



## **The University of South Australia students association**

### **UniLife's submission to:**

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations  
Review:

*The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Services, Amenities  
And Representation for Australian University Students*  
DISCUSSION PAPER

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## Introduction

Legislation banning compulsory up-front student union fees was passed in December 2005 and became effective from July 2006. This legislation prevented Universities from requiring students to become members of a student organisation or charging a compulsory fee for any non-academic student facilities, amenities or support services. In addition, Government funding to Australian Universities and approval to operate as a higher education provider was, and still is, conditional on compliance with VSU legislation.

In 2006 amendments were introduced to ensure Universities complied with the requirements of the *Education Services for Overseas Students Act* to provide essential support services for overseas students, including assistance in the transition to a new life in Australia, legal services, health services, grievances and appeals processes and a student contact officer. This raised concerns among student organisations that this would lead to increased costs for international students. According to NUS<sup>1</sup>, universities responded to these requirements by increasing tuition fees for international students beyond those charged to domestic students enrolled in similar courses.

The introduction of VSU meant that student organisations throughout Australia lost most, if not all, of their funding. For almost a decade before, student organisations throughout Australia had lobbied against VSU, arguing that valuable and much-needed support services for students would be lost. The fact that VSU has impacted on the level and quality of student representation and support services is not in question. The task at hand is to ascertain the **extent** to which VSU has impacted on student services, amenities and representation.

UniLife is the peak representative student body at the University of South Australia. Its primary role is to respond effectively to the needs of diverse groups of students through the provision of quality services, facilities and activities. As a major stakeholder that has directly experienced the effects of VSU, UniLife is well placed to provide an accurate account of the impact of this legislation on the quality of the educational experiences of Australian tertiary students. In order to demonstrate the devastating effects wrought by VSU at the University of South Australia. UniLife proposes to examine how the range and quality of effective student representation, academic and welfare support services, facilities and activities offered prior to 2005 compare with those currently available.

## UNISA STUDENTS' BODY : BEFORE AND AFTER VSU

### 1. Financial Impact

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<sup>1</sup> See NUS submission to the *Discussion Paper: Impact of VSU, February 2008*, p.3, Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

The University of South Australia is the largest university in the State and is spread over six campuses in the metropolitan and rural areas. In 2005, the total number of students enrolled was 32 266<sup>2</sup>, the majority of whom were members of USASA, the University of South Australia Students Association. The main funding base for USASA was the Student Amenities Fee (SAF) collected by the University; the SAF was supplemented by revenue from commercial enterprises. The SAF, for a full time student in 2005, was \$230.00. Students suffering financial hardship could request to have their amenities fee waived.

In the 18 month period following VSU, various attempts were made to recruit student members, with a range of voluntary membership packages costing from \$10.00 to \$68.00. Take up rate was just 168 packages across the entire student body in 2007 and, hence, not cost effective. After considerable research, it was decided by the UniLife Student Board to approve, for 2008, an annual Premium Membership fee of \$20.00. The take up rate to date of this new package is 1 461. In addition, students can choose Free Membership at enrolment, which entitles them to a UniLife-produced student diary, eight issues of the student newspaper and access to individual advocacy services.

UniLife funding comes from 3 main sources:

- University funding (until 2010)
- Investments
- \$20.00 voluntary Premium Membership

Funding is allocated to three main areas which are summarised as 'VOICE', 'ADVICE' and 'PLAY'. Voice = representation; Advice = advocacy; Play = sporting and non-sporting clubs, campus events and activities.

The \$20.00 voluntary membership provides students with access to the second hand book service, equipment hire, assistance with organising sporting/non-sporting clubs, priority access to UniLife activities and events at discounted rates and 'Frequent Values' discount rates for hotel accommodation, restaurants, insurance, films and various special offers.

In 2007, USASA was renamed 'UniLife', and staff embarked on a vigorous marketing and premium membership recruitment campaign. To minimise costs, staff and students designed a new logo and website and produced and printed brochures, posters and signage. To generate income, a second hand book service was successfully trialled at City West; this has now been extended to the other three metropolitan campuses. Staff and student reps also successfully organised the entertainment and activities for orientation week at all of the metropolitan and regional campuses, including producing posters for sporting and non-sporting clubs to display. Staff also participated in the University's orientation activities for international and domestic students at the four metropolitan campuses.

## **2. Changes in Service Provision**

### **2.1 Changes in Staff levels and locations**

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<sup>2</sup> University of South Australia - Key Statistics, <http://www.unisa.edu.au/pas/bai/keystatistics/keystatistics.asp>

Prior to VSU, USASA had a visible presence on all of the University's five major campuses and was an active and innovative participant in the academic and cultural life of the University. The student body employed over 90 permanent and casual staff at any one time and over the years provided hundreds of students with casual employment. UniLife now employs nine full-time and one permanent part-time staff. By April, it is expected that the full-time staff will be further reduced to seven.

There is no doubt that the decrease in numbers of staff has had a major impact on services provision. Perhaps even more significant is the loss of accumulated experience and knowledge of the higher education sector and the role of student organisations. All but one of the current staff are recent appointments and of these only one has experience of the higher education sector and the role of student organisations.

The challenge to maintain and increase quality student services with limited opportunities to generate additional revenue through commercial enterprises inevitably means that increases in staffing levels are unlikely in the near future. Consequently, the capabilities of existing staff will continue to be stretched to the limit.

Another difficulty faced by UniLife has been re-establishing a presence within the University. In 2006, all of the 'shopfront' offices and commercial shops were closed and remaining staff temporarily relocated to fourth floor offices in the Playford building at City East Campus. In March 2007, UniLife was relocated and provided with office space on all five campuses. The closure of campus sites during this period led to the common (mis)perception among students and staff that a student association no longer existed at UniSA. Overcoming this perception has taken time and effort, primarily because of the obscure location of some of the offices. The central office at City East campus, for example, is now located in the basement of the Centenary building with no natural light to staff offices and with the main external access being through a loading bay area. The building is old and the area does not contain any teaching or academic staff rooms and, consequently, has no regular flow of student traffic.

## **2.2 Changes in Student Services and facilities**

The extensive range of student support services, amenities and activities offered to student members were of major value to university staff and the wider community. USASA had offices, shops, cafes, bars and entertainment areas, plus a fully equipped gymnasium with professional experienced staff at the City East Campus. All of the facilities were available for use by students, members of University staff and the wider community. In July 2006, all of USASA's offices and shops were closed. UniLife now has an office at each of the metropolitan campuses with one permanent full-time staff at each campus responsible for the provision of all services at Mawson Lakes, Magill and City West. There is no doubt that UniLife faces major challenges to provide and sustain the level and quality of essential services required by students. The following table illustrates the loss of student services, facilities and activities that have occurred since VSU.

**Services: Before and After VSU**

<b>Before VSU Services Available to all Students</b>	<b>After VSU Available to All Students ** Available to Premium Members Only</b>
<i>Accident insurance</i>	<i>UniSA now provides</i>
<i>Student employment service</i>	
<i>Student loans</i>	
<i>Student accommodation</i>	
<i>First aid course</i>	
<i>Scuba diving course</i>	
<i>Self defence course</i>	
<i>Bar and Waiting Course</i>	
<i>Childcare subsidy</i>	
<i>Student grants</i>	
<i>Legal advice</i>	
<i>Individual advocacy</i>	<i>Individual Advocacy</i>
<i>Health Information and massage service</i>	
<i>Tax help</i>	
<i>Austudy information and advice</i>	
<i>Second hand book service</i>	<i>** Second Hand Books</i>
<i>Cheque writing</i>	
<i>Computer, laser printers and Laptop hire</i>	
<i>Lost property</i>	
<i>Coin change</i>	
<i>Cheap photocopying</i>	
<i>Magazine and information package for externals</i>	
<i>Postgraduate publication</i>	
<i>Entropy – student newspaper</i>	<i>Entropy – student newspaper</i>
<i>Locker higher</i>	
<i>Laminating</i>	
<i>BBQ, sporting and recreational equipment hire</i>	<i>**No funds to maintain</i>
<i>Passport photographs</i>	
<i>Free films</i>	
<i>Fair Days, theme weeks, local and national touring acts</i>	
<i>Message service</i>	
<i>Credit union agency</i>	
<i>Meeting rooms</i>	
<i>Student pigeon holes</i>	
<i>Sexual health - free condoms / tampons</i>	<i>Sexual health - free condoms / tampons</i>
<i>Free student diary</i>	<i>Free student diary</i>
<i>Ambassador Card discount card</i>	<i>**Frequent Values discount card</i>
<i>Sporting and non-sporting Clubs</i>	<i>**Sporting and non-sporting Clubs</i>
<i>Campus activities, social/cultural events</i>	<i>Campus activities, social/cultural events</i>
<i>Employment service</i>	<i>Employment web link provided</i>

### **3.0 Other important changes**

#### **3.1 Changes in student collective representation**

Student collective representation is the aspect of UniLife most impacted by the introduction of VSU. Depletion of funding has meant that UniLife has been unable to maintain their affiliation with the two national student bodies (NUS & CAPA) both of which have traditionally been a resource, support service and place for development for student representatives. The implication of VSU is that UniLife is, and will continue, finding it difficult to sustain effective student collective representation.

The central decision making body (Student Board) included campus representatives, elected Branch representatives and non-voting representatives from student media, sporting and non-sporting clubs.

Participating in University decision making is one of the most important roles for student representatives, this includes University Council, Academic Board, Academic Policy & Program Review Committee, Student Services Sub-Committee, Student Assessment Policies and Procedures Advisory Group and, most importantly, Student Appeals Committees at both the Divisional and University level. Student representatives are expected to be fully informed about different committee procedures, specific areas of responsibility of each committee as well as student issues.

Student representatives may change annually and, if they are to be effective student representatives, need to be supported by experienced staff with a sound knowledge base of University Committee procedures. The task of student representation is time consuming which often means that if student reps are to maintain satisfactory academic progress they often have to forgo paid employment and inevitable loss of income not to mention leisure time. Financial support for student reps is, therefore, of vital importance.

With the introduction of VSU, one of the first cost reductions was student honoraria. Currently, the UniLife President receives his or her honorarium (\$10K); all other representatives are paid a smaller honorarium (\$2.5K), conditional on meeting attendance.

The increased workload and expectations on such a small number of student reps, especially during academic review periods, combined with lack of funding for reasonable levels of honoraria has meant that UniLife is also struggling to maintain effective student representation at an adequate level. The following table illustrates the changes in the representative body after VSU:

### Student Board

Before VSU	After VSU
President	Yes
Education Vice President	
Equity & Welfare VC	
Services Representative	
Postgraduate Representative	Yes
External Student Rep	
International Student Rep	
Aboriginal/Torres Straight Islander Rep	
Women's Rep	
Environment Rep	
6 Campus branch Directors	10
Student Radio Director (non-voting)	
Sports & Recreation Rep (non-voting)	
Entropy Editor (non-voting)	Yes
Clubs & Societies (non-voting)	

### Campus Based Representation

#### Before VSU – five of six Campuses

Branch Director
Education Rep
Environment Rep
Equity Welfare Rep
International Student Rep
Services Rep
Postgraduate Student Rep
Women's Rep
General Student Reps (6)
Media Rep (non-voting)

#### After VSU – All Campuses

City East	City West	Magill	Mawson L.	Whyalla	Mt. Gambier
2 Reps	2 Reps	2 Reps	2 Reps	1 Rep	1 Rep

### **3.2 Changes in individual student representation**

As stated earlier the University of South Australia has the largest number of students in the State. The student population includes significant numbers of female, international, external, rural and isolated students, all of whom have different academic and or cultural needs and interests. Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander students comprise an important equity group. Traditionally, elected officers from all of these groups as well as postgraduates formed the representative body at each of the six campuses.

An essential service to students is the representation and advocacy of individual student interests. The provision of independent advocacy services is one of the core services underpinning all student organisations, and, at UniSA, it is one of the areas that has been adversely affected by VSU.

Advocacy services have always been independent, confidential and provided to students free of charge. While all students share some common experiences, there are groups of students that face additional or unique problems. These include students from overseas, those studying externally and postgraduate students. At UniSA, these student groups also represent major growth areas.

Prior to VSU, each of these groups had access to an advocate with specialist knowledge and experience of their particular academic needs, issues and problems. Advocates typically assist students in the preparation of, and accompany them to, appeals and other academic related meetings. They also act as a referral point for both University and community services. This type of specialist knowledge extended to University Policy, state and federal legislation, etc. and would be invaluable at student appeals and also in providing information and advice about pertinent welfare services.

Following VSU, the specialist advocacy staff positions were made redundant. The University agreed to provide funding for advocacy which allowed for one advocate to be located at each of the four metropolitan campuses, but with no allowance made for administrative support. In addition, the University's International Student Adviser positions have been removed. The depletion of advocacy services has impacted, and will continue to impact, the most vulnerable student groups (which include students from overseas, external students and those at rural and regional campuses).

### **UniLife Summary**

Post-VSU, UniLife has been greatly assisted by UniSA, with two-thirds of its budget coming from the University, conditional to the delivery of KPIs. However, the budget limitation has seen significant downgrading in the provision of funds to both sporting and non-sporting clubs; this aspect is now less than one dollar per student of funds directly available to clubs for equipment. In 2007, membership of Clubs was down over 30% on 2006.

Participation in clubs is a key element in the development of adults with balanced social interactive skills. For sporting clubs, there is the added physical health element.

We see these interactive skills as the "seedbed" for future leaders. A decline of the academically able in clubs must be a concern to all Australians interested in maintaining a healthy democracy. These students are the budding leaders and need to learn and practise the essential interactive skills so that they, in due course, can successfully introduce changes to Australian society needed to maintain our democracy and prosperity.

UniLife sees the move to impose KPIs as conditions to funding as understandable and justified, but we need to recognise that these KPIs reflect the ideals of administrators, not the current students.

### UniLife recommendation

We at UniLife suggest the funding for student bodies be separated into three levels as expressed in our UniLife logo “VOICE, ADVICE, PLAY”.

- Advice: individual student advice and advocacy services.
- Play: clubs, both sporting and non-sporting.
- Voice: student voice, as expressed on Uni Committees and in the media.

The funding itself could come from a variety of sources. For example:

- A per student up-front fee, similar to the pre-VSU SAF;
- A per student fee incorporated into the HECS/HELP debt, either as part of the academic debt or in addition to it;
- A per student allowance paid by the Government

With one exception the KPIs for any allocated funds should allow each Uni to craft its own outcome.

The exception is in our view nationally there is a need for a KPI of Voice which may read along the lines of : “Effective representation of each of the University’s students, as determined annually by their elected representatives.” Funding of this should be just \$20 cpi adjusted per student.

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