

Submission

to

Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and
Education

The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students

Women's Department within Arc@UNSW Limited: response to 'The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Services, Amenities, and Representation for Australian University Students'

Issue: The Women's Department welcomes this enquiry by the Rudd government into the effects of VSU on Australian students at university.

Throughout our submission, we focus on the effects of VSU on female students. These are outlined in the categories of child care as a service and the status of women's representation at UNSW.

We also recommend from the outset that any public policy with the aim to attenuate the effects of VSU should not just be youth-focussed. VSU has a direct or indirect effect on all female students including those who are considered mature-aged.

Background: Arc@UNSW Limited (from herein 'Arc') is the student organisation that was borne out of the amalgamation of the Source, the Postgraduate Board, COFA Students Association and the UNSW Student Guild (from herein 'the Guild'). These four bodies existed during universal student unionism (USU).

The Guild was a student representative body composed of the following departments: Education, Welfare, Women's, Queer, International Students, Ethnic Affairs and Activities. The Guild also encompassed the student publication, *Tharunka* and clubs and societies. The Guild's governing body was known as the Guild Council.

Arc's governing body is the board where the majority of board directors are democratically elected former or current students. Two board directors are university appointees. Furthermore Arc is a non-profit based company, advertises itself as a membership organisation, and relies on funding partially from membership, retail services and events. Arc is also heavily dependent on recurrent university funding, and advertises the University as a supporter on its website.

There are three main branches within Arc: Clubs and Activities, Representation, and Central Services. All of these branches are integral to the student organisation yet the focus here is on representation.

• **It is important to highlight here some sources of funding for student organisations and services and amenities, and how funding is/was allocated.**

In 2006 and prior to the full inception of VSU, a student paid \$78 to a Miscellaneous Activity Fund (MSAF), \$275 toward the Source, \$88 toward the Sports Association, and \$72.60 toward the Guild annually.

University Council is the governing body of UNSW. University Council delegates to the Student Affairs Committee (SAC) the approval of projects from the MSAF.

On SAC, two elected student representatives/committee members sit alongside 5 other committee members who are from University management and staff.

Changes in service provision since VSU

1. Is your institution or organisation supporting different services and amenities to those which were supported prior to the introduction of VSU?

Arc does not have the funding to continue the Postgraduate Board and Guild's joint financial support of House at Pooh Corner, one of the two child care centres on campus that prioritises student parents. From 2006, the University replaced these two bodies' partial funding while the rest comes from child care fees and the NSW Department of Community Services.

2. Without any change to existing VSU arrangements how might services and amenities be further affected?

The House at Pooh Corner strives to provide the best service regardless of funding yet since VSU, fees for student parents has risen dramatically.

Table: Daily House at Pooh Corner fees

Year	Student	Others
2005	41	46
2006	43	48
2007	54	64
2008	56	66

As one can see from the table *even with university funding* as opposed to funding from USU, fees **rose by \$11 each day** between 2006 and 2007.

Most child care places are reserved for student parents. Thus it is impossible for staff and those from the community who would constitute the 'Others' in the above table to offset costs from student parents without taking away the latter's child care places.

VSU clearly affects the viability of the centre and its affordability for student parents. Most student parents at House at Pooh Corner are postgraduates (in 2008, 51 out of 60 student places) who often need extra support. Moreover the University gives more funding to HoneyPot, the other child care centre that prioritises students.

Lastly, I have observed that House at Pooh Corner's autonomy is at risk due to university funding.

Changes in student representation and advocacy since VSU

What has been the impact of VSU on capacity for student representation and advocacy, both on campus and in the wider community? Describe any changes in the level of such services available to students.

- The Women's Officer sits on the Student Representative Council within Arc.
- The Women's Department lacks the support of professional staff which existed prior to VSU. As noted the Women's Department was part of the Guild, and the Guild employed 8 professional staff, most of whom fulfilled a support role to the different Departments' day to day functions.
- The Women's Department is well-funded in Semester 1, 2008. Yet this is mostly due to the sympathies of the feminist, *former* Managing Director of Arc who believed in the work of the Women's Department.
- Despite the consistent and hard working efforts to represent students; the Women's Officer – as have other Officers on the SRC – has been asked to *justify the position* and remuneration to a sub-committee of the board. UNSW has its own particular issues where student consultation has been negated by the University; such as the cut of a 14 week semester to a 12 week one, the cuts made to Women's and Gender Studies, and reduction of the quality of education within the Arts Faculty wherein 70% of BA students are female.

The continual requests for justifications and time spent fighting for funding takes time away from running campaigns.

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- These realities conjunct with the observation of the lack of importance within Arc given to the SRC. This is partially understandable due to the pressure on Arc to attract members and to focus their monies on programs and events that attract financial returns and membership *because of VSU*. Yet representation has been severely devalued within Arc and could lead to burnout of the important student representatives, which then affects the quality of representation.
- The autonomy of women's publications such as the 2007 women's edition of the student publication *Tharunka* was severely affected, and the autonomy of the 2008 women's handbook was threatened.

