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Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to you on behalf of the Australian Law Students' Association (ALSA) in regards to *The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students* Discussion Paper.

ALSA was established in 1978 and is the peak national representative body for Australia's 32 law student societies and 30 000 law students. ALSA's primary objective is to represent and promote the interests and concerns of all Australian law students.

Enclosed is ALSA's submission. Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions or comments relating to the submission, or would like to arrange a meeting.

Kind regards



Mitch Riley



**SUBMISSION TO**

**THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE**

**RELATIONS**

*THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTARY STUDENT UNIONISM ON SERVICES, AMENITIES AND  
REPRESENTATION FOR AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS*

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**SUBMISSION DATE**

8 MARCH 2008

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For many years, ALSA has been a strong advocate against VSU (see Appendices 1 and 2). ALSA remains opposed to voluntary student unionism as introduced under the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Act 2005 (the Act)*.<sup>1</sup> ALSA believes that the \$85m in transitional funding provided by the Government has delayed the full impact of VSU, and that the deterioration of services will continue in the near future. The user-pays model is inappropriate for the provision of essential student services that are non-excludable, or in the public good. Furthermore, students are often unaware of who is providing the service, or they never contemplate utilising 'emergency services such as financial assistance, counselling, legal services and educational representation. Western Australia and Victorias' experiences with VSU provide insight into the full effects that will be felt on campuses around Australia in the coming months and years. The ECU Student Guild was forced into liquidation, and a number of universities were forced to fund or administer essential services.

Law student societies deliver services of vital importance to students, such as careers events, publications, educational representation, and legal competitions. Many law student societies were heavily reliant on union funding, and have consequently offered a reduction in services offered. Law student societies are yet to be established at Australia's three newest law campuses.

ALSA's preferred model is one where unions are able to levy a compulsory amenities and services charge. This should fund essential services such as counselling and legal advice, and fund societies that offer services of direct academic benefit, such as competitions and careers events. This fee should not be used for political campaigning sporting facilities or social events, as these can be adequately funded under a user-pays approach. Any compulsory fee should be deferrable as part of a student's HECS debt. Alternatively, universities or the government should give unions an equivalent rate of funding to ALSA's preferred model, and allow them to deliver the same services. Given the chronic underfunding of higher education, the government should fund these services.

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<sup>1</sup> The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Act 2005*.

## **1. THE IMPACT OF THE ACT ON STUDENT SERVICES**

ALSA believes that student guilds and unions provide Australian students with essential and invaluable services that have been, or will be drastically reduced or withdrawn as a result of the Act. These services include:

- Academic advice and advocacy;
- Policing of illegal fees;
- Student welfare and equity services;
- Financial assistance;
- Employment services;
- Personal counselling;
- Healthcare;
- Childcare;
- Promotion of culture, clubs and societies; and
- Campus buildings and infrastructure.

As the Government's transitional funding arrangements dry up, the full effects of VSU will be felt. A similar impact has been felt by university sports associations, which are also reliant upon the funding provided by upfront fees.

### **1.1.1 The Effect of VSU Legislation in Western Australia**

The deleterious impact of the VSU for the provision of student services is exemplified by the consequences of the *Acts Amendment (Student Guilds and Associations) Act 1994* (WA) for Western Australian universities. Initially, the Commonwealth compensated student organisations for lost income due to state VSU legislation, and reduced grants to offending states.<sup>2</sup> However, once Commonwealth compensation ceased and the full effects of the State VSU legislation were felt from 1997 onwards, the Edith Cowan University Student Guild collapsed, and the remaining student guilds were forced to make massive cutbacks to student services. Moreover, Universities were forced to take over direct administration and financing of many basic student services. In summary, the effects on UWA, Curtin, Murdoch and ECU Guilds were as follows:

- An inability to meet wages and operational expenses;
- Widespread redundancies and subsequent staffing shortages in key areas;
- Reductions in student services, facilities, representation and capital;
- Massive budget cuts across key areas, notably academic, welfare, on-funding of faculty and other societies, and representation budgets;
- The sale of key organisation assets, including sports associations; and

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<sup>2</sup> *State Grants (General Purposes) Act 1993* (Cth).

- Low membership take-up rates (UWA – 28%; ECU – 13%; Murdoch 38%; and Curtin – 10%) despite an increasing demand for guild services, which was indicative of rampant free-riding.

