Creating a National Framework for Student Partnership in University Decision-Making and Governance

Principles

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Creating a National Framework for Student Partnership in University Decision-making and Governance: Principles

A National Senior Teaching Fellowship awarded to Professor Sally Varnham enabled her to conduct a national collaboration. This exercise aimed to develop a set of principles and a framework to facilitate and support student partnership in tertiary institutions and in the sector in Australia.

The activities were:

1. A series of workshops in which there was participation from 43 organisations and around 300 higher education staff, student leaders and students' associations and agency representatives.
2. Input from workshop groups at a range of conferences with a wide diversity of participants;
3. Presentations at conferences conducted as conversations with groups of students; and presentations to specific groups within universities, for example, Academic Boards, and Learning and Teaching groups. These all involved significant audience interaction and discussion.

The outcome of this sector wide input has been developed into this series of principles. These principles articulate both the will, and the means for the Australian higher education sector to move forward to embrace student voice in decision-making and governance in institutions and to develop a culture of student partnership in the sector generally.

These principles are intended to support an expectation of institutional development of a strategy of student engagement across the broad spectrum of an institution's operations, from learning and teaching to direction and strategy.

The principles and framework provide aspiration and guidance for institutions. Consequently, they are presented in a format providing stepped levels of detail and accompanied by ideas for facilitation which emerged from wide collaboration input.

It is important to recognise the diversity of the Australian sector and its students and for any principles to be sufficiently wide so as to enable facilitation of student partnership processes by institutions which suit their particular characteristics.

The Principles (short form)

Principle 1: Building authentic partnerships

Tertiary education institutions, staff and students should work together as partners at all levels of decision-making and governance for the enhancement of quality of learning and teaching, the student experience and outcomes for students. Institutions should create and promote a culture of partnership which is supported by all members of the institution's community.

Principle 2: Communication – honesty and transparency

Transparency and honesty on the part of institutions, staff and students are essential to building trust. An open and trustful relationship is necessary to encourage all members of the institution to work together.

Principle 3: Strong Student leadership

Strong student leadership plays a critical role in developing partnership nationally and within institutions. Student leaders play key roles in providing professional representation of student interests. Effective knowledge management, transfer and handover between outgoing and incoming leaders is crucial.

Principle 4: Training and Support – as a partnership

Appropriate training and support is vital to enabling students to participate professionally and effectively in decision making and governance. This function is a joint responsibility of both staff and students and requires appropriate resourcing. Support should also be available to staff to assist their partnership with students.

Principle 5: Every student's voice – diversity and inclusivity

Systems for engagement should provide opportunities for every student to present views on issues that affect them. It is important that institutions consider processes for incorporating the voice of underrepresented student groups in the diverse Australian sector.

Principle 6: Valuing student voice- recognition of formal and informal engagement

All forms of engagement and representation should be valued. The difference students make to institutional decision-making and governance, the quality of learning and teaching and the student experience and outcomes should be clear. Institutions should consider coherent schemes for recognition of student engagement.

Principle 7: A National Presence- for facilitation and support

A national presence supported by the sector is needed to sustain and strengthen the culture of partnership to support and build capacity in tertiary institutions, staff and students.

The Principles (long form)

Principle 1: Building authentic partnerships

Tertiary education institutions, staff and students should work together as partners at all levels of decision-making and governance for the enhancement of quality of learning and teaching, the student experience and outcomes for students. Institutions should create and promote a culture of partnership which is supported by all members of the institution's community.

1.1 A clear understanding of 'partnership' is essential. It is a process of student engagement which has at its core staff and students working together in all aspects of an institution's operations, to foster enhancement of student learning and teaching, and the student experience. It requires:

- The engagement of students in all areas both formally and informally from the beginning of their tertiary education careers.
- Staff and student organisations working together to make opportunities for engagement clear to all students.
- The involvement of students in defining where and how student voice is articulated.
- Institutions working with students from the beginning of a decision-making process, to identify issues and to reach decisions on solutions, strategy and direction.

Principle 2: Communication – honesty and transparency

Transparency and honesty on the part of institutions, staff and students are essential to building trust. An open and trustful relationship is necessary to encourage all members of the institution to work together.

2.1 Institutions should work with students to determine the most effective means of communicating with different cohorts of students in changing technological and physical environments. It would be beneficial for senior managers to come to where the students are regularly so they can engage directly with different student cohorts.

2.2 Students need to be provided with access to all information and data required to enable them to effectively participate in decision-making and governance activities.

