

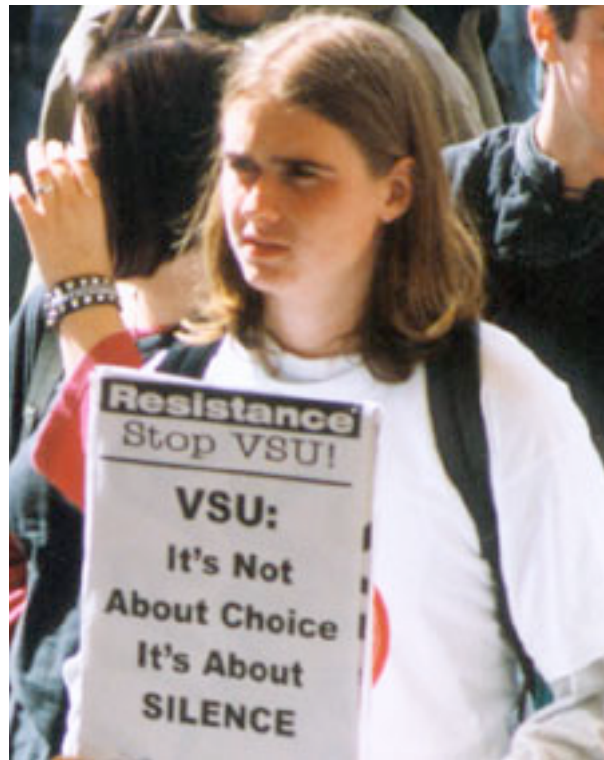
# Voluntary Student Unionism

*Comment by David Lafferty  
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Currently, all tertiary students pay an affiliation fee, separate from the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), to their student union.

This fee varies slightly between universities. A full-time student can expect to pay between \$60 and \$150.

As part of its higher education restructure, the federal government intends to introduce “voluntary student unionism”.



This will mean that students can opt for the student union not to receive their fee.

The Liberal government has proclaimed two reasons for introducing VSU, one pragmatic and the other ideological.

The government has claimed that financially hard-pressed students will be saving money which can be used to buy textbooks, food and pay rent.

From a government that is simultaneously attempting to double the number of up-front fee paying places and increase HECS fees up to 30%, this argument holds little water, particularly with students.

“With individual course fees increasing by thousands of dollars, do you think that we [students] will be overjoyed to save the \$60 from not affiliating to the Student Representative Council?” asked Paul Jacobs, Chairperson of the Griffith University Student Representative Council.

The second argument the government has put forward is that through VSU they are upholding the principle of freedom of association.

The government says that the right not to belong to a union is a fundamental right of every individual.

Yes, individuals have rights, but so do collective groups.

The right of students, as a whole, to protect their access to a quality education is paramount, and far outweighs the rights of individual students to choose to associate.

Here we have one right, that of the collective, pitted against another, that of the individual.

It is only our values that determine which right is more important.

“If students at university decide that it is in their interests for every student to belong to the union, then that is what they have democratically decided and that should be accepted. The very real human freedom provided by free, quality education (a fundamental aim of the student union movement) is infinitely more important than an ideological commitment to an abstract notion of freedom of association” said Jacobs.

Student unions provide a strong, united student voice in the political arena.

This is perhaps the real motive for the government seeking to undermine student union membership and funding.

Aside from defending the collective interests of students, student unions also provide heavily subsidised services such as food outlets, child care, welfare services and many other facilities, that without student union funding will be non-existent.

*David Lafferty is the welfare officer at Griffith University and a member of the Socialist Alliance.*

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