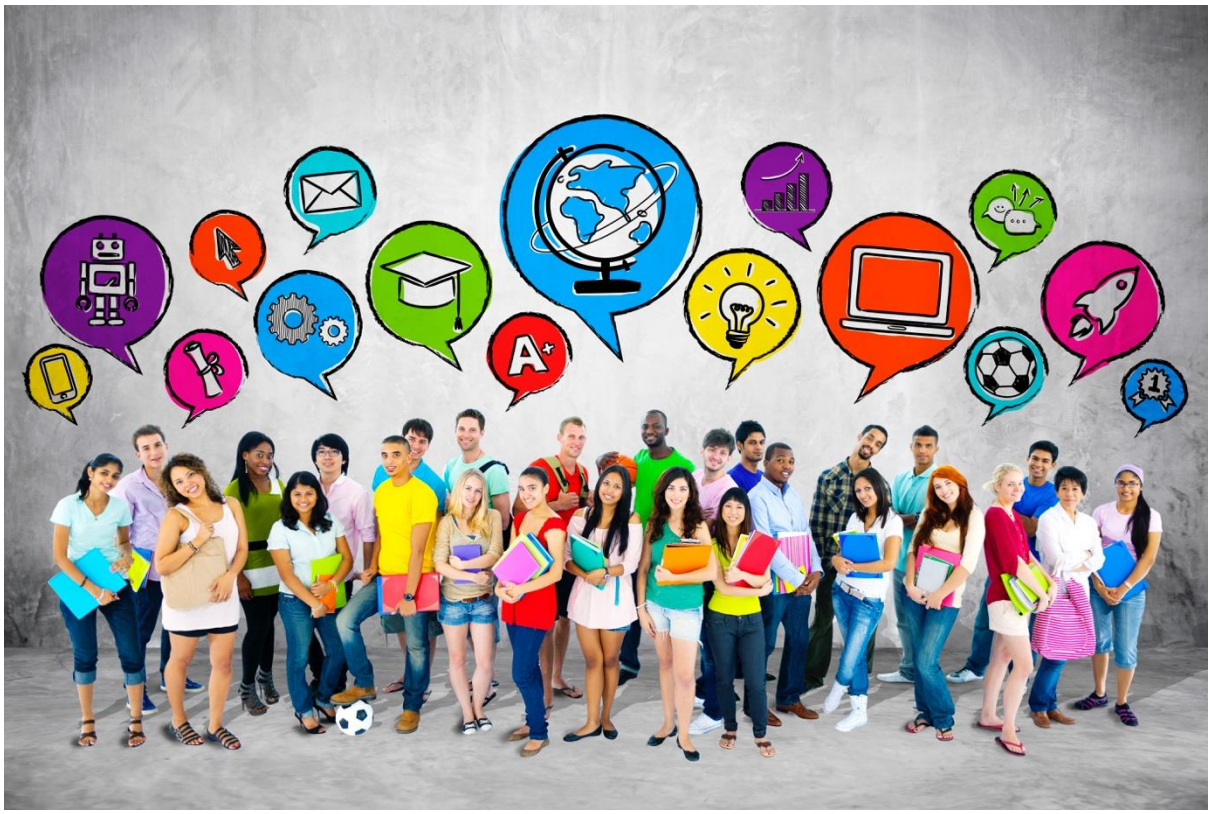
# Creating a National Framework for Student Partnership in University Decision-making and Governance



## Workshop briefing document

Australian Government
Department of Education and Training

Australian Learning & Teaching Fellows

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# Purpose

This briefing document relates to workshops being run as a part of Sally Varnham's National Senior Teaching fellowship entitled: *Creating a National Framework for Student Partnership in University Decision-making and Governance.*

It is provided to workshop participants to assist them with preparing for the workshop.

It follows the questions below which were posed earlier in order to generate thinking about practices in individual institutions:

- **To what extent is the student voice embedded in your institution's processes and structures?**
- **What evidence shows that the student voice has made a difference to decisions and the quality of provision?**
- **How is an active and independent student voice encouraged?**
- **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?**
- **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?**

These questions were designed to assist university stakeholders to think about how they are currently engaging with students in decision making. They are an important starting point. Now we are embarking on a national collaboration which requires wider input towards the creation of agreed principles and a national framework for student engagement. To achieve that outcome, the focus moves to a more general consideration of the aspects of student engagement in university decision making which are core to creating effective, sustainable and authentic student voice.

