



Case Study

University of the Sunshine Coast - Student Governance Structure

Module 1 – Introduction to being a Representative

The student governance structure at USC enables students and the university to work towards authentic and sustainable partnership in decision-making. It aims to enable students to be active partners in shaping their learning experience, to build skills and to amplify and diversify the student voice at USC.

The student governance framework was designed to facilitate a productive relationship between the institution and the student body with a tiered scaffold of student-led groups, committees, and associations from different spheres of the student experience. The USC Student Senate structure replicates staff governance structures to enable students to be an engaged and active voice in institutional change processes.

This model has been adopted as part of USC's wider students as partners (SaP) strategy to encourage authentic student engagement across our multi-campus, regional University. Ultimately, we hope to see increased student retention through engagement, enhanced sense of belonging from first year, and a positive impact in graduate outcomes due to enhanced graduate attributes and employability.

2017: Identified need

In the context of national conversations around the student voice, generated by Professor Sally Varnham's OLT Fellowship, the beginning of this project at USC started with a conversation – between the Co-Chairpersons of the SRC, the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students) and USC Student Engagement. From the outset, the development of this student governance framework required buy-in from USC executive members and students who are passionate about working in partnership.

Prior to the conceptualisation of the framework, student voices were heard at various volumes. They were strong in some areas of the student experience – for example, the undergraduate student experience – but weak in others – for example, the postgraduate student experience and general academic matters, like course content and delivery. Some were not being heard at all.

In the past, the SRC or the Student Guild would be approached to provide comment on policies or ideas for change, typically at the end of a change process, rather than at the beginning. This made it difficult for the SRC or the Guild to authentically participate. In the SRC, the underrepresentation of international and postgraduate representatives made it challenging to discover the issues affecting these students and to find timely solutions. While we did have international and postgraduate representatives on the Council, there was not a critical mass or group of representatives from this same area at the University.

It was agreed that a clear governance framework connecting students and staff from various levels of institutional operation – from course content/delivery to strategic matters – would help cultivate a culture of partnership and help empower a student voice in change processes.

2018: Design

During 2018, 622 hours of work were invested by diverse students to work in partnership with Student Engagement staff to produce a student governance framework. The goal was to design a framework

that accurately represented the diversity of students at USC, to scope out the underrepresented areas of the student voice, design various committees to ensure adequate representation, and to determine how these committees would feed into the overarching Senate.

In Semester 2, 2018, students participated in further working groups to refine the original model developed in Semester 1. At this stage, draft terms of reference and composition were developed for the newly designed committees of the framework – the Student Senate, the Postgraduate Students' Association, campus liaison groups, and the school student groups. The students involved in the working groups also represented the diversity of the student voice – student representation from all campuses and various schools, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, postgraduate students, and international students. Between February 2018 and September 2018, 85 students participated in the development phase.

Towards the end of Semester 2, 2018, Heads of School were invited to a student-staff forum. This event was an opportunity for the students involved in the student governance working groups to discuss the governance project with School leadership and seek support in forming partnerships. At this forum, six of the involved students presented and there was overwhelming support received from the school staff in attendance. Formal endorsement by the University executive was then achieved and the project received approval by the Vice-Chancellor and President.

In December 2018, six student leaders were invited to present the student governance framework to USC Council. It was a great opportunity to establish further buy-in for the student governance framework. Following the presentation, members of Council showed great enthusiasm in the project.

2019: Implementation

As seen in figure 1 the Student Senate is be comprised of the following elected representatives:

- Two Student Representative Council (SRC) Co-Chairpersons (Undergraduate academic experience),
- One Postgraduate Students' Association (PSA) Coursework representative and One HDR representative (Postgraduate experience),
- Student Guild President and Vice-President (Clubs and Societies) (social, welfare, and advocacy student experience),
- One Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Leadership Committee representative (Indigenous student experience)
- Two USC Campus representatives (represent the different needs of our multi-campus institution)
- One USC Council student representative (to establish a connection between the Student Governance Framework and the University's Governance system)
- One International student representative (International student experience)

Each representative on the Student Senate is connected to a tier 2 group – who are representing a broader area of the student experience. For example, the Student Representative Council focuses on the undergraduate academic experience. Most of these tier 2 groups, are connected to a tier 1 group who focus on a subarea – for example, the SRC's members are fed from the School Student Groups where each individual group represents the undergraduate academic experiences from a specific school.

Since February 2019, USC has customised an online system for students to opt into the 300 student representative roles. These formal roles include: institution-wide representation for each program at every year level, and each school at our multi-campus university, along with roles for indigenous and international students in each of the 18 student-led student-governance groups.¹

With a soft launch from late July to late August 2019, with little to no promotion, 70 students have registered for the extended SaP program, with 75.7% of students who signed up (53 students) registered for Student Representative roles (other roles include Student Volunteers and Student Leaders). These students are already undergoing interviews and training for their roles. In the coming weeks and months, as we formally launch and promote our unified SaP program, we anticipate many more students registering for the program, undertaking the formal training and participating in student governance activities thus, amplifying and diversifying the student voice at USC.

¹ Exceptions to this are in the membership of the Student Guild and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Leadership Committee which have their own rules for representation of minority groups.

From the beginning and throughout the project development, it was essential to have student-staff partnerships. Establishing executive interest from the conceptualisation phase, and working as a student-staff partnership, was critical in receiving funding, in guiding the development, and arriving at the implementation phase. Without the executive buy-in or funding support, it would have taken longer or may not have been possible to establish a holistic framework that incorporates the diversity of the student experience. With this support, and the network of partnerships, there was resilience when some of the key executive staff and students departed USC during the project development.

The first Student Senate meeting is scheduled for September 2019 – this will represent the inaugural meeting of the top tier of our student governance framework. This meeting will enable elected students, representing the diversity of the student voice, to establish the strategic direction, including designing a partnership agreement with the University. This bottom-up tiered model will encourage authentic student engagement, encouraging and empowering students to be active partners in shaping their university community.

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