For example, the University of Western Australia Guild of Undergraduates made the following cutbacks as a result of the legislation:

- 28 Guild employees lost their jobs;
- The sexual assault referral centre was closed;
- The Guild cancelled 24hr/365 day personal accident insurance for all University students;
- The Guild was forced to close the Guild computer lounge;
- The Guild cut its student representation budget by 80%;
- The Guild cut its student welfare budget by 35%;
- The Guild cut its textbook subsidy scheme by 70%;
- The Guild was forced to cut activities on campus, and club and society funding by approximately 50%; and
- The Guild was forced to sell numerous valuable assets to stay afloat, including the Guild Shop, the UWA Sports Association, and most of its office space.

### **1.1.2 The effect of VSU legislation in Victoria**

The *Tertiary Education Amendment Act 1994* (Vic) retained a compulsory student service fee which could be used for food services; meeting rooms; sports and physical recreation; child care facilities; counselling; health care; legal, health, housing and employment services; visual and performing arts; and audio-visual media, academic support and overseas student services. In 1995, the regulations were extended to include the conduct of student elections to university council and its committees, and other management committees of the institution. In sharp contrast to the Western Australian experience, Victorian student organisations generally continued to offer a comprehensive range of services, adequate student representation and maintained staffing levels. Furthermore, voluntary membership levels remained high, and in 1996 ranged from 60-70%, with the highest membership rate being at Melbourne University (85%).

The effects of the Victorian Voluntary Student Representation (VSR) model were far less dramatic than in Western Australia. Student organisations were able to maintain their primary services and core functions under the legislation, although representation of student interests necessarily suffered.

### **1.1.3 The Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Act 2005**

On 9 December 2005, the Senate passed the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Act 2005*, which abolished compulsory student unionism, and associated upfront fees from July 2006. The Government provided universities with \$85 million over three years for recreational and sporting facilities; however, no ongoing funding commitment has been made to compensate unions for the \$172.8 million they collected in the final year before VSU.

While ALSA appreciates that not every service provided by student unions will benefit all students, ALSA maintains that all students should contribute to the provision of essential services by student unions as all ratepayers contribute to government services that they may not solicit. All students benefit from a range of student services during their university careers, but more importantly, all students benefit from the assurance of services they will hopefully never need: emergency loans; personal counselling; sexual assault referral centres; academic appeals; legal advice and many more. These services, by their nature, are not those that students anticipate that they will use; hence, they cannot accurately account for them when deciding whether to pay their union fees. Furthermore, students often benefit from the services provided by their student association without being aware of the direct involvement of their association. Students do not always differentiate between the services provided to them by the university, the student association, faculties and other student organisations. This is evident in the example of policing illegal fees, 'night bus' services provided by unions, meeting rooms, and advocacy services.

ALSA's primary opposition to VSU is on the basis that VSU has led to a reduction in the funding and support previously available to student associations who add value to students' education. However, ALSA does not support the funding of all student societies. ALSA believes that funding should be given to those societies that provide a direct benefit to students in relation to their degrees, by providing services such as educational representation, tutorials, careers events and competitions. Students seldom realise that societies providing services such as these are reliant on university funding, and do not factor this into their decision-making process. Furthermore, a number of these services, such as careers events, are non-exclusory; hence, are subject to free-riding. ALSA does not believe that students should be compulsorily required to contribute to sporting facilities, political campaigns or social events, but should be required to contribute to the abovementioned essential services. Whilst these are important parts of university, they are well-suited under a user-pays scheme.

The argument that if students value the services provided to them by their student association they will be willing to contribute financially to that service is not well-founded. The analogy with government again holds true: if taxpayers valued the services provided by the Government then they would be willing to contribute voluntarily to the provision of Government services without compulsory rates and taxation. However, Government services could not be adequately provided without compulsory rates and taxes because of the nature of Government services: the provision of public goods, the provision of non-excludable services and otherwise providing for the public generally. The nature of student services is similar, and the logic for compulsory contribution is precisely the same. If there are concerns about the manner in which these fees are being utilised or the way these organisations are operation (and ALSA believes that there are such concerns), the answer is to preclude unions from providing funding for certain activities, and to increase accountability – not the total abolition of upfront fees, which simply equates to the abolition of non-market supported services entirely.

