Student Voice
Australia

Building Better Partnerships

Representation, engagement
and sustainability

Student Voice Australia 2021 National
Symposium Book

Acknowledgement of Country

Student Voice Australia would like to acknowledge the ongoing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' connection to land, waters and sky. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a rich history on these countries and their continued custodianship of the lands now constituting Australia is a significant part of culture, education and knowledge.

We would like to acknowledge contributions to this book made by authors situated on many countries across Australia, including the lands of the Kaurna people, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, Boon Wurrung and Woiwurrung of the Kulin Nation, the Turrbal and Yagera peoples, Wiradjuri, Ngunawal, Gundungarra and Biripai peoples, the Whadjuk people of the Nyungar Nation, Wurundjeri people, and the Kabi Kabi/Gubbi Gubbi people. We acknowledge those who walked before, elders past and present. Australia always was and always will be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land.

We would also like to acknowledge that we welcomed colleagues from New Zealand and extend our respects to ngā iwi Māori as the Tangata Whenua of Aotearoa.

Table of Contents

Foreword from Professor Philippa Levy

The 2021 Student Voice Australia National Symposium was a fantastic opportunity to share practices, experiences and insights across a diverse group of international and Australian leaders and practitioners all committed to progressing student voice and partnership in decision-making and governance in higher education.

Our exploration of how we can build better partnerships through representation, engagement and sustainability was framed by two international keynote speakers: Oisín Hassan from the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) in Ireland, and Maisha Islam from the University of Winchester. Oisín discussed NSteP's sector-leading work and shared a preview of its new 'Steps to Partnership' framework. The framework is both tremendously practical, and evidence-based – a great resource to inform tailored partnership strategy and initiatives for different contexts. Maisha challenged us with an important, critical evaluation of the role for student partnership approaches in equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives in higher education, focusing especially in the context of racial and religious diversity, and stimulated a thought-provoking discussion and close to the Symposium.

We were delighted to be joined also by a panel of student leaders and the founder of Student Voice Australia, Professor Sally Varnham, who presented the inspiring Whiria ngĀ rau – 'Progressing from student voice to partnerships' initiative led by the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations, Te Mana Akonga, Taurira Pasifika and the National Disabled Students' Association with the support of the NZ Ministry of Education.

An informative discussion with our First Nations student panel provided powerful insights into the experiences of Indigenous students and their hopes that partnership approaches will help effect much-needed future systemic change for more equitable and inclusive higher education.

Finally, participants had the opportunity to engage with one another in interactive student and staff breakout groups, and we had the pleasure of showcasing case studies and presentations that highlighted inspiring student voice and partnership work currently being taken forward across Australia.

Each of the Symposium presenters was invited to contribute to this book. I am delighted that Student Voice Australia is able to share these contributions with a wide audience.

The Symposium was recorded and can be viewed via our website and YouTube channel: https://studentvoiceaustralia.com/symposium-2021/.

Partnerships for All: Embedding inclusive practice to represent minoritised student groups

Maisha Islam
University of Winchester (UK)

This article will present some of the main themes explored from my keynote presentation. With a pertinent and timely theme of 'Building Better Partnerships', and a specific focus on representation, engagement and sustainability, the aim of my keynote was to ensure that these sub-themes were reflected in the context of racial and religious diversity.

The case for diverse and inclusive engagement: 'Business' and 'moral' drivers

From a Western Higher Education (HE) perspective, we acknowledge that our student bodies are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of the identity characteristics they hold. For example, in the UK, almost a quarter of students come from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds and more than half of students identify with some sort of religion or belief (Advance HE, 2020). In Australia, Indigenous and disabled students, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, have also seen an increased representation. Undergraduate enrolments from these student groups have seen a stark increase since 2008; for instance, 'Indigenous undergraduate student enrolments have more than doubled (111 percent)' (Universities Australia, 2020, p. 36).

The reasons for these widening participation trends have largely been driven by governmental rhetoric and levers. As a result, the 'business case' for universities to be committed to diverse and inclusive engagement are influenced by pledges for 50% of young people in England to participate in HE (Coughlan, 2019) combined with deliberate policy action providing (financial) incentive for universities to ensure certain under-represented student groups are enrolling and succeeding in HE (see Australia's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPP) and the Office for Students' use of Access and Participation Plans).

Nevertheless, as practitioners in HE, I argue our main drivers should come from a moral standpoint, given the evidence of systemic inequality affecting our diverse student groups. From a UK perspective, this includes a long-standing gap in the proportion of BAME students being awarded 'good degrees' in comparison to their white peers (Universities UK & National Union of Students, 2019). Similarly, there are concerns about completion and retention rates of Australia's Indigenous student population (Asmar et al., 2015; Gore et al., 2017). Therefore, as promising as our increased participation trends are, we cannot morally endorse the prospect of HE if there are clear failures in the conditions our students are being asked to learn in; indeed, 'access without support is not opportunity' (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Problematising partnership?

Engstrom and Tinto (2008) poignantly highlight that every student, regardless of their background, can succeed in HE if studying under the right set of conditions. Their research demonstrates the effectiveness of institutions that develop learning communities owing to student success and persistence. The concept of 'partnership' in HE has long been heralded as a tenet of effective learning communities. Indeed, the benefits of students and staff working together, particularly in learning and teaching spheres, has overzealously been reported in the literature (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020) – and for good reason! However, we must take a critical lens to partnership to ensure that we are not simply perpetuating the inequalities we hope to dismantle when considering how this way of working serves racially and religiously diverse student groups (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam, & Reid, 2019).

It is therefore important that we always start our intentions for partnership by considering historically marginalised student groups, rather than it being an 'add-on' or afterthought to our activities (Guitman et al., 2020). For example, in setting out a national framework for student partnership, I emphasised during my keynote that Varnham's (2017) 'Stepup' ladder should ideally

start with Principle 5, 'Every student's voice – diversity and inclusivity', as its first rung.

Building 'better' partnerships and fostering inclusivity

Moving forward on these considerations outlined, I offer reflections from my own work where I have actively sought to improve and enhance diverse representation:

1. Disaggregating 'diversity' and utilising an intersectional lens

Terms such as 'diversity' cannot be employed meaningfully unless used with clarity. Institutions should use their data to target where appropriate support must be given and to consider hidden intersections. For example, the lack of attention given to Muslim students in HE partially accounts for an emerging 'Muslim degree-awarding gap' (Gholami, 2021). Understanding the structural barriers to Muslim student voice and equitable experience (Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021), including how we can ensure a sense of belonging for these students, are the first basic steps to creating the right conditions to thrive in (Islam, Lowe, & Jones, 2019).

2. Purposeful partnership opportunities

It is essential to consider the representation of student and staff partners and purposefully create opportunities for those that are actively seeking to transform the experiences of historically marginalised groups. As such, when seeking to improve the 'Asian' student experience at the University of Winchester, the empowering nature of a student-staff partnership can extend beyond the remit of a project (Islam & Valente, 2021).

3. Steering from senior leaders

Institutional commitments to advancing equity goals must be championed by senior leaders. Leading by example is an important part of the culture change we seek and encourages a partnership approach from the top down (see: the University of Winchester's Race Equality Action Group).

4. 'Trilateral partnerships'

Racially and religiously minoritised students, like other students, experience university from multiple spheres. However, literature on partnership is largely concerned with these processes through a learning and teaching lens. Focussing attention to how (specifically marginalised) students can have a voice in all aspects of their experiences, by working across university departments and student unions, ensures that a partnership ethos runs throughout the culture of an institution (Islam, Burnett, & Collins, 2021).

