



What About Relief From The Student Services And Amenities Fee?

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While Daniel Andrews hands out thousands of dollars to international students in Victoria, domestic students are left to foot the bill as they continue to pay fees for services that do not exist.

The Student Services and Amenities Fee is a compulsory upfront payment of up to \$308 introduced by the Gillard government in 2011. This repackaged form of compulsory student unionism, where fees are set by the university but with a large portion going to the union or guild, has resulted in a conflict of interest that has left domestic students without a voice at a crucial time.

Generation Liberty has discovered that the majority of public universities in the state of Victoria are continuing to charge this fee, with the exception of La Trobe, which waived the fee, and Deakin University, which switched all students to the lower online student fee. There are currently no sports events, club meetings or student barbeques, but the money for them is still being collect ed hand over fist.



This is at a time when a large proportion of university students are suffering from severe financial strain. Research from the Institute of Public Affairs has shown that younger Australians have been some of the hardest hit by the economic lockdown. With sixty per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds having lost their job, had their hours cut or had their salary reduced.

Student unions and guilds have remained strangely silent on this issue. This could be because they receive the lion share of their funding from SSAF. Student unions are supposed to be a voice for students and hold universities to account. Right now, universities is effectively paying off that voice.

Their self-interest is made clear by the fact that they have not been silent when it comes to other student fees. The University of Melbourne Student Union recently released a video calling for fee relief. To support their demand, the USMU sighted their recent survey report of 6,421 students, which revealed 89.41 per cent are in favour of fee reduction. SSAF was not mentioned once in the 15-page report.

UMSU and many other student unions are conveniently choosing to focus on long-term fees, which in most cases will be added HECS and paid at a later date for domestic students, instead of the much more immediate issue of the compulsory SSAF, which is paid upfront.

\$308 in students' pockets now would provide much more immediate relief than a slightly reduced HECS fee in 5 years' time. Despite this, the idea of even reducing this payment has not been raised by the UMSU.

This admission is even more glaring when a neighbouring university is doing the right thing and waiving the fee – La Trobe University is even providing a refund service online for those who have already paid the fee. So obviously this is not an unreasonable request.

Some universities and student unions have claimed these on-campus services will now be provided online. The University of Melbourne explains on their website that “Many SSAF funded services are being redesigned for our virtual campus, with a stronger focus on student wellbeing and a sense of belonging and connectedness across our student community”.

“Wellbeing” is a subjective term. For example, UMSU recently held an online workshop event in collaboration with the group Women’s Climate Justice Collective — a national group led by women, aiming to mainstream feminist climate justice, entitled Enviro Workshop: Feminist Climate Justice. Which they must have felt would be more beneficial to student body than having the extra money in their pockets. While this may keep the content producers employed, funding it seems to be an unfair burden for students when so many of them have lost their jobs.

What is worse is that many universities, including the University of Monash and Federation University, only charge these fees to domestic students. This is in spite of the fact that the services thereby funded are provided to all students.

Compulsory student unionism was axed under the premise that it was wrong to force students to indirectly fund political campaigns that they disagreed with. It was brought back under the premise that it was only going to be a fee for tangible amenities.



It is clear from the actions of the universities and their unions that this justification was a farce. It is time to scrap the SSAF. Universities should make a point of putting their students first.

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