## 2. THE IMPACT OF THE ACT ON LAW STUDENTS

### 2.1.1 The Impact on the Funding of Law Student Societies

Prior to VSU, a number of Australia's 32 law student societies received significant funding from their student organisations. These societies provide crucial services to Australia's 30 000 law students, including careers services, academic services, legal competitions and educational representation. At the ALSA Council meeting in April 2005, six law student societies indicated to ALSA that they would cease to exist under the proposed legislation, as their primary or only source of funding was their student organisation. These Societies were predominantly regional, and as such served the interests of Australia's most disadvantaged law students. Further, it was also clear at the April Council meeting that VSU would force many other law student societies to reduce their services to their members, often substantially. At the September 2007 Council, no law student society had ceased to exist. However, a number of societies had insufficient funding to attend, sent only one delegate (instead of two) or sought funding from ALSA to attend. Prior to September Council, ALSA surveyed each law student society. Five universities out of the 26 that responded indicated that they were adversely affected by VSU. Primarily, this was a consequence of reduced funding opportunities. This meant that some societies had to increase membership and reduce the number of events and services provided. In addition to these detriments, a number of societies welcomed being able to shun union bureaucracy and regulations.

The survey canvassed the direct provision of services by law student societies to their members. However, it did not cover the effects on the running of the societies themselves. In addition to direct funding, unions formerly provided less tangible forms of support. Typically this included: computer and software facilities and support; the provision of office and recreational spaces; the availability of administrative assistance such as mailing services; reduced rates on food, drink, equipment and function venues for social events; and the necessary infrastructure for the representation of students to the faculty, university and general public. A key service that was often provided by student organisations was the insurance of law student societies under the umbrella of their student organisation. The loss of this insurance seriously undermines the ability of law student societies to offer many services to their members, particularly social services. Thus, it is clear that without student union funding and support services the activities of law student societies will be restricted in number and compromised in quality.

### 2.1.2 The Impact on the Representation of Law Students

Law student societies have an important role to play in student representation within their faculty, university, locally and federally. The contribution of students on faculty and university committees is highly valued by staff and students. Consequently, most law student societies enjoy broad representation on key committees including curriculum, information technology, library, enrolments, the law faculty and boards of the faculties generally. All students benefit from the results of this representation and

consultation. Law student society representatives are democratically elected by the student body. Therefore, all law students can have a say in who represents their interests, and further, to which services and activities funds are allocated. The passing of the Act has had obvious ramifications on the representation of law students, making services less, rather than more, responsive to student needs.

### **2.1.3 Law Student Society Activities**

Law student societies are reliant upon financial and other support to assist them in providing a multiplicity of services to students. Law student societies organise and run group and individual tutorial programmes for students; study-skills workshops; career seminars and fairs; community legal centres; conferences; mooting, client interview, witness examination, negotiation and paper presentation competitions; and the production of such publications as career guides, orientation handbooks, year books, magazines, academic journals and alternative law handbooks. These activities should be distinguished from the party-political or purely social activities conducted by some student organisations. The loss of these services would radically devalue the educational experience law students gain while at university.

Law student societies also organise a range of social activities to enhance the enjoyment of, and facilitate the greater incorporation of students into university and faculty life, although ALSA does not believe that a compulsory services fee should be used to fund such events. These activities include law balls, first year camps and dinners, cocktail parties, cruises, regular lunches and BBQs and sporting events. A major consequence of VSU has been to decrease the funding available to societies that are currently reliant on support from their student association. Some law student societies have been forced to reduce the range and quality of services they currently provide to students. This has not only had an effect on the social experience of law students, but the educational value they derive from their time at university.

Due to the time and financial constraints under which law faculties currently operate, law student societies are relied upon to provide practical education experiences through organising and administering mooting, trial advocacy, negotiation and client interview competitions, the running of community legal centres, careers seminars and publications, and the provision of tutorials. With a decrease in funding, some law student societies can no longer provide this broad range of educational opportunities to students. Universities have made it clear (through the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee) that they are not able to commit any funding to take up the short fall for these essential services. Consequently, VSU has decreased the quality of legal education received by students.

Many of the services provided by law student societies are unprofitable and would not survive on a user-pays basis. Moreover, law student societies reject the notion that their worth can be reduced to a question of economic sustainability. They take pride in the quality and range of the services, activities and publications they provide to students. Law student societies reject the notion that the funding they receive from student unions is spent on

activities that law students do not want. While not all law students take advantage of all the benefits offered by their society, all students rely on at least some of these services.

