

# Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
Legislation Committee

## Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005

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## **Inquiry into the provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005**

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*Sng. 13/6/05*

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# SUDS UNDER VOLUNTARY STUDENT UNIONISM

Document prepared by Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS) President  
with the assistance of SUDS Executive Council  
Date: 13<sup>th</sup> June 2005

## 1. The History of SUDS

SUDS is the longest continuously operating theatre society in Australia. Even the most cursory glance of the archives reveals at least 38 former members of SUDS who are now illustrious members of the wider theatre community including John Bell, head of the Bell Shakespeare Company; Neil Armfield, head of Belvoir Theatre Company; Terry Cronin, Bob Ellis, Andrew Upton, Clive James, Germaine Greer, Ruth Cracknell, playwright Michael Gow, Leo Schofield, actors Sacher Horler, Anita Hegh, Lucy Bell and Sydney University's own head of Performance Studies, Ian Maxwell. SUDS continues today to be a major feeding society for the major drama schools in Australia and in the last two years a significant number of SUDS members have been accepted into WAAPA (Perth), VCA (Melbourne) and NIDA. Several other recent graduates have gone on to make contributions to major film and television releases.

In addition to this, SUDS is also an excellent place to develop leadership skills. Former members of SUDS have gone to become community leaders including Judge Michael Foster, QC's Derek Cassidy and David Rofe, gay activist Katherine Cummings, Dr Colleen Chesterman (National Director of ATN WEXDEV) and Neville Wran. Why even Gough and Margaret Whitlam met whilst performing in a SUDS play. In the last year alone several SUDS members went on to be employed as Verge Arts Festival Convenors, elected as members of University of Sydney Union Board and to organise large scale events such as Mardi Gras Festival. University theatre teaches students to analyse, organise, question, envision and rebel; to not only identify problems but to creatively solve them.

## 2. The Current State of SUDS

Every year, SUDS produces:

- 11 "cellar" shows,
- 4 "wildcard" shows,
- 2 major productions,
- 2 summer programme plays,
- 3 or 4 Arts Festival Projects,
- workshops,
- Writer's group projects,
- Women's group projects,
- dramatic involvement in political demonstrations,
- and democratic, well attended, member run general meetings every second academic week of the year.

SUDS is undoubtedly the most productive university dramatic society in Sydney and probably the most democratic with every selection of show and major decision put to a general vote by the membership. Membership usually falls between 400 and 700 members each academic year.

A productive and creative atmosphere such as SUDS allows not only an incomparable opportunity for expression but allows strong communal and social networks to be formed. In being a centrepiece of culture at the University of Sydney we help to provide an environment which engages students and help keep them at university. Students who are uninvolved, socially isolated and culturally impoverished are far more likely to drop out of their studies. This costs the government money in wasted HECS fees and costs society in wasted potential. Students who produce, criticise and see student theatre are involved in a dynamic community. Involved students are not only more like to remain at university, excel in analytical studies but are also likely to give back to this dynamic community. A conservative estimate suggests that over 10,000 volunteer hours are contributed by SUDS members every year to running the society and producing its vast output. In addition to this, members are involved in an enormous variety of volunteer duties both to build campus culture and serve the wider community.

### **3. The Future of SUDS under VSU**

Under VSU legislation, the University of Sydney Union could not continue to support SUDS without a differentiation between paying union members and non-union students. Non-union membership in SUDS may be priced far in excess of the student budget or SUDS may be forced to exclude non-union students altogether. With far fewer paid members of the union and far more pressure to exclude non-union students, SUDS faces a major membership crisis under VSU. A tiny membership not only means less output of poorer quality but also means a much smaller injection of cash from the \$5 membership fee collected from each applicant at the beginning of each academic year. The financial consequences of this would be devastating for SUDS as a society.

Through careful financial management, SUDS has been able to survive in recent years with minimal cash support for the University of Sydney Union. However, this is only possible through the free access SUDS has to the Union owned Cellar Theatre. It is important to be clear: SUDS as it exists now could not survive without affordable access to the Cellar Theatre. SUDS simply cannot afford to pay commercial rent for the Cellar Theatre. Under VSU the Union would come under enormous financial pressure and would in all likelihood be forced to charge SUDS for the use of the Cellar Theatre. Such an arrangement would simply financially cripple SUDS possibly resulting in just 2 or 3 productions a year as has occurred at UNSW and Macquarie University when forced to pay the high cost of theatre hire. Reduced output means that each member has far fewer chances to participate in a show. Membership will undoubtedly dwindle even further. The combination of these two factors would mean the end of SUDS as it has existed for the last 111 years.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

SUDS has a long and proud history of creating great theatre, great theatre practitioners and great leaders. Presently SUDS is an enormously creative, productive, well-run society which forms one of the centrepieces of campus culture. VSU legislation represents a real and potentially devastating threat to the membership and financial viability of SUDS. Should SUDS be forced to cease or severely limit its activities, hundreds of students will miss out on the opportunity to be part of the creative community that has kept so many students at university and launched the careers of so many more.