STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN UNIVERSITY DECISION-MAKING AND GOVERNANCE – TOWARDS A MORE SYSTEMICALLY INCLUSIVE STUDENT VOICE

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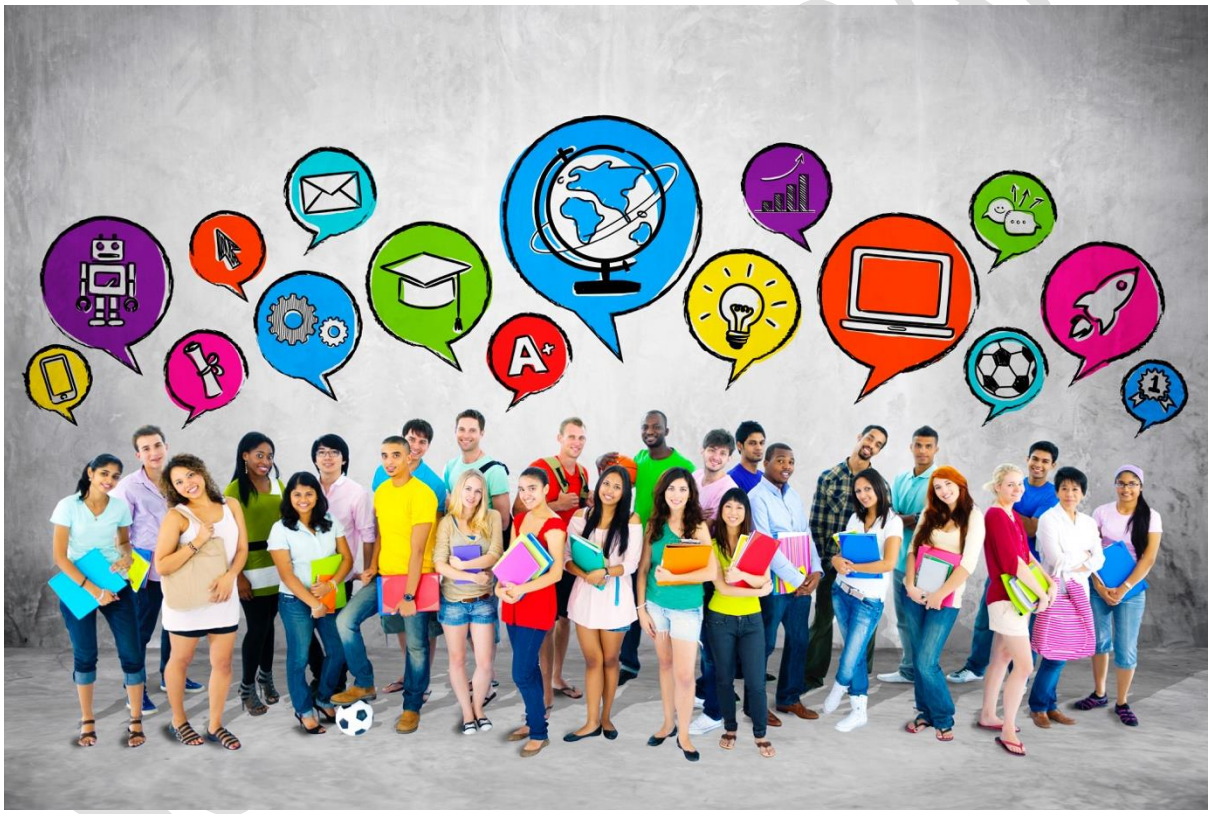

FINAL REPORT

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List of acronyms used

AHEGS	Australian Higher Education Graduate Statement
ANZELA	Australia and New Zealand Education Law Association
ASR	Academic Student Representative
AUT	Auckland University of Technology
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CISA	Council of International Students of Australia
ELIR	Enhancement-Led Institution Review (Scotland)
ENQA	European Network of Quality Assurance
ERASHE	European Students in Higher Education
ESU	European Students Union
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HECQN	Higher Education Compliance and Quality Network
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council of England
HERDSA	Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
LLB	Bachelor of Laws
NATIPSA	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Postgraduate Students Association
NUS	National Union of Students (UK and Australia)
NZUSA	New Zealand Union of Students' Associations
OIAHE	Office of the Independent Adjudicator of Higher Education for England
OLT	Office for Learning and Teaching, Commonwealth Government of Australia
OXCHEPS	Oxford Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies
PG	Postgraduate
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency (UK)