#### **2.1.4 The Impact on New Law Student Societies**

In 2008, the University of South Australia and the University of Southern Queensland opened new law schools, the latter at two campuses. Fledgling societies find it almost impossible to obtain private funding and are reliant on the union for financial support. Establishing a new society is a challenging and lengthy process, which requires both financial and in-kind support. New law student societies are unlikely to be able to afford the cost of legal competitions and publications, and will find it difficult to entice employees to visit campuses without an information distribution mechanism. In rural areas, funding opportunities are even scarcer. It is only once societies have established goodwill by adding value to the student body and the legal profession that they can seek private sponsorship. Given that unions are no longer a source of income for societies, new societies must either be funded by their law school, or the private sector. New law schools typically have no spare funding due to the establishment costs of a law school. As already outlined, the private sector is unlikely to sponsor a society until it can be sure that there is some benefit to them. Hence, ALSA is concerned that whilst established societies will feel the impact of VSU, it may prohibit the establishment of the vital services that law student societies provide at new law schools.

### **3. THE IMPACT OF THE ACT ON UNIVERSITIES**

As a result of the Act, Australian universities have been forced to make up the shortfall for the provision of students services on campus, or disband them. This was also the Western Australian experience of VSU, where universities were forced to take over the financing and in some cases the administration of many basic student services. Student guilds and unions were unable to provide many essential services, or provide them at an affordable price to students, and universities were forced to provide these services themselves or fund student organisations to provide them. Given the current funding crisis facing universities, it is irrational and irresponsible to shift the cost of these services to higher education providers.

Moreover, the radical reduction in student services, on-campus life and the ability of student organisations and faculty societies to service their members will make Australian universities a less attractive option for overseas students. This will have further deleterious effects on university income and the Australian economy. It is noteworthy that the leading UK, North American and western European universities, including Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard, have universal student unionism and compulsory student fees as an accepted norm.<sup>3</sup> In New Zealand, to legitimise its VSU legislation, the

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<sup>3</sup> In those jurisdiction the "the payment of a compulsory student fee is widely accepted as the best way of providing student support services and representation." Australasian Campus Union Managers Association, *Submission to 1999 VSU Senate Committee*, No.159 at 4.

government held a referendum of its students in each university on whether to retain a universal levy. In all but one case the students voted in favour of the levy.

#### **4. THE EFFECT OF THE ACT ON ALSA**

While ALSA is not directly funded by a student union or association, we do rely financially on our members paying their annual affiliation fees. These fees are determined on the basis of the number of law students at each particular university. Law student societies that are substantially funded by their student union rely on this financial assistance to be able to pay their affiliation fees. While ALSA has waived the affiliation fees of struggling law student societies in the past, this is an unsustainable practice. Furthermore, ALSA has had to fund the attendance of a number of smaller societies as a result of VSU. ALSA would not be able to operate effectively if all law student societies substantially affected by the introduction of the VSU withdrew their fees and membership, or simply were unable to attend biannual Council meetings and the annual Conference.

Furthermore, by being forced to withdraw their membership or simply being unable to participate in the activities of ALSA, the students at the law schools would be forced to forego valuable opportunities such as taking part in national competitions run by ALSA, attending the Australasian Legal Education Forum and having access to ALSA publications.

#### **5. ALTERNATIVE MODELS**

##### **5.1.1 Western Australian Model**

Under the *Acts Amendment (Student Guilds and Associations) Act 2002 (WA)*, Western Australian universities collected a modest amenities and services fee from all students, which was allocated to student unions, sports associations and to the provision of other amenities and services. However, membership of WA student organisations was voluntary and students could choose whether or not to join their student organisation. Fees paid by students choosing not to join student organisations were used by the University to help fund service provision.

ALSA urges the Government to consider allowing universities to charge a compulsory services and amenities charge. This ensures that vital student services are maintained and that universities are not subject to the additional financial pressures of providing or funding student services formerly provided by student organisations.

##### **5.1.2 Victorian Model**

Under the Victorian model of Voluntary Student Representation introduced by the Kennett Government in 1994, student organisations collected a compulsory fee but were prohibited from using these compulsory fees to fund political services and representation. While ALSA considers student political representation to be an essential aspect of the work of student organisations,

it regards this more limited legislative provision as preferable to the model currently provided for under the Act.

### **5.1.3 ALSA's Preferred Model**

ALSA believes that the ideal approach is a compulsory union fee that can be deferred onto HECS. This fee should be used to provide services and amenities that directly benefit students. ALSA does not believe that students should compulsorily fund political campaigns, or union agendas. However, essential services, such as counselling, legal advice, educational representation and financial support should be provided on campus. Funds should also be allocated to student societies who provide services of educational value to the student community, such as careers events, competitions directly related to students' education, academic publications and educational representation. The fee should not be used to fund sporting or social activities. Government or the universities should fund sporting facilities on campus, and levy appropriate user-pays charges.

