

National Queer Officers' Report to NUS National Executive 4/4/2009

Heidi Claus and Liam Byrne

1. Orientation Weeks

For Orientation Week we prepared a number of National Office resources for campuses to use. This included the Queer Office 'Broadsheet' and petitions on Welfare support and for Equal Relationship Rights. The Broadsheet was received very well by campus collectives and departments. In particular it was great to see campuses that do not have any strong engagement with NUS such as RMIT using these Broadsheets and petitions.

We covered a great many campuses for Orientation Week. Speaking to different campuses in the lead up to the week, and making face to face visits as well. In Melbourne Liam visited all the major campuses, RMIT, Monash, La Trobe, Swinburne and Melbourne Uni, and in Sydney Heidi visited Sydney, UNSW, UTS, UWS and Macquarie.

These campus visits were received very well. And since O-Week we have been continuing to visit Queer events on various campuses. We see this as very important to inform new students of NUS and our national campaign, but also to reconnect campuses with NUS. It is very important at campuses such as RMIT where engagement with NUS has fallen away, that we have a bloc of pro-NUS activists within the Union. Already the Queer Officers have communicated their appreciation of the assistance we have given them there. It is also important at places such as Melbourne Uni, where there have been political arguments as to the importance of affiliation. Maintaining a continuous link between these campuses and the National Queer Office is an important way to prove the importance of NUS to Queer students on these campuses.

2. Community Engagement

Pride and Mardi Gras

A major priority for the National Queer Office is engagement with the broader Queer community. This is a real priority for two reasons. Building links with the community gives us access to material and human resources that are indispensable for the campaigns that we aim to run. Also many Queer students do not know of their Queer collectives and departments, and many study on campuses where Queer departments do not exist. A vibrant NUS presence at community events gives us an opportunity to meet these students, and to hopefully engage them in our activities.

The Pride March held in Melbourne on the 1st of February was a real success with at least 60 students marching in the NUS 'Pride in our Student Unions!' contingent from campuses all over Victoria.

Our contingent got a great response from the crowd, who enthusiastically responded to our pro-Union, pro-equal rights chants and slogans. We were definitely one of the liveliest and most vibrant contingents on the march, and did a great job at establishing our student unions as part of the queer community. It was also a great chance to bring activist from different campuses across Victoria together to march for our student unions.

For the Sydney Mardi Gras NUS marched as part of the Queer Student Network float, wearing blue and carrying NUS placards with slogans such as 'Out, Loud, Union, Proud', 'Queers need student unions' and 'Rudd, Gillard, Give us back our student unions!'.

Another success of this march was involving campuses such as Macquarie Uni Queer Department in the parade despite the crushing of their student union, the queer department is leading the way for rebuilding unionism and collective action after VSU.

Community Media

We have been engaging with community media outlets to build the presence and profile of NUS. Some of the notable examples include an article in the *Southern Star*, and an upcoming broadcast on Joy 94.9 on Tuesday March 31 as part of National Youth Week. We have also been in negotiations for possible recurring presence on Joy's Queer youth program 'Generation Next'.

3. Campaign for Equal Relationship Rights

2009 is the Fifth Year of the Ban on same-sex marriage rights. There seems to be some sentiment amongst the community to get active around this question. A real positive has been that NUS were explicitly invited to be involved in the organising of the NDA, which will be happening on August 1. This is because of the great work that the Queer Office did in 2008, which means that the role of students in the campaign has been recognised and well received.

We have been along to the NDA planning meetings, and will have the NUS logo on the material for the campaign, which will be distributed far and wide amongst the Queer community. This is fantastic as it will increase the profile of NUS, and show the National Queer Office to be a serious campaigning office, a role recognised by other groups.

The NDA will be on Saturday August 1 to coincide with the final day of the ALP national conference. We have spoken to Queer activists in other states, who all seem enthused to do something on this day, and to have a serious student union/guild presence there.

We have also created a 'Statement for Equality' in the lead up to the NDA. This statement (attached at end of report) has been sent around to a large range of student unions and guilds, community groups, social justice groups, trade unions, parties and

individuals invited to endorse it. It has been received well and has bolstered the profile of NUS amongst the Queer community. When the endorsements have all been gathered we hope to launch the Statement in the community press, student media etc to build the profile of the campaign, promote the NDA on August 1, and to show how much support exists for equal rights.

Some notable endorsements we have received so far include:

- Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch)
- Monash Students Association Queer Committee
- Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby
- Australian Marriage Equality
- Transgender Victoria
- Family Access Network
- Queer Greens
- Dave Barrow for NUS
- Australian Coalition for Equality

The statement has also been endorsed by the blog/online forum 'DykePage' who have placed it on their website, inviting people to endorse it, and also inviting them to print off a copy, sign it, and send it to Robert McClelland, the Federal Attorney-General.

We have also joined the public debate concerning other discriminatory policies that Queer couples face, including producing a submission to the NSW Inquiry into Adoption by Same Sex Couples. We have also produced a press release regarding the new changes to same-sex couples' access to Centrelink services, exposing the hypocrisy of the governments willingness to recognise our relationships when it enables them to reduce welfare payments, but stopping well short of equal rights.

4. Article on National Queer Office in *Southern Star*

NEW NUS QUEER OFFICER TAKES A STAND

Category:

[News](#)

Author:

[Andie Noonan](#)

Posted:

Thursday, 12 March 2009



They're often seen yelling into megaphones on a street near you, but student union activists refuse to stop fighting their uphill battle for funding. Incoming National Union of Students Queer Officer Liam Byrne is no exception when championing student rights. The Melbourne University arts student said it's vital that services offered to queer students continue in the future. The Rudd Government gave an undertaking last year that underfunded student services (a result of voluntary student unionism) would be a thing of the past. On campus, however, queer activists say the Government's proposed scheme is still not good enough for struggling groups. Federal legislation currently before the Senate will allow higher education providers to impose an annual compulsory student services and amenities fee of up to \$250 from July 1 this year. Under the scheme universities, not student unions, will collect fees from students. Student unions are concerned that this method will see the demise of certain activities and groups such as queer collectives.

