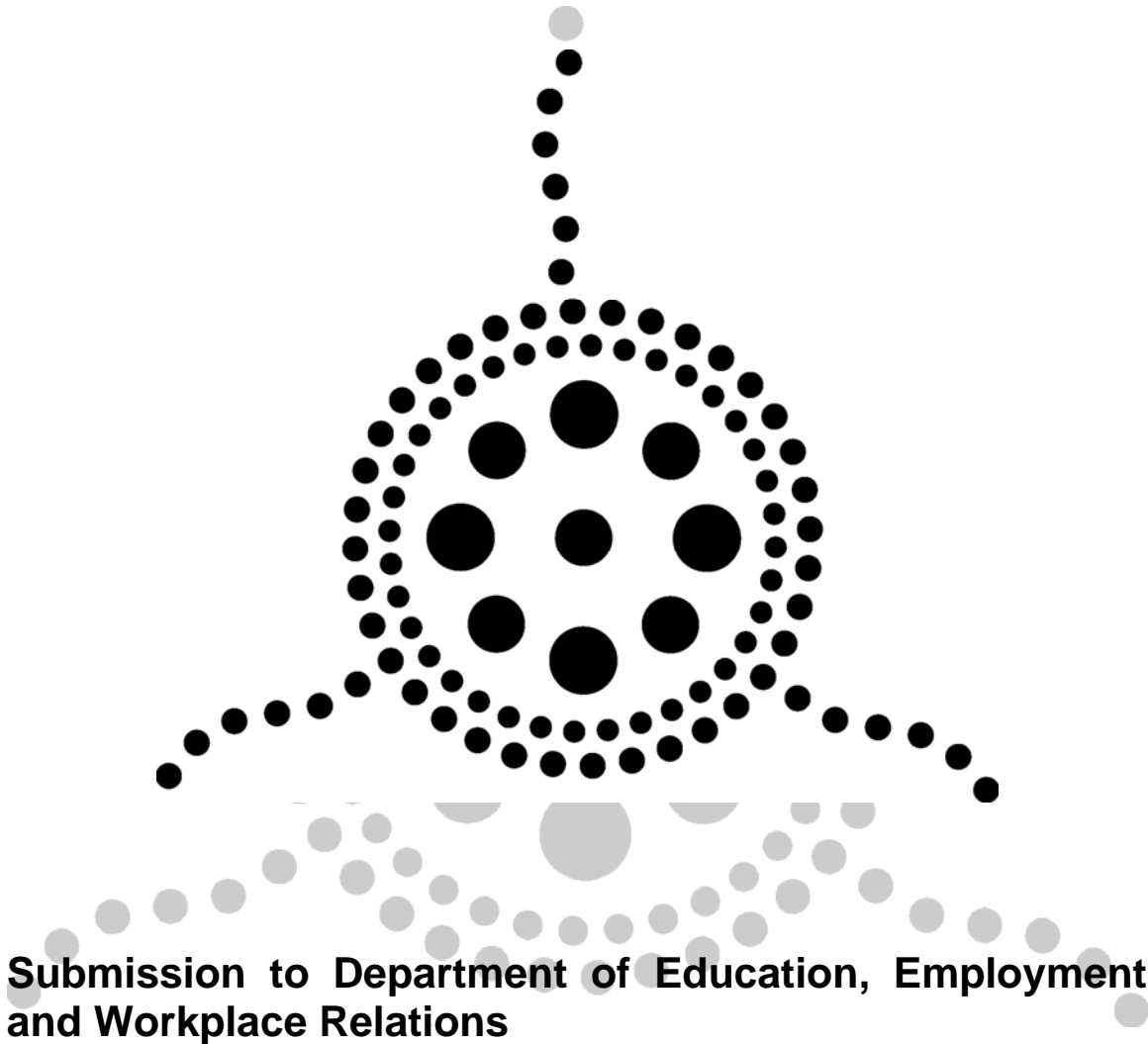


***La Trobe University Students' Representative Council
Inc.***



**Submission to Department of Education, Employment
and Workplace Relations**

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

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1. Introduction

1.1 What is the SRC?

The La Trobe University Students' Representative Council is the main representative body for students at La Trobe Bundoora (the other being the La Trobe University Postgraduates Association). We have a proud history, and have existed since the inception of the University in 1967. We are independent from the University and are run by students, for students. Along with representation, we also offer independent academic advocacy, we run the Universities Clubs and Societies Program, as well as student media. The council consists of nine student office bearers and eight general members, all of whom are elected annually at campus, paper-based elections, and in which any enrolled student is eligible to vote.

