

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

RESPONSE

from

FLINDERS CAMPUS COMMUNITY SERVICES
INC



by

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Introduction

This paper is in response to the release of the Australian Government's Discussion Paper relating to the impact of Voluntary Student Unionism.

This paper has been submitted by the management of Flinders Campus Community Services Inc (FCCS), trading as Flinders One. The Board of FCCS has also approved a submission by the Student Council, and Flinders University has indicated they will also be making an independent submission.

Background

Prior to VSU Flinders University had six distinct and separate student organisations. These comprised:

- Student Union
- Students Association
- Sports & Fitness
- Clubs & Societies Association
- International Students Association
- Postgraduate Students Association

The allocation of student fees was determined by the Student Organisation Committee (SOC) comprising the six Student Presidents.

With the advent of VSU likely, the six organisations, in collaboration with the University commissioned an independent review of how best to operate in a VSU environment. This review was conducted by PKF who delivered their final report to the University in late September 2005.

Arising from PKF's report, University Council at its December 2005 meeting, gave in-principle approval for the formation of a single organisation with appropriate governance arrangements, and in April 2006 approved the Rules for FCCS. It was agreed that FCCS would be established as an incorporated association, with each of the existing six student organisations passing a special resolution to amalgamate and to form FCCS. FCCS was formally incorporated on Monday 3 July 2006.

FCCS Objects of Association are:

- ❖ to promote, support and protect the rights and interests of Students;
- ❖ to organise, offer and promote activities and programmes that assist, complement and enhance the educational experience and the personal and professional development of Students;
- ❖ to offer and promote Student support services, recreation, sport, advocacy and representation;
- ❖ to offer services and facilities for the University Community, guests and visitors to the University; and
- ❖ such other objectives as may be ancillary to the above.

Flinders University is the only member of FCCS, and as such FCCS is recognised as a controlled entity of the University. However FCCS does operate independently and without hindrance or control by the University. The Board of FCCS comprises an independent chair, five external directors (business, legal, non for profit type skills and includes the GM) and five student directors.

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Two student directors are directly elected, and the other three student directors are appointed by Student Council. Student Council is an official sub-committee of the FCCS Board and comprises 16 elected student representatives. It is the peak student representative body on campus.

Discussion Points

Exploring the impact of the VSU approach

Financial Impacts

What is the financial impact of VSU on your institution or organisation?

As a whole the six associations received funding in order of \$3.3m from student services fees. Approximately 10% of this was allocated to capital reserves, with the remainder distributed amongst the organisations based on historical allocations and current needs or bids.

In parallel with the introduction of VSU the process of amalgamation occurred, resulting in a reduction of 38% of full time (FT) or Permanent Part Time (PPT) staff. This resulted in some \$936,000 worth of redundancies paid out of the SOC Capital Fund that saw FCCS commence with around \$2m of working capital. This was viewed as barely adequate to cover the requirements of working capital and to provide capital replacement and development for a student service organisation that services a university community population of some 20,000. To date the capital reserves have remained stable however FCCS is planning capital developments of some \$600,000 in 2008 in an attempt to increase operational revenues.

FCCS has retained all commercial operations which include Food & Beverage (F&B), Sport and Fitness and Retail shops turning over around \$5m pa.

Overall FCCS has had to take a commercial stance post VSU to move towards a model of self-funding. Commercial operations have had to become profitable as previously towards the end of pre VSU, only Retail made any surpluses. All student service operations have been reviewed from a subscription perspective as these are subsidised through commercial operations. In its first full year of trading FCCS is successfully moving towards a sustainable model, achieving a sub \$25k deficit (against a budget of a \$153k deficit).

Financially, due to initial working capital and the review process undertaken FCCS has met the onset of VSU successfully from a financial perspective. This has been a cautious program of growth, and as FCCS achieves sound financial results it is increasing its direct support back to student services.

What approaches have been implemented to offset the loss of income from compulsory student union and amenities and services fees and how successful have they been? Your response might refer to the following examples:

a) voluntary contributions/fees from students;

FCCS investigated a student fee model but have not moved on this option due to costs to implement and administer, historical under subscription, and the overall reduction in operating income by having to offer inducements and discounts.

b) financial and in-kind support from the university;

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The University has continued to provide in kind support previously enjoyed including rent free space, utilities and sports field labour costs valued at around \$1m pa.

The University now directly contributes to the provision of 3.5 FT staff (advocacy and welfare) and provides cash contributions on application for specific student events. It would be expected that the later and potentially the former will revert to FCCS as our financial performance improves.