Fresh from university Orientation Week, Byrne told *Southern Star* that provisions in the federal Government's proposed student services fee will leave queer groups "out in the cold". He said the impact has already been felt with some universities having no queer representation at all. Early indicators suggest services including child care, sport and societies, and student media will be likely to get the funding nod while student union-organised groups like queer collectives may miss out.

"While it is varying from campus to campus, the indications so far are definitely very worrying," Byrne said.

"A number of administrations think queer organising is not something which they see as going along with the marketable image of their university.

“If they are then funding student unions which are then taking up the issue of same-sex marriage rights which is putting pressure on the federal Government, I believe they are going to be worried this will damage the relationship with the Government and they may be more recalcitrant in terms of funding.”

At his home campus of Melbourne University, Byrne said the news is not looking bright and university administration has not considered the plight of queer students.

“There’s still a space to campaign around it. They haven’t categorically said no, but they haven’t included us in the key things that need representation.

“Homophobia doesn’t stop at the university gates. It’s still alive on campus. It’s especially important that we have queer departments, queer collectives, places like this where students can find a safe space.”

info: unistudent.com.au

5. The NUS National Queer Office Statement for Equality

Five Years After the Ban on Same-Sex Marriage – It's Time for Equal Rights

In 2004 the Howard Government, with the backing of the Australian Labor Party, amended the Marriage Act to formally ban equal relationship rights in Australia for same-sex couples.

This ban on same-sex marriage and other relationship rights that flow from the right to marry, formally entrenched the inequality of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex people, before the law.

The Rudd government has insisted on maintaining this ban on equal rights.

Earlier this year the Federal Attorney General of the Rudd Government, Robert McClelland wrote to Australian Marriage Equality, that this discrimination "reflects the widely held view in the community that marriage is between a man and a woman".

Five years after the introduction of the ban on Same-Sex marriage, it is time for this injustice to stop.

A nationwide Galaxy Poll published in June 2007 found that 57% of Australians support Same-Sex marriage. It is time for the Rudd Labor Government to stop making excuses and to repeal the ban on equal relationship rights.

Since the election of the Rudd government there have been many reforms at both a state and federal level that recognise the discrimination that LGBTI people face.

These reforms are welcome, but are still short of full legal equality.

LGBTI people are not second class citizens, and it is time that the Government stops treating us as such.

We, the undersigned groups, organisations, and individuals, endorse this call for equal relationships now – It's time!

6. Submission made by NUS National Queer Office into NSW Inquiry into Adoption by Same Sex Couples

Dear The Hon Christine Robertson MLC,

Re: Inquiry into Adoption by Same Sex Couples

I would like to make a submission in support of removing discrimination against same-sex couples in adoption law.

Currently, NSW allows individual lesbians and gay men to apply for adoption but not same-sex couples. This legal discrimination is arbitrary and makes no sense.

As a result of adoption discrimination, some children with same-sex parents may miss out on having their parents legally recognised. This has significant implications for their rights, and their parents' responsibilities, under law.

Parents who are not legally recognised are not automatically able to sign a permission note for school or consent to medical treatment. If a parent dies or the parents separate, children are disadvantaged in legal regimes such as family law, inheritance rules and child support.

Same-sex couples should be assessed – like all couples and individuals – on their ability to provide a stable and loving home to a child. Sexual orientation is simply not an indicator of parenting ability.

Discrimination against same-sex couples has no place in NSW adoption law in 2009.

Yours sincerely,

National Queer Officers
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7. Press Release on Centrelink Changes for Same-Sex Couples

MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Rudd Governments Continued Hypocrisy Exposed by Centrelink Changes.

The ALP Governments changes to social security laws are ‘not good enough’ according to the National Union of Students Female Queer Officer Heidi Claus.

Claus comments on the changes that come into effect on July 1: ‘The government have recognised some same-sex relationships, and will be reducing income support accordingly. This is utter hypocrisy when the Government refuses to grant us fully equal relationship rights.’

‘The changes will force recipients of social security benefits to reveal their sexuality. In a society where members of the LGBTI community face discrimination in all areas of life, it is unacceptable that individuals and couples should find themselves “outed” if this is not their choice. This is a cause of great anxiety amongst the LGBTI community.’

‘The Government will recognise our relationships when it means they will save money, but will not grant equal relationship rights. This is not good enough – we demand Same-Sex Marriage rights now!’

National Male Queer Officer of the National Union of Students Liam Byrne adds: ‘These changes will deny many LGBTI people access to services that they previously had. In a time of recession and job losses it is unrealistic to think that the discrimination we face in the work force won’t mean that LGBTI people face a greater risk of losing employment. We need to protect access to welfare, not lessen it.’

‘Why should we accept less than what we had access to before, when the Government want even grant us the same rights as straight couples in Australia?’

‘We demand that no social security payment be lessened before we have full equal rights. We also demand a “grandfather” clause in any changes that will be affected, to protect LGBTI pensioners and elder couples who may be affected. After a life time of discrimination they need to be protected from unfair changes.’

The NUS National Queer Office will be raising these issues in the lead up to the National Day of Action for Equal Relationship Rights happening on August 1, to coincide with the ALP National Conference.