Prior to VSU we also offered a free tax service (lost), a student dental service (lost) and a student legal service (taken over by the University).

The SRC welcomes the opportunity provided by the Federal Government to make a submission detailing the impact of the Voluntary Student Unionism legislation on both our organisation and on the state of representation, advocacy, and student life more generally on our campus.

La Trobe Bundoora has historically been a campus with an active and engaged student body. The SRC has long maintained that campuses vibrant student community – facilitated by its student organisations – has been as important in attracting, supporting and retaining students as its academic output.

For information on the La Trobe University Students' Guild or on the La Trobe University Postgraduates Association please see their respective submissions.

1.2 Introduction of VSU - 50% cut in overall funding to student services

In 2006, the last full year of the compulsory General Services Fee, the University collected just over \$7 million from it. In 2007 the University provided a total of \$3.3 million to the provision of student services on campus. A voluntary membership program was implemented by the DSS (Guild Board) and collected \$225,000 in revenue (for more information please see the Guild Board Submission)

\$3.5 million in total funding has also been guaranteed in 2008 but the University has indicated that an indexed allocation of \$3.5 million in total funds would be unsustainable in the future and further cuts would be necessary. The reduction in funding has led to a concomitant reduction in service provision, representation, and student life. This submission will focus on the impact of the VSU legislation on our organisation, the SRC.

For a broad overview of the impacts of VSU on services on campus more generally, please see the La Trobe University Guild Board submission.

1.3 Student Organisations on Campus prior to VSU

Prior to the introduction of the VSU legislation, the Bundoora campus had three independent student-controlled student organisations; the Union Board, the Students Representative Council (SRC), and the La Trobe University Postgraduates' Association (LUPA).

These organisations, along with Sport and Recreation Association (SARA) and regional campus student organisations were funded almost wholly through the collection of the compulsory General Services Fee (GSF).

1.4 Student Services, Student Governance and Student Voices on Campus post-VSU

- In 2006 in response to the introduction of the VSU legislation, the University instituted a complete review of student services on campus.
- That review resulted in the University taking over the student-controlled Union Board (which had previously run the bulk of student services, events, activities on campus, along with some commercial operations) and dissolving SARA (Sports and Rec) to create the University-controlled Division of Student Services (DSS).
- After significant amounts of student lobbying and protest, the University created a student-controlled but advisory-only Guild Board to oversee the operations of the DSS and the provision of services on campus.
- The SRC and LUPA remained independent from the University but became totally reliant on University funding for their survival. This has compromised the independence of the organisations', particularly as the University has only provided minimal funding, all of which is tied to particular areas as part of a stringent funding agreement.

The current structures that the University has in place to help it listen to the needs of students are inadequate. The level of funding that the University

has granted the SRC (extremely inadequate even where the University is facing financial difficulty) is one factor which suggests that they do not value elected student representatives. Indeed, for some University administrators the introduction of the VSU legislation provided an opportunity to permanently sideline student voices. This is despite the fact that in the University's own VSU survey of 2006, 57.8% of students recognised that independent Advocacy and Representation Services were very important, with only 4% of students indicating that they were not important.

This sidelining has been particularly evident in the takeover of the student-controlled Union by the University's Division of Student Services (see above). The Guild Board, which is student-controlled but advisory-only, has no real decision-making capacity, and is subject to "the overriding authority of the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Equity and Student Services)."¹ This arrangement is unsatisfactory and represents a complete reversal of the pre-VSU arrangements whereby the General Manager of the Union was required to report directly to the elected student board.

This erosion of the student voice on campus under VSU has been accompanied by an increased reliance by the University on "direct" contact with the student body through intermittent student surveys and focus-groups.

The University has historically also been ad-hoc in its approach towards student representation on University boards and committees. It has made no concerted or co-ordinated effort towards ensuring that there is adequate student representation on academic and faculty boards, yet consistently seeks to lay the blame on the under-funded, and under resourced student organisations for this failure.