No formal lease or funding agreement exist other than the exchange of letters on an annual basis.

c) the implementation of 'user pays' approaches; and

There has been a general recognition of the increase in a user pays model. Most F&B prices have remained static, except for CPI, as previously students received a discount from the advertised price rather than a cheaper price already being advertised. Sport and Fitness has also had a small price increase but an annual gym membership is still exceedingly competitive (\$299). Sporting Clubs are also required to contribute greater joining fees and are now required to pay for some of their university venue hire that was previously free. The only service that was previously free and that is now user pays is the casual employment service. This was \$40pa but has now been revised to \$9.95pa for 2008.

d) other (please state)

Sponsorship. FCCS has sought commercial sponsorship for events, products or general cash contributions as a revenue line. This resulted in some \$200,000 in 2007. This has included some cash contributions from the university as discussed above.

Investments. Sound investment of our capital funds to produce additional income (risk free).

Management. Particularly in F&B a significant review was undertaken to introduce profitability through efficiency and effectiveness rather than driving prices. A review was also undertaken on all student services with some being closed, the Parent Centre and student publications, and some services reduced or user pays introduced eg clubs & societies support and employment services.

Marketing. FCCS has undergone a complete marketing and re-branding exercise, driving the business with a new launch thus raising awareness in particular to the university community.

Community. FCCS has sought additional income from outside of the university community, in particular grounds & facility hire to external sporting organisations. This occurred pre VSU but more effort has been placed in this area now.

Staffing. With the amalgamation significant savings have been made on staffing expenses. In many cases staffing support has been centralised which has resulted in the reduction of direct support previously enjoyed by the associations. Directors are not remunerated and only the Student President is paid a small honorarium.

How much have students been prepared to pay for services on a voluntary basis?

Students have been willing to pay fair market prices for services that they see of value and quality. Gym memberships of around \$300 have not decreased, student meals top out at around \$9 (roast) with no complaint. The employment service was under subscribed at \$40pa, but in 2008 at \$9.95pa there has been a considerable uptake.

What is the financial impact of VSU on you as an individual? Financially are you better off overall?

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No comment.

Changes in service provision since VSU

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

FCCS made a decision in 2006 not to close any pre VSU services, but choose to review those services in 2007. With the exception of the Parent Centre, all pre VSU services are still being undertaken, albeit in changed circumstances. For example employment is still being offered but no longer free, support is still available for Post Grads and International Students, but it is now on call as opposed to being dedicated.

The Parent Centre was closed in June 2007 and is the only pre VSU service that has been closed or ceased. Unfortunately the operational model adopted of being a free crèche for students was too expensive to sustain, and combined with significant under utilisation this service was not viable. Two fee paying commercial child care centre still operates on campus.

Campus life activities have changed significantly. Activities are now well costed and commercially responsible in nature and less frequent. The overall range of clubs and societies has decreased along with the levels of direct support. User pays introduced to some sports events like the Australian University Games has also seen lower levels of student participation.

It is also worth noting that student services that were stopped or significantly decreased following VSU and as budgeted in 2007, have now been reintroduced or increased in the 2008 budget. The Student Newspaper has been reintroduced, and financial assistance via grants have also been reintroduced for all clubs and societies.

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

With the exception of the capital development for the provision of new and upgraded services FCCS will experience a positive and increased support to services. As we attain financial independence FCCS will create further funds to reinvest in student services.

Are currently available funds being directed to amenities and student services of high importance?

Funds are being spread relatively evenly over the traditional services to ensure minimal levels of standards are maintained. However as more funding becomes available this is being directed as a priority towards supporting students and clubs and societies through the reintroduction of grants and student publications. Student Council also receives a reasonable budget allocation (in terms of other traditional student services) which gives them a higher priority than most like services.

Were services previously supported entirely by amenities and student services fees or were universities / others contributing additional funding?

Previously some commercial operations were in existence that where profitable did contribute some additional funds. This was mainly within the Union with retail shops and Sports with the fitness centre.

The University also provided in kind support as previously mentioned.

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Have there been job losses or changes in work loads and or responsibilities for you or your institution or organisation since the introduction of VSU?

As six associations amalgamated there were 38% job losses amongst FT and PPT time staff, with a further 35% casual job losses.

The major change to workloads & responsibilities was within the newly created central administration (essentially the old Union admin), which took on with no increased staffing levels the five other associations duties and roles, in particular sport. A new General Manager was sourced to run this amalgamated organisation.

