Continuing the Conversation

about student voice

A magazine produced by **Student engagement in university decision-making and governance- towards a more inclusive student voice:** *An OLT Strategic Priority Commissioned Project*

September 2016

Foreword

The "student voice" project arose out of experience with student engagement in university governance bodies and a recognition that in the changing tertiary education environment students will expect a greater say in how they experience tertiary education.

It is apparent that there is a wealth of experience with student engagement in other countries which is useful. At the same time, we have seen that some Australian tertiary education institutions have already implemented a variety of practices. Clearly, there are lessons to be learnt from international experience and from our collective Australian experiences in engaging students in decision-making.

The purpose of this magazine and our presence on the internet through our web and Facebook pages is to promote discussion and collaboration for the sharing of knowledge and experiences in creating and enhancing student engagement in decision-making. In this magazine we highlight what we have learnt so far.

Importantly we raise some simple questions designed for self-reflection by Australian universities.

Towards a national framework – why, what and how?

Following the successful OLT Strategic Priority Commissioned Project: *Student engagement in university decision making and governance- towards a more systemically inclusive student voice,* Professor Sally Varnham has been awarded a National Senior Teaching Fellowship entitled: *Creating a National Framework for Student Partnership in University Decision-making and Governance.*

This fellowship will enable Sally to pursue the development of a set of principles supporting a national framework for student engagement in university decision-making and governance.

Supported by an advisory group comprising student and institutional representatives as well as representatives from relevant agencies, Sally will engage in discussions with a range of sector organisations, students and institutions, which will consider the need for and purpose of a systemic approach, and how it would be supported and used. Ideally the principles and framework will be used as development tools for self - assessment rather than as an external measure. Of course they should also be consistent with the work and requirements of quality agencies and interface effectively with their activities.

It is planned to begin the discussions by asking a series of short self-reflective questions. A program of national workshops will then be run during the first part of 2017 in main centres and all stakeholders will be invited to participate. The sessions will be devised to ensure participants can bring any issues they consider relevant to the discussion. There will be an opportunity for participants and others who cannot attend the workshops to make written comments on issues including how those should be addressed.

The input from the workshops and any written submissions will be collated to formulate draft principles and a framework. This draft will then be circulated for comment. Once consensus has been reached we will ask participating institutions to endorse the framework and principles.

The framework will be presented at a symposium to be run as part of the fellowship.

We will be contacting you to ask whether you are interested in participating in the development of this framework or whether you would simply like to be kept informed of its progress. In the meantime, please feel free to contact Sally Varnham at sally.varnham@uts.edu.au or Sally's administrative officer, Ann Cahill at Ann.Cahill@uts.edu.au.

Starting a new conversation- towards a national framework

There are diverse actors, actions and levels of action that contribute to creating a systemic approach to student engagement in university decision-making and governance. The diagram below provides a schematic representation of this systemic model. The student voice project has encountered good practices across this model but has also noted gaps that need to be addressed in order for there to be a coherent, systemic approach to student engagement in Australian higher education.

