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From: Inquiry into Drug Law Reform [REDACTED]
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Subject: New Submission to Inquiry into Drug Law Reform

Inquiry Name: Inquiry into Drug Law Reform

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SUBMISSION CONTENT:

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Students for Sensible Drug Policy has established and maintained a strong presence on the University of Melbourne campus in its first year, with SSDP arriving in Australia only one year ago. Throughout the process of affiliation as a club with the Student Union, our team went from one passionate individual to a working group of 15 students deeply concerned with the silence around youth drug use from the institutions on campus. By August, we had become an official club under the Student Union, with over 60 members and a tight knit following at our weekly events at the pub. It was remarkable to see how much interest came from the general student body, even with the limited recruitment we were able to action due to time constraints, lack of access to funding and the internalised stigma that can come with publicly advocating for drug law reform. This has highlighted a deep frustration on campus amongst students who use drugs and their friends. We are tired of the lack of debate or critical thought around our drug laws, we are concerned about the lack of harm reduction services to a student body that includes a significant amount of drugs users, and we are desperate to connect with the experts, politicians and the unquestionable evidence base that gives legitimacy to the concerns we feel.

We therefore include this submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry to give voice to the strong discussion evolving on campus around the harm and alienation our drug laws cause, and what the largely unanimous hopes are amongst our student body for drug laws which are rooted in evidence and compassion, over stigma and a policy hangover from the 20th century. Largely unanimous is a term deliberately chosen: when met with our ethos, students at this University are overwhelming in favour of reform.

That said, internalised stigma related to drug policy, and even talking openly about this issue, is rife on campus. Running recruitment tables as a legitimate, policy alternative club has seen interested students very hesitant even to approach us, believing that any kind of connection to the controversial issue of "drugs" may cost them opportunities in the future. We argue there is a large number of students and young people supportive of reform who are too concerned of identification and repercussions to even make a submission to this inquiry. You politicians must be aware: never mistake a silence around this issue for support for the status quo; in our significant experience advocating for this issue, the common sense is increasingly in

favour of reform (as shown in recent polling around pill testing and marijuana laws), but it is also very afraid of repercussions of owning this stance publicly.

This manifests in an inability of students to access legitimate policy alternatives; because of a deeply held societal stigma resulting from the criminalisation and fear inherent in our drug laws and political discourse around them. We worry that allowing students to be cut off from evidence based policy sets a dangerous precedent in an open, liberal democracy. Furthermore, by stifling a legitimate academic discussion, the potential policy possibilities outside of the moralistic judgment of drugs are too stifled. The growing psychedelic research field comes to mind, with evidence strongly showing therapeutic benefits of some illicit substances in treating mental illness, a perennial problem of our time. In a state branded “the Education State”, with a seemingly proud history of open-minded intellectualism, we could be leading the way here. We have the resources and we have the people; we just don’t have the political will.

Our club has had particular experience in the drug policy debate, becoming the first in the country to lobby the Student Union to initiate a Harm Reduction program, including the provision of re agent testing kits to students who need them. Despite a unanimous Student Council vote in favour, and overwhelmingly positive feedback from both the student body and the media, prejudice towards harm reduction policies at a University and government level have stalled the introduction of this program. We believe there is a legitimate argument to be made that had this program begun as it should have at the start of the summer of 2016, the circulation, use and popularity of re-agent testing kits would have been significantly higher in drug using populations. This could have had an impact on the rates of use of harmful substances which have resulted in numerous hospitalisations and deaths in Victoria and Australia. The refusal to engage with evidence-based harm reduction which is proven to reduce drug related harm makes us furious; and all because of a misguided idea that drug use will be encouraged. The evidence and the lived experience of young people says that drug use doesn’t need encouragement. What it needs is a policy discourse and framework which can make this behaviour safer, since it is definitely not going away. We cannot stress this enough: this behaviour is as old as time, and it is not going away.

Our club contains members who use illicit drugs, and members who don’t. Use is not judged, it is openly analysed in the context of potential misuse, and those choosing to use are supported to avoid this. We are confident that this approach reflects a widespread attitude change in our generation. We are united by our commitment to policy alternatives which do not impose old-fashioned moral judgments about drugs, but which impose evidence based messaging around their health effects. This is shown, particularly by the Portuguese decriminalisation example, to reduce the rates of harmful drug use. And if we’re honest, isn’t that what these laws are all about?

This submission was drafted by the elected executive of our chapter on behalf of our 72 members, in accordance with the ethos of our Constitution.

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File1:

File2:

File3: