

# The Unique Role of the Student Association in International Student Support: A Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) Perspective

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## Abstract

This paper looks at student organisations and the role they play within the university environment. It will identify some of the key adjustment issues that international students face and the services DUSA offers to assist students with these issues. It also looks at the proposed VSU legislation and the impact it will have on international students and DUSA.

## Introduction

This paper will focus on the role that Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) plays in offering international student support across all Deakin University campuses. Using studies relating to key adjustment issues for international students as a base, the paper will highlight and attempt to impress upon the reader, a general understanding of the role student associations can and do play in the day to day lives of international students. Covering the wide range of services offered, the paper will serve to outline DUSA's mission, vision and values that are used to celebrate and nurture the multiculturalism brought into university life by international students. The proposed VSU legislation will be briefly explained and considered to show the possible positive and negative outcomes that may affect the necessary services provided by DUSA.

## Student Unions (Victorian) International Support – General

International support offered through student organisations varies considerably across the universities in Victoria. International student support can be provided as a department within the organisation, situated within another department or by a separate autonomous organisation under the auspices of the Student organisation. The lines of reporting and management can also differ significantly.

Some Student Associations are affiliated to NLC (the National Liaison Committee for International Students in Australia), the NUS (the National Union of Students) or CAPA (Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations).

Student organisations provide services that complement and enhance services provided by the University. The types of services and levels vary considerably. Some services offered by Student Unions in Victoria include:

Advice and referral	Dental Services	Legal service	Representation
Advocacy	Diaries and wall planners	Libraries	Short courses
Art – studios' workshops, art festivals	Employment programs	Orientation Week and Disorientation Week	Short term loans

Bar/bistro	Entertainment	Overseas student lounges	Sport
Book loan scheme	Environment programs	Pals/mentor programs	Student publications
Cafes	Equipment hire	Pre-departure briefings overseas	Tax Help
Clubs and societies	Free Lunches	Pastoral care	Theatres
Community linkages	Functions	Peer support	Trips and tours
Conferences	Housing	Queer representation	Web Sites
Cultural events	Bookshops	Radio	Welfare services
Women's representations	Seminars/Workshops	Discounted photocopying, faxing, binding, laminating, etc	

### **Role of DUSA within the University**

To discuss the role of DUSA or any other student association within a university environment, we first need to touch on the meaning of Internationalisation education, the growing trend of multiculturalism in society and the overwhelming challenges that the international student faces in today's global society.

“Although we may claim that universities are, by definition, international institutions with common intellectual goals, common structures and purposes, in practice we know this claim is deceptive”.(McSwiney, 1995, p.1)

Internationalisation in simple terms can be defined as the act of bringing something under international control. One can think of internationalisation as a process of creating an environment so that any person regardless of their country of origin can move in or out of that environment without experiencing any major displacement. The expression of internationalisation was well captured by Knight (cited in Wächter et al, 2002, pp.5) when he described “...the phenomenon as a process of integrating an international dimension into the research, teaching and services function of higher education”. Universities face a mammoth task as they attempt to develop and engineer curricular programs that are relevant in a harsh, increasingly competitive global economy in an attempt to attract students from the global pool. This challenge is hard to ignore for both economic/financial reasons but also for maintenance of reputation and recognition. Far from making academic achievement the overriding factor in attracting International students, the need to provide a quality international study experience in the host country has created a major challenge for today's universities.

An international student put simply is a student who studies in a foreign university. The idea of an international student is not a new concept but it has been greatly stimulated and influenced by the growing trend of multiculturalism in our society and technological advances which include ease of travel, which have created greater options of where, when and how to study. This development has brought about a challenge to the international student in adjusting to a new environment.

Tseng et al (2002) have identified four major categories of adjustment that are faced by international students:

- General living adjustment, such as adjusting to new food, living/housing environment and transportation, adaptation to a new climate (weather), dealing with financial problems and health care concerns.

- Academic adjustment, such as lack of proficiency in the English language, lack of understanding of a foreign educational system, and lack of effective learning skills or academic skills.
- Socio – cultural adjustment, for example, experiencing cultural shock, cultural fatigue, or racial discrimination, having difficulties in adjusting to new social/cultural customs, norms and regulations, differences in intercultural contacts/social activities, and encountering conflicts between host standards (world views, values, life styles) and those of home country.
- Personal psychological adjustments, such as experiencing homesickness, loneliness, depression, frustration, or feeling alienation, isolation, the loss of status or identity, and feelings of worthlessness.

The idea has always been that information and resources are provided during pre-departure seminars, post arrival meetings and primarily during Orientation Week. Using Orientation Week as a study case, one can easily identify that during this period a lot of information is provided within a congested period of time. This is aimed towards newly arrived students who are experiencing disorientation, jetlag, the need to prioritise accommodation needs and enrolment and coping with new customs, cultures and practises of the host country and institution. A lot of secondary information such as community linkages, where to get help and how to seek help in dealing with adjustment issues can easily be lost at this point. To further understand the needs of international students and the challenges that they may face, one has to visit the components underpinning the overall international study experience.

Ying (2002) identified and defined the principle of the overall study experience as being built on two foundations that he identified as:

- Academic achievement
- Quality of overall international study experience

Ying (2002, p.470) goes on to say: “The former served as an objective, narrower indicator of academic success, while the latter was a subjective, more global assessment of the overall experience of studying overseas”.

Daley (2004) said: “It is entirely possible to have a study career featuring high academic achievement, yet with poor overall experience. This might lead to adequate final grades in a student’s own studies, but ultimately detracts from a student’s feeling of accomplishment of satisfaction, personal growth, and personal development which grow from a successful overall international student experience”.

In response to these outlined adjustment challenges faced by international students, DUSA attempts to provide a member focused, caring, nurturing, helpful, compassionate and understanding attitude when dealing with international students. The levels from which DUSA draws its inspirational and nonetheless challenging goals can be described as:

### *Student Perspective*

The representative structure ensures that the student perspective plays an important part in the policies, directions and services provided by DUSA. DUSA as an organisation is built upon a founding principle of mirroring the needs of students which in practice requires a certain degree of flexibility. The structural design of governance carries with it the need to be in continuous evolvement which calls on management to operate in a dynamic environment. Continual change of direction is required to address those issues pertinent to students at any point in time. In an environment where internationalisation is a big player, the growing trend of multiculturalism in our community serves to highlight the many challenges that international students face during their university years. It is with this in mind DUSA sets out to try and develop services that are relevant, intuitive, helpful, understanding and caring for the international student.

### *Independence*

DUSA’s independence from the university is based on the wants and needs of students taking first priority. This independence enjoyed by DUSA ensures no conflict of interest in providing students with the necessary and sometimes much needed services such as advocacy.

When explaining the role of student associations, White (2003. p.57) wrote: “Although the universities have good official support services, some students prefer to get help from fellow students. The student unions employ officers who can explain your student rights. For international students, the best place to get help is the international student centre. But it is good to remember that you can also get independent help from the student union”.

### *Liaison*

DUSA liaises with the university, external agencies and local community groups in all matters that better assist and expand the student’s experience whilst at university. This is a crucial matter as DUSA attempts to formulate inclusiveness for the international student into the host country and can help to combat and alleviate some of the challenges created by adjustment.

### *Watchdog*

DUSA has a watchdog role in monitoring internal and external changes that may adversely affect international students. This involves monitoring media releases and policy papers from Federal government agencies such as the Department of Foreign Affairs.

DUSA’s internal watchdog role involves:

- Monitoring compliance to the ESOS Act 2000 (Education Services for Overseas Students) and the National Code of Practice by the university in its dealings with international students.
- Monitoring any changes to university policy that may disadvantage or discriminate against international students.
- Fighting for change where necessary.
- Promoting an understanding of the international student and the need to provide a quality overall experience that does not call for conformity but a learning and accepting environment.

Whilst the external role involves:

- Monitoring any changes of the ESOS Act 2000 or any other legislation that may impact on international students.

This is not to say we have all the answers. To a certain extent some of what we do may not be effective in combating all the challenges faced by international students but, as an evolving organisation and through constant re-evaluation, we can hope to learn and strive for excellence in meeting the needs that are generated by international students in their daily lives.

## **Overview Of DUSA and its Support And Services For International Students**

DUSA recognises that it is important to have respect for the diversity of students, their interests and their cultures, and DUSA values a positive environment for learning, study and student life. It aims to provide a broad range of educational and welfare services to cater for the needs and interests of international students at Deakin University.

### **DUSA Mission, Vision and Values**

#### **Our Mission**

To fight for the integrity of our education; and maximise the educational experience whilst enhancing the wellbeing of members and providing equitable access to DUSA services.

#### **Our Vision**

DUSA provides outstanding student representation which is relevant, informed, responsive, proactive and committed, through the recognition of the diversity of backgrounds, cultures and interests of our members. DUSA provides services of the highest quality and is recognised for its commitment to equality and social responsibility.

#### **Our Values**

- Free and Equitable access to the highest quality of scholarship, teaching and research.
- Respect and acknowledgment for the diversity of students, their interests, beliefs, cultures, needs and opinions, including the traditional custodians of the land.
- The creation of an empowered student body through ownership of their association.
- Open and honest communication of all issues, transparency in decision making and accountability for student outcomes.
- Equity and social responsibility.
- Pro-active, focussed, motivated and enthusiastic student representation.
- The celebration of the diverse achievements across the student population.
- Accountability of decisions made for the greater good of the association.
- Sustainable physical and social environment.

The DUSA strategic plan states that our Representation will “celebrate, nurture and sustain cultures within our community” and “encourage the university to respect the diversity of cultures”.

DUSA works under a governance and management structure, within a member-led organisation.

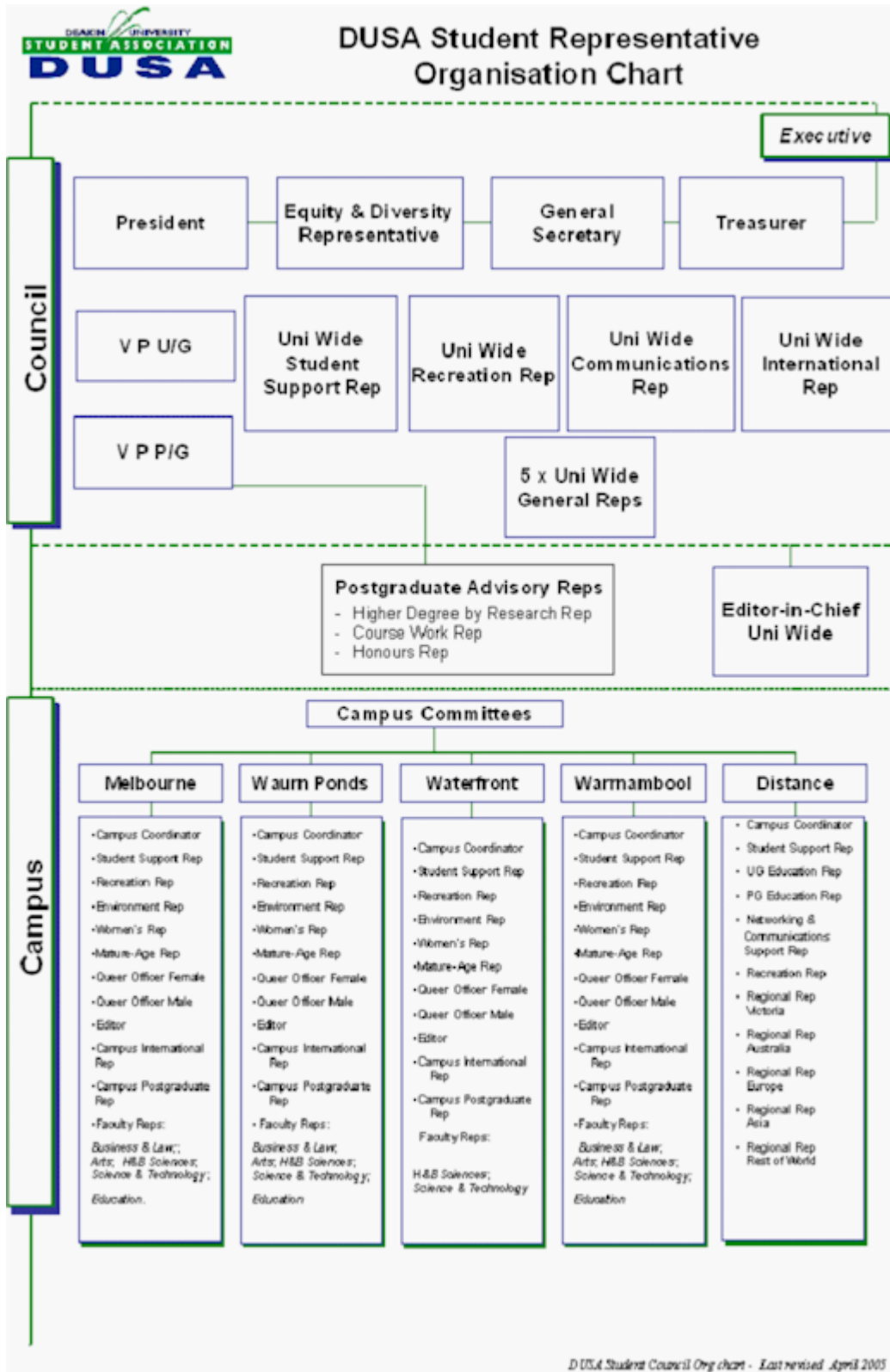
### **Unique position**

DUSA is in the unique position of being able to look at the big picture regarding International students in their institution, without the constraints of being part of the university. Staff at the association do not work for the university, they work for the students, and this puts staff in the position of being able to fight for the best outcomes for the students without a conflict of interest with their employer.

While advising students on their rights as International students in this country, we also have a responsibility to advise them of their responsibilities, to advise them of the breaches, inform them of the penalties they can incur and encourage them to stay within the guidelines. But we are also in the position of not having to report them if we know they are breaking visa conditions. Students know this and can approach DUSA with a whole range of problems that they will not talk to Deakin International or other University departments about for fear of being reported to DIMIA (Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs).

