

Effect of VSU at Macquarie University

I am absolutely opposed to a universal banning of compulsory student fees. In saying so, I am no advocate of the way many student organisations are currently run. As a student of Macquarie University, I am a member of three organisations, SAM (Students at Macquarie – the student union), MUSC (Macquarie University Students' Council – the students' association), and MUSA (Macquarie University Sports Association). Macquarie University exists in a rather unique position in relation to VSU. The impact on current representation and services from MUSC and SAM will be minimal, as they barely provide any services or accountability at present. This is an early consequence of VSU, and despite our situation, VSU would have terrible consequences on our campus in future years.

Over the last year especially, MUSC and SAM have declined considerably. Both SAM and MUSC are run by the same man, Mr Victor Ma (President and Chairperson accordingly, and member of the Liberal Party.) Amid allegations of rigged elections, Mr Ma's cohort holds the majority of positions on both the SAM board and the MUSC council. Under his leadership, we have seen the erosion of services and representation on campus, especially through the corruption that stagnates MUSC. The 36th MUSC holds office illegitimately, their term having expired at the end of last year. They instead voted amongst themselves for the stated purpose of 'restructuring through Incorporation', which they have done so unconstitutionally with the full complicity of the University. This is done under the rationale of 'preparing for VSU'. The 36th MUSC are using questionable legal advice that claims students aren't members of the organisation, despite the fact that they are required to pay fees and the constitution is worded as such. For the past two years, the University has withheld MUSC's funding (the collected student fees) as the students' council was unable to provide audited reports. As a result students haven't seen any of the services they were required to pay for anyway. It is highly likely that should VSU come in, MUSC will cease to exist entirely in its current form.

SAM, on the other hand, is not concerned about VSU at all. For the past few years they have been creating a contingency plan to operate at the same levels as they currently do. They have reportedly put aside \$3 million for redundancy payouts when VSU is applied. Most of the food outlets are outsourced to private contractors, and services are being cut everywhere (eg. the art centre has closed down, and the free computing labs have closed, to reportedly be replaced by an internet café). The downside to SAM's preparedness is that for the past few years they have been withholding funds, cutting services to save money for the 'rainy day'. SAM's projected budget does not anticipate any revenue whatsoever from voluntary student membership. In effect, it is already operating as a union under VSU – there are increased prices in food, diminishing facilities for students to use (space is rented out to businesses and franchises), and a rapidly dwindling cultural centre, despite the best efforts of many of the staff. It has ceased to act as a student organisation working towards campus community, and now operates as a pure business, with free rent.

So why, in the light of this situation at Macquarie University, do I not support VSU? The answer is fairly simple. I believe that education is a holistic experience that extends beyond the classroom. University is a place to expand your social horizons, question your values and grow as a person. The few services that are being provided

now are vital to a healthy campus that encourages development outside of the classroom. Last year I was involved in the student magazine run by SAM, the only student publication on campus, where everyone had the opportunity to have their work published and freely distributed. I am the president of the firespinning club the Macquarie Pyromaniacs, a free club that teaches the art of fire performing every week. We are an affiliated club with SAM, and while we don't utilise the funding that SAM provides to clubs, we do utilise their weekly newsletter to advertise our club, their stalls at O-week and their BBQ facilities to fundraise. It is only a small example of a niche group on campus, but we are part of a body of clubs and societies that involves participation on campus that goes beyond the classroom. I personally believe that involvement in extra-curricular activities has a flow-on affect to ones dedication to their education. I know from personal experience that participating in my club, or the drama society (of which I am also a member, among others), it make Uni that much easier and enjoyable to attend, which has positive affects on my work.

I am also part of a group that wants to return accountability to our student organisations, and create a strong community of support and culture on campus. We are called 180 Degrees, and can be found at www.oneeightydegrees.org

The reason I cannot support VSU is because, while the immediate consequences for us may be minimal, the affect on other student organisations across the country will be devastating. A blanket ruling that essentially kills off these organisations' source of funding will destroy the myriad of services and representation that are offered elsewhere, as well as the few of our own.

It is further than the services debate though. It is my dream that in a few years we will be able to turn around the culture of corruption and 'bottom line accountability' that has crippled out student organisations turned around, to a body that is truly representative of the students that vote them in. I believe that we need to get rid of the 'resume builders' and students that are in it for the money. While VSU will achieve this effect, it is comparable to shooting a fly with a cannon. The negative consequences shall far outweigh the desired affect.

Ultimately, student representation is about giving a voice to students, and providing an environment that encourages questioning and development. In terms of representation, it is unrealistic for the Government to assume that a University can step in and provide those services. For instance, if a student is appealing against the University for one reason or another, how can the student turn to the people that have ruled against them for assistance? Similarly, Universities are run as financial institutions. In their illustrious histories there have been hundreds of examples where University administrations act against the will of students, or at least the majority of students that vote for their representatives. The students then lobby the university and act as a kind of safeguard against universities pursuing their own agenda. Where will this sort of representation, this lobbying power, come from if there is no student organisation to hold the university accountable? Similarly, universities are breeding grounds for political ideas and debate. Student bodies have traditionally acted as a counter-argument to Government actions, providing much needed debate and forcing accountability. VSU will impact upon students' abilities to create that discussion and critique of public policy, which safeguards concentrations of power.

While I do not support VSU, I do think if the Government was serious about fixing up the problems that took into consideration the unique and important roles of vastly differing organisations, rather a blanket rule of market accountability, which as history has demonstrated in WA and VIC ends up shutting the organisations down. If there truly was a desire to give students a choice about VSU, then, for example, it should be put to a referendum on each campus.

The Government's proposed legislation carries with it the air of hypocrisy and personal agenda. There has been little engagement with the people that will be affected by VSU, and an apparent unwillingness to negotiate. It is with great irony that a Government which slashes higher education funding and allows for a 25% HECS increase claims to act in the best interests of students, by saving them a couple of hundred dollars while their fees increase by thousands. VSU seems hasty and ill-considered, and the effects of such legislation would be devastating to Universities across Australia, and the future of higher education.