SCC	Student Campus Council
sparqs	student partnership in quality Scotland
SRC	Student Representative Council
SRP	Student Representation and Participation
SSCC	Student Staff Consultative Committee
SSLC	Student Staff Liaison Committee
TEQSA	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Authority
TSEP	The Student Engagement Partnership
UA	Universities Australia
UG	Undergraduate
UK	United Kingdom
UNSW	University of New South Wales
UoW	University of Wollongong
UQ	University of Queensland
UTS	University of Technology Sydney
UWS/WSU	Western Sydney University
VUW	Victoria University of Wellington

Executive summary

Introduction

This project aimed to investigate the case for a more systemically inclusive student voice in decision-making and governance in Australian universities. It was driven by the need for a deep consideration of the meaningful and effective engagement of students' views at all levels and of all cohorts, and how this may enhance the quality and standards of the institution and the student's university experience. It drew on international experience and current practice in Australia to ask:

- What is 'student engagement' leading to 'student partnership' in university decision-making?
- Why may student engagement processes warrant consideration in today's higher education environment, in terms of value to universities, their students and to the sector as a whole?
- How may student engagement be embedded most effectively in university policies and processes to enable the development of a culture of student voice?

Higher education in Australia is increasingly multi- and trans-disciplinary with a drive towards student-centred learning. There are projects underway which follow the developing trend in comparative higher education sectors – in the UK, Europe and New Zealand – towards practices and processes which embrace 'students as partners' in learning and teaching. This is accompanied abroad by consideration of the part played by engaging the student voice inside as well as outside the classroom in university decision-making and governance. An emerging body of research internationally points to the benefits for universities, in terms of enhancement of quality and standards, and for students in their university experience and their development as critical thinkers, innovators, leaders and citizens. Sector-wide collaboration in the UK led to the formulation of principles contained in the National Quality Code for Higher Education (Chapter B5) and the formation of The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP); and in Scotland, the establishment of student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs) and development of the Student Engagement Framework. In Australia, there has been a dearth of research which focuses on student engagement in university decision-making and governance, and how it can contribute to good practice.

All Australian universities have some formal representative systems which enable students to have input into decision-making and governance. Anecdotally from discussions with leaders in the sector, for example chairs of Academic Boards and Senates; feedback following seminar and conference presentations; and interaction with university managers, students and student bodies, there is a feeling that we could do more. The project showed that a range of Australian universities are working in this area, providing instances of exemplary practice and commitment to further initiatives to embrace the student voice in a wide range of university functions.

The project drew on international experience and evolving examples of good practice in Australia to stimulate a conversation about student representation.

The Project approach

Engagement of all sector players was essential to the central aim of the project. Each of the four stages incorporated a dissemination strategy.

Stage 1: International research

- The first stage involved analysis and synthesis of international project reports, in particular, the Bath University/Quality Assurance Agency (UK) (QAA) project and Good Practice Guide, student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs) *'Celebrating Student Engagement'*, and the Ako Aotearoa/New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA) Report *'Student Voice in Tertiary Education Settings'* (all 2013/14); and UK agency and government reviews of higher education institutions.
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with top-level sector personnel and student representatives in the UK, Europe and New Zealand.

Stage 2: Australian research and review

This stage entailed researching university policies and processes, and surveying senior managers of universities and private institutions, as well as student leaders at Australian universities.

The paper produced by these two stages was used as a basis for discussion at the workshop conducted on 27 October 2015 which involved students and university personnel. One outcome of the workshop was the identification of the factors needed in order for effective student engagement to become embedded in and integral to the operations of universities. These factors replicate the themes from international and Australian research.

Stage 3: Case studies and a pilot study

These studies aimed to provide understanding and knowledge of practices occurring in Australian universities.

Stage 4: Dissemination and impact

The project's findings were presented at conferences, workshops, in The Voice publication, and on our website and Facebook pages. At first this aimed to raise awareness and engage the sector. Later dissemination was more targeted and involved active engagement by personnel from universities and students in a student-engagement conversation. A large-scale national forum on 5 September 2016 marked the end of the project. It involved invited international and national speakers, and two sessions were facilitated by Australian and New Zealand students. As the project ends and the Fellowship begins, an active media strategy will be developed using outlets such as The Conversation.

