



Students' Valuation of Student Union Services

The case of Ultuna Studentkår

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Abstract

This study examines students' valuations of student unions and their willingness to pay to maintain the quality of student union services, using the Ultuna Student Union at SLU as a case study. The study applies the Contingent Valuation method through an online survey distributed to students at the Ultuna campus. The findings suggest that the average student values the student union and states a positive willingness to pay for maintaining union quality. However, the results are based on a sample in which a large majority of respondents are student union members, limiting the ability to draw reliable conclusions. Despite this limitation, the results provide meaningful insights, as the study uncovers member characteristics and reasons for participation, as well as heterogeneous preferences and free-riding tendencies among non-members. The findings imply a need to strengthen communication and selective incentives, to ensure long term financial sustainability of the Ultuna Student Union.

Keywords: Students, Public Goods, Collective Action, Free riding, Heterogeneity

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Description
SLU	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
WTP	Willingness to Pay

1. Introduction

Student unions provide essential public goods and services to students, yet their increasing reliance on voluntary contributions exposes them to financial vulnerability driven by collective action and free riding problems. This year, government support was reduced by 30 percent, affecting all student unions across the country and weakening their ability to carry out core functions, particularly academic monitoring, which is their primary mission. Understanding students' valuation of these services is therefore crucial for assessing the financial sustainability of student unions.

Although there is an extensive body of literature on the economics of public goods, including studies examining collective action, free riding and preference heterogeneity (e.g., Samuelson, 1954; Olson, 1965; Ostrom, 1990), and economic valuations of non-market goods using stated preference methods (Carson et al., 1992; Vossler, 2002), there is currently no economics literature applying these methods explicitly to student unions. Therefore, examining student union services as a public good offers an opportunity to explore how students value collective services such as academic monitoring, social engagement, and student culture, and to assess how stated preference methods perform in this context.

The purpose of this study is to understand students' valuation of student unions and to estimate their willingness to pay for maintaining the quality of student union services, using students at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) Ultuna and *Ultuna Studentkår* as a case study. To achieve this, the Contingent Valuation method is applied through a survey distributed to all students at the Ultuna campus.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How do students value student unions when membership is no longer mandatory?
 - a) What motivates students to participate in student unions, and what discourages participation?

- b) How willing are students to financially contribute to maintaining the quality of student union services under increased financial pressure?
- c) How do these valuations vary across student characteristics and what do these patterns imply for the financial sustainability of student unions?

1.1 Scope and delimitations

This study covers students' attitudes toward their local student union, and the willingness to pay to maintain the quality of its services at SLU Ultuna, based on an online survey conducted in April and May 2026. The survey was distributed through mailing lists and student Facebook groups to all students at campus Ultuna (approximately 3000 individuals).

The study focusing exclusively on current students, excluding alumni and staff. Respondents must be over 18, provide consent, and be enrolled under the LTV, NJ, or Forest Science-faculty, while students from the VH-faculty are excluded.

2. Background

2.1 Student unions under financial pressure

A student unions' purpose is to represent and support students within a university or college. Its primary mission is to act as a collective voice of students, ensuring that student interests are considered in decisions regarding quality of education and campus life. In addition, the student union provides services such as social, cultural- and educational activities, housing assistance and counselling regarding student welfare issues (SLU, 2026).

Student unions emerged in European universities in the 1600s-1700s and has gradually evolved worldwide into structured, democratic institutions central to student participation (UNESCO, 2024). Sweden's oldest, the Uppsala Student Union, was founded in the mid-1800s, and national coordination through Swedish National Union of Students (SFS) began early in the 1920s (SFS, 2026). Not long after, in 1932, the Ultuna Student Union was founded by the name "Lantbrukshögskolans Studentkår" at "Lantbrukshögskolan", today known as the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences or SLU (Ultuna Studentkår, 2026).

For a hundred years, students were required to be members of their local student union, until the mandatory membership was abolished in 2010, following a decision by the government. As compensation, a yearly government grant was introduced for the financial loss it meant for the student unions (Regeringen, 2008). However, the proposed compensation of 310 SEK per full time student was never realised. In practise, the unions received only about a third of that sum (SFS, 2025).

This year, that grant has been reduced by 30 percent, affecting all Swedish student unions (Regeringen, 2025). Rasmus Lindstedt, President of SFS, described the proposed reduction as a "devastating blow to higher education", arguing that it may negatively affect academic monitoring, as the funding is primarily intended to support that function (SFS, 2025). The situation has led to

an increased reliance on voluntary contributions, leaving student unions in a fragile position driven by collective action and free riding problems.

In short, it is to the benefit of all stakeholders to examine students' attitudes toward student unions and to deepen the understanding of the demand for student union services. Such insights are essential to ensure financial sustainability and the continued capacity to carry out core functions, in particular academic monitoring, which benefits the entire student body.