2.3 It is important that students can see that their voice counts. Transparency around how decisions are made is a key element of effective partnership. This requires also communication with students regarding the outcomes of their input and their engagement in working together.

2.4 Success stories of situations in which the institution and students have worked together on resolution of issues should be shared.

Principle 3: Strong Student leadership

Strong student leadership plays a critical role in developing partnership nationally and within institutions. Student leaders play key roles in providing professional representation of student interests. Effective knowledge management, transfer and handover between outgoing and incoming leaders is crucial.

3.1 Institutions are encouraged to recognise and acknowledge the student voice as mature and professional which with appropriate training and support is equal to the task of contributing respectfully and responsibly to institutional decision-making and governance.

3.2 Student leaders and representatives need to commit to supporting knowledge management and participate in knowledge transfer to incoming representatives.

3.3 Having processes which ensure that student leaders and representatives do not all change at the one time provides an opportunity to secure knowledge within the leadership and representative group.

Principle 4: Training and Support – as a partnership

Appropriate training and support is vital to enabling students to participate professionally and effectively in decision making and governance. This function is a joint responsibility of both staff and students and requires appropriate resourcing. Support should also be available to staff in assist their partnership with students.

4.1 A course/year or subject representative system (or equivalent) is an important means of laying the foundation for partnership by helping to build expertise and confidence across a wide base of students**.**

4.2 Mentoring by senior executives and existing student representatives is recommended.

4.3 Institution staff and student bodies working together on training and support is a partnership function as well as helping to build a partnership ethos. Staff and students should together develop a system whereby student bodies are provided with resources to enable them to perform this function effectively and efficiently.

4.4 Student leaders and representatives within an institution comprise a group which requires cohesion and oversight in terms of training and support. This includes leaders of student bodies such as student association/union and guild executives, students on representative councils and student representatives on faculty and university/institution boards and committees and other institution bodies.

4.5 Because student bodies typically have transient officers, it is desirable for their offices to have professional support to assist transition and knowledge transfer from year to

year.

Principle 5: Every student's voice – diversity and inclusivity

Systems for engagement should provide opportunities for every student to present views on issues that affect them. It is important that institutions consider processes for incorporating the voice of underrepresented student groups in the diverse Australian sector.

5.1 Institutions need to recognise the difference between representing and being representative. It is important to support opportunity for all students to be heard and their views to be promoted by their representatives.

5.2 Student representatives should see their role as to gather opinion so that they can fairly stand in the stead of all students in decision making processes.

5.2.1 Student representatives should not be perceived as representing certain groups. Student cohorts are heterogeneous and different groups within the student body may well hold different views for many issues. The role of student representatives is to represent their fellow students to the extent the impact of the issue under consideration is likely to have on the student community. This should include the impact the issue may have on specific groups.

Principle 6: Valuing student voice- recognition of formal and informal engagement

All forms of engagement and representation should be valued. The difference students make to institutional decision-making and governance, the quality of learning and teaching and the student experience and outcomes should be clear. Institutions should consider coherent schemes for recognition of student engagement.

6.1 The considerable time that students invest in representative activities should be formally and tangibly recognised.

6.2 Students value having their efforts recognised and the best way is the reporting and celebration of the outcomes produced through student partnerships.

Principle 7: A National Presence- for facilitation and support

A national presence supported by the sector is needed to sustain and strengthen the culture of partnership to support and build capacity in tertiary institutions, staff and students.

7.1 Functions of the national presence could include:

development of policy and national processes to support the development of partnership;

a website that can be used to share information, good practice and resources, and support collaboration;

a national conference engaging students and institutions to promote best practice sharing and problem solving;

and national support for training.

7.2 National education sector awards for celebrating student partnership achievements would assist in demonstrating sector wide commitment to student partnership.

Putting the principles into practice – tips and observations

The points below have been developed from input from the wide range of members of the tertiary sector who attended the collaborative workshops, presentations and workshops at conferences and other events including by invitation at specific universities

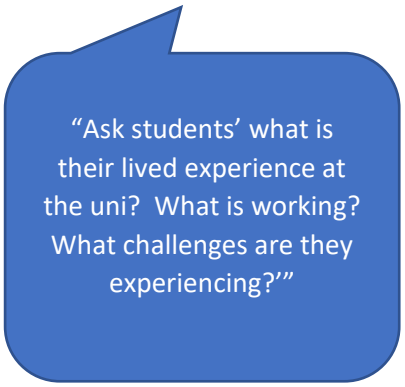
Principle 1: Building authentic partnerships

Tertiary education institutions, staff and students should work together as partners at all levels of decision-making and governance for the enhancement of quality of learning and teaching, the student experience and outcomes for students. Institutions should create and promote a culture of partnership which is supported by all members of the institution's community.