Student partnership in university decision-making
A systemic model
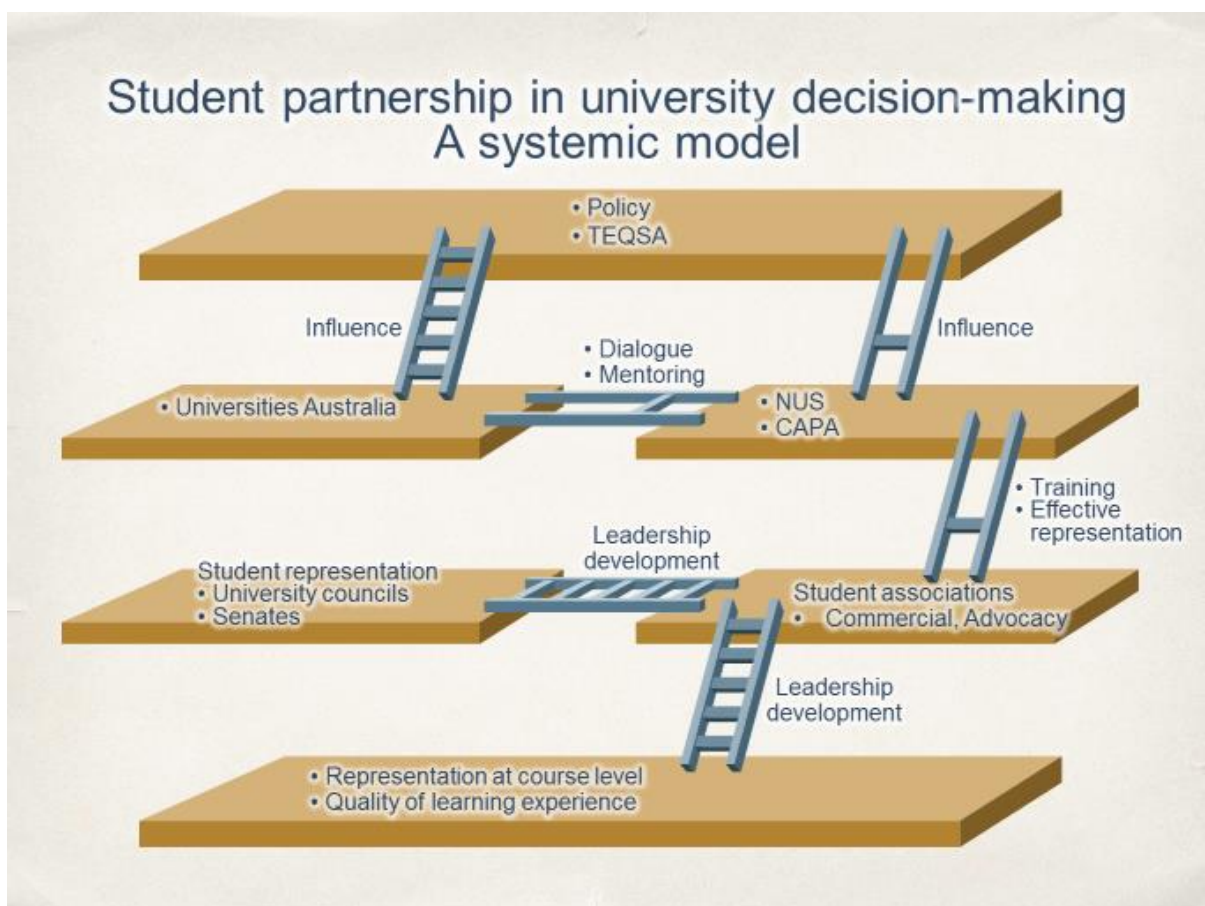
To help to get a clear picture and to identify where gaps lie we offer the following self-reflective questions:

1. To what extent is the student voice embedded in your institution's processes and structures?

2. What evidence shows that the student voice has made a difference to decisions and the quality of provision?

3. How is an active and independent student voice encouraged?

4. How does your institution demonstrate that it is listening to student voice? Do you consult students early in decision-making processes? Do you ask them at appropriate times? Do you give them enough time to respond? Do you incorporate their views into the decision?

5. Are student representatives trained, supported and well informed and prepared for their role. How do they work with other students to ensure the views they put forward are genuinely representative?

Since our last edition

Since we presented our last edition of this magazine, the project team has continued preparing case studies that capture evidence of good practice in student engagement at Australian universities. These case studies cover universities of different types and from most Australian states.

We have encountered some very good examples of capturing student voice including (among other examples): staff- student consultative committees (SSCCs), student leadership conferences, an academic student representative program, student representative councils, mentoring student representatives to present proposals at board and council level, and an example of student-institution co-creation. We have also run a successful SSCC pilot project. The case studies will be presented in the final project report. A complete set of the case studies will be available on the project website.