**International representative structure**

*DUSA representative organisational chart*



### *Campus level*

Each campus has an International Campus Representative (elected by International students) and this student is the contact person for all international students on that campus. The International Campus Representative monitors situations and International student issues on their campus and forms a committee of international students to plan a program of activities for their particular campus, including Multicultural Day. This committee is known as CISC (Campus International Students Committee) and feeds information to the Cross Campus International Representative.

### *Cross Campus*

The Cross-Campus International Representative acts as a spokesperson for all overseas students on matters relating to DUSA and gives a voice to International Students on University boards and committees. This International Representative organises activities and events to assist International Students in feeling welcome and supported at each campus. This person also has a role to monitor university policy changes that may affect International students. The cross-campus representative and the campus international representatives form a committee known as DISC (DUSA International Students Committee). The cross-campus International Representative acts as the liaison between the campus international representatives and DUSA Student Council.

### *DUSA Student Council*

Student Council is the governing body of DUSA and provides for two-way feedback for all representatives to effectively communicate the needs and issues of all students.

As such Student Council is responsible for representing the concerns of students within the university and the community, setting the strategic direction for DUSA including DUSA's policy agenda and the governance of DUSA, and for the overall management of its assets and resources. It is Council's responsibility to ensure that the governance of DUSA is open and transparent principles of equity are applied in the operational policy of DUSA. Participation in DUSA by all students on all campuses and off-campus is encouraged.