¹ Guild regulations 6(1)

2. The Overall Impact of VSU on the SRC

2.1 Overall financial impact

The SRC has been hit disproportionately hard by VSU. In 2006 the SRC's total allocation of GSF funds was approx. \$1.1 million. The 2007 funding agreement was for \$250,000. The organisation had no reserves, assets, or commercial trading activities. The 2008 funding agreement with the University, still under negotiation, is for \$275,000.

2.2 Limited ability to offset loss of income

The DSS has implemented a voluntary membership scheme which has had limited success (for more information on this please see the Guild submission). In 2007 the funds from this scheme went into the DSS' general pool of funds so could have, in theory, flowed through to the SRC.

The SRC has managed to negotiate a funding agreement with the University which only covers our most basic fixed operational costs and funds our independent advocate.

The SRC represents all students at La Trobe Bundoora and has not implemented a voluntary membership scheme of its own. It has no commercial operations, and no ability to inject funding into setting up commercial operations. It therefore has no capacity to offset loss of income since VSU was implemented other than to seek funding from the University and is currently totally reliant upon University funding for its continued existence.

3. Changes in service provision since VSU – SRC Inc.

3.1 Dental Service CLOSED

Prior to the implementation of VSU the SRC operated a student dental service, which offered discounted dental health care to students. This service was also utilised by students from RMIT Bundoora. The service made dental health care more accessible, in terms of both cost and location, for students in Bundoora.

The service was closed in 2006. The SRC still regularly receives calls and visits from students wishing to make an appointment to use the service.

3.2 Legal Service – TAKEN OVER BY UNIVERSITY

The SRC also operated a legal service which gave free legal advice to all students. The University took over the legal service in 2007 when it was clear that the SRC could no longer fund the ongoing costs associated with the service. It is now part of the DSS. The operations of the Legal Service have changed since the University took control of it. Staffing levels have decreased. The service is not freely accessible to all students; students must be Guild Members or are charged market rates.

The provision of the Legal and Dental service cost the SRC an estimated \$240,000 per annum.

3.3 Free Tax Service – LOST

The SRC also offered a free tax service for students, where they could get assistance in filling out tax returns and with other taxation matters. The tax service was provided by the SRC's accountant, a position which has since been made redundant. It was very well utilised by both domestic and international students, who often had significant difficulties understanding their tax obligations, particularly in relation to Visa requirements.

3.4 Second Hand Bookshop – CLOSED

The SRC operated a second-hand bookstore for many years, which sold textbooks to students well below the price of a new text. This service was shut in 2006 in anticipation of VSU legislation. There is now no comparable service offered on campus.

3.5 Decreases in staff levels / staff redundancies

The SRC was forced to make a number of staff redundant in 2007 due to the drastic nature of the funding cuts faced by our organisation in the wake of VSU. Staff made redundant:

- **Accountant / Bookkeeper - 3 days per week**
 - Managed the organisations finances, gave advice on organisations expenses to executive, ran the free-tax service, sat on various university committees, was involved in student loans and was on the board of the University Credit Union.
 - This position was made redundant in 2007.
- **Research and Representation Support Officer – 3 days per week**
 - Advised office bearers in relation to committees, campaigns etc. Assisted office bearers with the development of policy. Assisted in the development of organisational materials. Had been with the organisation for a long time and had a wealth of institutional knowledge which office bearers and other staff could draw upon. In peak periods also assisted the organisations advocate with advocacy load.
 - This position was made redundant in 2007.
- **Receptionist / Clubs and Societies Administrator – F/T**
 - This position was made redundant in 2007 (with associated costs). It has been recreated in a decreased capacity (4 days per week). This means that the organisation does not have a receptionist/administrator present in the office one day per week.
- **Research Officer - 3 days per week**
 - This position was made redundant in 2005, in an attempt to cut costs in anticipation of VSU.

New positions created:

- **Receptionist / Clubs and Societies Administrator – 4 days per week**
- **Bookkeeper - 1 day per week.**

Positions retained:

- **Professional Advocate – Full Time** – provides expert independent advice and representation to students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) on academic matters, disputes with the University etc. The university has recognised the value of this service and has maintained funding for this staff member at pre-VSU levels.