Project findings

What is meant by 'student engagement' and 'student partnership'? The wide range of interpretations and implications of these terms made it crucial to establish definitions to frame this work. The project considered 'engagement through representation' and 'partnership through engagement' to distinguish the focus from work which is primarily concerned with a student's engagement in their own learning. It recognises, however, that in considering the university as a community of learning, all engagement is inevitably intertwined. For the project's purposes, engagement involves authentic inclusion of student views in university operations through both formal and informal mechanisms, particularly

representative structures. To encourage students to engage, they must see that their voice can make a difference. A perception of 'tokenism' acts as a deterrent to voicing views. Why is student engagement important to the student experience in today's higher education environment? The impetus for the project was the experience of its leader in university deliberative bodies and consensus with other academic board chairs that the sector could improve, informed by developments in the UK, Europe and New Zealand. The project considered international processes which enable students to play a purposeful role in the 'development, management and governance of their institution, its academic programmes and their own learning experience' (HEFCE, 2013). Importantly, there was consideration of the mounting body of evidence highlighting the benefits of effective student engagement for the enhancement of quality and standards in universities, and for the personal development and arguably the employability of students. From an analysis of published reports and reviews, and a series of interviews and focus groups involving a range of stakeholders in the comparative jurisdictions, it was possible to get a clear indication of what works for the benefit of the university, individual students and the sector as a whole.

How can student engagement be included in university policies and processes to embed a culture of a student voice? Key themes were identified from a comprehensive analysis of the international research and the components were mirrored in the Australian research. It has been clearly demonstrated that to encourage engagement, a sincere culture of partnership must be developed through demonstration by universities and the higher education sector of a commitment to and respect for the student voice. Communication is central: first, of the representative opportunities across the institution; and second, how the views of student representatives are integral to decision-making. Essential components are: effective, valued and supported student leadership in partnership with universities; a developmental approach to student representation from course/subject level upwards; resources for training and support; formal and informal processes for the engagement of students at all levels for continual enhancement of courses, their university experience and their personal development; capturing every student's voice to ensure engagement of the whole student cohort; considering the provision of meaningful incentives for student engagement and representation. A national entity supporting student engagement is key to sustained development of student partnership.

Recommendations

The project recommends a sector-wide collaboration framed by these essential components in the Australian context. It should consider the benefits and challenges of student engagement in the Australian sector with its wide diversity of types of institutions and student cohorts. The project uncovered considerable interest in the sector with many institutions now giving priority to creating a culture of collegiality and partnership. It is timely to build on this momentum to develop common understanding of 'student engagement and partnership', to share knowledge and experience, and facilitate innovation of institutional processes. This need is recognised by the granting of an Australian Learning and Teaching National Senior Teaching Fellowship to the project leader, Professor Sally Varnham (2016–17). The Fellowship will involve collaboration of senior university leaders and government policy-makers, student representatives, professional and academic staff, university management, and government agencies, towards development of principles and a framework to assist in this development.

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Introduction

This project investigated student engagement in decision-making and governance, and the case for a more systemically inclusive student voice in Australian higher education. It drew strongly on the experiences of student partnership processes in comparative sectors, particularly the UK and New Zealand. It considered current engagement of students in decision-making in Australian universities. It asked what is meant by 'student engagement' and 'student partnership', and why and how international experience could be applied to the widely divergent institutions and student cohorts which make up the sector here.

The research was inspired by the team leader's experience in university governance, and her prior research which considered legal aspects of the evolving university–student relationship. Key drivers were indications from abroad of the benefits of student partnership for universities in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, and the educational experience of students; anecdotal reports within Australia about the challenges of engaging student representatives; and the limited scholarship in this field. Importantly, it was seen that engaging students meaningfully in decisions which affect their university and their university experience can assist in their development of the necessary life skills of leadership, critical thinking, innovation and citizenship.

Student engagement

A wide range of interpretations and implications of the term student engagement made its clarification important at the outset. In the context of this project, the term covers activities ranging from those within learning and teaching to those that extend into other aspects of student life, such as how students interact with institutional structures, strategies and processes (Carey, 2013). The project drew on the latter approach, and that of student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs) in formulating The Student Engagement Framework for Scotland. It considered engagement of students working with their institutions towards quality enhancement through both formal and informal mechanisms.

The focus on 'engagement through representation' and 'partnership through engagement' distinguishes this project from other work which considers primarily engagement in learning and teaching in the classroom context. It acknowledges a synergy with this research however, and with other projects in Australia and abroad which deal with the transformative power of the engagement of students as partners in the learning and teaching sphere, for example, in curriculum development and review. Examples include the following Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) projects.[1] While this project examined engagement of students from an aspect wider than this work, it did so in recognition that a university is a community of learning where elements are interconnected.