Work is also progressing on finalising our reports for the end of the project. These final reports will also be available on our website once they have been approved.

The overriding theme which has emerged from both our international and Australian research is the development of processes which allow for meaningful and effective student participation in decision making, which show the university's commitment to and respect for student voice and a philosophy or ethos of partnership.

University/Student Partnership: What a university and the sector 'is' as well as what a university and the sector 'does'.

Student leaders' survey

We have previously reported the findings of our institutional survey (Voice 1 March 2015). We can now present the findings of our student leader survey.

Overview

With a response rate of around 50% of our sample (14 responses) and responses received from diverse institutions across the country the findings of this survey are representative of what is happening with student engagement in decision-making in Australian universities from a student perspective. It is important, however, to recognise that with a larger sample the picture might look somewhat different.

Students are engaged in a range of decision-making opportunities across their institutions most notably in senior decision making bodies such as council and academic board or senate. Final comments provided by students suggested concern that this opportunity for participation is tokenistic. Students reported less opportunity for engagement in matters related specifically to teaching and learning activities and where it occurs there are typically no voting rights. Institutional and staff attitudes to student representation overall are seen as compliant, with students being seen as customers or stakeholders rather than partners. Student representatives see little in the way of provision of formal incentives and recognition.

Student representatives are seen as no more than moderately difficult to recruit, typically come from the ranks of full-time, undergraduate, local students and recognise their role as representing the interests of their fellow students. There is some training and support for student representatives and this is mostly provided through the student association.

Students see that institutions do share information with students both about the institution and how they can become involved in representative roles. This is done through various sources. A potential challenge lies in ensuring valued information is easily available through sources students are most likely to use. The issue of communication raises interesting questions, for example, are student views on how institutions are doing with engaging them in decision-making communication issues rather than a question of what the institution is doing?

Where did the responses come from?

We didn't ask the students where they were from or what type of university they were from. Based on some of the other answers however we have representation from most states and different types of university:

4 Group of 8

2 ATN

2 regional

1 innovative research university

4 unaligned

1 unknown.

All respondents, but one, were elected student leaders and around half were involved in student associations, university councils and academic boards. Only one was involved at faculty level.

How do student leaders see their role?

All respondents saw their role as providing leadership and representing the interests of the student body as a whole. Less than half saw themselves as activists and one third identified the role as developing their careers.

How do student leaders see their institutions?

We asked student leaders to characterise their institution's attitude to student engagement in decision-making and governance.
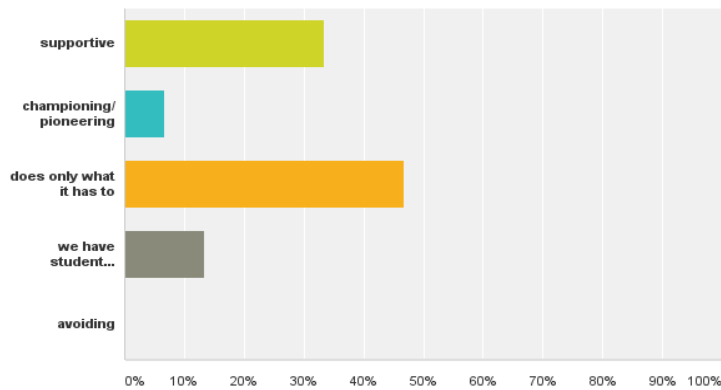
Institutional attitude towards student engagement in decision-making