2.2 Student unions as providers of public goods

In this study, student union services are analysed as a form of public good. All students benefit from student union services like improved academic standards or efforts to create a welcoming and inclusive campus culture, regardless of if they participate or contribute financially. Therefore, student union services exhibit similar characteristics as a public good. In modern economic terms, public goods are defined as non-excludable and non-rivalrous, meaning that one person's use does not reduce others' ability to benefit as well as that it is difficult to prevent anyone from benefitting from the resource. Due to the nature of these services, student unions face problems with collective action and free riding, which in turn undermines their ability to secure stable participation and funding.

2.3 Voluntary financing and collective action problems

Public goods are often synonymous with collective action problems, a situation where groups fail to act toward a common goal because individuals have incentives to free ride, prioritising their own self-interest rather than cooperating for the collective good. Theories suggest that without selective incentives to motivate participation, individuals tend to avoid contributing to the cost, knowing they can benefit from the resource regardless of their own participation (Olson, 1965). For the Ultuna Student Union, the financial pressure calls for coordinated efforts and contributions to maintain the longterm quality of the union services, a situation that is difficult to sustain due to challenges with collective action.

However, theories based on people as rational economic individuals (*Homo Oeconomicus*) is a simplification that does not always accurately capture reality. In fact, people are often driven by non-economic incentives to act a certain way (Ostrom, 1990). For example, the theories contradict the fact that roughly 800 individuals voluntarily contribute to the Ultuna Student Union every semester, and continue doing so, by voluntary work and membership fees. Although, it should be mentioned that a membership at the Ultuna Student Union includes additional benefits (apart from academic monitoring, social events and student culture), such as the ability to reside at campus, to apply for scholarships, to rent a holiday house on the Westcoast of Sweden, and also 20 percent discount on dinner parties and events (Ultuna Studentkår, 2026). Nevertheless, these are historically low member figures and theories of free riding and collective action are genuine problems.

2.4 Ultuna student union as a case study

The Ultuna Student Union is a large organisation with approximately 800 members, of whom around 80 are active functionaries engaged in a wide range of committee activities. These committees cover areas such as academic monitoring, traditions and ceremonies, cultural and social events, educational initiatives and networking with the industry, as well as other student-led activities like sports, sauna sessions, food markets and so on. In addition, the union organises annual graduation ceremonies for Bachelor's and Master's students at the end of May, along with a formal ball.

The union is governed by an executive body consisting of a nine member-board, three of whom are employed full time. Its yearly turnover is roughly 5 million SEK, reflecting the scale at which the union operates (Ultuna Studentkår, 2026).

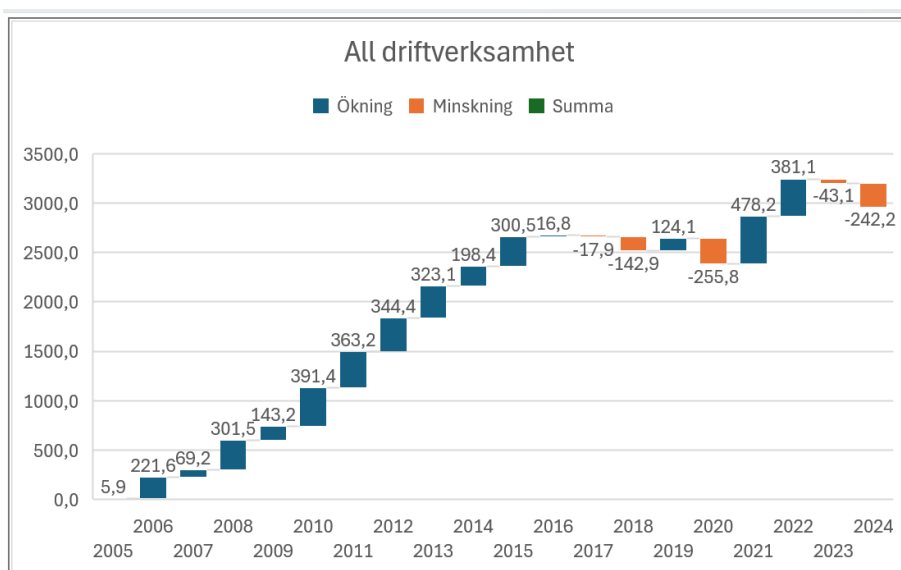


Figure 1. Yearly results over the last 20 years, where profits are blue blocks and losses orange. (Anders Danielsson, Controlling unit, Ultuna Studentkår, 2025)

Despite the scale of the operation, the organisation has been seeing reoccurring yearly losses over the last decade, as presented in Figure 1. This is particularly due to high costs, a declining interest in the party and events department, and a costly vacation house, Arons hus on the Westcoast of Sweden, that was donated to the union a long time ago and has required frequent, expensive renovations. On top of that, the 30 percent reduction of the government grant implies a loss of an approximate amount of 140 000 SEK in yearly support.

Motivated by the reduction in government funding and increased reliance on member contributions, the board presented a formal proposal to the union meeting on 7 May for a 50 SEK increase in the membership fee. The results of the vote are presented in the Results section.

Because membership data is only available from 2014 onward, developments in member numbers directly following the 2010 abolition of mandatory membership cannot be assessed. Nonetheless, the available data show that the union has maintained a membership level of around 800 students, just under one third of the student body (Ultuna Studentkår, 2026).