All Officers on the SRC must remain accountable to their constituents and to each other. The Women's Officer must act transparently regardless of VSU or USU.

Overall the corporatisation of UNSW's student organisation has witnessed a lack of support for the Women's Officer, a lack of professional support within the Representation arm of Arc, and time away from representation due to requests for funding and justifications of the position. This may lead to burn out and inadequate representation.

Exploration of models for sustainable services for female students

Amenities and services for female university students

1. Is there an essential suite of amenities and services that female university students should be able to access?

The following amenities and services are recommended for female university students.

- **Women's Rooms at Kensington and COFA campuses**

A Women's Room is a safer space for women on campus. It is a place to retreat, to use its resources and to speak to the Women's Officer when she is available.

Both Kensington and COFA campuses have Women's Rooms, are under the purview of Arc and the Women's Officers, and are integral to the University community.

- **Parents' Room**

Parents' Rooms enable parenting students' privacy and provide amenities for parents and their children.

One Parents' Room is provided by Arc and the other is provided by the University.

- **Child care centres**

Child care is fundamental to access to and equity within higher education. Without the availability of affordable, responsive and quality-driven child care, many women would not be able to attend university. The previous government's social conservatism that underpinned policies which disproportionately affect women included attacks on child care. The removal of the child care subsidy in the community, escalating cost of child care off-campus, Family Tax Benefit B and short sighted measures such as the Maternity Payment are examples of the shortfalls of the previous government's gendered social engineering. Well-funded and thus affordable child care is not being provided in the community thus it must be available on campus for female students.

Other very important services for women:

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Female students must have guaranteed access to the following: a Counselling Service, Health Service, Accommodation Service, Employment Service, reliable Security and Escort Services, and an Equity and Diversity Unit.

Safety on campus is a concern for many female students. The University outsourced security from 2006 and money from the MSAF contributed to the subsidising of Security Services.

Legal advice and advocacy from the Student Support Department is now restricted to Arc members. The loan scheme previously available from the Guild is not a service Arc can offer.

2. Can services and amenities be prioritised? Which might be considered crucial to campus community life and individual student success?

These services and amenities cannot be prioritised. These areas cover nearly all facets that are necessary to sustaining a quality of life during university study, and to offset the lack of student income support and the student poverty outcomes that stem from the previous government's policies.

Attending university is an investment for an individual's life chances, for the community and for Australian society. Thus students must be holistically supported to gain the most out of their investment.

3. Are there any services provided before the VSU legislation that are no longer required or should be provided on a reduced basis?

No.

Position and recommendations

The Women's Department believes in a student association funded through universal student unionism. We argue that a well-funded, accountable, democratic and independent student association constitutes the best model to enable female empowerment, support, and access and equity for women students on campus.

- **The Women's Department believes in universal student unionism.**

Universal student unionism provides the foundation for adequate student representation and accessible services and amenities which are imperative for female students. What must be noted is that sometimes women students have gender-specific needs and have been affected by VSU to a greater extent than some men in some areas. One factor contributing to this is that many female students rely on some services to a larger degree than some men.

- **The Women's Department's position consists of the full repeal of VSU without a HECS clause.**
- **An upfront, full fee payment of student association fees with a cap that should differ according to the needs of each campus is recommended. Particular to UNSW, the fees should be reduced.**
- **An option of payment through instalments should be made available with the reinstatement of USU. This would exist in addition to the once yearly universal payment.**
- **Student unions that have not been decimated by VSU should develop interest-free loan systems available to every student to pay his or her student association fees.**

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This position is consistent with the position of the Network of Women Students Australia (NOWSA), an activist and support group within the student feminist activist movement.

- **This position partially runs counter to the National Union of Students' (NUS) position. As noted, we reject the HECS-style clause as a viable solution to VSU.**

I welcome the idea that non-members will pay *an amount equivalent* to the Student Support and Services Levy as recommended by NUS (NUS submission paper, page 3). This will ostensibly discourage free riding from other student fees.

However the reasons for the rejection of the deferment option are as follows:

1. The deferment option does not allow enough student independence from the government. Since the government will be in effect funding student organisations due to the deference of fees with HECS, student representatives and activists' capacity to be critical of governments will be severely curtailed.
2. Student organisations must be independent from universities. Despite the University having previously allocated monies from student fees to student organisations, it was the student organisations themselves that distributed the money within them to different Departments. Where the University distributed student fees to university-run services such as the MSAF by the SAC, the SAC only had two student representatives. There is a concern that universities will place stringent conditions on representation because it would be in their interest to do so.
3. However small the increase is (less than 5%, NUS 2008), the fee will actually be more expensive if deferred than paying up front.
4. The HECS repayment threshold of a \$38149 income fundamentally denies the government the funding that can be distributed to student organisations while waiting for students to pay back their debt. 1/3 of students cannot afford to pay their HECS debt due to the increase of HECS in their life time (Minister Macklin, 2005), thus free riding on others student association fees will ensure.

Women's independence, autonomy, representation and access to holistic welfare and other services are at risk because of VSU.

Universal student unionism to ensure the support and empowerment of women university students in Australia!