ALSA believes that in theory, a number of the abovementioned essential services can be provided by universities, and not by student unions. However, since the introduction of VSU, a number of universities have chosen to fund unions to deliver these services. This may be because of unions' track records and capability, or a lack of interest or capacity for Universities to deliver these services. Furthermore, the evidence from VSU in Western Australia suggests that rather than taking over the management of these services, universities let them shut down. In any case, services such as educational representation require a separation from the university. Alternatively, if the Government does not wish to levy a compulsory fee, the abovementioned services should be either funded by the university or Government. In ALSA's opinion, because of the chronic funding shortfall in universities, the responsibility should fall to the Government.



## APPENDIX ONE: ALSA'S 2005 SUBMISSION ON VSU

### AUSTRALIAN LAW STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION



## SUBMISSION ON VOLUNTARY STUDENT UNIONISM

### **Inquiry into the Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill 1999 Voluntary Student Unionism**

The Australian Law Students' Association (ALSA) is opposed to Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU).

ALSA is the peak representative body for law students in Australia. All twenty-eight Law Student Societies in Australia are members of ALSA, comprising a student membership in excess of 20 000. One of ALSA's primary functions is to represent and promote the interests and concerns of law students in Australia. To this end we oppose the introduction of VSU as it will have a detrimental effect both on the continued existence of strong Law Student Societies and the quality of legal education.

#### ***VSU and a reduction in funding***

The basis of ALSA's opposition to VSU is that it will lead to a reduction in funds and support available to student associations and other student organisations. The argument that if students value the services provided to them by their student association they will be willing to contribute financially to it is not well-founded.

First, students often benefit from the services provided by their student association without being aware of the direct involvement of their association. Students do not always differentiate between the services provided to them by the university, the student association, faculties and other student organisations. Secondly, the notion

of 'user-pays' is not appropriate for a majority of student association activities such as representation of student interests within and outside the university arena.

Just as all students benefit from services provided by student associations and the organisations they support yet may not voluntarily choose to contribute financially to their student association - the revenue raised through taxation benefits all citizens yet were taxation to be elective, citizens would not opt to pay taxes. The fundamental premise of VSU, therefore, is unsubstantiated.

### ***Law Student Society funding and support***

Law Student Societies are funded in many different ways and from varying sources. Most commonly, Law Student Societies receive financial assistance from their Faculty, by student subscription, sponsorship and from their student union, or student association. Some of the larger Law Student Societies are able to operate without requiring their members to pay membership fees. In many cases, funding from student unions represents a large proportion of the revenue of Law Student Societies.

In addition to direct funding, less tangible forms of support are also provided by student associations to Law Student Societies. Typically these include: computer and software facilities and support; the provision of office and recreational space; the availability of such administrative assistance as mailing services; reduced rates on food, drink, equipment and function venues for social events; and the necessary infrastructure for the representation of students to the faculty, university and general public.

Without student union funding and support services the activities of Law Student Societies would be restricted in number and compromised in quality.

### ***Law Student Society activities***

Law Student Societies are reliant upon financial and other support to assist them in providing a multiplicity of services to students. Law Student Societies organise and run group and individual tutorial programmes for students; study-skills workshops; career seminars and fairs; community legal centres; conferences; mooting, client interview, witness examination, negotiation and paper presentation competitions; legal fora; and the production of such publications as career guides, orientation handbooks, year books, magazines, academic journals and alternative law

handbooks. These activities should be distinguished from the party-political activities conducted by some student organisations which feature in Government statements on VSU. The loss of these services would radically devalue the educational experience law students gain while at university.

Law Student Societies also organise a range of social activities to enhance the enjoyment of and facilitate the greater incorporation of students into university and faculty life. These activities include law balls, first year camps and dinners, cocktail parties, cruises, regular lunches and BBQs and sporting events.

A major consequence of VSU will be to decrease the funding available to societies that are currently reliant on support from their student association. Law Student Societies will be forced to radically reduce the range and quality of services they currently provide to students. This will not only have an effect on the social experience of law students, but the educational value they derive from their time at university as well.