## This work is underpinned by the elements of student engagement as identified by the Student Engagement Framework for Scotland:

1. students feeling part of a supportive institution
2. students engaging in their own learning
3. students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning
4. formal mechanisms for quality and governance
5. influencing the student experience at national level.

## The Workshop will focus on the following questions:

**Opportunities**

1. What opportunities should universities be providing for students to participate in decision making in their institutions?

**Communication and Transparency**

2. How should institutions be communicating with students about those opportunities and outcomes from engagement?

**Student Leadership**

3. How can universities best work with student leaders to develop and maintain effective student representation?

**All student voices**

4. What can universities do to encourage representation of all student voices?

**A national partnership culture**

5. On a national level what should the sector be doing to further a partnership culture?

# Background to the Fellowship

The Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) Strategic Priority Commissioned Project: *Student engagement in university decision making and governance- towards a more*

*systemically inclusive student voice* preceded the fellowship and informed the Fellowship proposal.

To assist participants in considering the workshop questions this briefing document contains:

- A: Precis of the key findings distilled from the international and Australian research carried out in the OLT project; and
- B: More detailed summary of that research.

## A: Key Findings of OLT project

### *1. Effective and valued student leadership in partnership with universities*

Strong student leadership at all levels is shown to be pivotal with a strong focus on partnership of student associations and student leaders with the university. The UK QAA states: *'It is notable that for an institution to do well in engaging students, it needs to work in partnership with the representative student body'* (QAA, 2009–2011). The representative context of student leadership needs clear definition at both a national level and at most universities. Case studies of two Australian universities which have a strong commitment to student leadership showed clearly the value in a collaborative partnership approach and institutional support for its place in the matrix of student representation at universities. Support for this role could follow through to national student bodies.

### *2. A developmental approach to student representation from course/subject level to high-level institutional bodies*

The importance of the development of student representative capability from the early years of students' programs emerged universally as an important factor. Case studies at Australian universities showed that course representatives play a key role in gathering student opinion and working with academic staff to use this information to enhance the student experience. This role gives students representative experience and confidence to propel further into faculty and university bodies.

### *3. Resources for training and support of student representatives*

Training and support is essential and may involve student trainers. The value is well recognised in UK reports (ELIR 2008–2011, QAA Scotland 2014–15). Importantly, training can be a partnership enterprise between universities and student associations. There is also a need for working with university personnel and academics to develop processes to incorporate the views of student representatives.

### *4. Processes for the engagement of students in curricula design, and involvement in a continual process of enhancement of courses and their university experience*

Student engagement in the classroom was not a specific focus of this project but it is integral to the development of a culture of student partnership. There is an increasing body of OLT and international research in this area.

***5. Capturing every student's voice – engaging under-represented student groups to ensure engagement of the whole student cohort***

A significant challenge lies in capturing the voices of all student cohorts – international, Indigenous, distance, full-time and part-time, and undergraduate and postgraduate – and there is a need for sector-wide collaboration to share ideas to consistently deliver the best outcomes. The voices of international students are seldom specifically included within current structures. The need for innovation in this area is particularly important to maintaining international competitiveness by showing that the Australian sector is seen as responsive to and inclusive of the views of these students.

***6. Considering the provision of meaningful incentives for student engagement***

The development of appropriate financial and non-financial support for student representation needs consideration. Research indicates that the low level of diversity among student representatives may be related to financial issues such as the need to engage in paid work to support study. It is necessary also to examine a range of possibilities for educational recognition which may be seen to aid employability.

***7. National entities supporting student engagement***

In the comparative sectors a key role is played by strong national entities which support student engagement. They have permanent staff to assist with research agendas, training and support. In the case of elected student organisations, they provide the knowledge transfer which is essential with a transient student body. These agencies work either through sector support for the national student organisation, for example, NZUSA or ENQA and ESU, or as a separate body set up as a collaboration between sector bodies, for example, sparqs (set up in 2003) and TSEP (created in 2012). The latter are collaborations between the National Union of Students (NUS), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Guild of Higher Education. Their work illustrates the value of a sector-supported coordinated agency or collaboration underpinning a policy commitment to student partnership.

# B: A more detailed summary of the international and Australian research

## International research findings

The first stage of the OLT project looked at the current state of student engagement in the UK, Europe and New Zealand through a review of relevant reports and interviews with stakeholders. This work found that in the UK, Europe and New Zealand, policy and practice in the higher education sector is working towards embedding a culture of student partnership.

## 1. *Reports Reviewed*

- **The UK**

The QAA-commissioned review by the University of Bath accompanied by a Good Practice Guide for Higher Education Providers and Student Unions concluded that student engagement has brought about a variety of changes in institutions. Institutions and students' unions reported that the most common changes were related to the areas of policy, practice and procedures; feedback; curriculum; assessment; and resources. There was necessarily a huge range and differentiation between institutions in the types and extent of engagement. The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) was established. This created *The Principles of Student Engagement: The student engagement conversation 2014* which followed the expectation and indicators for student partnership in universities created by Chapter B5 of the Quality Code for Higher Education, By matching the indicators in Chapter B5, the Principles aimed to gather and disseminate good student engagement practice and share the creation of a partnership culture. The value this adds to individuals, institutions and the sector, and the challenges it poses, were emphasised.

The GuildHE, in collaboration with TSEP, produced *Making Student Engagement a Reality: Turning Theory into Practice*, which sets out 12 case studies demonstrating that 'student engagement has the potential to have a powerful and lasting impact on the student experience'. *Engagement through partnerships: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education* (2014) sets out the context and case for partnership in learning and teaching, focusing particularly on the role of student associations. It addresses the tensions spawned by a model of working together often guided by different priorities:

> Creating an ethos of partnership that permeates the whole culture of an institution requires confronting the significant tensions raised and entering into a re-negotiation of the relationship and underpinning values between a students' union and its institution. (p. 59)

The UK National Union of Students' (NUS) *Manifesto for Partnership* (2012) states that at its roots partnership is about investing students with the power to co-create not just knowledge or learning but in the higher education institution itself:

> A corollary of a partnership approach is the genuine meaningful dispersal of power … Partnership means shared responsibility – for identifying the problem or opportunity for improvement, for devising a solution and – importantly – for co-delivery of that solution' (p. 8).

- **Scotland: student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs)**

Student engagement was one of the five 'pillars' of the Quality Enhancement Framework (2003). The 2013 sparqs report, *Celebrating Student Engagement: Successes and opportunities in Scotland's university sector* is a chronical of the steps to embed student engagement as a key part of decision-making in institutions and in the sector. It details success in quality enhancement and improved learning experience for students. The knowledge and experiences of the Scottish sector are set out in an array of sparqs-produced documents and reports including toolkits dealing with different aspects of student partnership implementation, for example *Guidance on the development and implementation of a Student Partnership agreement in universities* (2013) and *Recognition and accreditation of academic reps – practices and challenges across Scotland's colleges and universities* (2015). The positive outcomes of student engagement are set out in reviews undertaken for the Enhancement-led Institution Review (ELIR) process of QAA Scotland.

- **New Zealand: New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA) and Ako Aotearoa (the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence)**

These bodies jointly commissioned research into local student representative systems and how they contribute to quality enhancement in tertiary institutions (*Student Voice in Tertiary Education Settings: Quality Systems in Practice*, 2013). They discovered a vast range of levels and means of student engagement across diverse institutions, from informal class representative systems to formal representation on committees and governance bodies. The research found that:

> Where there were examples of true partnership in action, students made a significant contribution to quality enhancement at the class, faculty and committee level. This worked when students were perceived and treated as equal partners, the students themselves were well prepared and worked in a consultative way with other students to ensure that the views they were putting forward were representative, and when organisations acted on student input and communicated this back to students (pp. 4–5).

- **Europe: European Students Union (ESU)**

The European Students Union's (ESU) *No Student Left Out: the do's and don'ts of student participation in higher education decision-making* (2011) focused on the role of student organisations, providing an overview through a series of case studies of the development of student participation in university governance, demonstrating how student bodies can successfully and inclusively represent students.

