Dani Samuels is an extraordinary athlete and has the full support of her university. But it might not always be this way, writes Don Knapp.

University of Western Sydney student athlete Dani Samuels won the prestigious NSW Sports Federation’s Athlete of the Year Award last week. Samuels became the front runner for the award when she won a gold medal at the 2009 IAAF World Athletics Championships (Berlin), becoming the youngest female athlete ever to win a world discus title.

The path Dani travelled to get to Berlin is less well known. Samuels enjoys the academic support provided by the UWS Elite Athlete Friendly University program, and she was also a member of the 2009 Australian World University Summer Games team that performed so well in Belgrade, winning five gold medals.

Samuels won gold in the discus at the University Games on her way to Berlin. “That Dani was able to participate and perform so well at the University Games set up a perfect preparation for the world championships”, said Australian team chef-de-mission, Olympic finalist and World University Games dual gold medallist (swimming) Martin Roberts. “Not only did Dani throw a personal best in Belgrade; she beat a number of competitors who were also preparing for the world championships, so she went into Berlin with a lot of confidence”, added Roberts.

Sadly, the University Games pathway is in jeopardy. University sport experienced heavy collateral damage as a result of the introduction of voluntary student union (VSU) legislation in 2006. Today, there is no long-term, systemic funding stream to support sport services, sport staff, or the billions of dollars worth of sporting facilities on Australian university campuses.

Athletes have traditionally part-funded their costs to get to the World University Games. The Australian Sports Commission provides additional funding support for athletes named in the University Games team, while the program is managed by Australian University Sport.

Historically, universities have also made grants available to respective student athletes selected to represent Australia. These grants are provided by university sports associations, guilds, or vice chancellors. Grants are a major factor in making the costs of travel to the University Games more affordable for athletes. With no fee base in support of sport and other student services on campus, university sports associations and guilds are feeling the pinch. Vice-chancellors are harder pressed to fund athletes, and sport in general, on campus. An alarming number of campus sporting services and facilities have been cut or eliminated since the introduction of VSU in 2006.

“Research that underpins the Bradley review recommendations clearly showed that student engagement in campus activities, such as sport and recreation, encourages retention by improving the quality of the student experience”, said Professor Richard Larkins, president of Australian University Sport.

“While the incidence of obesity, diabetes and heart disease are on the rise, any public policy that has the effect of deteriorating the quality of sport and recreation services on campuses is ill conceived and runs counter to the national health interests of Australia”, added Larkins.

John Inverarity, former test cricketer, educator and currently the head of St George College at the University of Western Australia, puts the path Dani travelled to get to Berlin in context.

“Becoming engaged is a key factor for student athletes like Dani Samuels cannot afford to get to the World University Games. Are we heading for the days when a few remaining sporting services and facilities on campus are so commercially geared that many students cannot afford to use them?”

To avoid this, support for the government’s proposed Services and Amenities Fee legislation, scheduled for reintroduction into the Senate in March this year, is vital, says Larkins.

Don Knapp is CEO of Australian University Sport.