



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

Newsletter No. 2

We have completed workshops in Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne and Perth involving around 250 participants representing 37 institutions and a significant number of student groups.

The themes which have emerged from the discussions during the workshops and via our Survey Monkey portal continue to mirror those from our OLT project: *Student engagement in university decision making and governance – towards a more systemically inclusive student voice*. At the same time the discussion is developing specific context for the Australian higher education sector.

The range of sub themes and ideas that accompany those emerging themes is being reinforced and capturing some new perspectives.

Online responses are continuing to come in. 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>.

What participants have said

The themes, sub-themes and ideas we have collected so far are as follows.

Vision

It is essential for there to be a clear understanding of 'partnership' as a process of student engagement which has at its core staff and students working together to foster enhancement of student learning and teaching, and the student experience.

At the heart of student partnership is a commitment of all members of the university 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. Partnership means all parties working together from the outset through ideas and towards solutions.

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

Students need to actively embrace partnership opportunities, to commit to promoting sustainable student representation through supporting effective knowledge management and transfer between representatives.

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.

Student cohorts are diverse, embracing traditional fulltime undergraduate school leavers through to mature age part-time, post graduate, online, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and international students.

Staff, encompass academic, professional and management groups as well as many other support roles. Support and management roles include roles directly involved in student engagement.

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 universities. Student cohorts are transient and student representatives change regularly. Whatever their role or position, all are *members* of the university and have valuable perspectives to offer.

Just as student cohorts are diverse, so are Australia's universities.

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 universities.

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. 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.

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 the university and students have worked together on resolution of issues should be shared.

Senior university managers need to come to where the students are regularly so they can engage directly with different student cohorts.

Opportunities

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

In any university decision making, involving students from the beginning in the identification of issues and ideas and working together towards solutions is recognised as important. The inclusion of students in all university projects, or co-creation, from the start of the idea has been strongly recommended.

It would be useful for all universities to conduct an audit of student engagement within their institutions to identify the gaps, challenges and opportunities, and to share the results of that audit with students. Students need to be involved in defining where and how student voice is articulated.

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

Universities need to recognise the student voice as a mature and professional voice that with appropriate training and support is equal to the task of respectfully and responsibly contributing to university decision-making and governance.

Course representative system

A course/year or subject representative system (or equivalent) 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. Mentoring by senior university executives and existing student representatives is recommended. 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. Student representatives need to commit to supporting knowledge management and participate in knowledge transfer to incoming representatives.

Ensuring that student representatives do not all change at the one time provides an opportunity to secure knowledge within the leadership group.

Capturing every student's voice

A key principal of authentic student partnership in decision making is ensuring that every student has opportunity to present their views on issues that affect them.

There will be situations where students are provided with precisely that opportunity but clearly if every student were to participate in every decision, decision making would grind to a halt. The role of the representative is to gather opinion so that they can fairly stand in the stead of all students in decision making processes.

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.

Student representatives should not be perceived as representing certain groups. Student cohorts are heterogeneous and for many issues different groups within the student body may well hold different views.

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 as a whole. This should include the particular impact the issue may have on specific groups.

Decisions have to be made in circumstances where there may be a range of conflicting views as to the best course of action. Reaching a decision requires a careful evaluation of as many views as possible and the consequences of pursuing one particular course of action over another. Student representatives are charged with the responsibility of ensuring that they understand the various perspectives of the student body as a whole. The well-prepared student representative is able to articulate specific concerns so that they can be taken into consideration into the decision-making process.

Incentives

There is a need for a coherent scheme for recognition of student engagement which demonstrates that all forms of engagement and representation are valued.

The considerable time that students invest in representative activities needs to be recognised. 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.

Students value having their efforts recognised. The outcomes produced through student partnerships need to be reported and celebrated. They need to know how their voice has been taken into account in the final decision making and the reasons for the decision.

Students value seeing their ideas become projects that are successfully completed.

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 should 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.

National education sector awards for student partnership achievements such as those hosted by sparqs in Scotland would assist in demonstrating sector wide commitment to student partnership.

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