

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on the Scrutiny of New Taxes
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Submission to Senate Enquiry into Proposed Student Fees

I would like to express my opposition to the proposed Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) not due to ideological or political opinion, but based on my personal experience of university campus life and student union membership.

My personal experiences described below lead to the following conclusions:

- Student organisations are currently funded by university students who decide whether to become members and pay fees based on the perceived value of membership to them.
- The most successful student organisations post-VSU are those which present a compelling value proposition to students and convince them that membership provides value for money.
- The least successful are those which struggle to attract voluntary membership fees because students are not convinced they will receive value for money.
- Students deserve choice and flexibility, as everyone's arrangements are different. Many students juggle uni with work, part-time courses, or complete their entire course externally, never setting foot on the campus except to sit exams.
- The National Union of Students should not be funded through funds compulsorily acquired from students as a condition of their enrolment at universities.

I was a student at Curtin University between 2007 and 2009. I attended the university campus three days a week, and worked two days to support my studies. At the beginning of my first year, I joined the Curtin Student Guild because I wanted to get involved with student clubs and organisations. After learning more about how the student social scene worked, I realised guild membership wasn't a prerequisite to be involved in clubs. The clubs were self funded and attracted students with vibrant social events. The core benefit most students gained from guild membership was food and drink discounts.

I chose not to renew my guild membership in my second year because the \$110 fee did not provide me with value for money. In order to break even with the discounts on food, drinks and club membership, one would have had to spend \$730 on campus during the course of the year. Some people would benefit from this, others did not. I did not regret my decision during that year. I enjoyed a vibrant campus culture as a member of various social clubs, participated in a sports team, represented myself during academic disputes with unit coordinators and saved the \$110 fee for textbooks and my own discretionary spending.

In my third year in 2009, the Curtin Student Guild modified its membership fee arrangements in an effort to be more attractive to potential members. For \$99, students would receive a \$50 food and

drink voucher for on-campus outlets in addition to discounts, access to social events and the other services guild members can access. Finally guild membership provided value for money and I chose to rejoin. This is the perfect example of how voluntary student membership encourages student organisations to attract members by catering to students needs.

My experience is typical of many of my colleagues at Curtin and other WA universities like Murdoch, UWA and Edith Cowan Universities, all of which have vibrant voluntary student organisations. As a rule, students will make a choice to join their student organisation based on whether they feel they need to access the services the guild provides or whether they are likely to spend much time on campus. Having membership forced upon students as a condition of their enrolment will take away that incentive for student organisations to cater to students' needs. They will get the fees regardless.

An important question to ask when considering the SSAF is – will student organisations still choose to affiliate with the National Union of Students (NUS) and where will their affiliation fees come from? The NUS is a well-known political organisation which ran strong partisan campaigns during the 2010 election supporting the Labor Party. Will the individual student organisations pay their affiliation fees out of fees compulsorily acquired from students?

The vast majority of students at Australian universities do not know what VSU, CSU, NUS or SSAF is. I would suggest the fairest way to decide whether the SSAF is worthwhile is to actually ask the students it will effect. Doubtless the student politicians will support it, whilst the other 95% of the student population will say if they wanted to be a member of a student union, they would join, otherwise the Federal government should mind its own business.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this personal submission to your inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Cameron Sinclair