

**NATIONAL UNION OF
GREEK AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS
(NUGAS)**

POLICY

**VOLUNTARY STUDENT
UNIONISM
(VSU)**

**PREPARED BY:
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1994

HISTORY OF VSU

Probably the greatest threat that Victorian students as a group face in 1994 is Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU). This legislation forces a situation whereby students who enrol at a tertiary institution do not have to pay, and cannot pay their General Service Fee (GSF) to organisations with student administration.

They intend it is inferred at present to outlaw the collection of such a fee particularly with regard to the representative & political functions of Student Organisations. At present the payment of such a fee is compulsory and it is used to provide services such as eating places, activities, photocopiers, Contact, Counselling, the Health Services, the Dental Service, Driving School, childcare system and the S.R.C. Legal Service at a subsidised rate. The Sports and Recreation Centre also comes out of the GSF as does the representation and other activities provided by the S.R.C. (Newsletter, Newspaper, Clubs and Societies, the Women's Action Collective, the Education and Welfare Committee and among other thing).

In all likelihood the nature of the Victorian legislation will outlaw the collection of the GSF for organisations with student control, and to thus annihilate all factors of student representations and to remove any student participation in the determination of service provision.

The drastic and damaging effect that the imposition of VSU would have on student organisations have been widely published recently. Given that VSU will seem to provide little benefit to the student population, will only increase the price and reduce the access to basic services and will mean that a whole array of student activities and interests will cease to exist. The main proponents of VSU claim that forcing people to pay the GSF and become members of the union is an infringement of a basic human right — the right to Freedom of Association. It is apparently a violation of basic human rights to make a person join a union or political party against her/his will and as Australia is signatory to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, amongst other things, which prohibits such compulsion; it is a gross miscarriage of justice that is nevertheless forces its students to become members of the student organisation. Thus the compulsory payment of the GSF upon enrolment is seen to be nothing less than a violation of a basic human right. This surmise is false on two counts. Firstly, student unions are not seen to be on the same par a Trade Unions and they are certainly not the same things as a political party. A decision of the Equal Opportunity Board in Victoria (S. Kenmar vs. A.L. Prichard and Monash University) found that a particular student was not being forced to join a political party or a union in the sense when he was forced to pay his Union fee because

“The HAS (Monash's equivalent to the SRC) is no political body in the sense that a political party or some trade unions could be said to be in that its very nature of politics is capable of changing from one side of the political arena to the other depending on the active members within it. The former bodies (i.e. Trade Unions and Political parties) are inherently representative of one particular view of politics and their policies reflect this”.

That is, in joining the Student Union, the student in question was not forced to join a party with any necessary particular political persuasion as the direction of the organisation is constantly in a state of flux depending on who gets involved -and every student has the right to get involved and influence the salary and direction of

the union and the SRC – including S. Kenmar. Furthermore, there is no sanctions against a person who decides not to get involved: involvement in the Union’s political activities is not compulsory nor does it has any ramifications whatsoever for a student who does not involve himself in these activities.. There are no sanctions upon any member who fails to go to student general meetings or involve themselves in election or in any committee of the HAS.

Thus being compelled to join the student union does not come under the Declaration of Human Rights because, firstly it is not a political organisation in the sense that Trade Unions and the political parties can be said to be in so much as anyone with any particular political persuasion has the right to get involved, in the union and secondly, there are no sanctions or ramifications for not getting involved.

More ever beyond the legal interpretations of what contravene the UN Declaration of Human Rights there are obviously severe limitations to the theory of “freedom of association’. Accepting this, there seems little to be gained from applying the principle of freedom of association to student unions given that no-one is discriminated against or receives any dis-benefit from being a member and are all can gain to some extent by pooling our resources to provide the cheapest and most accessible facilities and services to the student body, in a manner in which all students can participate in the decision-making process.

It is worth considering the role of government in collecting taxes and distributing resources from and to the community as a possible analogy. The nature of this activity is not voluntary and nor should it be: no-one would take seriously the suggestion that taxes should be voluntary and if someone wanted to use a road or a school when they could pay for it as they used it. The same arguments can be used against the push toward VSU: a much greater range of services and facilities can be provided at a much cheaper price if we pool resources collectively. Further, if these resources are collectively pooled and managed by the community which provides and uses them, they are much more likely to satisfy the needs and requirements of their users than they would be if they were controlled by people motivate solely by profit.

What has been also emphasised in the campaign against VSU is the range of services that student organisations provide almost to the exclusion of an emphasis on our diverse cultural and political activities. Whilst it is understood that to an extent we may feel we should play down our political activities given that they may ultimately cause our downfall, the result of doing so will be that we reinforce the view that some how political and cultural activities can be and should be thoroughly defended. All students have the right to get involved in their student organisations and to have a say in their student organisations and to have a say in their direction. These that don’t get involved have chosen not to, they haven’t been prevented, and thus they cannot say they have been discriminated against if the student organisation takes a direction to which they are opposed.

Finally, the push towards VSU will lead to the perception of political and cultural activities as an illegitimate way in which to spend student money.

HOW DOES VSU EFFECT NUGAS?

The National Union of Greek Australian Students (N.U.G.A.S.) is an organisation comprised of various Greek clubs from tertiary institutions. The life and blood source of N.U.G.A.S. is derived from the existence of Greek clubs and their well-being on campus. Without the operation of Greek clubs to allow the influx of new students to join the organisation and to maintain the existing membership of students, N.U.G.A.S. would not be able to operate.

For many years people have perceived N.U.G.A.S. as an external body from the Student Representative Council (S.R.C.), however this assumption is both true and false. N.U.G.A.S. does not have to answer to the S.R.C. or more importantly to Clubs and Societies (C&S), however many people tend to ignore the fact that our Greek clubs such as Latrobe University Greek Club, must answer to C&S. In order for a Greek club to form and operate on campus they must be accepted by C&S, in order to be allowed to promote or organise their functions or campaigns.

Clubs and Societies ensure that clubs on campus operate in relation to student rights and needs. Hence, they are not detrimental to any student, non-discriminatory. C&S also provide services to their affiliated clubs such as monetary assistance for their activities, access to photocopiers and stationery for their newsletters, tax exemption forms for the purchasing of equipment and merchandise (e.g. medallions), discounts on student services and facilities (e.g. access to lecture theatre) and recognition in their university structure.

Such services provided by Clubs and Societies are needed for the operation and maintenance of our Greek clubs. Without the existence of C&S, Greek clubs will be left to struggle on their own. The effectiveness and the structure of Greek clubs will deteriorate, which will inevitably lead to their destruction. This will then lead to the suffering of N.U.G.A.S., which is dependent on their clubs well-being to operate effectively.

Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) is a legislation that forces a situation whereby students who enrol at a tertiary institution cannot pay a General Service Fee (GSF) to organisations with student administration. Thus, outlawing the collection of such a fee particularly with regards to the representative and political functions of student organisations.

At present the payment of such a fee is compulsory and it is used to provide many services such as Clubs and Societies that assist the maintenance of Greek clubs. The nature of the Victorian legislation will outlaw the collection of the GSF for organisations with student control, and to thus annihilate all factors of student representation, and to remove any student participation in the determination of service provision. Hence, the collection of GSF will still occur, but to the university not to student organisations.

With the payment of GSF being made to the university, they will then determine in where fees can be spent on, such as, only towards health, welfare and sporting services. Cultural and social activities and student representation have already been outlawed because they are run by student organisations.

Therefore, the introduction of the Victorian VSU legislation will only lead to the loss of power held by student organisations to distribute the GSF on activities they believe necessary. Inevitably, their loss of power to operate effectively will mean services provided by student organisation will cease, due to their lack of funding. Ultimately, this will mean the deterioration of Greek clubs and the destruction of N.U.G.A.S..

Destruction will arise because of the increase of expenditure occurred by the organisation. The increase costs in which clubs must accommodate for will mean an increase in the cost to attend a function by a member in order to subsidise the increase in outlay. Hence, may result in the decrease in membership participation and attendance of functions, which will inevitably mean the deterioration and destruction of the organisation.

Senator Susan Ryan

Minister For Education

C/O Parliament House.

Canberra A.C.T. 2600.

Dear Senator Ryan,

I would like to express my disgust at your government's turn—about on the issue of free education. The introduction of the \$250 fee won't seriously affect wealthy students whose parents can and will pay for them, but it will have a major impact on those students who are already struggling to survive. Many of your government's policies have attempted to increase opportunities for economically disadvantaged students entering the tertiary sector, but the changes brought in with this year's budget will have quite the opposite effect.

I am shocked to see that visa charges for overseas students have increased yet again. Providing education for overseas students is one of the most viable forms of overseas aid, yet your government seems determined to turn the overseas student programme into a profit-making venture. With visa charges at their current level, it will be only the already—privileged who will be able to afford an Australian education.

Although you claim that the full tertiary allowance will be increased to \$80 per week next year, this includes the \$250 fee and the old \$100 incidentals allowance. It is therefore apparent that tertiary allowances are worth less than ever, since the cost of living increases every year. \$80 per week is in any case ridiculously inadequate, and the means test determining eligibility for tertiary allowances is unrealistic. Many students in genuine need are ineligible for allowances. The \$2000 limit on earnings to supplement an allowance, however meagre, makes the erroneous assumption that parents will be willing to financially assist their children in higher education.

Payment for education should be extracted from students when they can afford it, through a fairer taxation system, and not before. I hope that your government will realise its obligation to provide a free and accessible higher education system, and alter its funding accordingly. Education should be a community resource, and as such it is not for sale.

Yours sincerely,

PETTE PIRPIRIS
N.U.G.A.S. Victoria
Policy Officer

FEDERAL TERTIARY ADMINISTRATIVE CHARGE

The National Council of N.U.G.A.S. would like to re—affirm its strong opposition to the Government's introduction of a tertiary administration charge of \$250.00 We see this so-called administration charge purely as a tertiary FEE which blatantly takes away one's right to free education. We stand firm in our belief that education is the right of every member of Australian society and not a privilege for the few. It is unfortunate that a Government of the Labour Party, a party that historically has enjoyed the support of the overwhelming majority of the student body, has decided to betray this support.

The \$250.00 fee creates a precedent for future years, and if we allow it to eventually remain, it will no doubt be increased per annum reaching a stage where only a small section of students, namely those coming from an upper class background, will afford to attend a tertiary institution. The next step then will be, and there are already signs emanating which allude to this, the total privatisation of tertiary education, which will no doubt signal the end of an education system designed to promote the individual's right to free and creative thinking.

The National Council urges all its state organisations and its affiliated clubs to come into contact with their respective campus SRC's and express their solidarity by actively participating in the anti-fees campaign organised on their campus. The National Council also directs the National Executive of N.U.G.A.S. to actively lobby the relevant Government bodies at all levels on this issue in any way it sees fit, thereby expressing the Union's opposition to the administration charge.

Direct action must be taken promptly if we are to maintain our right to free, equal and accessible education for all.