Over a third saw their institution as supporting student representation and around half considered their institution does not value student representatives. The question of how staff see students received diverse responses. None of the respondents characterised staff as seeing students as partners and around 25% considered students are seen as customers. Significantly the largest response was in the "other" category. There was some evidence of staff engaging effectively with students in decision-making roles but this was mixed with positive relationships not being seen as existing at all levels, and some taking a negative view of staff-student relationships. There is some indication that student representatives consider that they are viewed more seriously than other students.
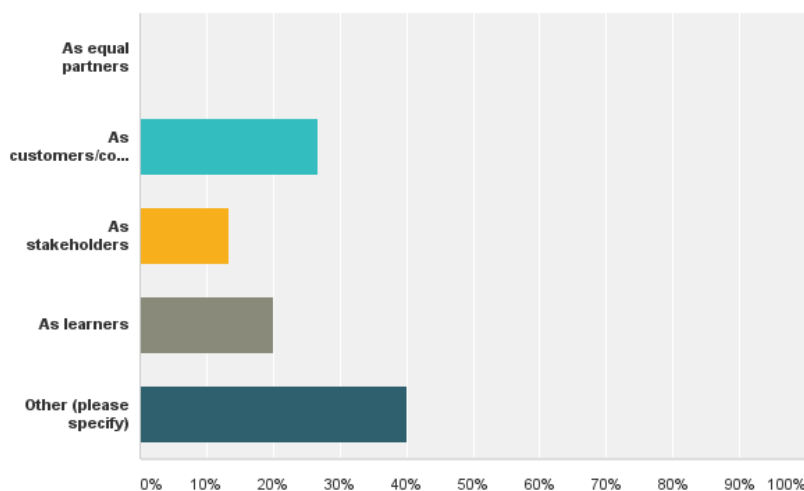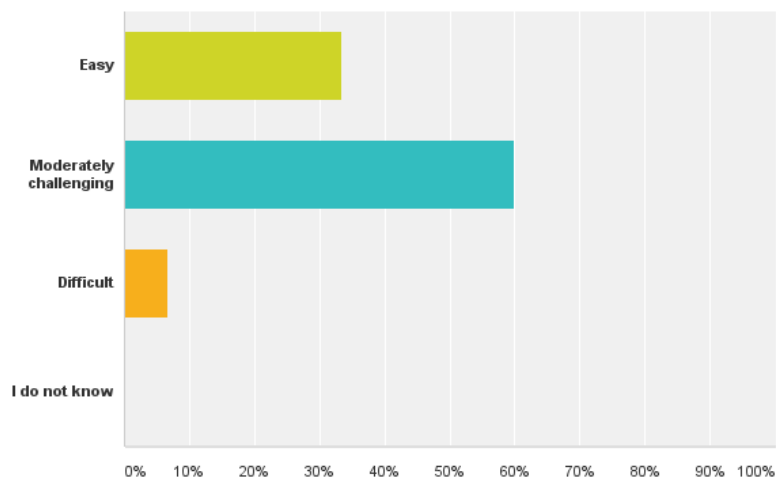

Staff attitude towards student engagement in decision-making

Recruitment

Recruitment of student representatives was reported as mostly moderately challenging (60%) with one third of respondents reporting it as easy. Only one respondent considered it difficult.

Ease of recruitment

Representatives are most likely undergraduates and many representatives took on the role as they knew a current or past student leader. Postgraduate, part time and international students were the categories considered least likely to engage as student representatives.

Training and support for student representatives is provided through the student association and current student representatives. Support is provided by staff who have this duty as part of their work load in some instances.

