

Australia: Oppose the attack on students' right to political freedom of expression at Victoria University!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality VU
20 February 2025

Dear VU students and staff,

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club at Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne addresses this to you as part of our campaign against an attack on the privacy and democratic rights of students and their clubs. This attack is being conducted by Student Life on behalf of the administration of VU.

On January 16, 2025, the IYSSE club participated in an orientation event at VU's City Campus. At that event, the IYSSE VU signed up students as members using the online membership form. Student Life, the arm of management that governs clubs, introduced this new procedure in September 2024. The online form is accessible only by the club's executive committee and Student Life staff.

IYSSE members also had contact forms to collect details of students interested in learning more about the club.

For the seven years our club has been affiliated with VU, the IYSSE and doubtless many other organisations on campus have practised this.

At the January 16 event, a VU employee involved in administrating clubs and societies declared that IYSSE members could not collect students' contact information on our contact form due to a new privacy policy.

Clubs were never previously informed that we are not allowed to collect contact details outside the membership form.

This is a profound curtailment of the right of the IYSSE and all clubs to conduct campaigns that could attract students.

It is also a direct violation of the privacy and democratic rights of students, which we are seeking to defend and protect. The students attending VU are all adults and have the legal right to voluntarily provide their details for further discussion and contact if they so choose.

On February 7, the IYSSE club's Secretary sent a letter on behalf of the IYSSE to the VU employee. It stated:

We have studied VU's Privacy Policy, the Australian Privacy Act 1988, and the Victorian Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014, to which it refers and have found

no legal basis on which [the VU employee's] claim was made. To the IYSSE's knowledge, no other university—even those with strict membership collection rules—has enforced such a rule preventing the collection of contact information by clubs....

Further, it is, in fact, VU which would be violating the privacy of the students.

By decreeing, extra-legally, that students can only give their contact details to the IYSSE or any other club through the online club membership form to which VU Clubs has access, you are forcing students, domestic and international, to hand over their names and contact details to the university administration. In so doing, they are compelled to declare their political interests or affiliations to the university administration. This is a serious breach of privacy that has the effect of suppressing political association and discussion. This is under conditions where there is an international assault on the right of students to engage in political activity on campuses.

It also breaches the Victorian Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014, which refers to "political opinions" and "membership of a political association" as "sensitive information" that must be protected. This also contravenes the implied freedom of political communication in the Australian Constitution. Students interested in socialist politics and the IYSSE club may not wish to have their association with the IYSSE handed to the university administration because they have legitimate concerns that this will impact their standing in the university.

In a response, on February 10, the VU employee reiterated that information from club members must be collected through the online form. However, the response did not address the IYSSE's objection to the staff member preventing the club from gathering the details of non-club members.

The VU employee then continued to suggest that the IYSSE

“operates as an external organisation” rather than participating as an affiliated club representing a segment of the student body. This provocative statement clearly attempts to create the conditions whereby the IYSSE is no longer affiliated with VU, making it much more difficult to discuss with students and hold on-campus events.

The VU employee’s comments on the closing paragraph of the IYSSE letter highlight this. The IYSSE stated that it would “continue to gather contact information outside of the membership list so that the student club can contact interested students” and that the club would “oppose any attempt to prevent our club members from collecting this information.”

In the response, the VU employee said that the IYSSE’s defence of its democratic rights raises “serious concerns about the club’s willingness to comply with university policies” and that, should the club supposedly breach any of the university’s policies, it “will result in immediate removal from the event by security. Failure to adhere to these conditions may also impact the club’s future affiliation status.”

The VU employee’s threats reflect the university administration’s deep hostility toward the IYSSE and students’ basic democratic rights.

It comes amid an international assault on civil liberties, including the right to protest on campuses.

In Australia, students have been targeted for opposing the Gaza genocide. In October last year, three students at Western Sydney University were arrested for engaging in a peaceful protest against Israel’s war crimes and the complicity of the Australian state and universities.

Dozens of Australian students have been subject to disciplinary action for joining pro-Palestinian encampments at the universities. Several students at the Australian National University have been expelled for their involvement.

At VU, within a month of Israel’s genocidal assault beginning in October 2023, management and Student Life attempted to prevent the IYSSE from holding a meeting opposing the genocide and fighting for an anti-war perspective among students.

University academics are also being targeted by a Zionist witch hunt orchestrated by the Australian Labor government and the corporate media. For instance, Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, a widely-respected researcher at Sydney’s Macquarie University, is being targeted for opposing Israel’s genocide against the Palestinian people.

This is part of a hysterical media and political campaign led by the Albanese government, supposedly against “antisemitism” and “hate speech.” The real target is anyone who opposes the genocide in Gaza and the broader eruption of militarism globally.

Academics in the UK, Germany and the US have also come under attack for speaking out against the genocide, which all the major powers have backed.

In perhaps the most blatant attack, fascist US President

Donald Trump has started preparations to deport international students and faculty from universities who oppose the genocide in Gaza. This is just one of the many executive orders signed by Trump within the first days of his new administration.

Behind these attacks on free speech and the right to protest is the escalation of imperialist war globally.

Albanese’s Labor government is working to complete Australia’s transformation into a frontline state in the US-led preparations for war with China. Now, Labor is signalling that it will collaborate with Trump as he deepens the confrontation with Beijing, which is viewed as the chief threat to American capitalist dominance.

This is part of Labor and the entire ruling elite’s support for a developing global war aimed at a new imperialist redivision of the world, which includes the genocide in Gaza, the threat of a regional war in the Middle East targeting Iran, and the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Universities, which were once the centres for robust discussion, political dissent and protest have been transformed into an integral part of this militarist agenda. They are hubs for lucrative research and development projects with arms manufacturers to produce machines of death. They are also key ideological centres for the promotion of pro-imperialist propaganda.

The last thing the government and university management want is a student population that is organised to fight against war, inequality and the turn to dictatorship.

That’s why the IYSSE is being targeted. We represent the most politically conscious opposition. We’re the only youth and student organisation in the world explaining the origins of war and inequality in the capitalist system. We’re the only ones turning to students, youth and to the working class to build the revolutionary movement required to end capitalism and build an egalitarian, peaceful, and democratic socialist world.

We demand that Victoria University cease its attempts to prevent the IYSSE from obtaining the contact details of students interested in our socialist, anti-war perspective. We appeal to all students and staff, who wish to defend democratic rights on campus, to contact the IYSSE and take part in this crucial struggle.

Sincerely,

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact