

ORGANISATIONAL SUMMARY

Background

Prior to VSU there were five separate student organisations at UNSW: The College of Fine Arts (COFA) Students Association, the Post Graduate Board, the UNSW Sports Association, the UNSW Student Guild, and the UNSW Union. These are now referred to as 'legacy organisations'.

Arc @ UNSW ('Arc') was created as a response to the implementation of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) legislation and through a 22 month consultation process between the four legacy organisations (excluding UNSW Sports Association) and the University. The establishment of the Arc was made possible by significant financial support and goodwill from the University and the legacy organisations.

The Arc was incorporated on the 15th August 2006 and began operating on the 2nd January 2007. The Arc is a public company limited by guarantee and is now the sole student organisation at UNSW, with sporting clubs now falling under the auspices of UNSW Sport and Recreation.

Structure and Role of the Arc

The Arc is governed by a Board consisting of elected student directors, University Alumni directors, University Council appointed directors and the General Manager.

The Arc has two constitutional Student Bodies known as the *Student Development Committee (SDC)* and the *Student Representative Council (SRC)*. The SDC is responsible for volunteer programs, student development/employability skills programs and supporting clubs and societies at UNSW. The SRC is the peak student representative body at UNSW and is responsible for student representation. The SRC is the voice of students and represents the collective wishes of students to the university. The SRC and Office Bearers of the constituent representative departments are elected each year by and from the student body.

The Arc is a membership organisation whose ordinary members are the students of UNSW. Pre VSU membership of UNSW Student Organisations totalled 34 000 members. In 2007 membership of the Arc was free, and was taken up by 18 366 students. In 2008 membership of the Arc is set at \$149. At the time of submission (Day 1, Week 1 of semester) the Arc has 2 800 members.

The Arc provides the following services to its Members and the students of UNSW:

- Clubs & Societies
- Volunteering Programs
- Student Development Programs & Courses
- Student representation with constituent representative departments: Postgraduate, College of Fine Arts, Undergraduate, Women's, Queer, Environment, Indigenous, Students with Disabilities, Education, Ethnic Affairs/Anti-Racism, International Students and Welfare.
- Orientation ("O") Week
- Events & Festivals
- Advocacy and Legal Advice
- Student Publications
- Retail Outlets
- Bar and entertainment venues
- Art Gallery
- Student spaces

The Arc has been able to continue to provide valued services and representation to the students of UNSW but this only as a result of a long and arduous consultation process, at a great financial expense to UNSW and from a lot of hard work from students, Arc staff and volunteers.

Financial Impact

Arc @ UNSW currently has an annual turnover of \$8 million, compared with the UNSW legacy organisations which had a combined annual turnover of approximately \$30 million. In particular, the total annual funding for student representation and student support services at UNSW has decreased by 75% since VSU, and the total annual funding available for student development services has decreased by 45%. Prior to VSU some services were solely supported by student fees while others had additional revenue streams based in retail, venue, bar and food.

Approaches to offset loss of income from Universal Student Unionism

To offset the loss of income resulting from VSU, four of the five legacy organisations at UNSW were wound down, and a single new student organisation was established to provide services previously offered by the legacy organisations. The Arc has entered into a 3 year support agreement with UNSW which is due to expire at the end of 2009, and provides funding to support a range of services and activities seen by Arc and the University as integral for all students. The agreement also includes generous provisions for leases and capital works. The restructure of student organisations at UNSW has resulted in the loss of over 50% of the staff positions previously available in legacy organisations.

The design and implementation of a valued Arc membership package has been undertaken in consultation with students, and for the first time from 2008 non-members will be required to pay for access to certain Arc services.

Effect on Services & Amenities

The reduced funding and earning capacity of the Arc resulting from VSU has had considerable impact on students at UNSW. The Arc is no longer able to offer emergency loans to students in need and can no longer provide free entertainment on campus, leaving the music and arts community with fewer opportunities for performance and exposure. The University has taken responsibility for campus childcare services and food provision which were previously subsidised by legacy organisations, and students are now bearing the increased costs associated. Lower staffing levels at Arc (compared to legacy organisations) means fewer student employment opportunities.

Self sustainability was the top priority of the Arc during 2007, and as such resources have been directed towards promoting membership, increasing commercial revenue from Arc retail stores to ensure the Arc can continue to provide valued and essential services. This has meant diverting resources from other key areas such as student representation, advocacy and support.

Changes in student representation and advocacy since VSU

Since 2006 VSU has taken time and resources away from student representation. As the sole representative body on campus the SRC is responsible for representing all categories of students at the UNSW for a fraction of the previous annual budget and with fewer resources. As a result marginalised issues may be sidelined to retain resources for more general student issues, and there has been no coordinated student representation on the following issues at UNSW in the past eighteen months;

- Decreasing the teaching semester from 14 to 12 weeks without reducing fees
- Introduction of Saturday exams
- Removal of 100,000 library books from library
- Cutting of program majors from faculties
- A reduction in casual teaching staff, leading to an increase in class sizes

The nature of student representation at UNSW has also changed as a result of VSU. The SRC is no longer an autonomous body – rather, it is accountable and reports to the Governing Board, and the SRC budget requires Board approval. The Board includes two University appointed directors, and combined with the substantial funding received from the University this can be seen to

compromise the independence of the SRC and self-censorship and censorship by the Board are inevitable consequences.

The Arc cannot afford to provide professional support or permanent staff to conduct research, assist with administration of the SRC or provide advice and structure to the elected student representatives. This has negatively impacted on ability of elected office bearers to represent students of UNSW.

Going Forward

The Arc has been operating on the assumption that VSU will not be repealed in the immediate future. The Arc's strategic goal is to become financially self sustainable, however this is dependant upon three key factors:

- Renewal of the University support agreement
- Membership uptake
- Retail and other commercial revenue

If any one of these three factors were to fail Arc would find itself in dire financial difficulties and services and representation would suffer or be lost altogether. Despite the extensive structural change and careful planning to build a financially viable student organisation, Arc still has a very real risk of being financially unsustainable in the future unless there are significant changes to VSU legislation.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO ENSURE SATISFACTORY SERVICES AND AMENITIES AND STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE BODIES

Amenities and services for university students

The Arc believes its current suite of services essential and crucial to campus community life and individual student success:

Advocacy and representation for and by students

The SRC would be able to more effectively engage with their constituencies if adequate administrative resources were provided. These are currently very limited due to the tight financial situation of the VSU environment.

The Arc has a student support services department comprising of advocacy officers that are used by individual students for academic or personal issues, and a solicitor for legal representation. These services have been made available only to financial members of Arc and may be inaccessible to non-member students when they are most in need of these services.

The SRC and student support services would be more effective and would be able to assist more students if secure funding of these services were achieved through a change in VSU legislation.

The Arc urges the government to replace VSU legislation with legislation that allows for the preferred model described by the National Union of Students as indicated in their recent submission to DEEWR. The Arc believes this model would provide adequate financial support for student support services and student representation at UNSW while at the same time fostering independence.

This model addresses financial concerns for individual students as it allows for the deferment of the Student Support and Services Levy in a HECS-style payment system, however we feel that any Campus Community Facilities Fund should be regulated by an overarching government legislation with approvals determined by student organisations in conjunction with universities.

In our experience, if changes to VSU legislation are discussed the following should be considered in conjunction with the National Union of Students Preferred Model to ensure the existence of quality and valued student organisations:

- Establishment of an overarching regulatory / auditing body for student organisations or legislation that ensures all student organisation must be incorporated. Such legislation would ensure responsible and accountable financial stewardship.
- Legislation that entrenches management independence and student control of student organisations.
- Student organisation funding agreements that are tied to the delivery of valued services, with measurable performance indicators and outcomes.
- Changes to tax legislation for student organisations Allowing Student Organisations to receive tax deductible donations. Such tax benefits for donors would encourage philanthropy thus reducing the funding burdens of government and universities

We believe that the implementation of the suggestions outlined above would remove concerns regarding the stewardship and management of student organisation in the compulsory student unionism environment and reduce the financial burden to universities and the government.

The Arc @ UNSW has been able to provide independent, valued services and representation to the students of UNSW only as a the result of a long and arduous consultation process which came at a great financial expense to UNSW and through incalculable hours of hard work from Arc staff and volunteers. While this is the case VSU legislation needs to be amended to ensure that the Arc can continue to provide these essential services for all students at UNSW into the future, and to allow all students access to these services regardless of their personal financial situation.