However, there is currently no documented information regarding reasons behind the fact that more than two thirds of the student population at SLU Ultuna are not participating in the student union. Therefore, this study is an attempt to

understand these patterns, to be able to assess the financial sustainability of the Ultuna Student Union and to provide an example for other similar organisations.

3. Theoretical framework and literature review

3.1 Public goods, collective action and free riding

Samuelson was the first to formally distinguish between private and collective goods in his 1954 article. His theories established the framework on which all later public goods research builds on. Drawing on earlier theories from Wicksell and Lindahl about strategic behaviour, he notes that “it is in the selfish interest of each person to pretend to have less interest in a given collective consumption activity than he really has” (Samuelson, 1954). However, although all three discuss the underlying logic, none of them use the term *Free Riding*. The concept was not formally articulated until Mancur Olson’s work in 1965 (Olson, 1965).

Olson challenged the broad assumption that individuals with common interests will act together to pursue those interests. He demonstrated that individuals in groups, especially large groups, often fail to act collectively because of free riding incentives. He further argued that selective incentives, additional benefits available only to contributors, could mitigate the problem of free riding (Olson, 1965).

Since the publication of Olson’s milestone contribution in 1965, his theories of free riding have been expanded and questioned by several researchers.

Elinor Ostrom’s work (1990) challenged Olson’s theory by arguing that free riding is not universal. Through observations of successfully managed common pool resources, she showed that groups do overcome free riding problems under certain conditions and developed eight principles for sustainable governance. However, it should be noted that her concerns regarding CPRs were mostly directed toward Hardin’s *Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin, 1968), and her work primarily focused on environmental resources, dissimilar to non-profit organisations like student unions.

In her later work, Ostrom argued the need for developing a broader theory of human behaviour that recognises multiple types of individuals, rather than only

“Homo Oeconomicus” or “rational egoists”. She further argued that many individuals exhibit intrinsic preferences, a desire for something independent of its practical benefits, as “At least some individuals in social dilemma situations follow norms of behavior- such as those of reciprocity, fairness, and trustworthiness- that lead them to take actions that are directly contrary to those predicted by contemporary rational choice theory.” (Ostrom, 2000).

Earlier in 1990, Andreoni developed a model to better understand the motivations behind such behaviour, suggesting that these may include social pressure, guilt or a intrinsic satisfaction from helping others, the so called “warm glow” effect (Andreoni, 1990).

Shortly after Ostrom, the idea of conditionally cooperative individuals was introduced (Fischbacher et al., 2001). Through a public goods experiment, the authors found that about half of the subjects show conditional behaviour, meaning their contribution depend on that of others, while a third are self-serving free riders. Meanwhile, even conditional contributors show bias toward a “self-serving direction”.

Building on Fischbacher et al.’s research, Brandt and coauthors (2024) introduced more behavioural types within the context of contribution patterns: 1. Hard Riders, 2. Tough Riders, 3. Blind Riders, 4. Easy Riders, and 5. Low Riders, where “Blind Riders” represents the majority of the population and normally mimic the contribution of others and follow norms, whereas “Easy Riders” are strategic free riders and seek to minimize contribution while benefitting from the group. Ultimately, collective outcomes depend on the balance between different behavioural types and requires a limitation of “Easy Riders” to hide, and for “Blind Riders” to see contribution as the norm (Brandt et al., 2024).

3.2 Heterogeneity and preferences

The declining demand for student union membership may reflect a gradual shift in the student body. Historically, most students at the agricultural university shared similar backgrounds, making the Ultuna campus relatively homogenous and likely characterised by more aligned preferences. Today, greater variation in

programmes, socio economic backgrounds, and age contributes to a more heterogeneous student population and more diverse preferences.

Within the theoretical framework, Olson argued that heterogeneity complicates cooperation (Olson, 1965), while Ostrom showed that it is not inherently bad and can sometimes strengthen cooperation. Further, she proved that heterogeneity and collective action often have a non-linear relationship, as heterogeneity is not one thing but can refer to many types of contexts (Poteete & Ostrom, 2004).

3.3 Declining interest in non-profit organisations

A government report from 2024 confirms that membership participation in non-profit organisations has been declining across the country over an extended period, from 76 percent in 1998 to 54 percent in 2022, without revealing why. At the same time, participation has changed in the way it is expressed: while participation in traditional organisations has declined, this has created space for loosely structured individual- and lifestyle organisations, often through network-based mobilization made possible by social media.

Among engaged individuals, participation is more common among those whose parents were or are involved in voluntary work. It is also more common among girls than boys, lbtqi-individuals compared to hetero-cis individuals, and people with a Swedish background compared to those with a foreign background.

There is also a strong sense of pride associated with participation, where personal development and social context are key drivers. Further, the report shows that individuals are often driven by intrinsic motivations, as suggested by Andreoni (1990) and Ostrom (2000), (Socialdepartementet, 2024).