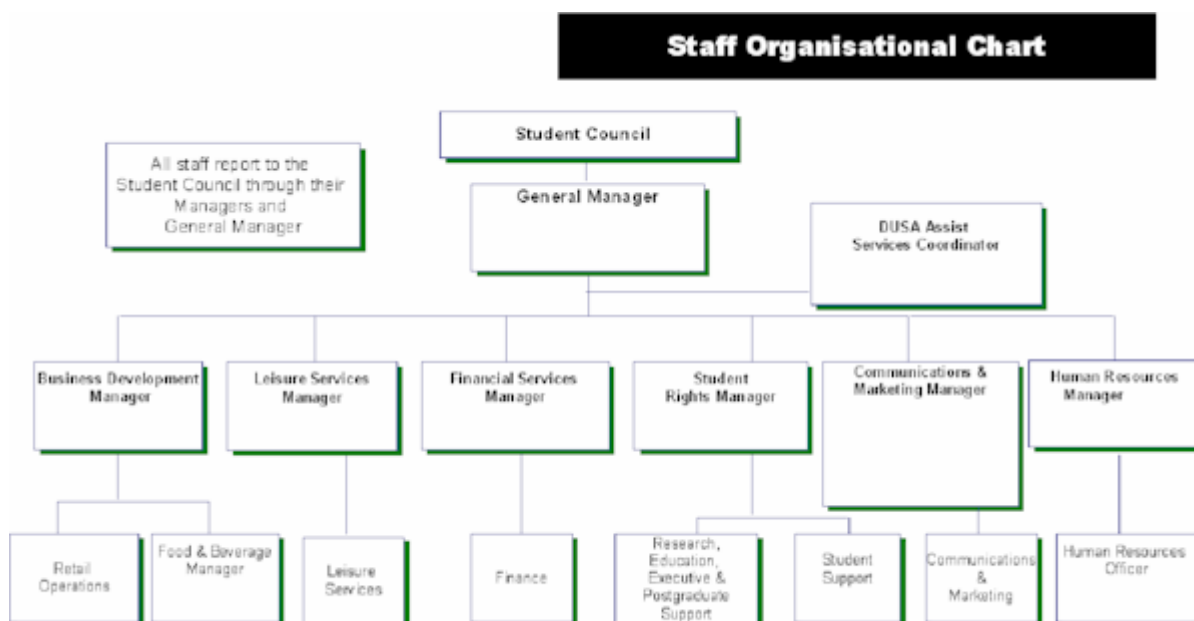
Student Council is made up of the Executive and Council Officers and Committees.

The executive is made up of the President, General Secretary, Treasurer and the Access and Equity Officer. The Executive is a committee of Student Council, exercising delegated power from Student Council.

The Student President meets regularly with the Vice Chancellor to discuss matters relevant to both organisations and to raise issues of concerns.

## International Student Support Staff

### *DUSA Staff organisational chart*



International Student Support staff of DUSA are situated within the Student Rights Department which provides independent assistance, information, advice, referral and support to students in a wide range of areas. There are dedicated International Student Support staff members who work with the International student representatives to formulate a program to support and enhance the international student experience at Deakin and to provide one-on-one assistance to all international students. Staff may respond to the needs of individual students or groups of students.

The International Support Staff role is quite varied and offers:

- Support for International student representatives
- Overall monitoring of wider changes that could affect international students
- Advocacy (for example in Show Cause cases, disciplinary hearings, postgraduate supervision problems)
- Events – social, educational and cultural
- Off-campus housing support (intensive support for newly arrived students)
- Advice and referral
- Pastoral care
- Monitoring problems within the university – local and endemic
- Support for programs, activities, proposals, etc raised by international students
- Responding to the demonstrated needs of international students
- Linking international students with the wider community

International students have access to all services provided by DUSA.

### Some examples of specific programs/activities for International students

#### **Intensive housing support for new International students**

Newly arrived International students are given intensive support to secure off-housing accommodation and on-going support and tenancy advice.

#### **Cultural Events**



Multicultural Days and evenings, cultural festival celebrations, Harmony Day, etc. Some of these are internal to the university and some are in conjunction with organisations in the local community.

### **DUSA PALS Program**

This is an opportunity to meet interesting people from all over the world. Students learn about the lifestyle and customs of students from unique walks of life and share differences in language, food and culture. This is a fantastic opportunity for students who intend to travel or for those interested in learning and practicing another language.

The objective is to initiate contact between students from different backgrounds and to encourage positive exchanges of cultures, traditions and ideas that will enable personal growth, acceptance and friendships that will last a lifetime.

### **Social events**

This covers a wide range of events from Welcome Back parties, End of Semester functions, trips and tours, visiting local attractions and events, International student gatherings and many others.

### **Cross-campus events**

These cross-campus events see students from all Deakin campuses meeting at a venue for a social get-together. This is particularly important for the regional campuses where there may be only one group of students from a particular country. Students are able to link in with students from their own countries or doing the same course on another campus.

### **Community links**

Particularly at the regional campuses, students are linked in with local organisations and supports such as the Police Multicultural Liaison Officer, the local Ethnic Community Council, community radio, local city council and International students from other institutions.