Taking active steps to increase diverse representation has already been identified as a need that is integral to the sustainability of Australian HE: 'More than ever, Australia's higher education sector needs an intersectional lens, where leaders see the world through multiple perspectives and through the experiences of students and staff from different backgrounds' (Law & Croucher, 2020). From this outset, we can thus be truly 'transformed by authentic encounters' and offer equitable experiences for those under-privileged student groups (Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020, p. 15).

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Maisha Islam is the Student Engagement Research and Projects Officer at the University of Winchester, whilst also studying for a professional doctorate in Education. Maisha's main research interests lie in the area of Black, Asian and minority ethnic student experience, and Muslim student sense of belonging in Higher Education, where she presents, writes and has published on these topics. Maisha is heavily invested in the area of race equality in Higher Education. For example, Maisha has investigated 'Asian' student experience in relation to degree-awarding gaps and has sat on a Universities UK staff panel which developed guidance for tackling racial harassment in universities. In addition to this, Maisha also sits on the Office for Students' Student Panel - the regulatory body for English Higher Education.

Artwork by Swivel Creative, which captured the keynote presentations live during the Symposium.

Building Better Partnerships: Perspectives from Ireland and the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP)

Oisín Hassan
National Student Engagement Programme, Ireland

About NStEP

The National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) was launched in March 2016 by the programme partners: Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Higher Education Authority (HEA), and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). NStEP supports student engagement in Irish higher education institutions, seeking to champion a strong culture of student and staff partnership through practice-based activities and informing policy developments.

The work of NStEP is shaped by three strategic priorities, which are:

- Strengthening the value of student engagement nationally

- Developing the leadership capabilities of students across Irish higher education

- Supporting staff and students across the sector to foster a culture of partnership

When NStEP was launched, the underpinning principles of the programme were set out in the 2016 Higher Education Authority's report on Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making. NStEP has been working to build a new framework for student engagement since 2020, recognising the significant evolution in practice since 2016. This new approach and developments were set out in the 2020 report, 'The Path to a New National Approach to Student Engagement in Decision-Making'.

NStEP has developed and run a highly successful student training programme. Over 4,400 class representatives have undertaken introductory training since 2016, with 1,500 in the past year during the COVID-19 global pandemic. NStEP also supports institutions to develop their practices in student engagement.

The 'Steps to Partnership' framework

At the 2021 Student Voice Australia Symposium, NStEP gave attendees a preview of the new 'Steps to Partnership' framework. The framework was officially launched on 27 May 2021 and is available in an interactive format on the NStEP website here: https://studentengagement.ie/framework/.

A key element of the new framework is the need for a shared, common understanding of the key phrases we use to denote students as partners ideas. These phrases are often used interchangeably to mean the same things when in fact they are quite distinct. Exploring these distinctions will enable staff and students to develop meaningful partnerships and will assist to remove traditional hierarchical barriers. The three key phrases the framework explores are 'student voice', 'student engagement', and 'student partnership' (NStEP, 2021).

The development of the new framework was cross-sectoral, involving hundreds of staff and students, and was led by a student/staff project team. This approach allowed NStEP to support the development of definitions and approaches that have been co-created by the sector, and are owned by the sector. This was an important opportunity to reflect on progress in student engagement and the remaining barriers to partnership.

The framework that emerged is understood in a 4-4-5-5 model (image next page):

- 4 Drivers of Student Engagement

- 4 Domains of Student Engagement

- 5 Principles of Student Engagement

- 5 Enablers of Student Engagement
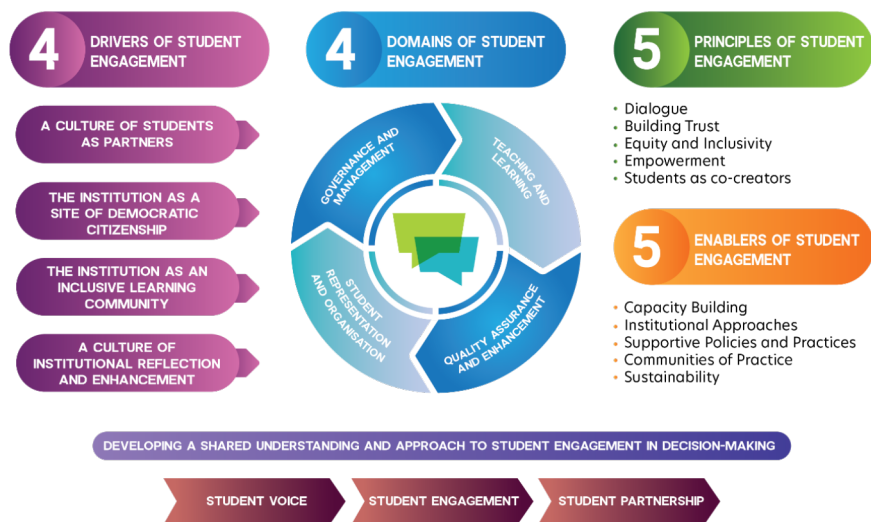
National Student Training Programme

The development of NStEP's national student training programme provides an important case study in the evolution of practice and thinking in Ireland. Initially, it was created to develop student capacities to engage with staff, effectively represent classmates and provide constructive feedback. The training programme now focuses on the development of wider student leadership across higher education, seeking to foster a sense that students can play a much larger role in the reimagining of policy and practice.

Details of the student training programme can be found at the NStEP student portal: https://studentengagement.ie/student-training/.

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Oisín Hassan is the Programme Manager of the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) in Ireland. NStEP is a partnership of the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), which seeks to strengthen and enhance student engagement in decision-making and foster cultures of student-staff partnership. NStEP has strong links with both sparqs in Scotland and with Student Voice Australia. Oisín was previously a students' union officer in his alma mater, Queen's University Belfast, with responsibility for equality and diversity, and then for education policy. He was subsequently elected Vice President for Academic Affairs at USI, the national students' union in Ireland, before taking up his post at NStEP. Oisín is a current international board member on the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, as well as a former board member of both the QQI and Ireland's National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. He is also current MSc student in public policy at Dublin City University.

Student Voice in Aotearoa New Zealand: Whiria ngā rau and onwards

Sally Varnham
University of Technology Sydney

The Harakeke – Flax bush

> *Pull out the shoot,*
>
> *Pull out the shoot of the flax bush*
>
> *Where will the bellbird sing?*
>
> *Say to me*
>
> *What is the greatest thing?*
>
> *What is the greatest thing in this world?*
>
> *I will say*
>
> *The people! The people! The people*

The Panel

While this presentation was led by Professor Sally Varnham, it was essentially the voices of Alice Mander, founding President of the National Disabled Students' Association (NDSA), Andrew Lessells, current President of the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA), and Jaistone Finau, current President of Tauira Pasifika, the National Association of Pasifika students. It is important to note here that Mamaeroa Merita, the immediate Past President of the Maori Students' Association, Te Mana Akonga, took part in a following session for First Nations' Students.

Student Voice in New Zealand

While the concept of 'student voice' is not new, and NZUSA has long been active in this area, it is fair to say that in practice it has been variable and a far cry from being embedded by providers. In 2013, a report was published, 'Student Voice in Tertiary Education Settings: Quality Systems in Practice', which outlined processes and practices in a number of New Zealand institutions. It concluded that notwithstanding that staff at most organisations view students primarily as fee-paying consumers, they also saw the 'students as partners' model as an ideal, preferred or future state. Importantly, it stated the view that 'Seeing students as consumers has the potential to constrain student voice, placing it in a reactive rather than proactive mode' (p. 4).

