

Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report by The Deakin University Student Association (DUSA)

Executive Summary

The Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) is the official student governing body representing students across four campuses: Burwood, Geelong Waterfront, Geelong Waurin Ponds, and Warrnambool.

Despite its essential role in advocacy, events management, and student welfare, DUSA faces significant challenges in maintaining operational efficacy due to an unstable funding model. Currently, the majority of its funds are allocated by Deakin University through the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF), which is negotiated on a yearly basis. This dependency undermines DUSA's capacity to effectively represent students and weakens its financial security.

To address this systemic issue, we propose the implementation of a legislated minimum 70% SSAF allocation directly to student unions like DUSA.

Introduction

The Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) has been an integral part of Deakin University, serving students across its four campuses in Burwood, Geelong Waterfront, Geelong Waurin Ponds, and Warrnambool. DUSA's primary objectives include student advocacy, social events, and delivering welfare services to students facing academic, financial, or other hardships.

However, under the current funding model DUSA and other student unions are restricted by financial insecurity and reliance on university funding.

The purpose of this report is to examine these issues in depth and propose a sustainable funding model through the implementation of a legislated minimum 70% SSAF allocation directly to student unions like DUSA.

The Current State of Student Union Funding in Australia

The introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) in 2005 significantly impacted the financial landscape of student unions across Australia. At Deakin University, DUSA experienced a decline in mandatory memberships, leading to a reliance on alternative funding sources, predominantly the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF).

DUSA's financial stability has since been closely tied to the allocation of SSAF funds by Deakin University. While this has helped the student union continue its operations, it has also led to complications and vulnerabilities, primarily the over-reliance on university funding.

SSAF allocations are prone to annual fluctuations. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this volatility, causing a decrease in international student enrolments and, consequently, a reduction in available funds.

International students at Deakin University present an additional complexity. While they pay high tuition fees, these funds do not contribute to SSAF, even though these students are significant consumers of DUSA's services. This creates a further strain on an already stretched budget.

Vulnerabilities of the Current System

1. **Decreased Student Representation:** Due to tight budgets, DUSA had to scale down its advocacy services, limiting its influence on university policy.
2. **Quality of Services:** Cutbacks have been made in services like mental health support and academic assistance.
3. **Dependency on University Administration:** The financial reliance on SSAF allocations by the university limits DUSA's independence on issues that may conflict with university policies.
4. **Long-term Financial Instability:** Uncertain funding makes it difficult for DUSA to commit to long-term initiatives.

Importance of SSAF to DUSA

DUSA has three main priorities as an organisation:

1. Advocacy and Student Voice
2. Events and Support Networks
3. Welfare Services

DUSA provides advocacy to Deakin University through its democratically elected student representatives, events to provide students with social opportunities, support networks and connection on campus, and a broad range of welfare services covering students experiencing academic hardship, financial hardship or any other difficulties.

These three priorities are dependent on consistent, guaranteed funding from Deakin University through SSAF.

1. Advocacy and Student Voice

DUSA has a student council and a committee to represent each campus at Deakin. Both the committees and council work on event and project delivery on campus, and advocating to Deakin University regarding student needs across all campuses.

Examples of change advocated for by DUSA:

- **\$25 million COVID relief fund:** The fund was established in 2020, which provided financial support for international students hit hardest by the pandemic.
- **Stipend Increase for Postgraduate Students:** The successful lobbying for an increase in stipends provided postgraduate students with a more liveable income and thereby improving the quality of their academic life.
- **Academic Reform:** DUSA successfully lobbied for a reduction in the 80% exam weighting in some courses, favoring a more balanced assessment approach that includes coursework and projects.

However, advocacy efforts are not without their challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the financial dependency on university funding, particularly through SSAF.

Due to such a model, student union's scope and power in an advocacy setting is very limited, and the outcome of any changes DUSA can advocate for students will largely depend on whether it is in Deakin University's interest to make these changes. Furthermore, there's always the underlying risk that biting the hand that feeds could lead to a decrease in essential funding, making it a careful balancing act between advocacy and financial survival.