Informing students about opportunities to become student representatives

Informal sources, social media and institutional websites are the most common sources of information for students about representative roles and opportunities and informal sources and social media the most effective.
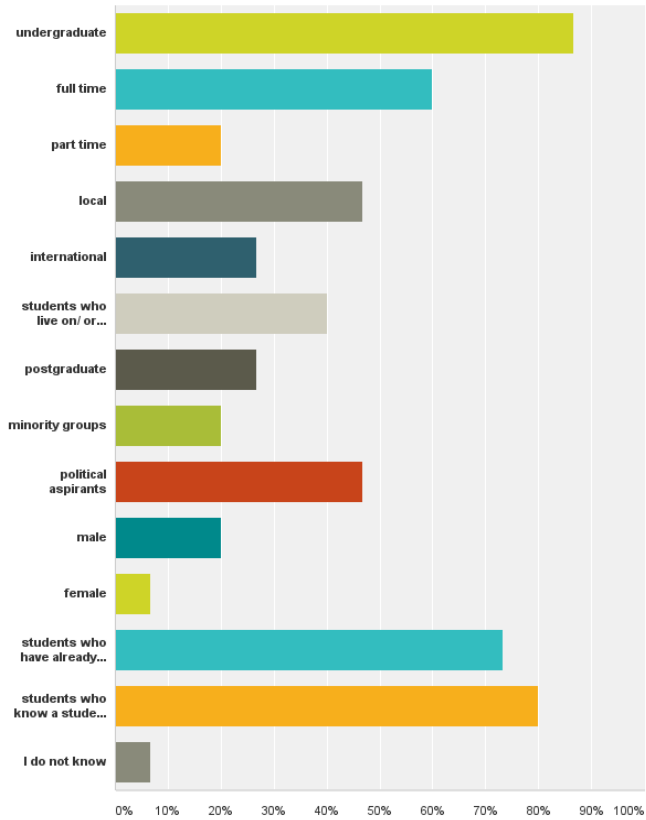
Which student groups are most likely to become student representatives?

Incentives

Informal recognition was the most common incentive for student representation reported. One third reported no incentives being offered and 20% reported payment or formal certificates being provided. The most highly ranked incentive was academic credit followed by certificates for specific training, inclusion on graduate statements and then payment.
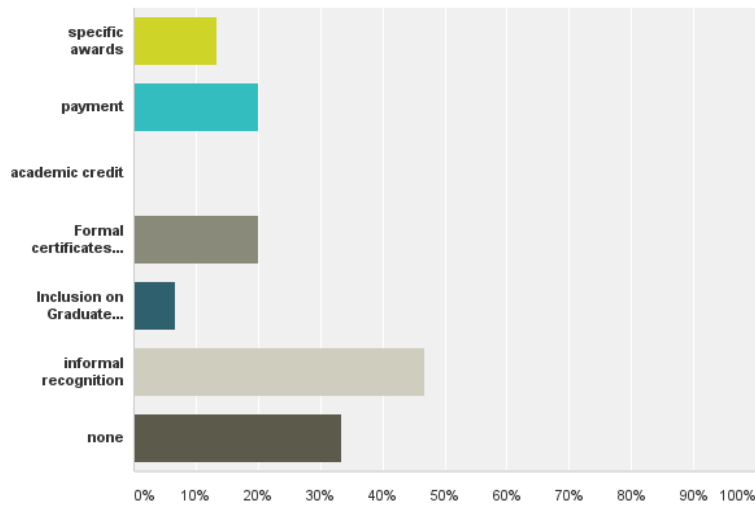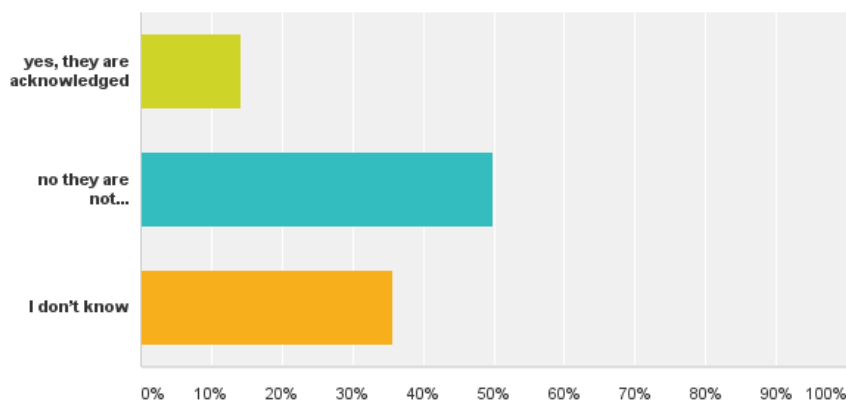
Incentives provided for student engagement
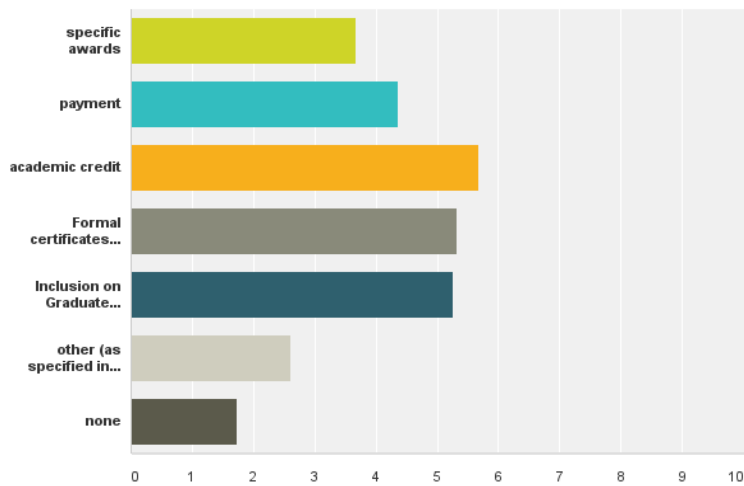
Incentives students value