3.4 Economic valuation methods for public goods

One of the most widely used economic tools for valuing public goods is the Stated Preference method. This method is typically applied to environmental public goods but are also widely used in health, marketing and public policy studies.

Within the stated preference framework, the Contingent Valuation (CV) method is a survey-based method used to assess the value of goods not traded in traditional markets by asking individuals about their willingness to pay for goods or services, or their willingness to accept a loss.

These methods can be traced back to the early 1930s, when Thurstone began experimenting with measurements of attitudes toward certain concepts. Since the 1970s, environmental economists have used the method to value non-market goods (Shang & Chiandra, 2023). In the early 1990s, the method was advanced by Mitchel and Carson with their publication of *Using Surveys to Value Public Goods* and, shortly thereafter, the environmental disaster Exxon Valdez oil spill provided one of the first major applications of the CV method within “passive use” or “existence” values, also conducted by Mitchel and Carson, as it was used to estimate the public’s willingness to pay to prevent similar events from happening again (Carson et al., 1992). In the following decade, the method was applied intensively (Hoyos & Mariel, 2010).

Simultaneously, the method has been seen as controversial, as it has received criticism for exhibiting hypothetical bias. It is proven that respondents tend to overestimate their willingness to pay in hypothetical scenarios, often due to impure altruism like warm-glow giving or a desire to please researchers. Building on this, criticism of the method involves statements such as “Contingent valuation responses reflect the willingness to pay for the moral satisfaction of contributing to public goods, not the economic value of these goods.” (Kahneman & Knetsch, 1992), raising questions about the method’s ability to determine economic values of non-market goods.

Today, one of the leading researchers within the field is Christian A. Vossler. His most influential and cited work (Vossler, 2012), explores methodological issues in experiments valuating public goods. The study builds on Carson and Groves research (2007), which argues that, despite hypothetical bias, respondents’ answers differ depending on whether they perceive the survey as consequential. Vossler demonstrates that stated and actual WTP are statistically identical when respondents believe that the study has “more than weak” effects on policy implications (Vossler et al., 2012).

Further, other research of his provides evidence that hypothetical bias may be smaller when the good is simple and well-understood, the payment vehicle is realistic, and the survey closely mirrors real life decision making (Vossler et al., 2003). In addition, open-ended formats often lead to higher variance and strategic bias, while payment cards reduce bias but introduce range and anchoring effects depending on the values on the cards, while dichotomous choice formats tend to be less prone to strategic misreporting (Vossler et al., 2018).

Another way to reduce bias, according to the literature, is to incorporate zero and missing responses by modelling the survey according to a specific model (Yu & Abler, 2010). Standard methods treat all zeros the same or ignore missing responses, which can lead to misleading results, since zero-responses may either reflect a true value of zero or a rejection of the question as a whole (Jorgensen et al., 1999).

4. Method

4.1 Sample and distribution

This study uses a cross-sectional stated preference survey to assess students' attitudes toward the Ultuna Student Union and the willingness to pay for maintaining the quality of student union services. Before distribution, the survey was peer reviewed by three students and a supervisor. The peers provided feedback on how they experienced the survey, if they understood the questions, and so on. Then, the questionnaire was distributed to students at SLU Ultuna through faculty mailing lists and student Facebook groups. It was available online for a week, from 27 April and 4 May 2026, and received a total of 297 responses by the time the survey closed. After inspecting the responses, I noted that the survey had been accessed by students at other SLU campuses; therefore, only 201 of the respondents were kept and considered valid for the sample, as the study focuses on students at the Ultuna campus.

Students affiliated with the Veterinary Student Union were also excluded, and if no answer was reported for the question of whether they were members of the student union.

Further, 31 respondents appeared to have dropped out during the second part of the survey, as no answers were recorded for those questions. These respondents were also excluded from the sample, resulting in 157 respondents included in the final analysis.

4.2 Sample representativeness checks

The sample characteristics were subsequently compared to known population parameters obtained through the Ultuna Student Union member database, Unicore, and the administrative system Ladok, to assess the representativeness of the sample.

4.2 Survey design

The survey was created using the software platform Qualtrics. It was designed according to the Contingent Valuation method to elicit the Willingness to Pay for maintaining quality of student union services.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part asked general questions regarding age, gender, study programme, disposable income, union-attendance, membership status and reasons for holding a membership or not. The introduction included a description of a baseline level providing respondents with information about the Ultuna Student Union and its services. Further, the questions were designed as multiple choice questions allowing only one response, with text entry options available when respondents selected “Other” or “None of the above”. This design facilitated data collection and analysis and meant to reduce bias by avoiding differing interpretations among respondents, or anchoring effects.

The second part of the survey examined students’ views on student union membership and their willingness to pay for maintaining student union services through an increase in the membership fee under different scenarios. It included reminders addressing hypothetical bias, asking respondents to state their preferences as if the scenario were real. In addition, a budget reminder was provided to highlight respondents’ budget constraints.

The WTP-question was designed using a single-bounded dichotomous choice format. Respondents were first asked about their general willingness to pay by indicating if they would vote yes, no or blank on a proposed change in membership fee, not revealing how large the change would be. If they answered ‘Yes’, respondents were asked to answer a follow-up question by voting ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to a randomly assigned price increase of either 50, 100, or 150 SEK per semester. That is, some respondents were asked about a price increase in membership fee of 50 SEK, some of 100 SEK and some of 150 SEK. The current membership fee is 250 SEK.

Finally, the section concluded with several debriefing questions. This included stating levels of certainty ranging from “Not certain” to “Completely certain”, open-ended protest responses, the opportunity to state another type or amount of contribution, and three different scenarios describing a potential deterioration in

the student union services, asking whether it would make the respondents' previous answer change. These scenarios presented a situation where the quality of the academic monitoring was reduced, a relocation of the venue was required, and that in turn influencing the student union's events and activities. Although it was not revealed to respondents, these are real scenarios that have all been considered and discussed among the union board.

4.3 Statistical analysis

The statistical analysis was conducted using Stata. First, descriptive statistics were produced to summarise the characteristics of the respondents. This enabled comparisons between members and non-members, as well as an examination of reasons for holding or not holding membership, and opinions regarding the most important functions provided by the student union. Furthermore, a simple linear OLS regression was estimated for a mean willingness to pay (WTP) across three different price levels; 50, 100, or 150 SEK more per semester.

In addition, an interval regression with a 95 percent confidence interval was conducted for respondents that voted 'Yes' to a general change in membership fee. Lower and upper bounds for WTP was constructed by setting the lower bound equal to the specific proposed price increase (50, 100 or 150 SEK more per semester), with the upper bound unknown if the respondent answered 'Yes' on given price, and vice versa for 'No'-responses. This method allowed for the estimation of the average WTP among respondents that supported a change in the membership fee. Finally, the follow-up question indirectly allowed respondents to state a lower or upper bound, as they were asked to provide an open-ended answer on whether they would contribute with a different amount, or in another way than through a membership fee.

4.4 Methodological limitations

One limitation with this study is the potential presence of sample selection bias. There is a risk that individuals who chose to respond to the survey were those who care most about the student union, which may lead to an overestimation of the willingness to pay for membership among the broader student population. At the same time, the responses may more closely reflect the views of current members. In the final sample, 132 (84%) respondents reported being members of the student union, while 25 (16%) indicated that they were not members. And another factor that may lead to an overestimation of the results is hypothetical bias and warmglow effects, as discussed in the theoretical framework-section.

Furthermore, among the 31 respondents who dropped out during the second part of the survey, the majority were non-members. While the exact reasons for this attrition are unknown, it is possible that these respondents had limited interest in the survey topics. Moreover, one could chose to interpret this as protest answers, if these individuals rejected the whole idea of increased voluntary contributions. However, I believe the first explanation to be true. Taken together, these factors suggest that the results should be interpreted with some caution.

There is also a possibility that a substantial share of respondents consisted of friends or acquaintances of me, the author, as they may have recognised my name when the survey was distributed. If this was the case, the sample may not be fully random.

Further, a broader range of response options would have been ideal, as the predefined options may have influenced the results, seeing that people tend to select the most convenient option even when a free-text “Other”-option is available. However, endless response options are not feasible.

Finally, as with all survey-based studies, there is a risk that some respondents did not answer the questions seriously, which could affect the reliability of the results.

5. Results

5.1 Descriptive statistics

As shown in Table 1, Agronomy- Animal Science was the most frequently reported study programme, followed by Agronomy- Crop Science, Landscape Architecture and Biology and Environmental Science. The age among respondents ranged between birth years of 1987 and 2007 and a big majority indicated that they were born between the years of 2000 and 2004, which is demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 1. Programme distribution by cohort, a comparison between the survey sample and member figures from the Ultuna Student Union.

Programme	Members	Sample
Agronomy- Economy	35	14
Agronomy- Animal Science	67	21
Agronomy- Rural Development	30	9
Agronomy- Food Science	18	7
Agronomy- Crop Science	43	15
Landscape Architecture	100	15
Biology and Environmental Science	74	15
Economics and Sustainable Development	43	12
PolKand and Sustainable Development	32	8
Forest Economics	66	7
Ethology and Animal Welfare	57	9
Landscape Engineering	28	4

Table 2. Age distribution by cohort. A comparison between the survey sample, member figures at Ultuna Student Union and enrolments in Ladok, birth years 1999-2005.

Birth year	Enrolments Ladok	Student Union members	Survey sample
1999	123	46	4
2000	187	91	25
2001	196	110	21
2002	204	123	26
2003	195	122	31
2004	175	95	18
2005	85	50	5

Table 3. Gender distribution among respondents who are student union members.

Gender distribution among respondents that are members		
What is your gender?	Freq.	Percent
Female	103	65.61
Male	50	31.85
Other	3	1.91
Prefer not to state	1	0.64
Total	157	100.00

As shown in Table 3, 65.6 percent stated that they are female, 31.85 percent male, 1.91 percent “Other”, and 0.64 percent “Prefer not to state”. Of 801 student union members, around 65 percent are female, 33 percent are male, and 3 percent “Other” or “Prefer not to state”.