3.6 Broader organisation implications of staff redundancies

- **Financial instability, risk of insolvency**

- Given that, post-VSU, the SRC was not in a position to meet its ongoing employee expenses, staff redundancies were required. However, the associated with the redundancies themselves put the organisation in an extremely precarious financial position. For a major part of the second half of 2007 the SRC was on the verge of insolvency.
- Extreme cost-saving measures were implemented to keep the organisation solvent. Office-bearer honorarium was not paid (including for the President, who continued to work 40-50 hrs per week). No funds were available for stationary, paper etc, and the organisation had to rely on sourcing materials from external sources (donations) to continue publishing materials for the benefit of students. This situation largely continues in 2008, as there is virtually no money in the current University funding agreement for representational activities (see *Representation* below).
- The organisation had no receptionist for the second-half of the year.
- The organisation had to rely completely on the hard-work and commitment of its unpaid office-bearers and executive. It is not an overstatement to say that were it not for the hard-work of those students, along with the strong activist culture on campus at La Trobe Bundoora, the organisation would no longer exist.

- **Increased burden on student representatives; decreased organisational capacity**

- Our ability to function successfully as an organisation relies upon our capacity to engage students and facilitate their involvement in the SRC's activities.
- The organisation no longer has ANY office-bearer support staff. Student organisations, with their yearly turnover of student-representatives, rely on staff-members for organisational memory and institutional knowledge. The only long-term staff member the organisation now has is our advocate – whose workload is such that she has very little time to be assisting student office-bearers and representatives.
- There has been a significantly increased managerial role for student officials. The executive has to constantly oversee the organisations financial situation, monitor costs and expenditure etc.
- Student-representatives have had to spend significant amounts of time fundraising. They have not, therefore, been able to spend adequate amounts of time doing what they were elected to do; representing students on academic committees, running campaigns etc. In 2007 in particular we had a noticeably decreased presence on campus, which has continued to an extent in 2008.

3.7 Representation – FUNDING CUT by 80%

- There has been an 80% decrease in funding for the SRC's representational activities since 2006.
- The University does not value the SRC's representational activities and has funded them accordingly in the University's funding agreement – with only \$25,000 allocated towards \$12,500 in honorarium for the President and the General Secretary in 2008.
- There is no money allocated directly for student representational activities. Unpaid Office-bearers currently have to spend a large amount of their limited time fundraising and sourcing materials for the representational activities which they want to run.
- **Office Bearer Honoraria**
 - Prior to VSU the SRC paid all of its 9 student representative office-bearers an equivalent full-time honorarium of \$12,500 per annum. This was not a gratuitous payment but was made in recognition of the significant amount of time that office-bearers spend in fulfilling their roles.
 - Honoraria is not provided as a wage, but aims to provide income support which enables students to take on their role as office-bearers and student leaders, and allows them to forego both part-time employment and full-time study as they undertake their role.
 - It is essential that honorarium is not restricted to such a level which financially prohibits students from becoming student office bearers.
 - The SRC has long maintained that funding for office-bearer honoraria is an investment in human resources, which allows OB's to spend their time organising campaigns, events and activities.
 - An honorarium also allows office-bearers to spend the significant amounts of time necessary to either represent directly students on various University Boards and committees or to facilitate the involvement of other students on these committees. In 2007, student representation on University committees was significantly down, in line with the cutting of all student office-bearer honoraria.
- **Despite the commitment and hard-work of unpaid student office-bearers, VSU has devastated representative activities on our campus. Current levels of funding for student representation are completely unsustainable.**

3.8 Clubs and Societies – FUNDING CUT by 25%

The SRC maintains that, along with the sports centre and sporting clubs, the Clubs and Societies program is the most successful program run within the university to engage students. The Clubs and Societies program run by the SRC is central to the student experience on campus.

Clubs and Societies at La Trobe have, nonetheless, generally operated on significantly lower levels of funding than other campuses. In 2007 funding for Clubs and Societies was cut by 25% from \$40,000 p.a to \$30,000 p.a. Participation in Clubs and Societies programs has subsequently fallen. Many clubs have indicated that their ability to hold regular events which engage students is severely constrained by current funding limitations.