### **Cultural Awareness program**

International students from different countries will give presentations about their customs and cultures. Students will have the opportunity to learn some daily greetings in different languages and enjoy music and dances from different countries.

### **VSU Legislation**

A quick overview of the current situation is that all students pay a General Service Fee (GSF). This fee is divided up to covers services for students such as the library, student insurance, information technology services, publication of handbooks and so on. A part of the GSF goes to the Student Association to provide a range of subsidised support services for students. It is not compulsory for any student to be a part of the Student Association and they do not pay union fees. Students have access to all Student Association services.

The proposed legislation is called the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2005. Without reiterating the entire Bill, it basically proposes that no fees can be charged for services that are non-academic, except for certain things like field trips, and that no student can be compelled to be a member of a student organisation. Violation of the legislation will come with a penalty of \$100 for every student place allocated to the university. It will mean a national shift towards the Western Australian form of VSU.

### **The impact of the proposed VSU legislation on international students**

Under the ESOS Act 2000, the National Code and national protocols, an institution must provide information or counselling services in the following areas:

- Accommodation
- Orientation

- Academic progress
- Further study

Under the National Code of Practice institutions must also “promote the successful adjustment by overseas students to life and study at an Australian institution” and “to assist student to resolve problems which could impede successful completion of their study progress.(Commonwealth Australia, 2001. p13)

So what does the proposed legislation mean for International students?

The new Federal laws will allow for all international students to still be charged an amenities and services fee but the Federal Government, by these laws, is discriminating against international students.

If it is up to individual institutions to decide whether or not to charge an amenities fee, the larger and wealthier universities would have a distinct advantage against those universities which would have to charge an amenities fee to provide the services. This would give them a competitive edge in the world market and create wider demarcations between universities when students are making their choices. Already there is division between universities in the Group of Eight on how they will charge overseas students. Some will continue with the same fee, some will not charge any fee and others still have to decide.

The new laws could also indicate to international students a certain degree of disparity between international and local students. We are treating international students differently from local students and this has been a situation that universities have striven to avoid in the past. There is already a stereotype about international students and this change could just highlight the situation even more. In a situation where international students are charged a fee and provided with services, and domestic students who are not able to be charged a fee do not have access to these services, this could cause racial tension between students.

International students come from a range of economic backgrounds. If they have to voluntarily pay for services, due to financial constraints some students may decide not to pay the fee and then when they have a need they will not have access to the service they require. Quite often it will be the very students who need the support services the most who will not be able to afford a membership fee.

The choice of an overseas institution is based not just on the academic merits but on the quality of the overall overseas experience. International students are high-level users of many amenities such as trips and tours, clubs and societies, accommodation services, sporting groups, entertainment, free food, advocacy, advice and referral, etc. The removal or reduction of some of these services and availability of others would diminish the perception of the value of local education packages and affect the quality of the overseas study experience.

### **The impact of the proposed VSU legislation on DUSA-provided services for international students**

- Many essential services currently provided by DUSA would only be offered on a user-pay basis and some services would no longer be available
- A loss of income of \$4.8million per annum
- Under the proposed legislation the University will only provide \$1million in the first year towards targeted services such as international housing, diary, Orientation Week and advocacy and decreasing amounts over successive years
- Possible change to a membership based organisation could result in some students not having full access to all services provided
- If international students pay an amenities fee and gain full membership of the Student Association, under a new structure this means they would be the only ones who could run for and vote on representative positions within DUSA. Again this has the potential for escalating into a divisive and potentially acrimonious public dispute not just between students, but also the wider community

## **Conclusion or Summary**

Student associations play a vital role in providing services for international students. Not all of these services are academic but they do help to improve the overall welfare of students thus contributing to the overall quality of the international study experience. International students face many adjustment challenges in their daily lives. They have so much to learn and try to understand amidst their own feelings of displacement. DUSA as a student association has always promoted a recognition of the international student as an important part of the university community. In response to this recognition, DUSA provides services many of which have been tailored to assist international students in readjusting to their new environment. The proposed VSU legislation has created awareness and a necessity for DUSA to engage in self-analysis and to improve its role as an organisation highly relevant to international students. Whether the VSU legislation is passed or not, DUSA has played an important role in assisting international students, both through its services and most importantly by giving international students a voice through representation.

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