So in comparison with the population parameters of the Student Union, the sample appears to correspond closely to the actual distribution. However, when compared to the entire student population, based on enrolments in the administrative system Ladok, the alignment is weaker. This outcome is consistent with the fact that a majority of respondents were members of the student union.

Out of the final sample, 84 percent indicated that they were members of the Ultuna Student Union, while 16 percent indicated that they were not.

Among non-members, 56 percent reported having visited the student union at least once during the past six months, with frequencies ranging from one to three visits up to more than six. The remaining 44 percent indicated that they had not attended the student union at all.

The most frequently reported reason for holding a membership was “Dinner parties and pubs”, while other reasons like “Community and networking”, “To be a functionary”, “Housing”, “Committee work”, “Academic monitoring” and “The right to vote at the Union Meeting” were mentioned by substantially smaller shares. In addition, 9 percent chose “Other”, which allowed for text entry. These responses included “All of the above”, “To be able to attend the graduation ceremony”, “No reason, have just continued paying” and “Pressured by my *buddy* during the initiation weeks”.

When asked about the main reason for not holding a membership, the largest share of respondents selected the option “Other”. These open-ended responses included statements such as “Found it very boring”, “I retired from the student union”, “I don’t have time”, “I feel too old”, “The money isn’t worth it”, “Dissatisfied with the social activities”, and “I am on exchange”. In addition, 18.5 percent reported that they are simply not interested, 4 percent that they do not know anyone there, and an equal share that they consider it too expensive. A further 2 percent stated that they have too much to study, 1 percent that they have too much work, and an equal share that they do not know what the student union does or what it can offer them.

When asked which functions of the student union they considered most important, 32 percent of respondents selected “Community, friends and networking”, 29 percent “Academic monitoring”, 28 percent “Social events, parties and pubs”, 6.5 percent answered “Student engagement, good for resume” and 5 percent “Other”. The open-ended responses included “All of the above” and “Graduation ceremony”.

5.2 Estimation results and Willingness to Pay

Table 4. General willingness to pay for a proposed change in membership fee

General willingness among respondents		
How would you by principle vote on the proposal, without currently knowing how large the change would be?	Freq.	Percent
Yes, for	65	41.67
No, against	65	41.67
Blank vote	26	16.67
Total	156	100.00

Of the total sample, equal proportions expressed a general willingness to pay for a proposed change in membership fee: 41.67 percent voted “yes” and an equal share voted “no”. In addition, 16.67 percent submitted a blank vote, and one respondent did not answer. This is demonstrated in Table 4.

Among members of the student union, 58 respondents were generally willing to pay while 55 were not and 18 submitted a blank response. The corresponding figures for non-members were 7, 10 and 8.

Building on these results, the mean disposable income among yes-voters was found to be approximately 9,66 percent higher than among no-voters.

Table 5. Mean WTP for maintaining the quality of student union services

VARIABLES	Mean WTP
Constant	57.59*** (4.310)
Observations	158
Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1	

As presented in Table 5, the mean willingness to pay estimated with a linear OLS regression was 57.59 SEK and can be interpreted as the average amount that respondents were willing to pay per semester in addition to the current membership fee of 250 SEK. This implies that they would be willing to pay

307,59 SEK in total in membership fees per semester for maintaining the quality of the student union services. The standard error of the estimate was 4,31 SEK.

Table 6. Average WTP for maintaining student union services using interval regressions

VARIABLES	Mean WTP int.reg
Constant	172.7*** (131.0 - 214.5)
Observations	65

However, the average willingness to pay estimated using interval regression was 172,7 SEK, with a 95 percent confidence interval ranging from 131 to 215 SEK, as presented in Table 6. This estimate was calculated for the 65 (out of 157) who voted ‘Yes’ on general willingness for the proposed change in membership fee. This implies that respondents that supported the proposed change would be willing to pay a total of 423 SEK per semester for membership.

The Union Meeting vote on 7 May resulted in 63 yes-responses, with no votes against and no blank votes.

Now, in the survey sample, 82 percent supported an increase of 50 SEK per semester, while support declined to 69 percent for an increase of 100 SEK, and further to 42 percent for an increase of 150 SEK.

Respondents that did not support the increase in membership fee were asked to state their reasons in the following question. The responses included following statements: “The student union is boring”, “It’s not worth more than what I’m paying at the moment”, “Can’t afford it”, “There are better things to spend my money on”, “Not that active so it’s not worth it”, “I think more people would have contributed if it was cheaper”, “Attending dinner parties is already very expensive”, “That’s almost as much as the nation’s membership fees and they have a larger service supply”, “The student union has become bureaucratic and too politically correct”, “The student union haven’t been doing a good job”,

“Would need to know where the money goes”, “I would if the union provided better benefits”, “I don’t even know what the union does”, “The nations are more valuable”, “I would if more people attended the pubs”.

When asked about their certainty of their previous answers regarding attitudes toward an increased membership fee, a majority were quite certain, very certain or completely certain while 12 percent were quite uncertain or not certain.