Have people other than university students been affected in your community by the introduction of VSU?

Community sporting organisations have benefited from VSU as sports grounds and buildings have been opened up to provide new sources of revenue. Previously these facilities were more restrictive to external users requiring more permanent use.

The University has seen increased workloads especially in their student related services of counselling and international student support.

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 capacity for student representation & advocacy is largely unchanged. The Objects of FCCS includes the provision of these services. However the resourcing and support to this area has significantly changed. Also it is now, except for the Student President (from 2008), on a volunteer only basis.

Individual academic advocacy remains well funded (by the University) and supported but is no longer provided or controlled by the Student Association, but forms a part of FCCS.

Describe how VSU has impacted on the operations of student representative bodies on your campus? Identify the affected body in your response.

It has curtailed their independence, funding and resources. Previously this area was independent with their own funds, administration and support. Student Council now forms part of FCCS, and receive their funds and resources through FCCS. Their budget is tight and the use of funds is reasonably restrictive. As they form part of FCCS they are no longer fully independent, and for systemic advocacy they require approval from the Board to take an issue on. That being said, whilst direct resourcing has ended, on call resources are available as required.

Representation for International Students has largely ceased to exist.

A Post Graduate Student Society is still operating but from a representation perspective they have minimal resources and support.

The Students Association has in effect become Student Council. Student Council was supposed to be the new student representative body comprising the above two associations, clubs and societies and sport. However the traditional representation for international, students clubs & societies and sport have disappeared and it has been difficult to find candidates.

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Does your campus or institution currently have an independent, student representative body? What work is it currently able to undertake effectively? In what areas is it falling short?

No, although Student Council forms part of FCCS (which forms part of the University) it does operate fairly independently. They have their own space, budget and limited resources to be able to operate to some effect.

It is able to run campaigns as required, engage with students, respond and be involved with issues that arise, fill positions on a number of University committees, and hold 50% of the FCCS Board positions to directly influence the direction of this organisation.

Loss of dedicated administration has effected their productivity, but it is yet to be proven or fully understood what support is required and how and when.

It falls short mainly due to their voluntary nature, as students do not have as much time as they use to, and need to work to live. Student Council is in a new phase of development and has not fully adjusted to the new environment, and are thus slower to get organised or respond to issues, or are yet to fully utilise available support and assistance from central administration.

It also falls short in that the process of student elections is democratic but the result, in that elections are not compulsory, does not mean that the majority of students vote, get involved or care about the process or result. Whilst Student Council is representative of and connected to the student population, it statistically only represents the voting support of less than 5% of students. The structure of the election process ensures that only those students interested in the process, which on the whole are those who are politically or interest group aligned, get involved as candidates or vote (although there is some level of voting from the general student population).

Overall student representation has significantly decreased post VSU. It would be expected that this would be due to a combination of voluntary only status, effective organisation, the loss of dedicated administrative support, student time constraints, the strength and capacity of student councillors and general currency/level of interest in student politics.

Exploration of models for sustainable services for students

Amenities and services for university students

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

This can be dependent on location but at Flinders it should include child care, health & counselling, academic advocacy, financial advice and welfare assistance, sport and fitness, employment, clubs and societies, cultural activities and leadership development. (F&B is also critical for those isolated campuses.)

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

Yes.

Sport and fitness, health, counselling, academic advocacy & welfare.

Are there services not provided before the VSU legislation which your institution should now provide?

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No.

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

Student representation does not require the level of funding that it use to receive.

What services and amenities, currently offered on campus, are being accessed by youth/community groups outside of the university? Should / do they pay for usage and access?

Food and beverage and sports and fitness facilities. Yes it is a user pays or fee paying use.

Are there particular issues relevant to providing student services and amenities in regional areas?

Yes. It is more critical that the full range of services are provided to ensure that there are no gaps in the student experience or to lessen their success in graduating.

Funding amenities and services

Should services be provided through user funding? How?

Yes, only where there is a measurable or direct financial cost or where the service is not health or welfare aligned. For example food service should be paid for, but counselling should be free.

What is an appropriate balance between government, university, student and user pays funding of university amenities and services?

As per the above operations should generally be funded by a student and user pays model, whereby on the whole health, welfare and capital infrastructure should be provided by the government and university.

Who should receive the funding provided by students and / or governments and how can it be used transparently so as to meet the requirements of all university students?