1.1 At the heart of student partnership is a commitment of all members of the institutional community working together or co-creating at all levels of the institution in a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect, where the voice of students is valued and opportunities for student input are promoted to and understood by all students.

1.2 It needs to be recognised as a relationship where all involved are actively engaged and stand to gain from the process of working together. It is to be distinguished from listening to or consulting with students. It can include all levels of an Institution's operations, from learning and teaching to strategy, direction and governance.

1.3 Partnership means all parties working together from the outset through ideas and towards solutions. Involving students from the beginning of decision making, in the identification of issues and ideas and working together towards outcomes is recognised as important. The inclusion of students in all projects, or co-creation, from the start of the idea is strongly recommended.



1.4 Some institutions are engaging with students in project based partnerships which provide opportunity for all to work together in identifying problems, needs or opportunities and working together on solutions.

1.5 The institution needs to report the outcomes of student partnership back to all stakeholders.

1.6 It is important that students actively embrace partnership opportunities, and commit to promoting sustainable student representation through supporting effective knowledge management and transfer between representatives.

1.7 While there is a place for politics in student representation, student partnership requires a professional approach that transcends differing political ideologies and promotes the recognition of the needs and interests of different student cohorts.

1.8 Australia's tertiary sector is characterised by diversity. In considering representation it is important to recognise that student cohorts are wide ranging, embracing traditional fulltime undergraduate school leavers through to mature age part-time, post graduate, online, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and international students Institutions need to develop effective and appropriate processes with this diversity uppermost.

1.9 Just as student cohorts are diverse, so are Australia's higher and further education institutions. These factors mean that principles of student partnership need to be flexible to accommodate differences and robust enough to embrace the needs of diverse stakeholders. At the same time, there is a need to leverage the expertise held by the stakeholder groups within institutions.

1.10 Staff encompasses academic, professional and management groups as well as many other support roles. Support and management roles include direct functions of student engagement.

1.10.1 The divide between student and staff is blurred with many staff engaging in further studies and students engaging in part time or casual work within institutions. Student cohorts are transient and student representatives change regularly. Whatever their role or position, all are *members* of the institution and have valuable perspectives to offer.

1.11 Engagement between academics and students across the institution, beginning with a system for course/class or year representation encourages ongoing dialogue towards course enhancement. It also enables the professional development of a wide range and number of students for their taking representative positions on faculty and institutional bodies. Several institutions have initiated such systems, together with forming Staff/Student Liaison bodies.

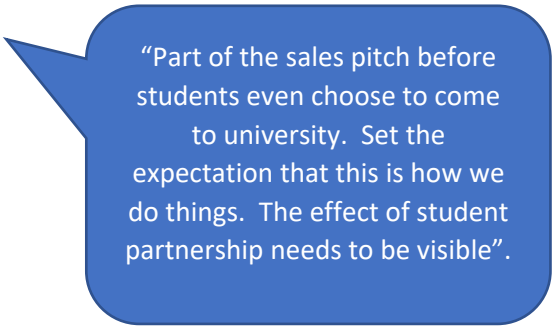
1.12 It would be valuable for institutions to work in partnership with student representative bodies to carry out an audit to identify what opportunities for student engagement in decision making they provide and where there are gaps and challenges that need to be addressed.

1.13 Institutions are encouraged to develop a student partnership agreement with their students.

Principle 2: Communication – honesty and transparency

Transparency and honesty on the part of institutions, staff and students are essential to building trust. An open and trustful relationship is necessary to encourage all members of the institution to work together.

2.1 Communication is vital at all levels. Ideally this should include communication from the institution as to the opportunities available for student representation and partnership, communication during decision making processes being undertaken at the institution, and communication of the outcome of these processes including the impact of students' views on the decisions and solutions.



2.2 Increasing the visibility of student leaders and representatives to the institution's community is important to assist and encourage all students to become involved, particularly those who may not normally be interested. Some examples are: the institution's senior management introducing student leaders at commencement and orientation; dedicated spaces for networking accessible to the student community; student advisory forums targeted to identify issues and involve all in reaching solutions; having a pool of paid student casual ambassadors and student project offers; a webpage dedicated to student partnership opportunities; places online and on campus to advertise roles and opportunities for further professional development to work towards leadership positions.

2.3 Existing resources are useful but there is also a need to investigate how best to communicate with different student cohorts by asking students what works best for them. Student leaders, clubs and organisations and existing student networks can assist greatly in this, for example for advice on the media students are using, including online and distance students.

