



Submission to the Senate Inquiry on VSU/ ASOL

Although I have co-authored another submission from the Australian Student Environment Network (ASEN), I wanted to write a separate one about my own experiences with student organizations, experiences that would never have been possible without Universal Student Unionism.

Student organizations are the lifeblood of the University community and a leading force in movements for a more just Australia. Without them, Universities and the broader community would suffer and there would be one less force in society holding corporate and government power to account. Destroying student organizations is a direct attack on democracy in this country, as it aims to cripple student dissent to government policy on student issues and other issues that concern not just students but the majority of Australians, issues like the environment, social justice, peace and participatory democracy.

I'd like to briefly recount some of my own experiences with Sydney University Students Representative Council (SRC) to illustrate the contribution one student organization can make. I first got involved in environmental issues through seeing an environment collective stall at Sydney Uni O-week in 2002. Having just moved to Sydney straight out of high school from my hometown of Newcastle, it was a difficult transition and I knew few people. In those first few months, the time where most students drop out, I found the SRC's publications such as the *Student Survival Guide*, and student Newspaper *Honi Soit*, extremely helpful in helping me understand the new environment I found myself in. They also made me feel part of a student community.

I attended the environment collective meetings weekly, and soon felt part of a student network on campus. I also joined and participated in a number of other clubs, including the Sydney Uni Recreation and Clowning Around Society (SURCAS), an arts group which teaches new students circus and performing skills, like juggling, fire-twirling etc, and organises performances at campus events. Other clubs which I became involved in included the Amnesty International Society on campus and the Sydney Uni Landcare group. From my experiences with these groups, with theme weeks, campus events, and political organizing, I gained experience, skills and friends which made going to uni worthwhile.

The following year I ran in student elections as part of the environment collective ticket, was elected to the SRC, and became environment officer for 2003. In this position I worked with students, staff, and community organisations every day, unpaid, to implement a sustainable campus, to educate students about environmental issues, and to involve students in community projects such as tree planting, campaigning for better public transport, and for better protection of our precious environment.

I also facilitated helping younger students get involved in the collective, take on leadership roles, organise forums and events, and write articles for the student paper on issues they were passionate about. Through the environment collective, they matured, made lifelong friendships, and developed the type of skills you just don't get taught in class. Constantly, the collective reached out to new students, through public debates, and events such as the Union's 'Environment Week'. The following year I ran with a group to edit *Honi Soit*, the student paper, and we were elected. *Honi* is a weekly paper with a print run of 5000. I cannot over-emphasise the importance of student media in creating a sense of community on campus. Student newspapers and radio stations make campuses feel like home to many students; there is a unique campus culture that is recorded and fostered by campus media. Once again, these things would not exist under VSU, and this would be a great loss to campus culture

On a broader, off-campus note, I am sure you are aware of the National Union of Students (NUS). My first experience with NUS was of the amazing work done by previous National Environment Officers, who ran very effective national campaigns and helped start up and sustain new environment collectives. I have now attended two NUS National Conferences, 2004 and 2003, and although there are significant problems, as with every organization made up of people with differing political opinions, such as Federal Parliament, the usefulness of a National Union to stand up for students' rights and funding to higher education and campaign for broader social causes cannot be denied.

In conclusion: I do not have time to go to every political rally but I am glad that my student fees go to organizing dissent to corporate capitalism, which affects every one of us, student or non-student. I do not pay women's rugby but I am glad that my student fees go towards supporting it. I am not indigenous but I am glad my student fees go towards campaigns for indigenous justice, because none of us are free until all of us are free. I do not have children but I am glad that there are Union childcare centres that allow parents to study at my University, because education should be accessible. I am not queer but I am glad that there is a Union Queer Space on campus and people fighting homophobia through the student union. I do not eat every day at the Union food outlets but I am glad that they are there for when I do. Most importantly, I know that all students, whether on-campus or off, full-time or part-time, studying Arts or Business, all need a body to stand up for students rights, individually and collectively, in the face of a government that is making education ever more expensive and inaccessible, making it harder for women, queer and other marginalised students, providing inadequate and difficult to access income support, and changing the political landscape of Australia to a user-pays, privatized system that neglects the welfare of most of us in order to line the pockets of the rich. We need student unions to struggle against this, to involve students in thinking critically about the world and to provide opportunities for students to take action on issues they feel passionately about.

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