

Voluntary membership is overdue

PETER MCCAFFREY responds to our recent article on student associations

JOANNE HARRIS'S ARTICLE, 'Political animals' (Education Review, 13 February) surveys the political leanings of various students' associations. Beyond this, it points to a wider issue: how students' associations misrepresent the views of many of their members and how this misrepresentation is caused by compulsory membership of associations.

Misrepresentation of New Zealand tertiary students is rife. Compulsory membership means students are compelled to join and fund associations before they can study. Many students find their so-called representatives expressing views that they, as individuals, would not support.

Supporters of compulsion argue it is justified because compulsory associations provide students with services that would not be available without forced funding.

The services provided by compulsory associations fall into two categories. First there are excludable services, where it would be possible for associations to prevent some people from gaining access. This includes participation in sports tournaments, access to funding for clubs, and orientation events.

Association-owned and subsidised media also fit this category. Although they are free to consumers it is possible to control advertisers' access to these consumers. Also, at most institutions excludable services such as health and counseling, crèches, and recreation centres are not provided by students' associations.

The second category of services is the non-excludable; activities where it is not possible to prevent students from gaining access. This includes the representation of students' supposed interests to the institution and the wider community.

The provision of excludable services gives other organisations a product they can sell on a voluntary basis. They say: join our group and you can take advantage of our services. However compulsory membership combines excludable and non-excludable services into one package. The inability to exclude students from accessing the 'benefits' of representation is used as an argument for forcing all students to pay for both categories of service.

Do the Young Labour activists currently in charge of the New Zealand Union of Students Associations actually represent the "common and collective concerns" of all the 180,000 people they claim to represent? And is the election of a single person the best way to understand the interests of the thousands of diverse people who provide 30 per cent of institutions' funding?

Of course this is extremely convenient for associations. They know that every student has to pay a fee and the association has no need to satisfy the needs of members who could potentially withdraw their funding.

This brings us back to the non-excludable service: representation. When compulsory associations undertake 'representation' they claim to speak on behalf of all student 'members'. But what is representation? In civil society, representation occurs when individuals give their permission to others to speak on their behalf. Under compulsory membership, students have not given permission for an association to speak on their behalf; instead they have joined in order to gain access to tertiary education.

As associations can only take a single position on any issue it is inevitable that any one position will not reflect the views of all compulsory members. Those affected students are misrepresented by the organisation that claims to speak on their behalf and has taken their money to do so.

As misrepresentation is an inevitable consequence of compulsion, the situation described in the article – where associations overwhelmingly promote left-leaning views – is another distortion caused by compulsory membership.

With almost 230,000 students in public tertiary institutions, there's an enormous diversity of political opinions. Instead of reflecting the diversity of student opinion, compulsory associations merely reflect the views of a handful of people on executives. In most cases these positions are on the left.

Compulsory membership has turned associations into wealthy organisations. Left-leaning students are drawn to student politics more than right-leaning students because left-leaning students emphasise the role of collectives in changing society, and see wealthy associations as ideal vehicles for promoting their views. Right-leaning students, however, are more likely to spend their time on individual pursuits.

Also, compulsory associations have traditionally been seen as the preserve of the left. Right-leaning students are often treated with disdain by the left who regard associations as their territory.

Compulsion means students who are not happy with their association can't express their displeasure by withdrawing their funding. Student politicians know they can safely ignore their non-voting members as long as they keep particular groups on side. This is done by dispensing funding to groups such as clubs, student media and special interest groups.

Student politics in New Zealand now mainly consists of associations controlled by people elected with turnouts rarely exceeding 10 per cent, who dispense money to select groups in return for votes at crucial times. This charade is observed with cynicism by the vast majority of students who don't participate and whose views are ignored but who are forced to pay for the entire exercise.

This is not just the jaded view of opponents of compulsory membership. The centennial history of the Auckland University Students' Association (AUSA), described AUSA in 1994, before it became nominally voluntary, as "an organisation which is operating



'democratically' at a very low level of participation, one which can be easily manipulated by a minority group'.

The illegitimacy of compulsory student associations has not unduly worried tertiary governors. Instead, compulsion is extremely convenient. Institutions have the convenience of being able to regard one person as speaking on behalf of all fee-paying students. And associations are able to have institutions collect their levies along with tuition fees and avoid the messy business of charging students directly.

The misrepresentation of students can't be solved by calls for students to 'get involved'. As long as compulsion remains, associations can safely disregard students who chose not to participate in association politics.

The problem can be solved easily. Students should be able to choose, on an individual and voluntary basis and without referenda, whether or not they join an association.

Services need to be separated from political representation. Core non-academic services – such as health and counseling, crèches, and student buildings – currently provided by compulsory associations should instead be funded by levies controlled by institutions. Again, at most institutions core services are already funded by levies controlled by institutions.

Councils will have to determine what services they want to charge to students. The services that an institution does not pick up such as orientation and sporting events could form part of the offer voluntary associations make to potential members.

In order to prevent backdoor subsidies to voluntary associations by councils, rules enforcing accountability and transparency would have to be applied to any funding collected by a council and transferred to an association.

Such a change in student representation would force councils to ask some fundamental questions about the current system of student representation: can someone elected by less than five per cent of students legitimately claim to speak for all students? Do the Young Labour activists currently in charge of the New Zealand Union of Students Associations actually represent the "common and collective concerns" of all the 180,000 people they claim to represent? And is the election of a single person the best way to understand the interests of the thousands of diverse people who provide 30 per cent of institutions' funding?

Councils need not fear voluntary membership. Many councils are quite content to have members from voluntary organisations such as the TEU included on boards as stakeholder representatives.

Voluntary membership is long overdue. It would ensure student's interests are represented legitimately and it would give institutions a new perspective on the issues that are actually important to their fee-paying student clients.

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