"Empower student organisations to run campaigns regarding opportunities for regular students to be involved in decision making opportunities and empowering student associations to create support structures for student clubs to engage with opportunities"

"Addressing the broader issue of student communication is the first step… including students in identifying how they like to be communicated with.. but good communication channels need resourcing"

2.4 Websites need to be up to date, comprehensive and user friendly so information can be accessed readily.

Principle 3: Strong Student leadership

Strong student leadership plays a critical role in developing partnership nationally and within institutions. Student leaders play key roles in providing professional representation of student interests. Effective knowledge management, transfer and handover between outgoing and incoming leaders is crucial.

3.1 Mentoring and support can be provided by experienced representatives and dedicated support officers. These roles can be beneficial in providing continuity between different cohorts of student leaders.

3.2 Institutional management can also provide valuable mentoring and guidance for student representatives.

"Celebrate the wins a bit more. There's a lot going on"

3.3 For student organisations to establish 'ownership' as partners with institutions, it is essential that they implement effective and efficient processes for changeovers including knowledge transfer to new officers. Ideally there should be a permanent employee within student organisations to oversee this process.

Principle 4: Training and Support – as a partnership

Appropriate training and support is vital to enabling students to participate professionally and effectively in decision making and governance. This function is a joint responsibility of both staff and students and requires appropriate resourcing. Support should also be available to staff to assist their partnership with students.

4.1 Specific training courses and tools can be used to prepare students for general representative roles with the level of complexity developing as roles become more sophisticated.

4.2 Professional training providers can be used to prepare students for roles such as directorships.

"Course representatives should form the foundation stone of developing student leaders. Having a system in place that trains and encourages this student representation widens the pool of student advocates"

4.3 Training and support for student representation and leadership nationally and within institutions should ideally be undertaken as a partnership exercise between the institution and students.

Principle 5: Every student's voice – diversity and inclusivity

Systems for engagement should provide opportunities for every student to present views on issues that affect them. It is important that institutions consider processes for incorporating the voice of underrepresented student groups in the diverse Australian sector.

5.1 Specific to the differing character and needs of different institutions and student cohorts, it would be valuable for institutions to develop processes to enable the range of student representatives to have access to all students so that student input can be gathered.

5.2 This access could include the wide publication of issues affecting institutions and students and were possible engage students towards solutions and outcomes.

"Develop a process whereby student reps can freely communicate with the student cohort to obtain feedback and then all allow them to close the loop and provide feedback back to the students".

5.3 Representatives need to be supported to enable them to engage with diverse student cohorts both on and off campus.

"Go to student activities – meet students talk to students, make collegial connections"

" We have to be careful how we use the word 'representation' and seek instead diversity of perspectives. I wanted student voice from different angles, and I want to just go out to cafes and find their views, and also [I] worked with student services who are very connected to students' views"

Principle 6: Valuing student voice- recognition of formal and informal engagement

All forms of engagement and representation should be valued. The difference students make to institutional decision-making and governance, the quality of learning and teaching and the student experience and outcomes should be clear. Institutions should consider coherent schemes for recognition of student engagement.

6.1 There is currently across the sector a variety of means by which the different forms of student engagement are recognised in institutions. There is much to be gained from networking and collaboration between institutions to consider the most appropriate forms this recognition may take within the different bodies.

6.2 These means of reward and recognition in individual institutions should be included within an infrastructure formulated by all members of the institution in partnership.

Where appropriate these may include academic credit, payment, specific awards and transcript recognition, and internships to recognise student representative activities.

6.3 Opportunities exist to build representative and leadership experiences into specific units of study.

Principle 7: A National Presence- for facilitation and support

A national presence supported by the sector is needed to sustain and strengthen the culture of partnership to support and build capacity in tertiary institutions, staff and students.

7.1 An effective national presence needs to represent the interests of institutions, student groups and sector agencies and provides opportunity to coordinate resources needed to develop partnership throughout the sector.

7.2 Ideally such a presence should be a partnership between the various sector bodies, including (but not exclusive) the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Authority (TEQSA), Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) and state equivalent bodies, Universities Australia (UA), Department of Education and Training (Cth), National Union of Students (NUS), Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA), Council for International Students Australia (CISA) and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Association (NATSIPA). Ideally any such presence would be supported not only by these bodies, but by all Australian institutions.