Due to time and financial constraints under which Law Faculties currently operate, Law Student Societies are relied upon to provide practical education experiences through such methods as mooting and client interview competitions, the running of community legal centres and the provision of tutorials. With a decrease in funding Law Student Societies will no-longer be able to provide this broad range of educational opportunities for students. Universities have made it clear (through the AVCC) that they are not able commit any funding to take up the short fall in these essential services. Consequently, VSU will decrease the quality of legal education received by students.

Many of the services provided by Law Student Societies are unprofitable and would not survive on a user-pays basis. Moreover, Law Student Societies reject the notion that their worth can be reduced to a question of economic sustainability. They take pride in the quality and range of the services, activities and publications they provide to students. Law Student Societies reject the notion that the funding they receive from student unions is spent on activities which law students do not want. While not all law students take advantage of all the benefits offered by their society, most students do rely on a majority of them.

### ***Representing Law Students***

Law Student Societies also have an important role to play in student representation within their faculty, university, locally and federally. The contribution of students on faculty and university committees is highly valued by staff and students.

Consequently, most Law Student Societies enjoy broad representation on key committees including curriculum, information technology, library, enrolments, the law faculty and boards of the faculties generally. All students benefit from the results of this representation and consultation.

Law Student Society representatives are democratically elected by the student body. Therefore, all law students can have a say in who represents their interests, and further, to which services and activities funds are allocated. The introduction of VSU, by removing, reducing or qualifying the use of student union funding received by Law Student Societies, is likely to make services less, rather than more, responsive to student needs.

### ***Australian Law Students' Association***

ALSA's activities include the organisation of such events as the Annual Asia-Pacific Conference and the Australasian Legal Education Forum; education policy development and research; the provision of useful careers information; the publication of several resources for law students; the provision of unique products and services to members; and the facilitation of communication and information exchange between Law Student Societies within Australia and internationally.

While ALSA is not directly funded by a student union or association, we do rely financially on our members paying their annual affiliation fees. These fees are determined on the basis of the number of law students at each particular university. Affiliation fees range from \$260 to \$440 per Law Student Society. Law Student Societies that are substantially funded by their student union rely on this financial assistance to be able to pay their affiliation fees. While ALSA is able to waive the affiliation fees of struggling Law Student Societies such as that at the Northern Territory University, ALSA would not be able to operate as effectively as it does at present if all the Law Student Societies substantially affected by the introduction of the VSU withdrew their fees and membership or simply were unable to attend Council Meetings and the annual Conference.

Furthermore, by being forced to withdraw their membership or simply being unable to participate in the activities of ALSA, the students at the law schools would be forced to forego such valuable experiences as taking part in national competitions, attending the Australasian Legal Education Forum and having access to ALSA publications.

For these reasons, ALSA firmly opposes the introduction of VSU.

## APPENDIX TWO: 2005 MEDIA RELEASE



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11 December 2005

### Statement for Release: Voluntary Student Unionism

On Friday 9 December 2005, Family First Senator Steve Fielding joined with the government and passed legislation banning compulsory student union fees from July next year. The Australian Law Students' Association (ALSA) would like to reiterate that they do not support voluntary student unionism and are disappointed that a vital source of support services has been taken from students. ALSA will use all endeavours to ensure that vital services continue to be available to students and that smaller Law Student Societies are able to continue in existence.

The Government plans to give universities \$80 million over three years for recreational and sporting facilities; however, no ongoing commitment has been made and universities currently collect about \$160 million a year in services and amenities fees. ALSA believes that student guilds and student unions provide Australian students with crucial services. Such services include:

- academic advice and advocacy;
- policing of illegal fees;
- student welfare and equity services;
- financial assistance;
- employment services;
- personal counselling;
- childcare;
- promotion of culture;
- sporting associations and facilities;
- clubs and societies; and
- campus buildings and infrastructure.

The legislation will also impact upon the international reputation of Australian law schools and universities generally. The University of Sydney's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Gavin Brown, says it is a sad day for tertiary education in Australia:

"It will be seriously damaging to Australia's international reputation. The fact that no compromise was reached on providing an amenities fee and the emphasis was placed on the idea that the only valid thing that you learn in a university is inside the classroom."

It is imperative that the Federal Government, by committing more funds to higher education, ensures that universities are able to provide the services currently provided by student associations. At a recent council meeting, six of ALSA's member Law Students' Societies indicated that they would not be able to continue under a regime of voluntary student unionism. This is particularly concerning for law students as such societies provide, for example, tutorials, practical programs and skills-based training. It would be unacceptable for students to lose access to these and similar services as a result of voluntary student unionism.