It seems that for many in Aotearoa New Zealand the 'future state' referred to in the report may be arriving. There are signs of an increased motivation to engage student voice in ways that are meaningful and authentic and for student partnership to become the 'way of doing things' in the sector. This progression is in line with the continuum from student voice to student engagement to student partnership, highlighted in the new National Student Engagement Programme of Ireland (NStEP) Discussion Paper outlined by Oisen Hassan on the first day of the Student Voice Australia Symposium.

Importantly, tertiary education in Aotearoa is widely diverse and has been undergoing significant change recently. Providers range from universities, polytechnics (now Te Pukenga) designed to bring together vocational training, other industry training organisations, and Te Wananga o Ruakawa (a Maori university). Student voice has been gaining formal recognition in much of this reshaping, with provision in: the 2020 Tertiary Education Strategy: *Te Aautaki Matauranga Matua*; the new Education and Training Act 2020, with its emphasis on a learner centred system which honours *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*/the Treaty of Waitangi; and, in the integral part the voices of students play in the codes of wellbeing and safety (pastoral care) currently being developed. Further, student voice is emphasised in the initiatives in the Academic Quality Agency's Enhancement Themes and in Ako Aotearoa's 2021–23 Strategic Plan. It is highlighted by a Summary Report released in May 2021 by Te Pukenga, the New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology (*Te Reo Akonga I Tenei Wa/Te Pukenga* Learner Voice Current State).

***Whiria ngā rau*: the mahi/the process**

It is against this background that the leaders of the diverse students' associations in Aotearoa New

Zealand were brought together and supported by the Ministry of Education, Te Tahuhu o te Matauranga, for the work leading to *Whiria ngā rau*. Included in the group were the leaders of Te Mana Akonga, NZUSA, NDSA, Tauira Pasifika, as well as representation from the Queer Student Group. The huis (meetings) took place over a period of three months and the launch was in November 2020. Because of my part in establishing Student Voice Australia, I was asked by the Ministry of Education to take a quality assurance role and to provide input from my experience. I took part gladly, yet fully realising the need for contextualisation to Aotearoa and the tertiary sector here.

Whiria ngā rau is designed as a harakeke or flax: the growth sprouts from the roots which represent the learners. This format was drawn on to explain the value of the shift from tauira (students) as disembodied 'voices' to being vital parts and partners in all that surrounds the learning process. The students worked together to apply their particular perspectives, insights and ideas to *Whiria*, which is both aspirational and practical. It is not intended to be directional but rather is a gift to the sector.

In first setting out the four pillars for student voice to partnership (A), it lays the ground for a conversation across the whole sector: what it is, its value and why is it important. It then moves to how, in real terms, to move from aspiration to embedding authentic partnership in institutions: making it real (B), and progressing partnership stories from tauira (learners) (C).

A. The four pillars of *Whiria ngā rau* which represent student voice to partnership

1. **Whakapakari**: strengthening students' voices – building capability and confidence to express student voice.

2. **Whanaungatanga**: building connectedness with each other – diverse tauira are involved and heard in decision making.

3. **Akoranga**: learning with and from each other – Tauira and providers work openly and transparently.

4. **Mahi Tahi**: working together – Tauira and providers develop ideas and solutions together.

B. Making it real: the next stage

The pillars were then considered with a wider group of tauira and sector organisations to set out their ideas of ways in which the four pillars in turn could be made real within institutions and the wider sector.

C. Progressing partnership stories from tauira

Student leaders were asked to canvas their student cohorts for experiences of students working together with their institutions, both those that worked to satisfy all parties, and those that did not. The latter were important for reflection on what went wrong and how things could have been done differently for a better outcome.

Particular views from the student panel

The three student panellists talked to the ideas and perceptions of student partnership from their particular cohorts. Alice spoke of the great need for respect and greater visibility and effectiveness for the voices of students with disabilities in order for their full and equitable access to further education. Jaistone addressed the particular position of Pasifika students in Aotearoa and the need for institutions to work together with this large group with unique needs, as non-partners in Ti Tiriti/Treaty of Waitangi, but alongside Maori and all students. He spoke strongly about the need for Akoranga/learning from each other. Andrew spoke to the wide-ranging perspectives from the student cohorts and providers who make up the higher and further education sectors here. He emphasised the need for Whanaungatanga/building connections with each other and embracing the expert voices of all learners. He spoke to how he sees Whiria ngā rau going forward to work with the sector to embed the principles of partnership in all decision making and governance by empowering all students in the room – from all cohorts and all providers.

They shared their individual views on how they could see partnership working within their institutions and where they could see it going from here.

Going forward

The work accomplished by Whiria ngā rau is now being taken out to the sector with the support of the Ministry of Education. The current focus is on

the roles of student representatives on institutional decision making and governance bodies. It considers the training and support needed for all members of these bodies (both students and staff) so there may be the transparency, respect and trust created for authentic partnership. Focus groups comprising providers and student representatives are underway. The aim is to share all perspectives, ideas and insights to widen and deepen the conversation regarding how best to support students and staff working together on all types of institutional bodies, taking into account the similarities and differences of the providers and their students. The discussion encompasses how to encourage more diverse student representation, greater authenticity of inclusion and more effectiveness for the expert voices of learners in our tertiary institutions.

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Professor Sally Varnham has recently retired from the University of Technology, Sydney, where she was Professor of Law. A National Senior Teaching Fellow, she published 'Creating a Framework for Student Partnership in University Decision-Making and Governance' and similar papers for Student Voice Australia, which she founded and piloted in 2019. She is Chair of the University Academic Board and a member of the UTS Council. Her recent research concentrates on the role of student voice in tertiary institution decision-making and governance.

Whiria ngā rau rōpū
Back: Nicola Meek, Jaistone Finau, Ali Leota, Mamaeroa Merito, Nohorua Parata, Andrew Lessells, Alice Mander, Aisha Hancox, Sally Varnham
Front: Sam Smith, Lauren Bell, Matthew Schep, Isabella Lenihan-Ikin, Jennifer Barrett
Picture courtesy of author

Connect with your Community:
Staff and students learning from each other

Alison Jaquet
University of the Sunshine Coast
Alisa Percy
University of Technology Sydney
Alexander deCorso
University of the Sunshine Coast

Staff and students gathered in parallel sessions designed to enable the sharing of experiences of working in partnership in student engagement. The goal was to create connections between Symposium attendees in safe spaces, to share good practice and to identify areas of interest to be discussed in future networking sessions.

Both groups began with the provocation: Why should students engage in decision-making in partnership with higher education institutions? With some additional guiding questions, they were asked to capture their discussions using Padlet. Their key points are summarised below.

Student session reflections:

Trust as an inherent tension in partnership work: Some student groups may not trust staff intentions and the level of authenticity in engagement. Similarly, those in executive positions have expressed concerns about student groups being potentially damaging to the institution's reputation, thus can be hesitant to authentic engagement and in providing the necessary supports for effective partnership work.

The need for resources and knowledge-sharing: There is a need for resources, by way of workshops and case studies, for passionate individuals, both staff and students, who require support to create initiatives effectively within their institutions. There is opportunity for SVA to leverage networks and assist with compiling existing, creating new, and sharing these kinds of resources.

Benefits from engaging with students in decision-making: Student voice in decision-making benefits both the students and the institution itself, including the creation of student-informed policies or teaching practices that satisfy the needs of students, both present and future. Social events, effective marketing and via curriculum were identified as ways institutions can effectively engage with students and provide a better student experience.

