

# 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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**Submitter:** Craig Comrie & Claire English  
National Queer Officers

**Organisation:** National Union of Students

**Address:** Suite 64, Trades Hall  
54 Victoria Street  
Carlton South, Victoria 3053

**Phone:** Craig Comrie 0424 408 932  
Claire English 0409 462 762

**Fax:** (03) 9650 8906

**Email:** Craig Comrie [queer@nus.asn.au](mailto:queer@nus.asn.au)  
Claire English [queerofficer@nus.asn.au](mailto:queerofficer@nus.asn.au)

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## What is the NUS National Queer Department and what do we do?

Queer Departments are vehicles of representation for queer students at all levels, campus, cross-campus (or state) and national. The National Union of Students (Queer Department) is the peak organisation established to represent and resource campus member organisations and their queer campaigns.

The National Queer Department has two part-time elected Queer Officers who are directed by the National Queer Committee, a body made up of democratically elected students from member campuses. Along with the National Queer Committee, students can be directly involved in the National Union of Students via the State Branches of the organisation and via cross-campus collectives established in each state.

We believe that queer representation, campaigns and political activity are a vital part of any university campus, and we believe in continuing the work of the National Department and Campus Organisation to ensure campuses are welcoming and supportive for queer students.

## What does 'Queer' mean?

**Queer:** is a term used in a number of different ways; as an 'umbrella' term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, genderqueer and other non-heterosexual identities. It is also used as a way of reclaiming and co-opting a once negative term; to remove queer as a term of abuse. The term queer also alludes to a fluidity of gender and sexuality and a rejection of socially imposed categories.

## Introduction

Student Organisations and the services they provide are an absolutely essential part of student life, it is not only a social necessity, but plays an integral role in the educational process of every student. The introduction of Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees Bill 2005 into Parliament is a step towards the dissemination of campus life, welfare services and the erosion of student's rights to representation.

Hardest hit by the impacts of these reforms will be those already marginalised in educational institutions and the wider community - Women, Indigenous, disabled, culturally diverse and queer students. The aim of the Government and Educational Institutions should be to work together with Student Organisations to offer services and representation to these students to ensure their academic path is made no more difficult than other students.

The transition from high school to University can be a hard and trying time for any student, but for queer student's life can be particularly hard. These students face entrenched public discrimination, homophobia, self-esteem and confidences issues and often find their transition into university much harder than their counterparts. Nation-wide Student Organisations and their queer departments work endlessly to ensure that queer students feel guided and supported whilst completing their studies, the Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees Bill 2005 put many of the services that Student Organisations provide to queer students under serious threat.

Without these services we will see more and more queer students unable to finish their chosen degrees and in turn drop-out of university due to the lack of support. Statistics show that queer young people are also six times more likely than their counterparts to self-harm or commit suicide; this is alarming not only for students at university, but the wider queer community.

Student Organisation counselling, medical and welfare services may be queer students only access to point to help and advice, the passing of the aforementioned legislation will; not only jeopardise these services, but the lives of many queer students.

## What Welfare & Advocacy Services do Queer Departments provide?

Nationally, Student Organisations invest over half a million dollars<sup>1</sup> into Queer Departments and their respective campaigns, prior to outlining the effects of the legislation on student organisations we feel it is important to paint the picture of what services are provided by Queer Departments across the nation and outline the benefits of this service provision.

The services for queer students offered by Queer Departments and Student Organisations can be loosely categorised into four broad areas - Space, Education & Information and Support, and Representation & Political Advocacy

### 1. Space

Most Student Organisations offer a 'Queer Space' for Queer students. This space acts as an autonomous area designated solely for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer students, where they can feel comfortable enough to express themselves, without public fear of homophobic taunts or homophobic attacks.

Queer Spaces also provide the opportunity for queer students to meet, socialise and support each other in their struggle against entrenched discrimination and homophobia, both within at the university and the wider community. Queer Spaces are extremely important to queer students who may be struggling with their sexuality, coming out or dealing with harassment they have experienced, they aim to be supportive, non-discriminatory and welcoming for all students who may be questioning their sexuality.

For non-queer members of the community, a 'queer space' may not seem that important, but hundreds of queer students access the nation access their student organisation queer space on a day-to-day basis, for many reasons, and the impact of not having this space will not only effect students personally, but it will also erode queer culture on campuses.

### 2. Education & Information

Queer Departments play a very important role in educating both queer and non-queer students about the issues that queer students face at university and in the wider community. More recently Queer Departments have also begun to play a role in educating university staff, lecturers and academics about ways they can eliminate sexuality based discrimination on campus and ways that non-queers can act in order to make life easier for queer student on campus.

Queer Departments play a role in educating both queer and non-queer students about sexuality issues, thus in recognition of this we will refer to them separately:

#### *Education of Queer Students*

As mentioned previously queer young people are up to 6 times more likely to commit suicide, this is an extremely alarming statistic that clearly outlines the need for queer students to have access to as much information as possible. This information is provided by the Queer Departments via Stalls on Orientation Days, available in the 'queer space' and online on student organisation websites.

The information provided by Queer Departments that is directed at queer students, includes, but is not limited to:

Safe Sex Pamphlets  
Safe Sex Materials (Condoms, Dental Dams etc)  
Contact points if feeling suicidal or you are self harming  
Queer-Friendly Doctor & Service Provider information

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<sup>1</sup> This figure only relates to the operating budgets of queer departments it does not include other services like supported medical services or counseling.

## Social & Support Groups and their contact details Healthy Lifestyle Information

Often Student Organisation Queer Departments are the only place queer students will be exposed to this information, due to the stigma attached to sexuality. This stigma makes it harder for queer students to access the information in the wider community as they often fear that telling their family General Practitioner or a member of their family, how they feel, will mean them being publicly 'outed' prior to them personally being ready to disclose their sexuality. The information provided by Queer Departments can be accessed anonymously and thus eliminates the chance of students feeling stigmatised.

### *Education of Non-Queer Students, Lecturers and University Staff*

Key to any University recognising and supporting queer students is education programs aimed at informing the non-queer population of the campus about the existence of homophobia and the experiences on queer students on campus, this education moves to make universities safe and inviting areas for queer students. Student Organisation Queer Departments play an integral role in this education process.

Prime examples of this are the participation of Queer Officers and queer students in 'Ally' Projects established at the University of Western Australia (UWA) and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). These projects run in conjunction with university equity departments, are an opportunity for academics, lecturers and staff, to be educated and understand the experiences of queer students, the discrimination they face and strategies to eliminate sexuality based discrimination on campus. It is vital that queer students are involved in this process as it is the 'true' stories of queer students that allow non-queer students to directly understand the impact homophobia has on them as human beings.

In addition Queer Departments also run forum discussions on issues related to 'queer experiences' on campus aimed at recognising areas where queer students feel marginalised. These forums further move to identify homophobia on campus and look at ways to eliminate practices that allow homophobia to exist. The Australian National University for example earlier this year ran a series of forums for resident tutors at their many colleges aimed at eradicating homophobia and sexism that so often are entrenched in college culture.

Queer Departments have also begun to take a role in educating the community more widely about sexuality discrimination and the issues that queer young people face. The University of Queensland Student Union and their respective queer collective have for example has established Gender and Sexuality In Schools Program, a initiative aimed targeted at all education system - Parents, Principals, teachers and students - to create a culture that accepts and celebrates diversity and actively reduces the incidence of homophobia and Gender Identity oppression in their educational institutions.

### 3. Support

In many cases the most vital services that Student Organisations provide to queer students is the free or heavily subsidised, access to professional services, whether they be counselling, medical or advocacy services.

In the same way that information is important for queer students due to the stigmatisation of sexuality, student support services provided by Student Organisations are also extremely vital for queer students. Counselling services are accessible anonymously on campus and are often offered free or heavily subsidised by student organisations. These services are utilised by queer students for many reasons, and often may be the only point of contact for students experiencing difficulties with 'coming out' or understanding the way they feel, quite seriously these services save queer lives.