## 2. *Interviews with stakeholders in UK, Belgium and New Zealand*

## *Themes*

- **Building a receptive institutional culture**

Overwhelmingly the research put an institutional culture of student partnership as central – seeing partnership as an ethos rather than an activity. First there must be institutional process and the creation of policy that recognises, as a starting point, the importance of the student voice. For students to gain a sense of ownership in decision-making they must see that they are able to make a difference. This is sometimes referred to as 'closing the feedback loop' and entails a demonstration by the university of a commitment to and respect for the student voice in all that it does. This comes from clearly valuing genuine student involvement not only on issues that matter to students particularly but by involving students at the outset in all decisions affecting the university's learning, and teaching activities and the educational experience it provides. It involves seeking their ideas for innovation and change, and ensuring that they are engaged throughout the process (rather than being 'consulted' at the end).

Communication is essential. Building a culture of partnership in an institution requires that students have timely access to relevant information from their first contact with the institution – opportunities for representation, information surrounding the issues and outcomes from their input. An ethos or philosophy is hard to measure but if a partnership approach is

genuine and successful it should be visible in how institutions work with students and the results of that work.

- **Strong, supported and effective student leadership**

Strong student leadership within universities and nationally, and a strong independent student union, is at the core of partnership and a strong student voice. The increasing focus on students' associations has reportedly led to a shift in the way they see themselves, moving them towards fulfilling a mature and professional role in partnership with their university. While recognising that there may be tensions between the historically political nature of student organisations and their ability to work together with the university towards common ends, the feedback was that the role of the student organisations need not be compromised. In many cases the students' unions partnered with the university to assist in the nomination and election of student representatives, programs for the training and briefing of students, and supporting student representatives. At one university, the union provided a 'student coach' who was part of the focus group. In all the sectors researched the national student union was pivotal in furthering the cause of the student voice and promoting a democratic vision of partnership.
Because of the transient nature of leaders in student organisations, it was seen as crucial that there was a permanent position in the association within institutions and at the national level, for continuity and knowledge transfer and this was common. This lends strength to the association's ability to take a leading role in student representation across the university or sector. In some sectors there was an ex-student known as a sabbatical officer who was in this position.

- **Capturing every student's voice**

The importance of, and the challenges associated with, engaging every student's voice was a universal concern. Increasingly in all sectors there are under-represented minority groups. All sectors agreed that the challenge lies in ensuring representation which reflects the attitudes and concerns of the whole student cohort, not just those of the representatives or particular causes they support, and there is a need for serious consideration of the means of working towards this.

- **Providing training and support**

There was universal agreement that proper training and support was crucial to enable representatives to participate effectively in their roles without compromising their studies or personal wellbeing. There were some differing views as to who should have responsibility for the providing and funding of training programs, mentoring and support for student representatives. While finances were important, equally important was the need to ensure autonomy and authenticity of the student voice. Generally, it was seen as a partnership function between the student associations and the institutions.

- **Building experience and expertise**

Building from the grass roots by providing representative opportunities at the course level was seen as greatly assisting both in the development of a culture of partnership and developing expertise in student representatives. In many cases, it was almost seen as a career

path by student representatives who started at course level and moved up through a faculty to senior institutional governance bodies. This process allowed students to develop an understanding of what was involved in university management and governance processes, and build experience and confidence in representative roles. Student staff liaison committees were common to many institutions and seen as beneficial in assisting students to develop skills in what it meant to be a representative – connecting with their constituencies to gather their views, working through priorities with them, and putting views forward while differentiating between representation and advocacy.

- **Providing meaningful incentives for student engagement**

There were a variety of ways across institutions and sectors for providing recognition of student representative roles and rewards for participation. These included payment, formal recognition in transcripts, academic credit and internships. Voice was not enough – it had to be accompanied by a demonstration of value and effect for students to feel it was worthwhile to contribute their time and energy as partners. Personal development and employability were cited as motivators.

- **Sector entities which support student partnership**

In the sectors studied there were strong relationships between national entities and student representative bodies. In Scotland, England and New Zealand, sector agencies such as the UK's Quality Assurance Agency, and in New Zealand, Ako Aotearoa, have provided funding for national student association initiatives relating to quality. Students hold positions on sector entities such as the QAA in the UK and the Academic Quality Agency in New Zealand. In contrast, in Australia there is no student representation at TEQSA. While there was student representation within the governance structure of the OLT, with the closure of that body there is no longer student representation at this level.

# Australian Research

## 1. *Policy*

Australian Government strategy is aimed at ensuring the excellence and competitiveness of Australian universities by enabling the sector to be more 'adaptive, innovative and engaged, globally and nationally' (Australian Government, *National Strategy for International Education*, April 2016).