Turnover among student representatives as a major concern for sustainability: Changes between elected student representatives on committees has been identified as a major concern for sustainability, leading to a loss of knowledge and momentum, which, critically, can lead to stalled progress on important initiatives. It was suggested that practices of student representatives be evaluated annually to ensure continuous improvement. With this in mind, there is a need for creating effective internal knowledge bases and handover strategies between representatives to avoid disruptions to progress. This was identified as an area for SVA to assist with, as membership with the network can provide connectedness, consistency and facilitation of the sharing of knowledge for new students entering the space via events and resources.

Key factors for success and recommendations:

- Employ, recognise and reward SVA champions. Student partners and representatives passionate and committed to partnership and engagement should be rewarded for their time and labour, by way of payment, course credit or certification of leadership.

- Seek out passionate and supportive senior staff to engage with and support student voice. Senior staff can assist through their endorsement and commitment of student voice in decision-making across institutions and can facilitate effective partnership and representation by mentoring and training student representatives.

- Encourage committee chairs to engage with students meaningfully in high-level governance

meetings to ensure that student needs are indeed represented. Students often feel uncertain, apprehensive and reticent to share their views during university meetings due to a lack of support. In order to enhance effective student representation on boards, appropriate inductions, mentoring and strategies (such as two students per committees) are needed.

Staff session reflections:

The major benefits of student representation include: improved and more relevant decision-making that draws on the wisdom of students' experiences and their fresh ideas; the shared ownership of projects; the development of student leadership skills; and, a much stronger connection with students and their experience.

Some of the biggest challenges to student partnership and engagement have included: developing improved strategies for engaging and supporting students, ensuring a diverse and representative range of voices are heard, and avoiding the burn-out of those students who do engage. On the staff side, it is important to help academics make sense of the nature of partnership with students and to overcome the tendency towards asymmetrical power relationships.

Key success factors include: having a whole of institution strategic approach with clear guidelines, agreements, and payment where appropriate; ensuring professional recognition for both staff and students; and, critically, establishing a culture of trust.

Ideas for future learning in this network: strategies for engaging time-poor students, and the engagement of students in policy framework creation and management; how to develop streamlined communication strategies; ideas for peer-to-peer learning and support; building capacity in constructive and challenging conversations regarding genuine student partnership; and, how to establish a culture of trust and transparency.

The session was a valuable way for students and staff practitioners across Australia to discuss these important aspects and challenges and will inform the creation of new SVA resources and networking opportunities. The session was captured live by Swivel Creative (image below).
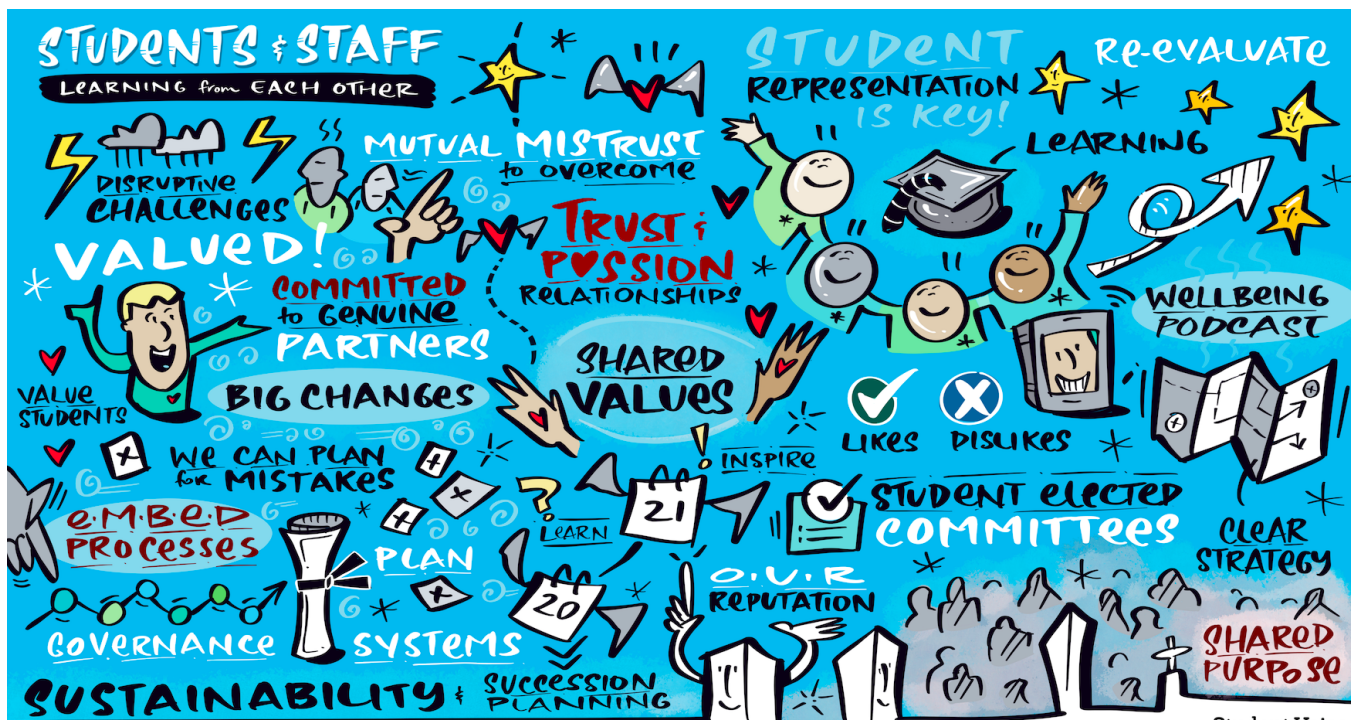
GRAPHIC FACILITATION by RACHEL DIGHT | SWIVEL CREATIVE

Student Voice
Australia

Increasing Student Voice at TAFE

Michaela Hosking
Holmesglen Institute (TAFE)

Background

Holmesglen is committed to embedding a culture of learner partnership across each of our services and functions. Since the 2019 pilot, Holmesglen has been a proud member of Student Voice Australia. We recognise student partnership may look differently in TAFE, so we work with Student Voice Australia to provide insights into the Australian Vocational Education sector and identify opportunities for TAFEs to adopt student partnership strategies.

We have modelled our student voice programs according to the diverse needs and requirements of our student cohorts and we work hard to bring each program together as part of our Learner Engagement and Partnership Strategy.

Our approach

Flexibility, responsiveness, partnership, mutual respect and continuous improvement remain key values that have supported us to grow student voice and partnership at Holmesglen. We are happy and proud to have shared our lessons and current operations and practices in the hope that we can encourage fellow education providers across Australia to partner with their students.

We felt it was imperative to dedicate resourcing to this space and did so in 2018 with the intention of growing the student engagement program. Initial surveying of our learners provided us with insights into what qualities they wanted in their student representatives. This information has formed the base of our student representative recruitment and training program.

Engaging our diverse learners

As a TAFE, our learners often cycle through our courses in a matter of months, sometimes weeks. To remain inclusive to all learners, we recruit, train and appoint representatives throughout the academic year. We structure Council operations in a way that allows newly appointed representatives to join the Council at any time and still be in a position to meaningfully contribute to discussions. Ongoing training and mentoring throughout the tenure of a student representative allows for growth and partnership and we do so via a suite of digital resources and professional development opportunities. We have established student representation on staff governance councils and committees and look forward to growing this membership.

Next steps

Our next steps involve growing our student representative program and improving our progress in reporting back to our learners.

