

I began my full-time Bachelor of Science degree in 2006. This was in the final semester of the compulsory ‘fee’ levied by the University of Sydney (and its student union, the USU). Like most students I paid the fee, the highest student union fee in the country, almost \$600. Ostensibly this fee was to go towards paying for student amenities provided by the USU, including clubs and societies and their activities; student food, buildings and public spaces; and running the Union itself. Normally I wouldn’t have had much of an issue paying such a fee except for two things:

1. The fee was compulsory; degrees were to be withheld unless the fees were paid and you were a member of the USU.
2. Much of the fees levied were going towards running student-unrelated political campaigns and public rallies.

There was no consideration of the students’ ability to pay the fee, utilise the services offered/provided or whether or not they wanted to be a paying Union member. Furthermore, as a full-time Science student who was generally in class from 8 or 9pm to 5 or 6pm every weekday, I had little use for these services offered except being a (paying) member of several clubs on campus. Most students completing full-time Science or science-related degrees shared this experience; I didn’t have time to use the services offered because I was too busy either in class or working to support myself, nor did I see the services on offer as particularly useful at the time. I did not and did not wish to use any of the sporting services provided, except for a pre-paid card, which gave me limited entry to the university pool.

When Voluntary Student Unionism was introduced I didn’t see much change in the breadth of services offered by the Union; in fact I saw their quality improve, and so I happily – and without compulsion – purchased a USU “Access” card for \$99 which provided me with discounts for Union-supplied goods and services, including food and the like, along with voluntary union membership. Under the Access scheme, I am still a member of the USU, even though I am graduating with honours at the end of semester 2, 2010.

The heart of the issue is whether or not students should be required to pay for services they may not want or need. Traditionally, students are generally quite impoverished income-wise, and this was particularly true in my case with a full study load (generally over 20 contact hours a week) and meagre weekend work to support myself. I did not seek income or youth assistance from the government during this time. I didn’t want to pay for services I didn’t need; and had VSU not come into effect during my degree, a substantial amount of money would have gone to support or subsidise those services, that could easily be obtained elsewhere and were used by other students. Students like me, who didn’t have time for leisure or sporting activities, shouldn’t be expected to support those who do; frankly, it’s unfair to expect students such as myself to do so.

The experience of other university unions hasn’t matched that of Sydney University, where the USU has thrived and become self-sufficient in its own right; that, of course, isn’t the fault of the students but of those who run those Unions, and students shouldn’t be expected to prop up those organisations. The Student Services Amendment Fee isn’t a necessary fee for services rendered by the university student unions. It’s a tax on students to support and subsidise services that, well, aren’t really all that essential in the first place, otherwise they wouldn’t require a compulsory fee from the entire undergraduate student body to survive.

From 2007, the money I would have spent annually on USU membership under CSU went instead to purchasing textbooks and financing a new laptop computer, a much more appropriate use of money related to my education.