



GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINE

Student Partnership Agreements

This Good Practice Guide (GPG) assists with the development of Student Partnership Agreements within tertiary institutions. Such agreements are widely in place across the UK and are now also being implemented at a number of institutions within Australia.

What is a Student Partnership Agreement?

A partnership is a relationship in which all parties work positively, collaboratively and openly for a common purpose. A Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) sets out the expectation that members of the institution will collaborate on decision making and governance, institutional strategy and direction. It provides a tool for members to work together for the enhancement of quality and the betterment of the student experience. Ideally this will encompass all activities, academic and non-academic, from learning and teaching, course development and delivery, to institution-wide decision making and governance.

A SPA provides a tool for embedding a culture of inclusion of the perspectives of all members of the community into decision making at all levels and within all facets of the institution's operations and its governance. An SPA:

- allows for an institutional environment that recognises the centrality of input and expertise of all its members to the enhancement of institutional quality and success;
- enables the personal and professional development of students through enhancing their skills of critical thinking, innovation, leadership and citizenship; and
- establishes the institution as an inclusive and respectful community of learning.

A SPA should be the outcome of respectful, clear and open dialogue between the parties. The process of this collaboration should establish and embed the trust and confidence necessary for an ongoing partnership.

! A Student Partnership Agreement should not be considered transactional in nature, rather focused on working together on common goals aimed at enhancement across the institution.

Who is involved?

A SPA is most commonly concluded between student leaders of a formal student representative body (e.g. student association, student union or student guild) and institutional management. Forming a SPA reflects a commitment on the part of the student community to ongoing engagement; and a commitment on the part of the institution to authentically and effectively engage with the student community.

A SPA intrinsically acknowledges the power imbalance which exist and establishes a means of working within this. The expectation of working together in partnership allows for the knowledge, expertise and insights from all perspectives to be incorporated within institutional functions. For students and student leaders, playing an integral role at the centre of their institution's activities can play a valuable part in their professional and personal development.

The particular characteristics of each institution will dictate to a large extent how the SPA is initiated, the collaboration towards its development, what it contains and the parties who complete it. Of importance is the nature of each particular student body and student representative structures and their relationship with management, including the support provided to student leadership in order to fulfil its representative role. The key is that the members of each institution work towards developing a relationship of partnership by collaborating to conclude an agreement to fit its particular character.



The institutions which make up the Australian tertiary education sector are hugely varied and diverse. This Guideline recognises the importance for each institution to develop its own structures to enable student engagement which is fully representative in light of the diversity of its student body and its particular nature.

Good Practice Approach

A Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) may be viewed in three stages:

1. Working towards a SPA: Initiation of the process and the collaboration towards reaching an understanding of partnership and the form the SPA should take;
2. The Student Partnership Agreement: Based on the expectation that members of the institution will work in partnership for the enhancement of quality and the student experience;
3. An Annual Action Plan: A mechanism for giving the SPA practical effect by regularly working together to determine priorities and establishing an action plan.

Why are Student Partnership Agreements Useful?

Many institutions across Australia have an articulated commitment to working in partnership with students and have introduced various processes which demonstrate this commitment.

There are many indications, however, that the current appetite for an ongoing and enduring positive partnership relationship across the sector between student leaders and management depends on the capability and confidence of those persons in student leadership roles yearly, and 'champions' among academics, professional staff and senior management.

The collaborative process to develop a SPA provides a tool to reach a common understanding and a deeper sense of working together in partnership which can endure over changes in student leaders and institutional personnel. It offers an opportunity to change through developing an approach to working together which is positive and open and which takes into account all perspectives for the common good.

1. WORKING TOWARDS A SPA: INITIATION AND DISCUSSION

- The process may be initiated by a positive proposal from student leaders (of student associations/unions/guilds) and/or institutional personnel.
- The first priority is to reach an agreed understanding of partnership as a joint working relationship between students and institutional personnel.
- The discussion then focuses on shared goals and values and what the SPA would hope to achieve based on these and characterised by:
 - Openness and transparency
 - Trust and honesty
 - Robust but respectful communication
- Led by student leadership, the process may be widened to include input from the student associations, sports and activities clubs, student representatives on faculty and institution-wide boards and committees; and accommodation facilities.
- It could be framed as a whole-of-institution exercise by the calling for submissions from the wider university community and/or by the holding of a forum, or Q&A open to all. This should be a joint enterprise of student leaders and management.

The relevant and desirable path would be tailored by the needs of individual institutions and designed to achieve the broad understanding and 'buy-in' necessary to work towards the embedding of a partnership ethos.

Ideally, developing a Student Partnership Agreement could be embodied within an institution's Strategic Plan.