Connect with us

We are always keen to share, engage and collaborate. Please feel free to reach out to Holmesglen via Michaela Hosking, Manager of Student Engagement and Success: michaela.hosking@holmesglen.edu.au

Students as Partners at Curtin University

Bridge Truell
Kat Clements
Curtin University

Background

Curtin is a global university with campuses across Australia, Malaysia, Dubai, Singapore and Mauritius. The Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) opened in Perth, Western Australia in 1967 and achieved university status in 1987, opening that year as Curtin University of Technology. Today, Curtin University has over 59,000 students and almost 4,000 full-time equivalent staff worldwide.

Commitment to student partnership

In 2019, Curtin enshrined its commitment to student partnership when the Acting Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) signed a Student Partnership Agreement with the President and Vice President (Education) of the Curtin Student Guild.

Commitments underpinning the Agreement include:

- Inclusivity
- Shared values and understanding
- Consultation
- Recognition
- Building knowledge
- United Nations Sustainable Development
- Goals (SDGs)

Our agreement

The Curtin Student Partnership Agreement focuses on three common goals:

1. To promote a receptive and accessible institutional culture which encourages and values the student voice.

2. To actively encourage students to engage in and contribute to Curtin's inclusive education and research experience, and the advancement of knowledge and extra-curricular activities.

3. To foster strong, supported and effective student leaders.

Milestones

- Presentations delivered to students, staff and external groups about Students as Partners at Curtin
- Student-facing website has been launched
- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals workshop conducted with students

Next steps

- Continued development of a Students as Partners model, including design of reward and recognition pathways for students and staff
- Building student and staff training materials
- Establishing reporting measures

Learning from First Nations Students:
Student panel discussion

Facilitated by Heather McGregor, Director of First Nations Student Success at Charles Sturt University, the panel comprised of past and present students: Keenan Smith (Flinders University), current NUS First Nations Officer; Mamaeroa Merita (University of Auckland), past Co-President of Te Mana Akonga; and Sharlene Leroy-Dyer (University of Queensland), immediate Past President, NATSIPA. The panellists discussed their involvement with student politics as First Nations student representatives. They discussed their experiences studying within colonial higher education, their challenges of dealing with exclusion and structural racism, and their progress with acknowledgment and representation. There is much work still to be done, of course, but with brave and motivated students like our panellists, the future of higher education will continue to transform.

The session was captured live by Swivel Creative (image below) and can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBXQt1ZTL00

Student Leadership Plan: students as partners at University of Technology Sydney

Kurt Cheng
University of Technology Sydney

Introduction

The Student Leadership Plan (SLP) is a project that is currently being implemented at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). Developed by academic board student member, Kurt Cheng, the plan aims to increase overall student awareness and participation in university governance and leadership roles. The plan was developed during 2020, and in January 2021 it was adopted by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education & Students) for implementation over two years.

Background

Student leadership is a term commonly used in Australian universities for any number of activities and opportunities for student participation. However, student participation within university governance roles at UTS has declined, like in many other institutions. In response to this, the SLP was developed between March and December in 2020, with approximately 75 consultations undertaken with students, staff, former staff and alumni. It was then adopted by the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education & Students) and a working group was established for its implementation. The plan required the collective effort of students and staff, with a proactive approach and willingness to achieve its objectives together.

The plan identified six issues underpinning a lack of student awareness and participation in university governance. It then provided 12 recommendations on how to address the issues identified. The recommendations were then clustered into short, medium, and long-term goals. In June 2021, the plan was approximately 25% completed, with three out of 12 recommendations implemented.

The plan was presented at the Student Voice Australia Symposium in May 2021. For the purposes of applicability, only nine out of 12 recommendations were spoken about, as the remainder were UTS-focused and may not apply to other institutions.

The issues

There are misconceptions about student representation stemming from both students' confusion about who is in fact representing them (distinguishing between student councils, unions, campus service providers), and from university leadership holding concern about who is indeed being represented.

The inherent limitations of students in elected representative roles was also identified as an issue, including the possibilities and productivity of their term, given many representatives serve for one year only. The plan thus explored existing direction and guidance given to student leaders to navigate the university effectively and ways of liaising with key staff for support. Further, the plan identified the opportunity to network and engage in other opportunities stemming from a leadership position at the University. Finally, the plan sought to ensure continuity of leadership by identifying methods of formal handover to incumbents and recognition from the University for a student's effort, participation and contribution.

How do we fix this?

This section will detail the recommendations that have been implemented in response to the issues identified. These recommendations have been clustered as short to medium term goals and were completed between March and June 2021.

Addressing confusion and university-wide awareness

The UTS website was redesigned to reflect the positions, names and headshots of key student leaders. The plan aims to create a 'three prongs' approach to distinguish university governance roles through boards and committees, the Student Representative Council (SRC) (Students' Association) and the on-campus service provider, ActivateUTS, which also has student representatives. FAQ's and website content will be rewritten by current student leaders to provide a

'student perspective' and will include advice relating to elections, eligibility and conduct of campaigns. It will also feature articles of key achievements of student leaders, such as passing historic reforms on Academic Board to introduce an Indigenous student representative in 2021.

Moreover, social media will be employed to ensure greater collaboration with the University's marketing team to publish key achievements from student leaders. The collaboration will also see articles published by student leaders about topical developments related to their roles, as well as assisting with photography where required.

Enhancing student experience and potential

The issues of student experience and limited direction have been addressed with recommendations for a tailored induction guide for student leaders upon entering their role. It also called for meetings with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education & Students) and student leaders in an informal environment prior to any official meetings. The aim of an informal introductory meeting is for students to introduce themselves without fear or intimidation associated with senior staff. It also sought to 'break the ice' through dialogue between newly elected student leaders and senior staff. This is to be followed by a meeting with the respective area leaders of which the student represents, including the Dean and/or Associate Dean of their faculty. This recommendation seeks the same objective, but at a local level where concerns can be raised at the relevant level of university structure.

It also recommended that a proactive approach to consultation is employed when a student leader raises an issue or concern. University staff should point student leaders in the right direction to seek more information before formally raising concerns, which can often be resolved outside of formal forums.

Networks, opportunities, effective handover practices and recognition

The plan identified that these four aspects relate to the actual experience of a student leader, beyond their ordinary responsibilities and the recognition received for their service. The unique role of a student leader places them in a unique position to also be involved in other opportunities. The plan seeks to create opportunities for student leaders to network with staff, particularly senior staff. At UTS, in the first half of 2021, a networking event was hosted with 52 student leaders from across the University, including those in governance roles, Student Representative Council (SRC) and ActivateUTS. Senior staff were also invited, and it allowed an opportunity for informal dialogue outside of formal business.

Formal handover documents will be produced to allow outgoing student leaders to guide their successor. Outgoing student leaders will respond to questions such as: *How did you find your time on x this year? What did you achieve, either yourself or as a group? What have you learnt from your role? Where do you see yourself using the skills you learnt? Why do you recommend this role to your successor? Any final tips?* This aims to provide some form of continuity amongst student leaders after an individual term is completed.

Objectives

The entire aim of the plan is to increase awareness of student leadership in governance roles across the University. In turn, it hopes for greater individual student participation in university governance. For institutions, a greater rate of participation is a means of achieving authentic representation, save for reducing administrative burden of staff reaching out to nominate students to fill vacant positions. For students, it is an opportunity to

Student leaders photographed with senior staff shared on social media and newsletters, image courtesy of author.

Kurt and Bevin with Professor Shirley Alexander, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education and Students), John Chalmers, Chief Marketing Officer and Greg Welsh, Head of External Communications

All the elected student leaders on the Academic Board with Deputy Chair, Associate Professor Lynn Sinclair

Kurt with Professor Shirley Alexander, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education and Students) and the Director, Governance Support Unit (GSU) and Director, Student Services Unit (SSU)

Kurt, Bevin and Ricky with Professor Anthony Dooley, Chair of the Academic Board and Michael McDaniel, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Leadership & Engagement)

develop lasting skills and networks during their time at university, with opportunities further beyond their institutions. It will also create the foundations for students to actively contribute to decisions that directly affect them, voice concerns where necessary and aspire to changes where needed.

