

One bad apple should not spoil barrel of student associations

19 August 2010

David Do and Dave Crampton

The behaviour of former representatives at the Whitireia Independent Students' Association (WISA), as it has been reported has been appalling and is unacceptable.

The individuals involved have taken advantage of a position of trust. It is extremely disappointing to see members' trust in any charitable organisation abused to any degree, let alone fraud of hundreds of thousands of dollars taken from students, many of whom struggle to make ends meet while studying.

The New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA) supports anything that that will make these individuals accountable for their actions.

Students' associations nationwide work hard for students every day. We provide vital services to students, such as welfare, representation, and advocacy for students who for example might dispute their grade, have problems with their landlord, or need help resolving a grievance with a difficult lecturer. Associations also provide a wide range of sports activities, clubs, societies, and events, helping create a great experience on campus, and support high-quality well-rounded education.

Associations, like incorporated societies and charities, are also required by law to be transparent and accountable.

Every association conducts an annual independent audit that must be ratified by members, and students decide their levy and budget allocation democratically through general meetings. The associations enjoy strong productive relationships with their institutions and manage students' funds with the care, high standards, and accountability such responsibility deserves.

NZUSA works closely with student associations to bring student issues up to a national level, but also provides training and support to assist associations in improving their operations and their responsiveness to students. Unfortunately WISA withdrew its membership with us last year.

The situation at Whitireia is an exception to the rule. No business, charity, or home is immune from fraud and crime. Take the recent examples of Roger McClay with charities, or Mark Bryers with Blue Chip. While it is blatantly clear that WISA has failed its members, it would be wrong to imply one example as

representative of all students' associations. Calling for voluntary membership for all student associations based on one example would be like calling for Parliament to be abolished because of the deeds of [former MP] McClay. Just because there's one or two bad apples doesn't mean you throw out the whole barrel.

Sir Roger Douglas' member's bill, which seeks to make all students' association membership voluntary, will do nothing to stop these issues occurring in the future. The chances of fraud occurring are greater if students' associations become voluntary, because current financial and accountability mechanisms could no longer be sustained; and associations would lose the motivation to be covered by the rules of the Incorporated Societies Act and Charities Commission.

Though under universal membership any student may hold their representatives to account, under voluntary membership it is more likely that an organisation may speak on behalf of students with no accountability to the entire student body.

Sir Roger's bill is an ideological solution in search of a cherry-picked problem. His proposed wholesale change is hardly justified by the actions of a small number of individuals. Instead, the bill will unfairly punish all tertiary students with little regard to their welfare or quality of education.

When membership was voluntary at Waikato University and Unitec, important student services, representation, and advocacy were stripped away. Government underfunding is already threatening fair access to a high quality education – removing services will only make things worse.

Students want good quality services and support in their education, and they overwhelmingly oppose voluntary membership. More than 4000 submissions were received on Douglas' bill, and only 2 per cent (less than 100) were in favour.

Whitireia students have been badly let down by the people involved. The new student representatives there will need to work hard to prove themselves to their students and their community, but with the right support and people involved, they will succeed.

David Do is co-president of the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations. Dave Crampton is an executive member of the Massey University Extramural Students' Society.