



Speech given by Jenny Leong, SUPRA President at the Your Rights at Uni Rally on April 12 2006

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on today, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to them and their elders.

My name is Jenny Leong and I am the President of the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association. SUPRA.

It is inspiring to be here on the front lawns with you today as it shows that our campaign for your rights at uni is a united one.

It is a campaign that unites, international students with local students, part-time students with full-time students, Darlington campus students with students from the Con and SCA and Nursing and Orange, and it unites postgrads with undergrads.

This campaign unites us because we are all students and we all have a right to well funded quality education, we all have a right to receive living assistance - whether it be Austudy or a Postgrad Scholarship - that is above the poverty line and we all have a right to independent representation, advice and advocacy.

The Howard years have brought massive public education funding decreases and prohibitive university fee increases. We have seen the reduction of time allowed for research degrees from 5 to 4 years and the expansion of full-fee paying postgrad coursework places from 30% to over 70%. We have seen the introduction of PELS, now FEE-HELP, and setting of the APA postgrad scholarship rate as \$10 higher than the cut off for access to Health Care Cards.

As postgrads, it is our right to demand adequate time to complete our research, it is our right to access Government funded postgrad coursework education. It is our right to not be compelled to sign on to massive debts to continue our education and it is our right to be able to access the benefits of health care cards on our low scholarship incomes.

But as you all know, it isn't just changes to the education that impact on our lives as students, the deluge of other atrocious policies that the Howard Government has implemented to alter our access to affordable health care and adequate living allowances, to intrude on our freedom of expression and association, and to abolish our protection in the workplace are all things that impact on us as students.

As students, it is our right to be provided with adequate living allowances, it is our right to be able to express ourselves freely, and it is our right to be protected in our workplaces. All of these rights are our rights as students.

And that is why we must unite to campaign against the Howard Government agenda to erode our rights and our choices.

The mean-spirited, short sighted, divisive agenda of the Howard Government reached a climax at the end of 2005 with the introduction of VSU. It was claimed that VSU was about choice, but it is clear it is about imposition. We did not want this legislation, the University did not want this legislation...where is the choice in that?

As students, we need representation, we need advice, we need advocacy and we need support. No matter what the laws say, we will continue to need these things. The introduction of VSU will not stop this.

The introduction of VSU means we will need to unite together, to campaign together, to work together.

We will need to be unified, powerful, inclusive and passionate in our campaign to ensure that our student unions and our student representative associations are fully-funded and remain independent.

Why is this important? Why do we need student associations?

In 1989 the NSW Government made a decision to stop allowing international students access to transport concession. Four years ago, after endless campaigns and letters and petitions, SUPRA made a complaint to the Anti-Discrimination Board, on behalf of some international students, on the basis that the act of not granting travel concessions to international students was discriminatory.

A couple of weeks ago the NSW Administrative Decisions Tribunal handed down a decision which found the Minister for Transport, the Director General of the Department of Transport, State Rail Authority and the State Transit Authority in breach of their own State Anti-Discrimination Act. The Minister and his department and its branches are all acting unlawfully by refusing to process travel concessions for international students.

The Minister could use his ministerial discretion to end the Government-led discrimination but do you think he has? Of course not. And why? Would it be too cynical to say it is because international students can't vote?

It is crucial that all of us, postgrads and undergrads, international students and local students unite together, with our student associations to raise the public awareness about this campaign and about all of our campaigns to maintain and advance our rights

as students.

And that is why we need fully funded, independent student representative associations. And that is why we need to unite. Because to borrow from the trade union movement who have been fighting their own war on alleged choices, we are stronger together.

It is time to unite in our campaign and to fight for real choice. It is time to say:

- It is our right to choose and we choose for our student representative associations to be fully-funded and independent.
- It is our right to choose and we choose that all international students have access to travel concessions.
- It is our right to choose and we choose for all students to be provided with adequate living allowances.

It is our right to choose and we choose to stand together, to unite, to organise, to struggle and to celebrate to protect our rights at Uni and our right to fully-funded independent student associations.