When asked whether their previous answer on willingness to pay would change if they were presented with a scenario involving deterioration of the academic monitoring service, 51 respondents answered “yes” and 102 answered “no”, while 4 answers were missing. When instead asked whether their previous answer would change if the scenario involved relocating the venue, and thereby affecting the parties and social activities, responses were almost evenly divided: 51.97 percent answered no and 48.05 percent answered yes. This indicates that nearly half of the respondents would have been willing to pay if they had been aware of a scenario involving a relocation of the student union venue.

Further, respondents were asked whether they were interested in contributing to the student union in ways other than through the membership fee, or by paying a different amount. This question allowed for open-ended text and several respondents mentioned donations, although without specifying an amount. Two individuals stated that they were willing to contribute by paying 500 SEK per semester in membership fees, suggesting an upper bound for willingness to pay among at least these respondents.

6. Discussion

This section discusses how students value student unions, both socially and economically, drawing on their stated motivations and willingness to contribute financially.

6.1 Economic valuation based on WTP estimates

Of all respondents included in the final survey sample, an equal proportion indicated that they were generally willing to pay and not willing to pay for the proposed change in membership fee, thereby contributing financially to the student union. Seventeen percent submitted a blank response.

It is perhaps unsurprising that many respondents were unwilling or hesitant to pay, as the question was phrased vaguely and did not specify the reasons for the proposed change or the extent of it. At least according to a few protest responses, this lack of information was cited as the main reason for their opposition. However, on the one hand, some individuals may have understated their interest in the union, by voting no, to avoid potential fee increases as an outcome of this study, a form of strategic behaviour originally proposed by Samuelson. On the other hand, some may have overestimated their stated willingness to pay, in case their statements were driven by altruistic satisfaction.

The mean willingness to pay for maintaining the quality of student union services, through an increase in membership fee, was 57,59 SEK per semester. Assuming a stable average of 800 members, that would generate almost a 100 000 SEK in annual additional income. In relation to the 30 percent reduction in government support, corresponding to a loss of about 140 000 SEK for the student union, this represents a promising start but would not be sufficient to fully offset the loss.

For the alternative method, the mean willingness to pay was 173 SEK per semester. Again, with a sustained average of 800 members, this would correspond

to an additional income of around 270 000 per year. That would be more than enough to compensate for the loss of government funding. However, this is likely not a reflection of students' general willingness to pay as only a small fraction of students are ready to contribute with that amount. Although it is interesting to see that some individuals are highly willing to contribute to maintaining student union quality. However, such an increase in membership fee would potentially risk current members dropping out and discourage future membership, seeing that some respondents stated that their main reason for not holding a membership as 'too expensive'.

I interpret the difference in the two different mean WTP-estimates as evidence of a clear divide between members that are highly engaged, and the rest of the population. While the estimate of 57 SEK is more conservative and may be more representative, the other estimate of 173 SEK reflects a high commitment and willingness to maintain the quality of the student union services among those who care deeply about the union. It is also possible that these individuals are better informed about the union's work and the challenges it stands against, which could contribute to a higher willingness to pay. Moreover, respondents with a general willingness to pay ('Yes'-voters) reported a higher mean disposable income, which could also affect their ability to contribute financially compared to those that were not generally willing.

The difference between the two methods may also be reflecting particularly strong hypothetical bias and warm glow effects among high commitment individuals, and in that case capturing intrinsic satisfaction rather than economic valuation of the 'good'. At the same time, the survey will most likely have been seen as consequential and was further a well-known concept to respondents, which hopefully reduced the risk for hypothetical bias, consistent with Vossler et al. (2012), who found that perceived consequentiality led stated preferences to align more with actual willingness to pay. The notion of consequentiality could in turn lead certain individuals to report a lower willingness to pay, even if they would have accepted the increase in a real situation. In other words, students' real valuation of the student union and willingness to pay for maintaining quality of the services could be either higher or lower than the estimates in this study.

Returning to the full sample, a majority of respondents supported an increase of 50 or 100 SEK, while a majority rejected an increase of 150 SEK. Although two respondents reported that they would be willing to pay 500 SEK in total membership fee per semester.

When making a comparison with the outcomes of the Union Meeting, where *all* attendants voted for the proposal of an increased membership fee of 50 SEK, it is worth noting that typically only the most engaged members attend these meetings, implying that the outcome may not represent the views of all members. Although, the absence of remaining members could be interpreted as indifference toward the suggested increase, meaning that they may accept an increase of 50 SEK. I make that reflection based on the fact that the proposal had been made official and communicated to all members prior to the meeting. Further, I argue that this voting scenario may have been influenced by warm glow effects, as the voting was conducted openly by hand in front of each other, suggesting that people might have felt moral satisfaction from contributing when their actions were visible, or afraid to challenge the norm.

Taken together, it can be difficult to say how students value the student union economically. However, the results of the study still indicate a clear willingness among students to pay for maintaining the quality of the student union services, suggesting that students place real value on their student union, particularly current members. The question remains, however, why two thirds of the student population do not value the very union that acts in their interest. According to the results of the survey, this appears to depend on individual characteristics and preferences, which prove to be relatively heterogenous.