Please see the La Trobe University Clubs and Societies submission for details on how the VSU legislation has affected individual clubs.

3.9 Student Media – FUNDING CUT by 70%

- The student magazine funding was cut in 2007 by approx. 70%. Current levels of funding did not cover 2006-level printing costs. The number of editions per year has subsequently been reduced from 10-6. The editors (now unpaid) have been forced to spend a significant amount of time trying to source advertising revenue to sustain the magazine.
- There has been a significant drop in levels of distribution and contribution as there are no funds available to promote the magazine on campus via activities and events such as magazine launches.
- There has been extremely limited in-kind support from the University, particularly the University media department.

4. FUTURE FUNDING CUTS IF NO CHANGE TO VSU ARRANGEMENTS

As previously stated, the University has allocated \$3.5 million in total funding for the provision of student services on campus in 2008. This amount is up for review at the end of the year and the University has previously indicated that an indexed allocation of \$3.5 million in total funds would be unsustainable in the future and further cuts would be necessary.

In 2007 the University commissioned an independent review into the budgetary allocation to the SRC. Included in the terms of reference was the direction:

“To make recommendations as to what services provided by the SRC should be maintained in light of the current restricted funding environment and what would be the most cost effective... of providing them for the benefit of the student body.”²

The “restricted funding environment” referred to was a \$7 Million University budget deficit.

The review recognised that the organisation was struggling to meet its basic operational costs and recommended a funding increase in that area.³ However, it flagged further possible funding cuts to:

- Representation (remaining honorarium)⁴
- Clubs and Societies⁵
- Student Media⁶

The SRC believes that if any of these future cuts did take place the operation of these services would become unsustainable. Funding for all of these services is already at extremely low levels compared to other campuses around the country. Many Clubs and Societies have indicated that if they were faced with further funding cuts the incentive to continue running clubs would be limited.

The SRC believes that it is only through the strong culture of active engagement and the commitment of students involved that the SRC has survived the extreme funding cuts caused by the VSU legislation and the limited ability and will of the University to fund our organisation’s activities (excl. advocacy).

² Phillips KPA ‘Report of 2007 Budget Allocation to Student Representative Council Inc.’ 2

³ Ibid 103

⁴ Ibid 38

⁵ Ibid 103

⁶ Ibid 35

5. Exploration of models for sustainable services, representation and advocacy for students

The SRC endorses the National Union of Students' Preferred Model for the provision of student services and representation on campus. This submission shall assume familiarity with that model, its main elements being:

1. A Deferred Student Support and Services Levy
2. The Campus Community Facilities Fund
3. Restoring Student Services and Representation Transition Fund.

Please refer to the NUS submission for more information on the elements of the model.

Areas of key concern:

- Advocacy and representation services are essential student services that should be funded through the same means as other services such as counselling, childcare and legal aid.
- Adequately funded and independent student representation is essential to ensure that the welfare and educational needs of students are met. These issues should not be divorced from the broader educational experience.
- If we are to build strong university communities that develop well rounded graduates we must provide for a strong and independent student voice. This is as important as ensuring that we have well funded- sporting clubs, student media and clubs and societies.
- The fee must be deferrable. It is widely acknowledged that many students are struggling to make ends meet, particularly at the beginning of the year. A compulsory fee acts as an additional barrier for students who are supporting themselves through University and for students from low-SES backgrounds (a significant proportion of the La Trobe University student community).
- The SRC is very concerned with levels of student debt, but notes that under the NUS preferred model the deferred levy would be significantly lower than previous General Service Fees, as it does not provide for infrastructure expenses (these are covered by the Campus Community Facilities Fund), and would probably only account for an additional 2-3% increase in the average HECS debt.

- The NUS model would provide a stable and sustainable income source for the provision of student services and representation on every campus, regardless of the Universities actual financial position. The SRC believes that there has been a markedly worse impact from VSU on campuses such as La Trobe where the University has not been in a financial position to fund Student services and representation to pre-VSU levels.
- The use of the funds must be governed by students. The revenue should not be seen to be just an additional income stream for the University. If students are providing the bulk of the funding for services then their representatives, elected through open and accountable mechanisms, should be able to decide how that money would be best spent. Students, not University bureaucrats, have the best insight into student needs and wants.