[11] *Student Leadership in Curriculum Development and Reform* (Deane, UWS, 2013); *Engaging postgraduate students and supporting higher education to enhance the 21st century experience* (Kinash & ors, 2015–16); *Innovative perspectives and approaches for enhancing the student experience* (Coates & ors, 2015–16); the OLT National Teaching Fellowship of Kelly Matthews, *Students as partners: reconceptualising the role of students in science degree programme curriculum development* (2015); and the Transforming Practices Program Student Engagement: Students as Partners (Crookes, 2016) (all currently underway); and 'Engagement through partnership: students as partners in higher education' (Healy & ors, 2014)

Student partnership

All research points to the conclusion that authentic and meaningful student engagement requires a culture of student partnership. This occurs where the institution and the sector demonstrate in their operations a commitment to and respect for the student voice. Communication is central to students being able to see that their voice is integral to decision-making. The principles embodying student partnership were set out by sparqs (sparqs, 2013) as:

- a culture of engagement
- students as partners
- responding to diversity
- valuing the student contribution
- focus on enhancement and change
- appropriate resources and support.

These themes were constant throughout the international research. They were repeated in the Australian research activities and are embodied in the conclusions of this report.

The Australian policy context

There is evidence that in the UK, Europe and New Zealand, policy and practice in the higher education sector is working towards embedding such a culture of student partnership. 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). In the competitive international higher education environment it is essential that Australian universities build on experiences from abroad in the drive for excellence. The project aimed to position the higher education sector in line with these strategies, to lead to further recognition and enhancement of the competitiveness of Australian universities internationally.

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.

An important rationale for investigating the case for change lies in the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 (in force January 2017, replacing the initial 2011 version). Clause 6.1.4 is directed at student engagement in decision-making and 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 national widening participation initiatives and the resulting diversity of the student body provide further impetus for continuing this work. 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. Developing an approach which provides better avenues for student representation could serve to address concerns relating to high attrition rates, particularly among students with low socio-economic status (Thomas, 2012).

A research-informed review of the Australian sector and outcomes

Research points strongly to the fact that students desire involvement, and that their voice is valuable. Student engagement, however, has failed to gain much traction in Australian universities beyond ad hoc representation on working groups and reviews, and student 'top-down' representation on governance bodies. The top-down approach currently practised is often viewed as token, affording little opportunity for meaningful and authentic student participation in university decisions and governance. This view is supported by international research, for example Carey (2013), Bergan (2004) and Luescher-Mamashela (2010). Evidence and experience from the UK and Europe shows that true participation entails more than sitting on committees and consultation in the latter stages of change (Arnstein, 1969). New Zealand research and practice also looks to the UK. The student voice is perceived as transactional in supporting marketability and reputation, and transformational in supporting the university as a democratic institution and a learning community (Dow, 2012, 2013; Gordon & ors, 2011).

As the policy context and university structures differ across institutions and national borders, there was a need for Australia to undertake its own research, which this project achieved. It has led to a developing momentum for considering the implementation of principles and practices of student partnership by all stakeholders, from students to academics and university managers. At the first project symposium held on 27 October 2015, the presentation on the international experience was the first time that many Australian academics and students were made aware of the relatively low focus on this area. Workshop participants were able to benchmark their institutional practices against practices in the wider sector and determine strategic focus areas. This activity produced the factors identified as necessary for effective student engagement to become integral to the operations of higher education institutions and these factors mirrored the themes which ran consistently throughout the project research. The focus was cultural change and the need for legitimacy of student representation; communication of representation opportunities and outcomes from student input; developmental pathways for representation and resources for training and support; students contributing ideas not just feedback; and reward and recognition for representative roles.

The final symposium held on 5 September 2016, followed by two one-day workshops on 6 and 8 September in Sydney and Adelaide, showed a marked rise in recognition of the importance of engaging students in university decision-making. This extends from discussion and workshopping of concepts, ideas and practices to the initiatives which universities have been putting into place. This is clear also from increased activity on Facebook and Twitter.