6.2 Varying valuations across student characteristics

The group of student union members appears relatively homogenous, with individuals primarily in their twenties, a predominance of women (consistent with the *Socialdepartementet* government report) and largely shared reasons for

membership ('dinner parties and pubs'). Although, participation was observed among all study programmes, and among members, equal proportions were generally willing to pay and not willing to pay for maintaining student union quality. Thus, within this demographically similar group, economic valuations still vary between individuals.

The group of non-members appears more heterogeneous in comparison, with a wider range of ages and diverse reasons for not participating or contributing to the student union. This variation makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the group beyond heterogeneity, which further supports Olson's (1965) theory that heterogeneity complicates collective action. Although, in hindsight, further background information such as parental background and sexual orientation (equal to the government report) should have been considered to be able to draw conclusions on heterogeneity, as it may have provided necessary insights on more differences between students' characteristics and their valuation of student union services. However, Ostrom makes a good point in that heterogeneity is a complex concept and that it is difficult to group all differences together, meaning additional background variables may not have added further value.

Nevertheless, a heterogeneous student body calls for a more diverse range of offered activities at the student union. Alternatively, improved communication regarding existing activities may be sufficient.

6.3 Social valuation based on stated motivations

Dinner parties and pubs appear to be the dominant reason for participation in the student union. However, when respondents were asked to identify the most important function of the union, academic monitoring was ranked higher. Interestingly, when presented with scenarios involving a deterioration of different student union services, respondents placed a higher value on dinner parties and pubs, again. This suggests that while academic monitoring is the primary reason that the union exists, social events like dinner parties and pubs are the primary reason for why students exist at the union, while they at the same time value

academic monitoring as important. This is consistent with the results of the government report on youth participation, revealing that social context is one of the key drivers of participation. That is, if one translates “Dinner parties and pubs” as social context and not explicitly alcohol and drinking.

Among students who do not value the student union, the reasons are many. While some stated their different reasons in an open-end text, almost twenty percent selected the option “Not interested”. This raises the question: what does “Not interested” mean? Lack of interest could reflect many different things. Perhaps these individuals are not interested in the social context, or just not the party-related activities involving alcohol and drinking. It may also indicate that they do not value academic monitoring, or that they are even unaware of what it is. Perhaps they are knowingly free riding on the efforts and contributions of other students. The possible explanations could be many, and as mentioned in the Methodological Limitations section, ideally the survey would have included endless options to explore them further.

At the same time, a majority of the individuals that were not members of the student union reported that they are or have been attending the student union up to several times in the last six months, without a membership. This is clear evidence of free-riding behaviour, indicating a need for reducing the ability for “Free riders” or “Easy Riders” to hide, as suggested by Brandt et al. (2024). On the other hand, it is fully acceptable to visit and use the student union without a membership at the moment, for example by attending the pubs, where no demonstration of membership or entrance fee is required. This motivates Olson’s (1965) ideas of adopting selective incentives to prevent certain benefits of members to be enjoyed by non-contributing free riding individuals.

7. Conclusions and implications for the Ultuna Student Union

This thesis set out to examine students' valuation of student unions and their willingness to pay for maintaining service quality, as well as to assess the financial sustainability of the Ultuna Student union and to provide an example for other similar organisations. The findings reveal that students are willing to pay a mean of 57,59 SEK more in membership fee per semester, resulting in a total value of almost 100 000 SEK in additional income per year if the member participation remains stable. An alternative method, measuring only respondents in favour of a general increase, resulted in an average willingness to pay of 172,57 SEK more in membership fee per semester yielding an annual increase of about 270 000 SEK, contingent on consistent member participation.

Further, the social context seems to be a key driver for participation among members, while non-members all have different reasons for not participating. This indicates a relatively homogenous member group, in contrast to a heterogenous broader population. In addition, the results show that many non-members have visited the student union in the past six months, which points to certain free-riding tendencies among those outside the organisation. This implies a potential need to improve the selective incentives available only to members, as well as to reduce the opportunity for non-contributors (free riders) to “hide”, for example by identifying a key motivator for participation, increasing the visibility of contributions, or creating conditions in which contribution becomes the norm.

The findings of this study suggest that the average SLU student at the Ultuna campus value their student union and is willing to pay to maintain the quality of the union and its services. However, this conclusion is based on results collected from a sample where a large majority of respondents are members of the student union. Given that over two thirds of the student population are not members of the student union, the sample is not representative, making it difficult to draw reliable conclusions.

Nevertheless, the value placed on the student union by its approximately 800 members should not be overlooked. Within this group, the study is representative and indicates a strong willingness to pay for maintaining the quality of the student union services, thereby contributing to improved financial sustainability. These findings suggest that participation as a member increases awareness and appreciation of the organisation. Finally, this might indicate the need for stronger communication toward the broader student population about the role and diverse activities of the student union, as well as decision makers, in order to strengthen the student union and ensure its continued capacity to fulfil its core functions.

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