Conclusion

This summary has discussed the plan's six issues identified and, for the purposes of the SVA context, has presented a succinct version of them and the nine recommendations. The remaining recommendations are UTS-centric and may not be applicable to other institutions more broadly.

The plan is a collective effort of students and staff, with a proactive approach to genuinely desiring quality student representation to advance institutions' strategic direction. At its core, universities are a community that provides endless opportunity for professional and personal development. Student leadership experience at the highest level is an unquantifiable skill to attain before entering a world of employment. It is essential that institutions create a leadership culture that drives willingness to participate and contribute through service, but also attain lifelong skills to advance students' professional and personal development. Moreover, it is important that students are not merely seen as students, but as partners co-creating an institution through mutual vision.

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Kurt Cheng is a third-year undergraduate student undertaking a Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Communications (Social and Political Sciences) at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). He is currently a member of the Academic Board at UTS and various senior governance committees. He is also a member of the Faculty Board in Law, which governs the strategic and academic direction of the Faculty of Law. Kurt is currently developing a two-year special project under the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education & Students) Division which aims to increase student leadership and co-curricular participation at UTS.

Students as Partners Success at Victoria University

Alice Growden
Farriz Roslan
Victoria University

Students as Partners (SaP) creates space for students and staff (academic or professional) to work together on teaching, learning, curriculum and governance. As a way of thinking, SaP shifts the educational paradigm of learning and teaching from something staff deliver to students to education as a shared endeavour achieved with students.

SaP can cover a wide range of activities, both in and out of the classroom. SaP is a concept characterised by genuine collaboration between students and staff with the values and processes of co-creation at the forefront and is the basis for engagement and advancement at Victoria University (VU). This approach between students and staff within the VU community will create a reciprocal process through which all participants can work together on an equal platform.

At VU, SaP is led and managed by the student coordinator and Chair/Deputy Chair. Student leaders of the group independently control and oversee the governance and management. They are mentored by the Associate ProVost and Director of Student Services.

Partnerships can involve:

- Students with students (peer mentoring)
- Students with staff, including professional staff and academics
- Students with senior university staff
- Students with alumni or industry members

This initiative is built on current practices enshrined in The VU Way.

The objective of the Symposium session was to share the methods of engagements through SaP to represent the ways in which students are participating in governance within the University. We provided background along with VU's vision and success of the program. All activities undertaken by SaP at VU to date include facilitating online and in person network meetings involving conversations about governance and change. Some areas of interest have included:

- Students and staff discussing the future of VU by providing feedback for strategic planning;
- The use of engaging software such as AnswerGarden and Padlet;
- Contributing to VU's mental health strategy;
- Working with architects to design a new student precinct building; and,
- Hosting and organising an Annual Roundtable.

Membership

SaP has approximately 30 student members across the VU community and consists of individuals who are fully enrolled and have shown leadership in past and voluntary roles at the University. The staff members are both academic and professional and are elected diversely from the range of departments across the University. The commitment expected from members is to attend the three networking events and one annual round table per year. Staff need to be open to discussing a range of concepts, including future plans for VU, and are asked to maintain confidentiality unless otherwise specified.

The Chair of SaP may invite any person of the VU community (whether internal or external) to participate in discussions or to present on topics of expertise to benefit the network members where the Chair determines it necessary.

This workshop explored the origins, key projects, student and staff experiences and outcomes of the

SaP Network at VU. Participants had the opportunity to gain insight into how they can partner with students to lead to a better tertiary education future.

For more information about our work, please visit: https://www.vu.edu.au/current-students/careers-opportunities/students-as-partners

Farriz Roslan is an international student from Singapore, currently in their second year of a Bachelor of Laws. Farriz was previously the Vice-President in Victoria's University's Student Law Society (Dictum Society) and is the current Director of Communication/Public relation for the University's International Student Association. Farriz has assisted, advocated and represented on behalf of VU's law students and international students to advocate change within VU and the surrounding community. Students as Partners is an initiative which Farriz considers a huge step forward for student voice and is excited to work alongside student leaders and staff members to continue this unique journey.

Alice Growden is in her fourth year of a Laws/Commerce (Applied Finance) degree at Victoria University. She has been a Senior Student Ambassador, Student Mentor, Student Assistant at Student Services, board-committee member and Clinical Learning Officer. Alice has been appointed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as New Colombo Plan Alumni Ambassador, a role which supports students to study in the Asia Pacific. Alice is excited to coordinate Students as Partners at VU to ensure every voice is heard and valued across the University.

Be Here, Be Heard: Enabling and representing student voice and agency

Nira Rahman
Campbell Rider
Wajeehah Rahman
University of Melbourne

With a view towards bringing positive changes and creating a sense of student partnership, a student voice project, Be Here Be Heard (BHBH), was initiated in 2019 by the academics from Arts Teaching Innovation (ATI) at the University of Melbourne. This project recognises that student engagement sits within a broader transformative learning pedagogical context. This initiative builds on and extends the experiential nature of student engagement and representation of student voice.

'Student voice' in this project is defined as the expression of values, opinions, beliefs and perspectives of students. Perhaps the most important part of enabling student voice is listening to students. The concept of 'student agency' in this project includes distributing the student voice to decision makers and ensuring that 'student voice' is being listened to.

The central objective of BHBH is to include students' views and insights into diverse learning environments. It also steers the conversation to a solution-oriented approach towards challenges and issues raised by the students, which leads to improvement in pedagogical practices. This encourages students to take the lead in co-designing, student experience, and assessing teaching and learning as a reflective process. It supports collaborations between academic staff and students in terms of developing teaching and learning practices.

As this is a student-directed project, there is a strong sense of ownership of the BHBH narrative and themes amongst participants. While the project reflects the self-directed nature throughout the year, the BHBH student team determines its annual focus. The team identifies the key areas of interest and concerns of students within the Faculty. These key areas then comprise the framework for an annual symposium, where staff and students convene to propose solutions to the problems identified; as they decide the narrative, they facilitate the discussion in the symposium. They are co-designer and co-producers in the interactive publication of BHBH. Hence, BHBH is aptly described as 'the funnel for Arts students' voice' by the participants. Every year, the BHBH student team presents these findings to the Faculty Board in the form of a strategic direction plan for the following year, where new projects are established to address the suggestions made by students. In this way, students decide the narrative, the discussion and the major focus of BHBH, rather than being directed and suggested by the Faculty.

Student participation is voluntary. The BHBH student team is recruited through multiple channels, such as open invitations via Faculty established networks and BHBH activities. Students can set their own boundaries by choosing how much time they would like to contribute and what skill sets they would like to bring. BHBH acknowledges diversity, intersectionality and mutual respect.

There are two academics leading and facilitating this project based in Arts Teaching Innovation (ATI), a unit that offers learning and teaching solutions to all Arts academics. As teaching and learning design academics, they work as a conduit between the three stakeholders — academics, students and professional staff — to develop an ongoing, active, parallel connection between all groups. The feedback received from the students through BHBH is always fed into specific subjects, programs and schools in the Faculty. This is done strategically, without stepping on any toes, or breaching the privacy, dignity or anonymity of any students or staff in the process.

