is that the HESA Bill 2005 will significantly reduce the income available to student unions such as the Melbourne University Student Union. Given such a reduction in income, student unions are likely to have to cut the budgets of certain departments and/or eliminate them altogether.

Historically, environment departments have been one of the first elements of a student union to be eliminated following the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism (henceforth 'VSU'). Following the introduction of VSU legislation in Western Australia in 1994, membership of student unions became entirely optional. By 1999, this meant that two of the four student union environment departments in Western Australia had been lost.

We are concerned that the HESA Bill 2005 will have a similar impact upon the Melbourne University Student Union and other student unions. If the Environment Department's budget is significantly reduced, it will no longer be able to fund the central activities of the Environment Collective (see above). Furthermore, if the position of Environment Officer/s is abolished altogether, then the Environment Collective is also likely to disappear altogether. This is because of the difficulty of maintaining a student-based group without access to institutional support and/or material resources.

The value of the Environment Collective

We consider that the disappearance of the Environment Collective would represent a significant loss to students at the University of Melbourne and the local community. The Environment Collective provides students with a unique opportunity to discuss and act upon their concerns for the environment. It also enables students to establish a social network of like-minded peers and to experience a sense of community on campus. For these reasons, we consider the Environment Collective to be a valuable aspect of student life at the University of Melbourne.

Conclusion

In view of the fact that the HESA Bill 2005 risks the continued existence of the Environment Collective, we urge the Senate Committee to reject the proposed legislation amendment and to maintain the current legislation in relation to the collection of union fees from students. In addition, we urge the Senate Committee to reject any modification of the HESA Bill 2005 which seeks to implement 'Victorian-style' VSU. Victorian-style VSU prohibits universities from collecting student fees for political purposes, which prohibits student fees being used to employ student office-bearers including Environment Officers. As indicated above, the position of Environment Officer plays a critical role in facilitating and supporting the Environment Collective.

Ms Imogen Hamel-Green
Environment Officer
Interim Student Representative Council
University of Melbourne
Parkville 3010

Phoebe Kelloway
Collective Member
Environment Collective
University of Melbourne
Parkville 3010

Andrea Main
Collective Member
Environment Collective
University of Melbourne
Parkville 3010

(On behalf of the Environment Collective)

