

Education and Science Select Committee
Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives
Parliament Buildings
Wellington



This is a submission on the *Education (Freedom of Association) Amendment Bill*. It has been prepared by UniQ Victoria. UniQ Victoria wish to make an oral submission.

Introduction

UniQ Victoria represents Queer, taakatapui, transgender, gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals and the aim of our organisation is to provide support, advocacy, and representation for LGBT students on campus.

UniQ meets regularly and plays a vital role (both at Victoria and nationally) in ensuring that LGBT students are aware of a supportive queer community that actively provides a safe space for queer, questioning and fully out students to meet.

In October 2009, a report by the University of Auckland found that in the last 12 months more than a third of same/both-sex attracted students in NZ secondary schools had seriously contemplated suicide, and around half had deliberately harmed themselves. In conjunction with this, queer youth were found to have higher rates of substance abuse, STIs and mental ill-health compared to students identifying as heterosexual.¹ While this research concentrated on secondary school students, it cannot be viewed as irrelevant to the welfare of tertiary students.

There is little doubt that queer secondary school students are in need of more support and there is an urgent need to facilitate the work of organisations targeted at supporting them. However, welfare issues do not end at secondary school, and UniQ feels that we provide an important resource for queer tertiary students. We are especially mindful of first-year students who are often living away from home for the first time. UniQ works hard to ensure that first

¹ Rossen, F.V., Lucassen, M.F.G., Denny, S. & Robinson, E. (2009). *Youth '07 The health and wellbeing of secondary school students in New Zealand: Results for young people attracted to the same sex or both sexes*. Auckland: The University of Auckland.

year tertiary students are aware of our inclusive and safe social events and the role of our Queer Mentoring Scheme.

Our activities with students include: a mentoring system, regular dance parties, social events on campus, workshops on issues such as mental health, a long history of political activism concerning queer issues, sexual health, eating disorders, international queer issues, and the annual Pride Week.

Pride Week involves many of the events mentioned above and we work with *Salient* (the Victoria University Student's association supported campus magazine) to produce a queer-oriented issue of the magazine each year. These issues of the magazine feature writing direct from queer students and deal with complex and pertinent issues to our community – ranging from fatphobia to legal reforms such as the abolition of the partial defence of provocation.

UniQ hosts many events in the city which are widely attended by the wider Wellington queer community – both from other campuses and from alumni and friends. In addition to this, UniQ organises Pride Week, a long-running and well-established event promoting queer issues and awareness on campus

We have a close working relationship with the Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association and have collaborated with them on a number of things, including:

- Support for Pride Week
- Annual Grants
- The use of the Association's administration equipment and support and experience of staff members
- The close relationship between UniQ and VUWSA via the VUWSA's Queer Officer executive position
- Free use of Student Union Complex facilities to host our events
- Queer Mentoring Program

We oppose this Bill because:

A voluntary membership system poses large problems for queer students on campus. Voluntary membership system will inevitably lead to less funding for VUWSA, and less support for clubs and representative groups on campus. UniQ Victoria is one such representative group. Unlike sporting or cultural clubs, who have more chance of survival under voluntary student membership, representative groups such as UniQ (groups that involve minority students who are not easily recognisable to University Staff) may not be able to continue.

Many queer students come to Victoria from rural centres. Universities are places of learning, but they are also places of exploration, investigation and self-discovery. This is true of all students, but it is especially pertinent for queer or questioning students.

Queer students new to university are often escaping from intolerant environments. Their tertiary education experience plays a vital role in affirming the equality of their sexual identity.

UniQ provides services and support networks that help students with this transition. For example, UniQ Victoria's queer mentoring program provides an excellent support network for new students struggling with their sexual identity. If student association membership was made voluntary, the ability for services (such as the mentoring program) to continue would be deleteriously undermined.

VUWSA makes an important contribution to our campus by:

- Running the administration and providing support to representative groups and clubs, as well as providing funding and free use of Student Union Complex facilities
- Providing Advocacy for queer students who may be dealing with homophobic attitudes from lecturers and staff
- Providing Advocacy services for students in general
- Providing the Campus Angels service
- Providing a Food bank
- Providing funding to the student magazine, *Salient*
- Providing funding for and support to the student radio station, VBC 88.3FM
- Providing a link between representative groups and NZUSA
- Organising entertainment and live music

- Providing information to students about flatting, finance, StudyLink, support networks, and other advice particularly relevant to student interests
- Activism and representation on wider issues facing students

These contributions are important because they are essential to student welfare. Additionally, the information and advocacy aspects ensure that students who utilise these resources are more able to focus on achieving well in their studies. Particularly important to queer students are the roles VUWSA plays in activism and representation, with the student movement having a strong history of supporting queer rights and fighting homophobia and transphobia. UniQ also strongly utilises *Salient* and the radio station, having student-targeted media serves us really well as a tool for communication and education, and we have both a regular Queer column in *Salient*, and have had a queer radio show once a week on the VBC.

There are other services which are beneficial to our members in a way that is not queer-specific. Campus Angels is a free service which involves having an "Angel" to walk you home or to a bus stop if you are studying late at night. This method of ensuring student safety is invaluable, and it goes without saying that having a Food Bank available is a service which many students would be terrified to lose.

Conclusion

If the Bill is passed we are concerned at the ability of VUWSA to continue supporting our activities for queer students on campus.

A loss of the services provided by VUWSA, and the subsequent lack of funding and support to UniQ would mean we would be unable to provide a lot of our more basic day-to-day services, would lose an important avenue for political advocacy and anti-homophobia campaigns, and as students we would all be adversely affected by the loss of VUWSA's welfare services.

If this Bill is passed, it will also affect our relationships with outside organisations. We work closely with Schools Out (a local group for queer secondary school students) and with the New Zealand Aids Foundation. With a less effective UniQ and with our organisation limited, Schools Out will be deprived of an important source of support, and the Aids Foundation will lose an

important method for both recruiting volunteers and providing safer sex information to tertiary students.

Last but not least, we are concerned that this bill will undermine the voice of queer students as a group in society. The battle for social inequality is patently still not over, and a strong queer voice on New Zealand University campuses has often been the catalyst for social equality in New Zealand. However, this bill threatens all students, and UniQ Victoria is concerned that its passage will undermine every student's voice in New Zealand's democracy.