The role of the academic leads in this project starts from providing a 'safe' place for students to open

up while they communicate with their collegial network within the Faculty. They help students to better understand the complexities of issues so as to more effectively advance achievable solutions. They also help students to have an increased understanding of the inner workings of the Faculty and improved familiarity with staff members.

BHBH acknowledges students as partners at various forms and levels. It fosters a process of adjustment and reciprocity. It also exemplifies a collective process where academics and students participate in addressing various teaching and learning issues as active members of the same learning community. In this way, the process itself contributes to fostering a greater sense of shared Arts identity.

Several factors explain BHBH's success. Firstly, it is not just one-way data collection from students, which the students can see through the achievements of the project. It promotes a conversation amongst the diverse student cohort, yielding a holistic view of the students' perceptions, experiences and expectations. Secondly, it aims to foster dialogue between academic staff and students within the Faculty. In this way, it ensures a well-represented student body that functions as part of a collegial community of interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry and activities. Thirdly, BHBH promotes student voice, engagement and partnership, and rewards participating students with valuable experience facilitating forums and workshops, editing written work and reports as well as delivering feedback at Faculty meetings. It fits well within the priorities mentioned in the Faculty of Arts' Strategy. In its current form, it creates a sense of belonging amongst participant students.

Since it started in 2019, it has enabled and ensured student engagement in teaching and learning settings. BHBH has continued to provide an important platform for students within the Faculty during the COVID-19 global pandemic, following the University's transition to completely online teaching and learning.

In 2020, BHBH has organised and conducted all activities virtually, with the 'Pop-Up Café' initiative a central part of this. Unlike a focus group, where staff prepare questions and topics for discussion, the Pop-Up Café is a digitally facilitated discussion group that invites students to strike up informal conversations with BHBH team members about their experiences, enabling them to share reflections that might otherwise slip by more formal methods of data collection. It also served as a touchstone for students eager for closer contact with the Faculty during a period of confusion and dislocation.

Students continue their dialogues despite such unsettling times through BHBH as it provides them with some sense of belonging and connectedness. BHBH ensures that the ideas of student participants are communicated to influence direct changes in teaching and learning pedagogies suited for diverse cohorts. This encourages and allows students to take active roles in articulating their ideas and insights.

BHBH shows that the power of student voice and student agency is not just in being heard, but in their ideas being implemented. Consequently, it changes and improves the practice of teaching and learning.

Dr Nira Rahman is a student-focused academic in Arts Teaching Innovation at the Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne, she works towards a more inclusive, applicable, transformative and internationalised Arts and Humanities Education. Her specific interests lie in co-creation in higher education; student voice and agency; Student Employability and Articulating Transferable Skills; intercultural communication and competencies in inclusive diverse classrooms.

Campbell Rider recently completed his honours thesis on the philosophy of spatial perception at the University of Melbourne and is continuing his involvement with the Arts Faculty's student partnership project before beginning his graduate study.

Dr Wajeehah Aayeshah is a Lecturer in Curriculum Design (ATI) at the University of Melbourne. She designs and evaluates curriculum and creates innovative learning and teaching spaces. She works closely with students to develop their voice and agency and co-create their Arts learning journey. In addition to higher education, she researches representations of Muslims in media, serious games, and creative narratives. She likes to drink tea and collect stories from all around the world.

Sustainable approach to continuity of student governance at the University of the Sunshine Coast

Belinda Brear
Melissa Geltch
Alexander DeCorso
University of the Sunshine Coast

The University of the Sunshine Coast's (USC) model of student engagement is underpinned by a student governance framework that enables students and the University to work towards authentic partnership in decision-making. The framework is a bottom up, three-tiered model that replicates the staff governance structure and features 17 groups representing students across each School and Campus, as well as High Performing Athletes, Indigenous and International students, and members of the Student Guild. Partnership in this context is not about relinquishing control; rather, it is about empowering those affected by decisions to actively participate in making them (Varnham, 2017). The framework is designed to ensure the diverse range of student voices at USC are represented while improving the student experience.

A review process of peer partnerships at USC began in 2018, with a students as partners ethos. 85 diverse students contributed over 622 hours to design the representative framework. Traditionally USC had about 16 students who were the primary contacts for executive staff to communicate changes occurring within the University. Through this review process, interactions with students transformed by elevating student participation and engagement, moving up the ladder of citizen participation from tokenistic to partnership (Arnstein, 1969). Vision and direction from USC senior leadership was crucial. In 2019, the framework proposal was endorsed by USC Council, the University's highest governing body.

Sustainable approach to design

Throughout the design of the framework, a number of sustainable measures were key to ensure the transfer of knowledge and in fostering long term, productive relationships now and into the future. Firstly, to ensure the transfer of knowledge between USC staff and students, a Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) funded budget was approved to provide a central administrative team to offer ongoing support to each group. The administrative team, made up of paid students, offers secretarial support, coordinates marketing and communications, and delivers events and training for student representatives. Secondly, to ensure the transfer of knowledge within each student group, each group have 'co-chairs' whose terms are staggered, minimising the risk of loss of knowledge within student leaders when students move on from their roles.

Closing the feedback loop was also an important sustainable priority in design. On a USC webpage, students can easily contact their representatives through an email managed by the administrative team, or by completing a form to submit any feedback, suggestions or issues. Tracking student feedback in this way ensures concerns across multiple groups are identified, students receive personalised feedback, and that outcomes are actioned from suggestions.

Flexible approach to implementation

During the implementation stage of the USC student governance framework from 2020, a flexible students as partners approach was key to success. Actively seeking feedback from students on what was and was not working in each group ensured that changes for improvement were made along the way. Examples of these changes included: one layer of Campus Liason Group being removed; a new Disability and Inclusion Group was established; and, students on staff-led USC committees joined the Student Senate.

Over an 18-month period of implementation, the student governance framework has made a

significant impact on ensuring that student voice is heard and has fostered productive partnerships between staff and students. The framework now features over 135 student representatives in 14 groups, has held over 100 meetings, provided six quarterly reports to USC Council and coordinated over 200 student led events and workshops. There have been several productive partnerships between staff and students, including:

- In 2019, the Student Senate created a sponsorship scheme to support students' employability by representing USC at selected national and international conferences.

- In 2020, the Student Senate collaborated with USC executives to deliver an equitable grading system for students in response to the COVID-19 disruption.

- In 2021, Student Representatives worked with staff on a number or working groups including the Campus Life Working Group, Academic re-alignment project, Health and Wellbeing working group and Student Voice Australia.

Overcoming challenges

Student feedback and productive partnerships have demonstrated that the governance framework has made a positive contribution to the student experience through an enhanced sense of belonging in fostering communities and enhancing students' employability through skill development and reflection. Yet, there are challenges and areas of improvement, and we are currently working on the following:

- Streamlined and collaborative communication between staff and students is a challenge at times, with some programs limiting the ability to share documents between staff and student tenancies. Governance groups are now using Microsoft Teams to collaborate and communication with each other and administrative staff. The Teams are a central and secure location to find key messages, reminders and resources, and to contribute to working documents and connect and collaborate between meetings.

- Additional support and training has been required for some students to help build capacity and confidence to prepare for their roles. This has been addressed through the creation of new resources both online and through on campus workshops.

- With the shift to online learning during the COVID-19 global pandemic, opportunities for authentic on campus engagement were limited. This has had lasting impacts for representative groups to collaborate productively with each other and also connect with the wider student community. Meetings, training sessions and networking opportunities are now available online with interactive activities, incorporating casual conversation in smaller breakout groups wherever possible.