2. THE STUDENT PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

The SPA should be a living working document. It should be short and clear and contain:

A statement of vision and understanding of the partnership relationship

This should include a commitment by student leaders to engage positively and by the institution to support student leaders in fulfilling their roles.

Expectations of working together in partnership in all institutional functions. These may be categorised as:

1. Academic/Learning and Teaching;
2. Community;
3. Wellbeing and Diversity;
4. Engagement with the sector and the wider community

Forms of engagement. These may be both formal and informal

Formal Representation

- On faculty/division/school and institutional governance bodies;
- On other institutional bodies such as working groups, appeal committees – standing or ad hoc in response to particular needs; and
- Course, class or topic student representation
- Student/Staff liaison committees.

Informal Representation

While authentic and effective formal representation is important, a true relationship of partnership also envisages and allows for engagement across the institution.

This may be through processes such as feedback and ad hoc engagement of students in working and focus groups. These could be initiated by students or management in response to the identification of particular issues and for development of ideas for enhancement.

Engagement of the wider student body may be through seeking their constructive and honest feedback and answers to surveys. This should be accompanied by a commitment from the institution to respond and communicate actions taken. This includes explanation as to why no action is able to be taken in a particular situation.

Provision for an annual action plan

A regular process for collaboration with incoming student leadership and student representative groups to discuss priorities and develop an annual

3. ANNUAL ACTION PLAN

action plan is desirable. This aims to give practical effect to the agreement.

This sets the basis for each successive student leadership group to work together with the institution on various themes towards shared goals. It ensures that students are part of setting the agenda for collaborative projects and key priorities for the coming year.

All staff should be encouraged to feed into this plan by identifying ways in which their practice could be enhanced by working in partnership with their particular cohort of students, for example in research or in the development of institutional IT processes.

The process for the development of a regular action plan would be shaped by the nature of each particular institution, but generally will occur within the specific areas identified in section two above.

Examples of initiatives developed in an action plan in the particular areas:

- **Academic/Learning and Teaching** – course and curriculum development, enhancement of assessment and feedback, focus on student support and student voice, collaborating on research at undergraduate as well as postgraduate level.
- **Community** – working together for the betterment of the whole institutional community through increasing student participation in volunteering, developing support and guidance in accommodation, promotion and development of student clubs and societies.
- **Wellbeing and Diversity** – working together on a student wellbeing strategy particularly progressing and embedding the engagement of diverse groups of students in integrated activities and programs.
- **Sector-wide and wider community Engagement** - working together with industry, increasing charitable activity, promoting initiatives for mental health and elimination of gender-based violence.

What is needed for a successful SPA?

1. Acknowledgement that challenges will arise, and these will be worked through collaboratively with the sharing of knowledge.
2. Student partnership should be visible to all students. It is important to work together to develop effective communication strategies that reach across the institution and to all student cohorts.
3. A responsibility on student leaders to ensure succession and the transfer of knowledge from outgoing to incoming student leadership groups. This includes what it means to work within the partnership relationship while not diminishing autonomy and freedom of thought.
4. A responsibility on institutional management and staff to develop an understanding of the expectation on their part of working together with students.
5. Institutional support for student leaders so that they may fulfil their roles and act with purpose and intent when engaging with their diverse student body.
6. Embedding of regular reflective practices to identify what is working and what isn't, accompanied by a readiness to make changes where needed.

Final Advice

To academics and managers: use the expertise of students to the betterment of all the institution provides; communicate how, where and when student input has made a difference, celebrate success with recognition and awards. Prioritise the removal of barriers for raising issues and honest discussion.

To student leaders and students: be bold and be positive – approach management positively with issues and your ideas and positive initiatives for resolution and enhancement. Encourage others to engage and show them how.

Further Resources

Examples of Student Partnership Agreements

Australian Examples

- [Australian National University Student Partnership Agreement](#)
- University of Western Australia '[The Partnership](#)' and 'The Action Plan' (internal document)

UK Examples

- [University of Edinburgh](#)
- [Robert Gordon University Aberdeen](#)
- [Heriot-Watt University](#)
- [University of Dundee](#)
- [University of the Highlands and Islands, Scotland](#)
- [University of Leeds](#)

The [STEPUP Principles and Framework](#) were formulated in 2017 after a sector-wide consultation led by Professor Sally Varnham.¹ These set out the crucial factors and provide the basis for the introduction of policies and practices to ensure the strength and workability of structures for student leadership and student representation.

Also see further SVA Good Practice Guidelines:

- [Structures for Effective Student Voice](#)
- [Developing Training for Student Representatives](#)
- [Mapping the STEPUP Principles](#)

¹ Varnham, S. (2017). [Creating a national framework for student partnership in university decision - making and governance.](#)