Students were asked whether their institutions formally acknowledge student contribution to governance and decision-making in publications and news items. For the most part students responded that they were not acknowledged or they did not know if they were acknowledged.

Acknowledging student input

Levels of student involvement

In terms of level of involvement, students reported being fully involved and having voting rights at over 80% in student associations, 60% in academic board, around 45% in council and significantly less at faculty level and below. Students perceive their achievements through engagement as affecting policy, council, academic board and in terms of raising issues.

Impact of student involvement

Respondents consider that student involvement has impacted decision making in their institutions, most notably within their student associations but also in raising awareness of particular issues and students' responses to them. Students also see themselves as having impact in relation to policy, within university council and academic board.

Communication

Students were asked what information provided by their institution that they considered the most helpful. The most useful category was results of student feedback surveys (93%), followed by reports of actions taken to enhance student educational experience (72%), employability survey data (64%), program/course evaluations and student progression and retention data (both 57%). University rankings, external examiners' reports and institutional financial data were the least helpful.

We also asked what information is shared with their institutions by their student associations. The most common information collected is survey responses. There was some discussion of the need for more formalised collection and sharing of information.

Students were asked to indicate the mechanisms used to inform students of enhancements to the student experience and the level at which these mechanisms operate. Email and websites were the most common means used by institutions, while student unions also use publications and social media. At the faculty level, notice boards and emails are most commonly used. At the department and course level, respondents were less clear about what mechanisms are used but email again seemed to have some preference as a mechanism. In the case of student representatives, student meetings were the preferred mechanism.

Further thoughts

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide any further thoughts they had. As with any survey these comments are often most valuable in presenting the picture. Two thirds of respondents took up that opportunity and their comments are provided below. Where institutions were specifically identified in the response this detail has been removed.   It should be noted that these comments come from various institutions, some of which may be still developing their student engagement capacity.   A strong theme throughout is the importance of appropriate and effective communication, with the main challenge emerging for institutions to ensure that the engagement they are working to provide is effective and effectively communicated to students. Here are some of the comments:

While students are awarded a spot of University Council and Academic Senate (as well as a number of other committees), often the University administration values the thoughts and opinions of students much less than they do their own. On University Council, the students 'have a vote' but nothing ever gets voted on. The number of students and staff are severely outweighed by the number of external members. Academic Senate is a place for University administration to pursue an agenda and very little input from the students is taken on board. I will concede xxxxx is better than most Universities overall in the question of student

governance, but it is often tokenistic and done so they can say "hey - we consulted students look how student centred we are," without attempting to respect the feedback and opinions being presented.

XXXXX avoids student engagement and involvement unless pressured by the student union. They have created a different body for student leaders with which they can 'consult' so as not to have to consult with the union.