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Belinda Brear is the Student Partnerships Officer at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) and is responsible for USC's co-curricular recognition program, peer-led learning support and student representation framework. With over 8 years' experience in Higher Education and student engagement, she is passionate about working in partnership with students to help enhance their employability.

Melissa Geltch is currently studying Law/Arts at the University of the Sunshine Coast, is co-chair of the USC Student Senate, and a student member of the USC Council. Melissa is a passionate student, interested in creating an inclusive USC community where everyone rises and shines.

Alex DeCorso is a Masters of Business Administration student at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Alex has a background in the hospitality and tourism industry, and is a current student representative on USC's Postgraduate Student Association (PSA).

Communities for Better Governance: Pathways from Students as Partners to engaged citizens

Aidan Cornelius-Bell

Flinders University

Definitions and understandings of student voice, participation and partnership vary across the higher education sector (Ahmadi, 2021; Barrineau & Anderson, 2018; Boland, 2005; Bovill, 2019; Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Cook-Sather, 2018; Gore et al., 2017; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Mendes & Hammett, 2020; Menon, 2005). In Australian higher education, student participation tends to encompass the gamut from students' participation in and co-creation of learning and teaching experiences through to full-scale student decision-making in formal governance positions. Implicit in accepting the spectrum of students' varied participatory modes is an understanding that students do more than just learn on and off campus (Allin, 2014; Boland, 2005; Brown, 2015; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Student roles in higher education governance spaces are often uneasy, rife with power imbalances and other challenges which make fulsome participation difficult. This short article, drawn from my PhD research, explores three problems with students' democratic participation in higher education in Australia and offers three solutions to such problems based on in-depth qualitative interviewing with 24 students and peer-reviewed literature. First, it is necessary to turn to an understanding of the problem in a multi-dimensional approach to student engagement.

Problem 1: Stifled committee participation and power dynamics

In my interviews with students about their participation on university committees, the most consistently raised issue was the power dynamics in committee structures. Students at Flinders University felt that while they had the opportunity to learn about the structure and work of governance bodies, their genuine participation in these spaces was limited due to their status and experience. In particular, students frequently raised that in a room where they were surrounded by 'professors', they felt that their experience did not entitle them to speak back to the issues which concerned them or their peers. While at least seven students I interviewed felt that they could have contributed something meaningful to their respective committee(s), they felt they needed to refrain until they were called upon to speak, due to the predetermined nature of the formal committee structures. However, despite perceived barriers to engagement, students were beginning to form informal networks to discuss their committee work:

> "we meet a fair bit and talk about ... what students are worried about and are talking about, and so we'll often kind of meet and talk about things" (Gwynne, M.A.)

The networked nature of students' participation on committees does not always sit neatly with the formal terms of reference; however, students whose networks supported them to participate tended to have better experiences in the committee space.

Problem 2: Mismatches between student politics and representation

Four students raised that the agenda of student politicians, those in Student Representative Council (SRC), Union or Guild positions were counter to the agenda held by students in colleges and faculties. Here, a particular political narrative was highlighted as detrimental to the progress of students who saw themselves as representatives, rather than politicians. While they saw students in formal positions, such as the SRC, as better informed about the governance landscape of the university, they perceived the political agenda as a detriment to genuine participation. Moreover, they believed that the training and support received by those political students should be extended to all students in governance positions. Indeed, there was a perception of a relative elite in student politics, whose positions were naturally reinforced to the exclusion of the less successful, or struggling, students on campus:

> "the noisiest, perhaps shiniest, vocal students get the attention. The problems are twofold. They don't represent, and they

don't actually speak out. And I want something for someone who is struggling, and that's why I think, not necessarily the best students should be on committees." (Clair, B.A. Hons)

Here, the imperative for high quality resources and training surfaces again. By diversifying and enabling more students to participate in training and representation systems, more students are able to have a say. In turn, this leads to better representation of students.

Problem 3: Lack of training and support for non-Union students

Across each of my interviews with current students, issues of training and support were raised as central to the sustainability, longevity and possibility for representatives, politicians and committee members alike. As reflected in the problems above, a lack of genuine community and relative inaccessibility of formal support to participate prevents students from fulsome participation in governance and teaching and learning. At the root, however, remains an absence of knowledge of the systems, processes and 'mess' behind the scenes in university contexts:

"There is so much that goes on that as a student you have no idea about. ... they've kind of offered not a lot of training [in] ... the student positions ... you don't feel qualified to say to kind of speak on behalf of students, even though that's what you're there to do."

(Retha, Ph.D. Humanities)

Here, networks of collegiality offer answers to the problems posed above. While students continue to feel ineffectual on committees, and their genuine voices are not realised by governance structures, the expectations of students on committees will remain low in a self-feeding cycle. These problems then require solutions. Some evidence-based options are raised below.

Solution 1: Use Students as Partners in teaching and learning as pathways to citizen building

Students as Partners (SaP) approaches, at face value, do not encourage students into governance positions. Indeed, SaP dwells more in the teaching and learning relation of the university than it does in democratic governance (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). However, reconceptualising SaP approaches as an opportunity for creating communities of inquiry and learning around

governance participation is not a long shot. When students engage in authentic partnership opportunities they frequently co-design curriculum and often have opportunities to co-design assessment (Ahmadi, 2021; Higgins et al., 2019). In this way, students are learning into the structures and processes of higher education, and by creating opportunities for all students to engage in partnered co-creation, embracing the values of partnership, more students can learn into these spaces than by previously narrowed opportunities through student politics (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2020).

Solution 2: Empower grassroots communities to teach each other

Student communities are a staple of higher education spaces, offering collegiality and support. These spaces may be formalised in student associations or operate as more disparate grassroots groups, arranged around student needs (Fowler, 1994; Huang, 2002; Moore-Cherry et al., 2016). This might include study or political organising groups, and can extend into digital spaces and social media groups, for example, the infamous 'Overheard at' networks. While some of these groups inherently benefit from andragogic strategies, others tend to be more social or politically activist in nature (Jones, 1969; Little, 1970). By supporting these networks to formalise, to provide the same collegial support while being rewarded for their contributions, student networks can grow to provide peer-to-peer learning and teaching support (Boud et al., 1999; Micari et al., 2010; Scicluna et al., 2015). These spaces enable students to meet 'graduate outcomes' (and equivalents) by equipping students with leadership, andragogic and pedagogic skills, thus supporting, in an abstract sense, 'job ready graduates' whose social circles naturally predispose them toward higher quality citizenship and interest in engagement and decision-making.

These strategies offer formalised and informal reward structures for students who engage. Historically, students who were more engaged in the structure, governance and process of universities were punished more than they were rewarded, typically bound in the mythology of the student activist as the banner waving, fist in air student of the 1960s and 1970s (Macfarlane, 2020). This has precluded students from diverse backgrounds, and with diverse needs, from fulsome engagement with their institutions. This

has been particularly true for students with diverse needs whose very attendance at a university can be a fight for recognition and adaptation to support their learning in the space (Barnes, 1996; Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Brett, 2016).

The strategies above are counterposed to this historical mythology about the 'political student'. By acting with students from a basis of SaP work, as the first step in the scaffolded process, towards fulsome engagement with those democratic structures that do exist in universities as an engaged and meaningful end point, more students are empowered, thus diversifying and enabling flourishing democratic communities. This process cannot be taken lightly. Indeed, neither can the process of stepping towards SaP in a meaningful way. It takes a great deal of time and thought to build learner capacities for partnerships, and it takes energy and drive from academic, professional and administrative staff to support students into governance spaces (Cornelius-Bell, 2021). This is a long journey, but meaningful ways exist, and need to be realised to equip students with skills for democratic engagement in an era of corporate capture.

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