Australian universities all have some formal representative systems which, to varying degrees, enable students to have input into decision-making and governance. Anecdotal interaction with leaders in the sector, students and student bodies, and more **formal** evidence from project surveys suggests that Australia may be lagging in its commitment to involving students as partners in their higher education experience.

**The Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 (in force January 2017, replacing the initial 2011 version) contains Clause 6.1.4 which is directed at student engagement in decision-making. It provides:**

**The governing body takes steps to develop and maintain an institutional environment in which freedom of intellectual inquiry is upheld and protected, students and staff are treated equitably, the wellbeing of students and staff is fostered, 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'.**

The Australian student demographic is becoming more varied, with large numbers of international enrolments, widening participation policies, distance education, and a greater enrolment of mature and second-degree students from an array of occupations and backgrounds. There is no longer the 'homogenous' student body for which universities were to some extent able to predetermine motivation and requirements. This increased diversity means that there is now a wide range of expectations and access needs best understood through engaging a cross-section of students in the issues.

## 2. *Australian surveys – student leaders and institutions*

Surveys of Australian tertiary education institutions and their student leaders were carried out to establish current practices for student engagement in university decision-making and governance.

## Student leader survey

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

Student representatives are reportedly moderately difficult to recruit, typically coming from the ranks of full-time, undergraduate, local students, recognising their role as representing the interests of their fellow students. A range of communication methods are employed to advertise opportunities, with informal sources and social media the most effective. The challenge lies in ensuring that valued information is easily available through the sources students are most likely to use. Training and support for student representatives is typically provided through student associations.

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 institution's attitude towards student engagement?*

Over a third of respondents saw their institution as supporting student representation but around half considered that their institution did not value student representatives. Around 25% of respondents thought that students are seen as customers, with no respondents perceiving they were considered partners. The engagement of staff with students in decision-making roles is variable. There is some indication that student representatives consider that they are viewed more seriously than other students.

- *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, lastly, payment. It is important to note here the issues of selection bias. From the project work, it has become apparent that student leaders may not be representative of the student cohort as a whole. In other project work and discussions, it appears that many university student leaders were student leaders at high school and reached university seeking leadership opportunities. While for them payment may not be important, there are other students who are not able to put themselves forward for leadership positions as they need to earn money to support their studies.

- *Levels of student 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 and academic board, and in terms of raising issues.

- *Impact of student involvement*

Respondents considered that student involvement had 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 saw themselves as having impact in relation to policy, within university council and academic board.

- *Communication*

Students reported that the most useful category of information provided by their institution 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 reported as the least helpful.

- *Further thoughts*

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide any further thoughts. A strong theme throughout was the importance of appropriate and effective communication, with the main challenge emerging for institutions being to ensure that the engagement they are working to provide is authentic and effectively communicated to students. There was also the persistent concern that student participation can be perceived as token. This can only be countered by furthering and deepening student engagement, engaging students at the beginning of decision making and strategy development processes, and maintaining a focus on delivering positive outcomes for students.

## Institutional survey

Analysis of this survey revealed that there are pockets of good practice where students are engaged in decision-making. However, there is no systemic approach. Australian institutions,

like some in the UK,  are grappling with the concept of students as partners, more often perceiving students as stakeholders or customers.

Respondents were from different types of institutions with the Group of 8, Australian Technology Network, Regional Universities Network, Innovative Research Universities, Open Universities, unaligned universities and other higher educational institutions all represented in the responses received.

- *Where are students engaged and how?*

Students are represented on all respondents' academic boards and at faculty level while most (84%) engage students on the institutional council and have a student association. Most institutions (92%) reported engaging students at course level and 80% engage students in grievance processes. At course level the engagement is overwhelmingly through student feedback surveys, with two instances of SSLCs reported, which are most prevalent at faculty level (64%). Committees in general are a major form of engagement, with surveys and ad hoc projects also being used to engage students. Fifteen of the responding institutions reported other forms of student engagement including student senators, student representative councils, consultation forums, co-creation projects and specialist senior executive appointments.

- *Ease of recruitment*

Almost half of the respondents (48%) reported that it was moderately challenging to recruit student representatives while 26% reported difficulty in recruiting student representatives. Some institutions noted that it was easier to recruit university-wide representative positions than faculty-based positions.