This situation doesn't just affect Deakin University; it affects all universities across Australia. Regardless of how strong a student union may be, enacting changes that prioritize students becomes exceptionally challenging when those changes aren't aligned with the best interests of university administration.

2. Events and Support Networks

Social events and support networks form an indispensable part of the university experience, creating a more balanced, enriching environment for students. Students themselves are best positioned to run the most engaging, accessible and safe events for other students.

DUSA's events are designed to make students from different communities feel safe and welcome on campus: DUSA runs various weeks celebrating student diversity, such as Pride Week for the LGBTQIA+ community, and UBelong Week for students of different communities and cultural backgrounds. DUSA also runs Self-Care Week designed to support student's mental health prior to the exam period.

OFest events allow students to make friends when they start university and create their own support networks, which is extremely beneficial for both their mental health and studies, and international students can make new friends in Australia and connect with students from their home countries.

3. Welfare Services

DUSA has a wide range of welfare services available to all students, covering a range of hardships students may be experiencing, financial hardships in particular.

- **Food Pantry:** Serving an average of 400 students weekly, this resource offers free or low-cost food items to students in need.
- **Financial Counselling:** Accessed by around 400 students last semester, the financial counseling services provide invaluable advice on budgeting and financial planning.
- **Welfare Breakfasts:** With consistent attendance of over 100 students per event, these free breakfasts not only offer a nutritious start to the day but also foster a sense of community and peer support.
- **Survival Centre:** Used by nearly 1,000 students each semester, this hub offers non-perishable food items, clothes, hygiene items and other essentials across all Deakin campuses.
- **Legal Services:** Used by international students experiencing visa issues.
- **Advocacy support:** Used by students accused of academic misconduct.

Students are increasingly facing more financial hardship and pressure year on year, due to the rental crisis and cost of living crisis. This is reflected in the DUSA Student Advocacy and Support Service survey conducted into use of some of DUSA's welfare programs.

Use of these welfare programs has dramatically increased:

- Use of the DUSA Survival Centre has increased by 370%
- Use of the Free Food Pantry has increased by 67%
- 80% of students who used the Free Food Pantry were experiencing food insecurity (worth noting that this food was free and available to all students in public spaces)

Recommendations

1. **Advocate for Legislation on a Minimum 70% SSAF:** A legislative guarantee ensuring a minimum 70% allocation of SSAF to student unions would provide financial stability, thereby allowing for better long-term planning and service delivery for students. Lobbying efforts should be increased to make this a legal requirement.
2. **Request for Greater Autonomy in SSAF Allocation:** Student unions should have greater control over how SSAF funds are allocated, allowing them to direct resources more effectively towards student welfare, advocacy, and community building initiatives.
3. **Call for More Transparency in SSAF Negotiations:** The process through which SSAF funds are allocated should be made more transparent. Both student unions and universities must be accountable in how funds are spent, with clear lines of reporting and open dialogue to ensure the money is serving the best interests of the student body.

At present, student unions rely heavily on funding from universities, and what's more, each university has full discretion over the amount of funding allocated to these unions. This situation exposes student unions to the risk of having their funding reduced or completely eliminated at the discretion of their respective universities.

DUSA is no exception to this pattern. While a small fraction of DUSA's funding stems from corporate partnerships, the bulk of its financial support hinges on the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF).

Therefore, it is imperative to legislate minimum SSAF allocations to student unions. This measure stands to bring significant benefits not only to DUSA but also to all student unions and the student community as a whole in Australia.

Conclusion

This report has highlighted the challenges faced by the Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) due to the current funding landscape. The impact of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) and reliance on the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) have led to financial limitations. These limitations are significant due to the range of student welfare, advocacy, and engaging events DUSA provides for students. These recommendations for legislative change, funding autonomy, and transparency are crucial to consider ensure student unions' ability to provide essential services and enrich the student experience.