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# A Helping Hand

Australian Scholarships Group (ASG) has helped countless Australian and New Zealand families put their children through school thanks to its dedication to assisting parents in supporting and improving their children's educational outcomes.

Images by Estelle Judah Photography

With \$1.7 billion in funds under management and more than 100,000 families as members, ASG is serving a vital function in supporting the educational aspirations of Australian and New Zealand families.

John Velegrinis, CEO of ASG, has more than three decades of experience in the banking sector and a deep passion for education. He says that while the organisation is celebrating its fortieth anniversary this year, its programs and services are more important and relevant than ever.

“What ASG has always done is fundamentally assist parents with their aspirations for their children's education. I think 200 years ago that was relevant; even 100 years ago it was relevant; certainly 40 years ago it was, and so it is today. Parents are always incredibly

concerned about the future of their children and being able to give them the best future opportunities in life, and education is a core piece of all of that.

“It's a case of needing to continually evolve as the world around us does. The fundamental need for our services hasn't changed significantly; where the shift has come about is that education is not viewed as narrowly as it was in the past. We certainly have curriculum-based learning and formal education as the centrepiece of what parents are concerned about, but then there are so many other aspects of education, such as social and emotional learning and life skills, that parents are looking for some assistance with.

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always looking for some additional support. The programs and our more holistic view of education today in the products and services that we offer are certainly helpful to parents and children on this journey.”

This change has seen ASG continually evolve its offering. “We're starting to introduce more programs, such as social and emotional learning programs for children from birth through to later schooling age. In fact, we're looking at the range of products and support services that can actually help further.

“However, we're starting to focus more on 'life stages' of children, whether it be career advice for older children or some more basic life learning skills for early childhood stages. We're starting to segment and get more specific about the approach and what parents will need at different stages in that educational career.” >



In the past two years as CEO, John has focused on this move towards becoming a more diversified and wide-ranging education services provider. “Fundamentally, it’s about the shift to becoming a broader holistic education services provider. That was part of what ASG had always been doing, and it’s now about giving it a greater focus.

“What we’ve done is to make sure that we’re very clear from the board down that we are a holistic education services provider; the financial products and services are one element of it, but there are so many other elements as well. It’s really about sharpening the focus to understand the market that we serve and how we’ll serve it better going forward.”

In the process of shifting this focus, John and his team have also worked to introduce significant changes to the cultural make-up of the organisation. John explains:

“The ethos and the mission of the organisation hasn’t fundamentally changed, but it has required a cultural shift in terms of the way we approach what we do given the evolution of the world around us. It’s multidimensional, so it’s a case of introducing new skills and capabilities as well as impacting culture to actually effect that change and take it to that next level. Over the past two years, there has also been a shift in the skills and capabilities that we’ve brought into the organisation.

“We are also investing in training and development. First, it was making that transition and getting very clear on the strategy. There are certainly some significant investments being made in capabilities such as systems and so forth, and now training and cultural adaption is the next step in the journey.”

John and his team are joined on this journey by a select group of loyal suppliers and strategic

partners. “We work with them in a variety of ways,” states John. “Effectively, you’ve got to start from a values base, and with education that’s not difficult to do as we’re all very passionate in this space. We are also fortunate to have access to our Education Advisory Council, a sub-committee of the ASG board that comprises reputable educators who provide us with specialist advice and information on key issues in the education sector.

“We have been working with other strategic partners like Sinapse, who have assisted us with project management and IT platform changes.” Working with government bodies on improving the Australian education sector is also something that the team at ASG is dedicated to. John says, “We’re starting to work with government on a range of fronts and certainly through industry forums. One of the other hats that I wear is vice-president of the Friendly Societies Association of Australia.

“We’re engaging government on some of the broader thinking around the way that friendly societies and their products can actually help to solve some of the issues that government is facing. We’re working with government to remind them of the existing opportunities or mechanisms that they perhaps hadn’t considered.”

In this area, John believes that ASG can provide a very significant role. “One of the clear issues for government at the moment is the continuing and burgeoning cost of education and the pressures on the budget. One of the ways that we can help is that when the Treasurer speaks about the end of the age of entitlement, well, ASG has been effectively doing that for the past 40 years in helping parents self-determine and take action to support and fund the educational outcomes of their children.

“It’s actually directly congruent with government’s direction at the moment, yet the opportunity doesn’t seem to have been picked up as widely as we might expect. To be fair, both the bureaucracy and the politicians are starting to understand the power of what we can do. We are becoming even more relevant as these pressures mount.”

As the cost of education increases, ASG will play a pivotal role for many Australian families. “Tertiary education is one thing, but even the costs for primary and secondary education are rising, irrespective of whether you’re in the private or public system. Over the past 10 years, the cost of education has actually risen by twice the rate of headline inflation.

“If you look forward, particularly considering policy directions in tertiary education, you can only assume that this trend will continue. With this challenging environment ahead, John says,

*“Working with ASG has been a journey of positive change as they embarked on replacing and upgrading their legacy systems. The introduction earlier this year of the new Salesforce.com system has given users and key stakeholders tangible benefits and improved member information.”*  
- Soula Skliros, Partner, Sinapse



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his vision for ASG is simple: “The vision for the organisation is to effectively be the ‘go-to place’ for educational support for parents in trying to ensure that they can actually bring to life their aspirations for their children’s education. It tends to start as a parent’s aspiration and then it becomes the child’s aspiration.

“The sector is not necessarily as well understood or as highly visible as we’d like it to be, and certainly we’re trying to raise that visibility by reinforcing the

relevance that we have. We have more than 100,000 families as members at the moment, and they certainly understand the relevance that we have and what we can do. As a member-based organisation, we’re really interested in the outcomes for our members—so everything we do is for, and on behalf of, our members.”

Families across Australia will work with Australian Scholarships Group in the years to come as the organisation develops and diversifies its value proposition. ●

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