Offered on many campuses around Australia 'Coming out Workshops' also offers vital support for queer students, they allow for a non-discriminatory space where students can

contribute their experiences of the sexuality and share coping strategies. These workshops may be the only chance students have to discuss how they feel, as their homes, families and friends may not necessarily be supportive of the sexuality or gender identity.

Added to the provision of professional advice for queer students Student Organisations also offer advocacy in dealing with academic appeals and assistance with dealing with Government Departments like Centrelink. In the case where students need further assistance outside of the student organisations, they can be referred to queer friendly service providers.

#### 4. Representation and Political Advocacy

One of the most important roles of the Queer Departments at University is the representation that it gives to queer students and further the department's right to politically organise on issues that face queer students.

University Queer Collectives annually elect 'Queer Officers' whose role is to be the public and visible face of the queer group on campus. Their role also extends to facilitating campaigns on behalf of the queer department, referring young people who use the department to counselling and support groups and providing representation on the respective student organisations councils. This allows queer voices to be heard in decision making bodies of the student organisations and further allows queer officers to ensure that decisions made in unions are queer friendly.

In many cases it is vital queer departments to have the right to politically organise on campus and in the wider community. With homophobia rampant in our community, campaigns that aim to educate others about issues that face queer people are extremely important.

## Impact of the Abolition of Compulsory Student Union Fees on Queer Departments

It is no underestimation that the services Queer Departments provide across the nation, save lives. The dedicated work of student organisations and their queer support staff are vital to the wellbeing of hundreds of queer students in their time of need. The array of services provided are under threat from the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism, Without these services it would mean queer students struggling to feel connected and comfortable with themselves, would be forced to struggle entirely by themselves.

I became involved in the university of Wollongong queer collective, when I was 18 and had only told about 3 people that I was gay. I was absolutely petrified to be recognised as a lesbian and was really scared to even go into the queer space. When I got the personal courage to deal with my sexuality I did it through writing letters to the sexuality representative on the student council. After a while I felt comfortable enough to actually speak to the sexuality officer.

After I met some of the other people in the queer collective I began to feel more comfortable. The queer space provided me with a space where I eventually felt relaxed and like myself and I could access information. It was very exciting and I felt extremely empowered when I used the space.

Eventually the friends I made through the queer collective were there to save my life when I was suicidal and self harming. Without the queer collective and the queer space I would probably be dead and I know that some of my friends might have been as well.

Queer Student, 22

By abolishing compulsory student union fees, Student Organisations will be forced to prioritise commercially viable ventures. Meaning that they will be required to consider make decisions like renting their own spaces to retain income, meaning spaces such as departmental offices will have to compete with commercial endeavours, for space.

Most at risk are the 'Queer Spaces' provided on campus, as they derive no financial income, and thus become unsustainable. These spaces provide a vital escape for queer students from entrenched discrimination, and allow those not 'out' to socialise and empower themselves in a safe and supportive environment. Without these spaces, it is apparent that queer drop out levels could increase, and most concerning, those in dire need of support will not be able to access services and thus fall into an at-risk category where suicide and self-harm become an unfortunate reality.

Additionally, free-counselling and subsidised medical services that are accessed regularly by queer students are also under severe threat from VSU. It will mean that Student Organisations will no longer be able to sustain these services at their current levels, forcing them to reduce subsidies and in some cases cut services. The increased cost of these services will mean that queer students will no longer be able to afford to use them, meaning that they will be forced to either access the services outside of the university environment or not use or worse not be able to access support services at all. These changes will have the largest effect on minority groups who use the services such as Indigenous students, disabled students and queer students.

The experience of Western Australian universities under Voluntary Student Unionism provides real examples of the worrying effects of this legislation. Murdoch Student Guild and the Edith Cowan Student Guild were all but decimated and were only able to survive after emergency funding from the then Keating Government. Queer Collectives and Queer Departments on these campuses have still been unable to fully survive from the effects of VSU. Additionally, in the experience of the University of Western Australia services like the 24hr sexual assault referral centre were forced to close and have been replaced by commercial businesses.

**Students cannot afford the effects that VSU will have on Student Organisations and campus life.**

**The NUS National Queer Department oppose any attempt of the Liberal Government to introduce any model of Voluntary Student Unionism.**