"Nationally the sector should affiliate and provide support to a national student representative body. Universities Australia should provide resources to the national body and involve them in governance to facilitate a national partnership between institutions and student unions"

7.3 This presence would provide a valuable vehicle for the sharing of experiences and best practice which are important aspects of facilitating, strengthening and sustaining partnership.

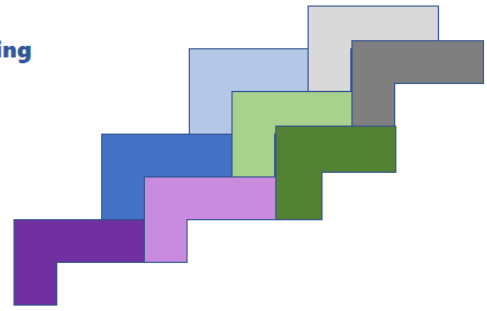
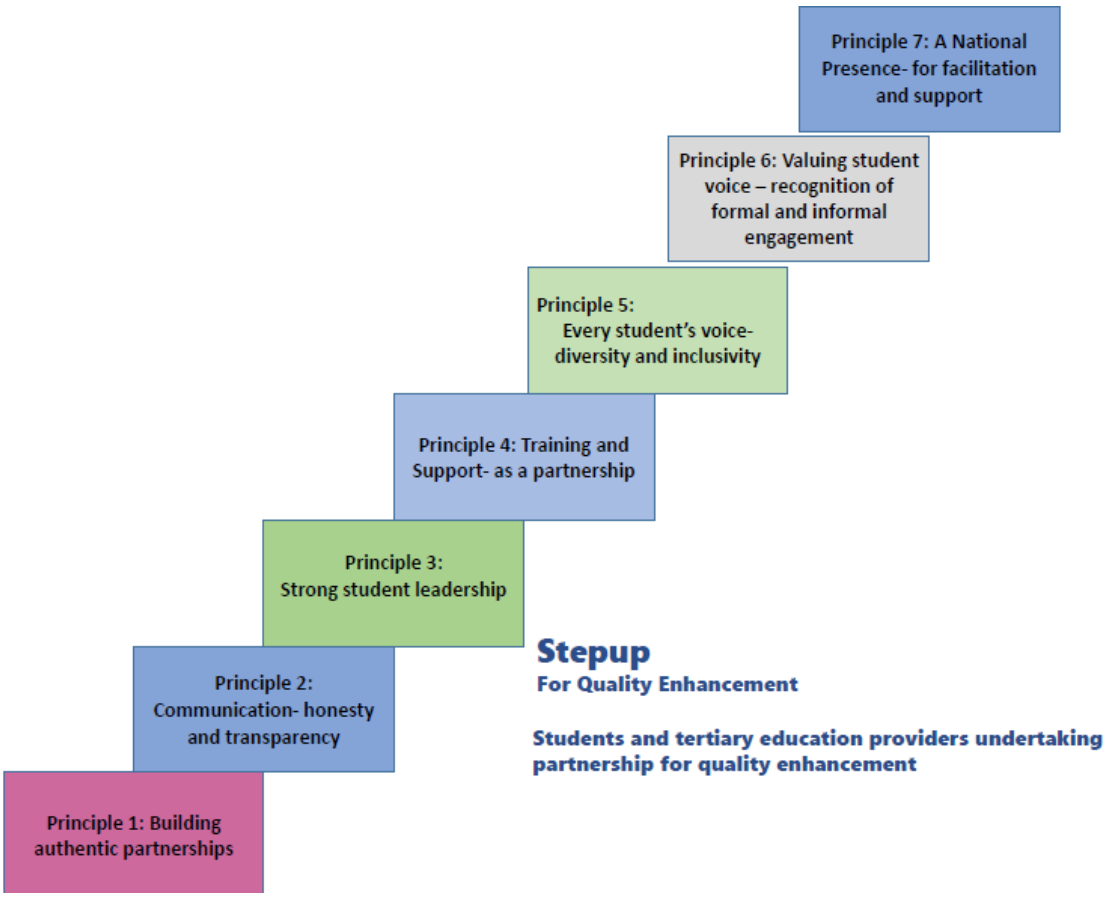
"Identify best practice. Create a suite of practical tools to support partnerships"

A potential name and logo for such an entity has been imagined as part of the fellowship activities:

Stepup

For Quality Enhancement

Students and tertiary education providers undertaking partnership for quality enhancement



The proposed logo reflects the process of building partnerships through engaging with the identified principles while embracing diversity. The steps reflect the process of all members of tertiary institutions stepping up to the challenge of engaging through partnership. The stepwise principles depicted in the logo below comprise a framework for building successful partnerships.