- *Who engages?*

The students most likely to engage are undergraduate, full time, local students. Postgraduate, part-time, international and minority-group students are significantly less likely to engage. Thirteen institutions reported that they are taking action to improve the engagement of groups with limited participation**.**

- *How does recruitment occur?*

Student association elections commonly provide council and academic board representatives as well as student association representatives. Institution-run elections are used in some institutions to provide academic board representatives as well as faculty representatives. At the faculty level, representatives may be volunteers, nominees or appointed by staff.

- *Training*

The vast majority of respondents reported some form of training for student representatives, mostly through formal institutional or student association programs, or staff who have this as a formal responsibility. There were also reports of using external providers to provide specific training (e.g. the Australian Institute of Company Directors). If there was a formalised process, respondents were asked to identify how it is funded. Sixteen institutions reported that funding was allocated to training student representatives. Mostly the funding is provided by the institution although there appears to be institutions allocating Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) to this purpose.

- *Support for student representatives*

Most respondents reported providing support and advice for student representatives, typically through staff with this responsibility. In just 44% of responses, the institution had formal institutional programs in place, with 36% of respondents providing student association programs and the same percentage utilising current student-representative mentors.

- *Informing students about representative roles*

All respondents reported having a mechanism for informing students about representative roles. Orientation and information on the institutional website were the most common means, with social media and student forums also popular. Other reported mechanisms were letters from the DVC, a pop-up shop, student ambassadors, information on the student association website and emails to all students.

- *Acknowledging student contributions*

Institutions were asked to report on whether student contribution to governance and decision-making is explicitly acknowledged in publications and news items. Ten institutions said that student contributions were not acknowledged and one was unsure. Those that reported that student contributions were acknowledged reported that this was through various channels including news stories, reports, attribution of authorship or contribution, AHEGS statement, meeting minutes, letters of thanks, and membership lists.

- *Performance indicators*

Institutions were asked to report on whether they had performance indicators for the effectiveness of student engagement. Thirteen institutions reported that they did not have relevant performance indicators and one respondent was unsure whether their institution had relevant indicators or not. For those institutions reporting having relevant indicators, they were generally found in the institution's strategic plan. The areas that were reported as being evaluated were variable.

- *Incentives*

In terms of incentives offered to student representatives, thirteen institutions reported providing informal recognition, seven provide specific awards and eight provide payment. Other reported incentives were training and development opportunities in relation to leadership and governance, AHEGS, and gifts and gratuities. Five of the institutions provide no incentives. None of the institutions provide academic recognition.

- *How the institution perceives students*

Student roles are perceived differently in different situations within institutions, the most common role being stakeholder.

- *Institutional attitude towards student engagement*

The most prevalent institutional attitude towards student engagement was championing/pioneering' - at about 56%. About 36% of institutions identified themselves as 'compliant'. The remaining 8% characterised themselves as avoiding student engagement.

- *Increasing engagement*

Institutions were asked to identify what would motivate them to increase student engagement. Of the respondents, 52% reported being self-motivated while 36% reported that provision of incentives to increase student engagement would motivate them.

## 3. *Australian Case and Pilot Studies*

Responses to the survey of student engagement practices in Australian universities revealed some initiatives and existing practices at Australian universities that are already providing opportunity for students to have a significant role in decision-making processes. However, approaches from university personnel following presentations at conferences provided the majority of the case studies. These initiatives often did not show in the responses of the same universities. This was an interesting finding in itself.

Many of the practices have been recently implemented and are thus not cast as best practice. Nonetheless, they show that there is strong interest in the sector in engaging students in decision-making, and what has been achieved so far by the universities who have championed the student voice. The following case studies were reported:

University A: Student Staff Consultative Committee

University B: Student Campus Councils at a multi-campus university

University C: Student engagement at a regional university with multi campuses and large numbers of distance students

University D: Student-centred key strategic partnership providing programs and activities which complement the learning and development outcomes of the university

University E: Student Guild and Education Council

University F: Academic Student Representative

University G: Co-creation of a major student facility

University H: Embedded leadership practices at an older university

University I: Staff Student Consultative Committee pilot project

University J: Embedded student representation processes at a private university

University K: Student representative systems at a young university

**The OLT Project Report is currently awaiting final approval by the Department of Education. The submitted draft is available on the website:** www.studentvoice.uts.edu.au