

VSU aftermath: the situation in WA

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PERTH — Voluntary student unionism (VSU) was introduced in Western Australia in 1993. As the student movement prepares to fight national VSU legislation, it is useful to examine the impact VSU had in WA and draw conclusions about the strategy needed to defeat it.

Unfortunately, WA provides an example of what *not* to do in the campaign against VSU.

In WA, the largely Labor-dominated student guilds and National Union of Students moved quickly to adapt to rather than actively oppose VSU. To various degrees, the guilds have shifted from being student unions which fight for the political and economic rights of students to being service-providers. Energy and resources have been directed away from political campaigns towards catering, social clubs and retail discounts.

While student services in WA have been adversely affected by VSU, it is the political role of student unions that the Liberals were trying to destroy. In WA, they largely succeeded, without even having to fight the student unions.

Prior to VSU, all students were considered guild members unless they specifically declined membership (in which case they were asked to donate an equivalent amount to a charitable organisation). Under WA's VSU legislation, the principle of universal membership has been abolished.

Guild funding comes increasingly from commercial activities. This, combined with the guild leaderships' claim that students are politically apathetic, is used to justify the leaderships' emphasis on "selling the guilds better" and downgrading their political role.

The Edith Cowan University guild, unable to obtain as much commercial funding as the other guilds, struggled along for a few years and then collapsed at the start of 1998. The guild continues to exist only due to a financial "rescue package" from the university.

Of all WA guilds, the Curtin University guild embraced "restructuring" first and most completely. It refused to play an active role in the anti-VSU campaign, jettisoned much of its political work and has persistently opposed and obstructed political activity on campus. The Curtin guild has become little more than a business enterprise with a thin veneer of "representation".

On Murdoch University and the University of WA, while political activities, clubs and departments still exist and are supported by the guild, the funding they receive is limited and the guild's political role is down-played in favour of its services, advocacy and "campus life" roles.

This is especially true on UWA. Last year, that guild hired marketing consultants Results Corporation to boost its image. It was advised that politics "alienates" students and that the guild should appeal to everyone "from Marxists to Nazis". Afterwards, the guild rejected a proposal to adopt Indonesian student activist and political prisoner Andi Arief as a symbolic member of the guild.

VSU and the student unions' response to it has meant that the education campaign in WA has been under-resourced and inadequately promoted. Labor-dominated NUS West has devoted few of its resources to active campaigning and has directly opposed actions such as the 1996 joint university, TAFE and apprentices "Stop the Budget" campaign.

This year, there needs to be a more substantial anti-VSU campaign, linked to the fight to drive back the Liberals' anti-student agenda. This campaign must avoid the mistakes made in WA if it is to defeat VSU.

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