Students should be a part of every decision making level in every decision making body as the primary stakeholders. The facilitators (the University) should provide adequate training as well as mentorships to ensure students understand the environment they are participating in and are given the tools to contribute effectively. The relevant peak student organisation should ideally be the body that elects/nominates the students to these various bodies.

The University often claims to value student representation and reflects this by including students in most of its high level committees and boards. However, the views of students who sit on these committees are not always taken seriously and sometimes the student participation is entirely token.

The 2016 symposium and workshops

In October 2015 we held a successful symposium that reflected on the findings of the international phase of our research and the findings of our institutional survey. It also provided an opportunity for participants to share ideas and experiences as well as hearing from a number of experts from Australia and New Zealand.

Symposium participants had the opportunity to tell us what they thought would be important to creating an effective environment for systemic engagement. The table below summarises the themes captured during that process.

Conditions for creating systemic engagement- themes identified by groups during our 2015 symposium
National Framework for Student Representation
Cultural Change
A new view of the university organizational structure
Good practice example on integrated organization structure
Students contribute ideas – not just feedback
Benefits of grass roots insights and student – student communication channels
Good practice at other Unis
Legitimacy of Student Representation
Timing of communications within structure
Contestation in allocation of responsibility
Measuring success
Continuity – retention of institutional knowledge
Management resources
Students as partners in curriculum
Training and support
Developmental pathways for representation
Equality of opportunity for representation
Building of relationships between staff and students
Reward and recognition, payment
Communications
Closing the Feedback Loop

This year's symposium sees us with the opportunity to present the final stages of the student voice OLT project and to hear from international experts. Our speakers this year are Anthony McClaran from TEQSA, Gwen van der Velden from University of Warwick and Eve Lewis from sparqs.

Anthony McClaran is the Chief Executive Officer of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), a role he took up in 2015. Anthony joined TEQSA from the United Kingdom, where he served as Chief Executive of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). Anthony's extensive experience includes serving as CEO of the UK's Universities and Colleges Admissions Service(UCAS); Chair of the Council of the University of Gloucestershire, senior academic administration and managements positions at the Universities of Warwick and Hull; Executive Board member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and; as a member of the

International Education Council and International Strategic Advisory Board (UK HE International Unit).

Gwen van der Velden is the Director of the Warwick International Higher Education Academy (WIHEA). Gwen has considerable experience in the development of university teaching and learning. At the University of Bath, Gwen developed new models of student engagement, established a strong student engagement ethos, led research projects in student engagement and organisational change and engaged in a range of national policy activities. Gwen is a Steering Group member of 'The Student Engagement Partnership' and has served on executive groups and advisory or policy development groups of various national organisations including the UK's Higher Education Academy, the Quality Assurance Agency and the Heads of Educational Development Group.

Eve Lewis has been the Director of student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs) since 2010. Eve was previously with Heriot-Watt University Students' Association where she led many innovative developments, including linking course representative systems with senior decision-making processes and implementing one of the first schemes of student-led learning and teaching awards in Scotland. Eve has been involved in developments around the role of students in Scotland's Quality Enhancement Framework. Eve led the research and development work in Scotland that resulted in the nationally agreed Student Engagement Framework for Scotland.

We are also pleased to have the opportunity to offer sessions led by student leaders from a number of different student organisations:

Sadie Heckenberg- President NATSIPA

Saba Nabi- National Equity Officer CISA

Jim Smith, President CAPA

Maddie Mulholland- President UWA student Guild

Luke Chapman – Student Director, ActivateUTS

Ben Gill – President ANUSA

Alistair Shaw- Executive Director NZUSA

Jonathon Gee- President VUWSA

Mitchell Keast- VUW

Continuing the Conversation

We hope you will join us in continuing the student voice conversation via our Facebook page: *Student Voice in university decision-making* and follow our activities via our web page: *studentvoice.uts.edu.au.*