The University should receive the funding and the funds should be distributed according to the makeup of the university student service organisation. If sound structure and management controls are in place then the student service body, like FCCS should receive the final funding for allocation. In the case of organisations run or controlled by guilds or unions, then the university should control funds via allocations or bids.

How can student amenities be made more sustainable, particularly sporting infrastructure which can be costly and require significant expenditure on maintenance?

The government could allow some flexibility in the use of DEST funding to include sporting infrastructure as "teaching" or "approved student space", which would allow the inclusion of sports areas within the university works bidding processes.

Where possible the hire to external users can assist sustainability, or running fitness centres and other like facilities in a more commercial manner.

The audit of pre VSU student space could result in excess space being handed back to the university in exchange for funding to be used on future amenities improvement or construction.

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Community engagement is often a strategic objective of Universities, and often this is achieved silently through the provision of sports fields and facilities. However the management and funding of these facilities has largely fallen upon Sports Managers & previously paid by student service fees. Post VSU Universities should now honour this commitment with increased funds or the inclusion of these facilities within their capital budget.

Describe your institution / organisation's preferred model that would facilitate adequate student services on your campus.

FCCS to be responsible for producing funds to run operations, and this be subsidised by a student services fee that would contribute to student services that create a campus environment (say from \$50 per on campus student).

A combination of government and university funds be also made available to support student welfare and advocacy activities and student services capital infrastructure. This capital is required for upgrades and the provision for student growth.

Exploration of models for advocacy and representation for and by students

What structures does your university have in place that helps it "listen" to the wishes of students concerning amenities, services and study? How can they be improved or made more effective?

FCCS has a student representative body, Student Council, and a number of collectives that provide a student "ear" to students.

FCCS operates a central student hub that provides advice & assistance to students including professional academic and welfare support.

Location is important in improving the service – it needs to be connected & visible to students.

Amalgamation is important. There needs to be one point of contact, not two or three, so students can go to one place & get all the support they require.

There needs to be no barriers to use. Student Council is not as universally recognised as it use to be and is no longer an automatic point of contact for the majority of students. Student Council need to raise their profile and promote their benefits and direction.

Student representation is now pretty much completely voluntary. There needs to be a system of reward developed to attract a wider base or students, but this reward should not be via remuneration. The Australians Union Campus Managers Association (ACUMA) has discussed the development of a universal VET or certificate award that recognises student involvement in representation and other university leadership roles.

How do university students on your campus appoint advocates or select others to represent their individual and collective interests?

Academic advocacy is a professional service (free to students) that is offered by FCCS. It is staffed by psychologists, social workers and professional case managers.

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Student Council is appointed each year through a process of democratic elections that are held in accordance with Electoral Council of Australia principles. Within Student Council specific collectives or interest groups are represented, and as such students elected to these positions must meet prerequisites. eg the Women's Officer, the Queer Officer and the Activities Officer.

The Student President in consultation with Student Council works hard to fill the various student representative requirements on various University committees and senates etc. These positions are normally via nomination and appointment through Student Council (and approved by the FCCS Board).

What advocacy and representation services are valued on your campus?

The professional academic advocacy service is a highly regarded service.

Student Council and the associated collectives are highly valued by the students who embrace these services but from an overall student population perspective they would not be statistically highly valued or recognised (or understood).

What are the best ways for funding advocacy and representation services?

Professional academic advocacy is a welfare resource and should be university/government funded.

Student representation should be funded as required through commercial operations, if attached to a commercial organisation or through voluntary membership. If not attached and voluntary membership funding is inadequate, in kind or cash support from the University, with strict principles could apply.

An alternate model is that funding could be tied to candidate and voter turnout – the greater the involvement by the student population the more funding the student body receives. This would be in addition to an agreed minimum funding level.

Should the government make adequate student representation and advocacy a condition of university funding?

Yes there is a requirement for both of these to exist on campus. However there should be an agreed minimal level of funding for representation tied to strict agreements for use of these funds.

Should the government impose requirements on either universities or student organisations in regard to the adequate and appropriate representation services?

Yes. There should be some measure of independence but representation needs to be core focussed on students and tertiary education issues.

Describe your institution / organisation's preferred model that would facilitate adequate student advocacy and representation on your campus.

Our current model is a result of extensive research, collaboration and agreement to work in the known at the time post VSU environment. It is still early days but at this stage a student service organisation (that delivers representation and commercial operations) that has 50% student membership is an equitable model that ensures a student voice balanced with commercial and professional expertise.

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