



Progress on a national framework for student partnership in university decision-making and governance

So far we have run two very successful workshops in Sydney and Brisbane involving over 80 participants representing 24 universities and 10 student groups.

The themes which have emerged from the discussions during the workshops and via our Survey Monkey portal mirror those from our OLT project: *Student engagement in university decision making and governance – towards a more systemically inclusive student voice*.

Really exciting is the range of sub themes and ideas that accompany those emerging themes. It is clear that these themes cannot be viewed as individual silos of activity. Rather they are seen as underpinning a network of interactions which may frame, promote and enhance successful partnership between all stakeholders in the higher education sector.

We have had a good online response so far but if there are any points you want to add or with which you disagree we encourage you to have your say at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/HQYJH55>.

So far, we can summarise the emerging themes, sub-themes and ideas as follows.

Vision

A clear and committed vision of all members of the university community working together or co-creating at all levels of the institution is key to the development of a true and effective culture of partnership. It is important to recognise that students and staff are all members of the university community and that some members may be both staff and student.

It is important to demonstrate that student representatives are valued through initiatives such as VCs introducing them to the university community at events such as commencement. Also important at the outset is spelling out opportunities for engagement for all students.

Communication

Openness and honesty is essential to building trust between students and university staff. This trust is necessary to encourage all members to work together.

Communication is vital at all levels. Available resources may be used but there is also a need to investigate how best to communicate with different student cohorts. 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.

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

Success stories of situations in which university staff and students have worked together on resolution of issues should be shared.

Opportunities

Students may be engaged in all areas and at all levels of decision-making from the beginning of their university careers. Staff and student organisations could work together to make opportunities for engagement clear from the outset.

The inclusion of students in all university projects, or co-creation, from the start of the idea is desirable. Involving students in the identification of issues and working together towards solutions is recognised as important.

It would be good for universities to conduct an audit of all student engagement within their institutions to identify the gaps, challenges and opportunities, and to share the results of that audit with students.

A course representative system is seen as key to laying the foundation for partnership. It builds expertise and confidence across a wide base of students. This engagement between academics and students across the university encourages ongoing dialogue towards course enhancement. It also enables the professional development of students for their taking representative positions on faculty and university bodies.

Training and support

Training and support for student representatives is essential and this could include mentoring by senior university executives. University staff and student bodies working together on training and support is a partnership function as well as helping to build a partnership ethos.

Because of the nature of student bodies with their transient officers, it is desirable that they have professional support to assist transition and knowledge transfer from year to year. There is an argument for student bodies to refocus, away from factional politics towards working in partnership within their universities for the common good.

Capturing every student's voice

Universities 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.

Incentives

There is a need to consider a coherent scheme for recognition of student engagement which demonstrates that all forms of engagement and representation are valued. This could be achieved

through an infrastructure for reward and recognition such as academic credit, payment, specific awards and internships to recognise student representative activities.

National framework

Sustainability and strengthening of a partnership culture would be greatly assisted by a national presence supported by the sector. Consideration of the form this should take should be a priority. Its functions could include 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.

There could be national education sector awards for student partnership achievements such as those hosted by sparqs in Scotland.

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