



Submission to the Senate Inquiry about VSU
from the NSW/ACT Student Environment Activist Network (SEAN)

My name is Wenny Theresia, a student at the University of Sydney, and this year's convenor of the NSW/ACT Student Environment Activist Network (SEAN).

SEAN is made up of all the campus environment collectives in NSW and the ACT and is unequivocally opposed to the proposed Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005, commonly known as Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU). Ultimately, this legislation is aimed at depoliticising universities: destroying the significance of universities as political spaces. This legislation is aimed at stopping students from engaging in collective and political organising – to silence student dissent, as most are bitterly opposed to the Federal government's socially, economically and ecologically regressive policies. Student activism is one of the most participatory of political spaces and Universal Student Unionism (USU) underscores the legitimacy of student activity as true political representation in action. In undermining the viability of the spaces and resources that universal membership to student unions provides student activity, VSU is, indeed, not about choice, but silence. VSU will severely undermine both sustainability initiatives on campus and students' ability to participate in broader environmental and social justice movements, to the detriment both of the environment that sustains us all and of the legitimacy of democracy in Australia. These are the aims, and will be the results, of this cowardly piece of legislation.

VSU will undermine both the right and ability of student networks like SEAN to organise on issues that students are concerned with, such as climate change, Indigenous land rights' campaigns, fair trade, peace and sustainable campuses. SEAN is supported by the National Union of Students (NUS) through the Environment Department of the NSW branch of NUS. SEAN is also supported by the student representative councils, associations and guilds of universities around the state from which environment collectives are able to function and through which students participate in their environment collective and SEAN. Students active within SEAN this year include those at the University of Sydney, the Sydney College of Arts (SCA), the University of New South Wales (UNSW), the College of Fine Arts (COFA), the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), the University of Macquarie, the University of Newcastle, the University of Western Sydney (UWS), the University of Wollongong (UoW), the University of New England (UNE) and the Australian National University (ANU).

Along with other state student environment networks, SEAN actively participates in the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN), itself facilitated by the NUS National Environment Department.

Student networks like SEAN, and on a national scale ASEN, are critical to student voices and education. Through their support of campus environment collectives, they encourage students to engage critically with issues in the classroom and the world around them, and empower students to organise to make a difference by fostering their participation in projects and issues they care about, both on and off-campus. Student organisations provide campus environment collectives with important resources like a physical space and facilities from and with which to organise (eg

computers, photocopying machines and banner material). Added to this, student networks like SEAN and ASEN develop wider communities that enable the invaluable exchange of information, knowledge and skills about campaigning successfully eg through network activist skill-share days when people who are involved in organising will come and share their knowledge of successful activism. Networks like SEAN are also important support bases for students who want to participate in the undeniably difficult task of grassroots action for the environment and social change.

As well as important campaigns, USU allows amazing student events like the Students of Sustainability (SoS) conference to happen every year. SoS is the largest annual national student-run environment-themed conference in Australia, and has become one of the most important events of the year for the student and broader environment movement. SoS is a uniquely informative, participatory and empowering forum for students, youth, environmental and Indigenous groups and organisations, academics, non-government organisations, politicians and ethical businesses from all around the country and even parts of the Pacific, to meet, exchange knowledge and skills, form invaluable networks and partnerships and generally get organised in the name of social and ecological sustainability. Even organising the conference has proven an invaluable experience as members of SEAN can attest: this year SEAN is co-organising the conference with its Victorian counterpart CCEN (Cross-Campus Environment Network), at Monash (Clayton) University from the 10th to the 15th of July (see www.sos2005.org for more information). SoS is a completely student-run, volunteer, not-for-profit event that has enabled students involved in organising the conference to learn many skills they otherwise would not have had the opportunity to do so, from organising forums and entertainment to seeking sponsorship and organising radio promotion. It's been a challenging but incredibly worthwhile process, and that's before the actual conference itself!

Dissent, collective organising and political activity should be a right, not a privilege, and should be critical facets of tertiary education. Through the support of USU, student networks like SEAN and ASEN and the Environment Departments of university student associations and NUS, play a vital role in creating and facilitating politically-engaged students who will engage critically with the world they inherit – surely one of the most important functions of tertiary education. Historically students have been at the forefront of social change movements such as feminist, queer and anti-racism movements; the campaign to stop the Vietnam War; and the Tasmanian Dam, Jabiluka and Irati Wanti campaigns. Universal membership of student unions is critical to protecting this important force of challenge to societal injustice, for progressive social change.

University absolutely would not be same without USU and SEAN believes it would absolutely be the worse without it. Ultimately, VSU will severely undermine student welfare and make a mockery of democracy in Australia: VSU will not only undermine student welfare by weakening campus life, culture and community and undermining critical student advocacy services for which USU is essential for the maintenance of the independence and integrity of these serves (eg help with academic appeals and welfare help), it is also aimed at silencing dissent and progressive political activity. This is particularly disturbing considering the context in which the

government is proposing VSU: from attacks on the rights and effectiveness of trade unions to tying government funding of environmental organisations and charities to “non-political” activity ie activity that criticises the government in any way.

For these reasons, SEAN unreservedly recommends that the Senate reject this piece of legislation as another cowardly legislative manoeuvre to stifle dissent, and the populace’s right to engage in collective and political organising.