



GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINE

Structures for Effective Student Voice

This Good Practice Guide (GPG) assists with the development or enhancement of structures within institutions to provide for strong, authentic and effective student leadership and student representative systems.

All Australian universities to varying degrees enable students to have input into decision making and governance, particularly through the involvement of student representatives in institutional boards and committees. The TEQSA Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 provide an external driver (as a minimum standard) for all higher education providers to involve students in decision making and governance processes.¹

These guidelines provide the foundation for successive students in leadership and representative roles to have the capacity, capability and confidence to work in partnership with their institutions.

Within this GPG the following terms are used:

Student Leaders: the presidents and executive officers of the student association (including student union or guild) elected (usually on a yearly basis) by its student members

Student Representatives: students elected or appointed on a regular basis to sit on faculty/college/division/school committees and boards; students representing their cohorts in courses, programs, subjects; and any other formal or informal representation of student views on a regular or ad hoc basis (for example as members of working groups).



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.

Key Points

1. There should be structures and processes in place to facilitate student representation across all levels of the institution.
2. Structures should enable student representatives and student leaders to connect and share. Inclusive structures will allow the identification of systemic issues and provide effective representation and advocacy at all levels (e.g. faculty reps should have means to communicate with course or subject level reps).
3. All institutions have a diversity of students within their student bodies. Practices and systems should enable structures to include the range of voices within the institution (as far as is practicable).
4. Regular changeover of student representatives is an essential feature of student representation. This results in challenges and opportunities that need to be embedded in the practices of institutions.
5. Students performing leadership and representative functions at all levels should have a fundamental knowledge and understanding of institutional governance and management.
6. Training should be provided for all students undertaking all representative functions. It is desirable for this training to be mandatory.

7. Training on working in partnership with students should also be provided for staff within the institution.
8. Student reps need to have access to relevant and current information so they can be informed decision makers.

Embedding Authentic and Effective Student Partnership

The following measures promote a culture of student partnership:

- A clear institution-wide philosophy of student engagement and student partnership visible at all levels of decision making and governance – from learning and teaching to institutional governance, strategy and direction.
- An understanding of, and commitment to the development of student representation and student voice by all stakeholders.
- Communication of the centrality of student voice both explicitly and implicitly to all students and staff from their joining the institution.
- An ongoing focus of all members of the institution to make the environment more inclusive for student representatives. This includes ensuring that student representatives at all levels are encouraged, trained and supported to work effectively within the institution.
- A responsibility on institutional staff to work closely with students in order to ensure that proper advice about technical matters, such as commercial and internal matters pertaining to decision making and governance, is given to student leaders and representatives to enable their informed input towards the best decisions.
- Student leaders and representatives should have access to change leaders within institutions. In order to have input into effecting meaningful change, access to executive and senior management is essential (within a university setting this should include VCs and/or DVCs).
- The means and support for student reps at all levels to interact and communicate with each other to ensure that systemic issues are identified and that reps on higher level boards and committees can reflect the experience of students at course or subject level.

Good Practice Approach to Developing Representative Structures

Democratic and independent student voice

- Where possible student representative positions should be filled by election while

reserving scope for appointment where the circumstances render this necessary or preferable. A process for nominating or applying for appointed roles similar to advertisements for expression of interest or for employment positions is recommended.

- Institutions and student leaders should collaborate to ensure that all students have knowledge of the skills required for student leadership and representative roles.
- Student representation is stronger when students have a chance to organise themselves through unions and associations. It is desirable that these bodies are funded and independent to fully reach their potential to genuinely and autonomously represent students.

Diversity and creating an inclusive environment

- Students in leadership and representative roles should have a developed understanding of the students they represent and consider the diverse needs of students when making decisions.
- Institutions should ensure that student leaders and student representatives have access to data relating to student demographics to provide knowledge of the particular cohort or cohorts they are representing.
- Student leaders and representatives have a responsibility to consult with the students they represent. Processes for communication to enable this consultation should be supported and implemented.
- Processes should be in place to measure and monitor the diversity of student representatives. Further activities and initiatives aimed at improving diversity and inclusion within rep structures should be implemented using this evidence base.

Change over of student leaders and representatives and succession

- Student leaders and representatives should have an awareness and an understanding of their responsibility in terms of knowledge transfer on succession.
- Outgoing representatives must provide a comprehensive handover to their successors.
- Both student representatives and institutions should work together in fulfilling this responsibility, and institutions should support students in this regard.
- Staggering the changeover of representatives is encouraged where possible to allow for effective knowledge transfer.

Training and support

- Processes should be in place to train all student leaders and student representatives.
- All student representatives should be required to participate in training before they are active in their roles.
- Training should also be provided to staff in roles supporting student leadership and representation.
- All student representatives and support staff should have an understanding of the fundamentals of governance and management, and the responsibilities within the governance and management models within their particular institution.
- Training should include the basics of leadership and representation; an explanation of the roles and the expectations which accompany these roles; and a discussion of institutional and sector policies and processes which impact upon their roles.
- Training could also include topics such as work, health and safety responsibilities, self-care, and support and advocacy services for students (depending on the particular representative role).

Effective communication and accountability

- Student representatives have access to mailing lists/listserv to facilitate communication with the entire student body (or subsets represented by the student) in order to promote accountability. These lists need to be managed in accordance with privacy policies within institutions.
- Student representatives should, where possible, report back to their constituents to ensure accountability and transparency.

Reward and recognition

- Institutions should consider incentives and reward for student representation. This could be either financial, academic notation or award receipt. The personal benefit students receive in exchange for donating their time as representatives should be made clear to all students.
- Institutions and student representatives should work together to ensure that student representation is visible and it is promoted and supported as an opportunity for students to boost their skills and knowledge, and their personal and professional development as leaders.

References & Resources

The [STEPUP Principles and Framework](#) were formulated in 2017 after a sector-wide consultation led by Professor Sally Varnham.² 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 [University of the Sunshine Coast - Student Governance Structure Case Study](#)

Also see further SVA Good Practice Guidelines:

- [Student Partnership Agreements](#)
- [Developing Training for Student Representatives](#)
- [Mapping the STEPUP Principles](#)

¹ TEQSA Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015: Clause 6.1.4: 'The governing body takes steps to develop and maintain an institutional environment in which ... informed decision making by students is supported and students have opportunities to participate in the deliberative and decision making processes of the higher education provider.' Clause 6.3.3 further provides that 'Students have the opportunity to participate in academic governance.'

² Varnham, S. (2017). [Creating a national framework for student partnership in university decision - making and governance.](#)