The project approach

The project comprised three phases, and incorporated a dissemination strategy in each stage. Using comparative research and practice, the project stimulated a student voice conversation to gain interest and 'buy-in' for innovation in universities and information-sharing. The approach was collaborative and involved academics, professional staff, university managers and students as reference group participants, as interviewees and for discussion of ideas. The three phases are summarised in this report with full reports provided as appendices (D, E and F). All research for this project is the subject of ethics approval provided by the University of Technology Sydney, Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number HREC 2012-459A.

Stage 1: International research and review (Appendix D)

The international study involved an analysis of written material such as reports and reviews relating to student engagement and student partnership. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in England, Scotland, Belgium and New Zealand with representatives from university management and student bodies as well as higher education agencies. The selected participants were from groups that had experience with developing student engagement or who were student leaders involved with representative processes, and the purpose in interviewing them was to establish what comprises good practice in this field. This research was undertaken to inform the next phase of the study which was to investigate current Australian practice.

Stage 2: Australian review (Appendix E)

Research on student participation in higher education governance and decision-making across all Australian universities took the form of:

- researching university policies and processes (based on their websites)
- a survey directed at senior managers of institutions informed by the research approach taken in the Bath University/UK QAA research
- a survey of student leaders at Australian universities
- survey analysis and review (produced and published in consecutive issues of The Voice).

Stage 3: Case studies and a pilot study (Appendix F)

Eleven case studies of student engagement initiatives and practices in Australian universities were undertaken. They arose in two ways: first, from practices identified by respondents in the survey of Australian universities; and second, they were identified by university personnel present at dissemination activities such as presentations at higher education conferences and seminars.

The case studies involved interviews with the main drivers of the processes, usually university senior management, personnel and students, and focus groups with personnel and students.

A pilot course representative student staff liaison committee (SSLC) model was run in a faculty which had not previously used such a system. Students were asked to volunteer to be representatives and training was conducted for those students involved. The pilot was followed up by interviews with participants to gain their perceptions.

Stage 4: Dissemination and impact (Appendices G, H & I)

The project adopted an embedded dissemination strategy, informed by the OLT's D-Cubed project (Gannaway, Hinton & Moore, 2011), and developed a communication plan in the establishment phase of the project. It was important to understand at the outset the differences and complexities of the target audiences for whom the project had relevance, from first-year students to university chancellors. Broad communications were aimed at establishing awareness and a climate of readiness for change. Later, the dissemination activities were more targeted and involved active engagement by personnel from all universities and students. Towards the end of the project, many sector dissemination activities were undertaken, including conferences and forums, such as Universities Australia. There is an ongoing process of developing an active media strategy, using outlets such as The Conversation.

Social media (Facebook and Twitter) was used throughout the project to ensure that key stakeholders, particularly students, were kept informed of the project activities and developments in the sector in Australia and internationally. Three issues of a key student publication, Student Voice Conversation, were produced and distributed widely, as well as being made available on the project website.

Other communication strategies included a symposium at UTS on 27 October 2015, attended by 45 students and university personnel from a range of Australian universities, and a large-scale national forum, to which all Australian universities were invited, marking the end of the project on 5 September 2016. There were 100 attendees at the forum comprising university managers and student engagement personnel, representatives from higher education agencies, academics and students. The sessions were led by:

- Anthony McClaran, CEO of TEQSA and past CEO of the UK QAA, on his experience of student engagement in the UK
- Eve Lewis, Director of sparqs
- Professor Gwen van der Velden, Warwick University, a member of the steering committee for The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) in England and Wales
- undergraduate and postgraduate student leaders, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and international students
- New Zealand students from the New Zealand Union of Students Associations including Dr Alistair Shaw, Executive Director.

The following day (6 September 2016) a workshop was facilitated by Eve Lewis, Director of sparqs, for students in the morning and combined students and staff in the afternoon. This workshop was repeated for universities in South Australia at the University of Adelaide two days later.

International research

International research involved:

- an analysis and synthesis of reports (Bath/QAA project and Good Practice Guide; Ako Aotearoa report; sparqs reports) and other relevant material such as reviews of policies and processes in place in higher education institutions (detailed in the references); and

- semi-structured interviews and focus groups with top-level university personnel, university managers, representatives of student organisations and other student representatives.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcripts reviewed by team members. A set of themes were identified, framing the Australian context.

Defining student engagement

The Student Engagement Framework for Scotland identifies the elements of student engagement as:

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.

It was clear from the outset that while the project focused on 'engagement through representation' (elements 3–5), all elements were relevant. These elements, central to creating an ethos of engagement (sparqs, 2013), were echoed in the Australian research.

This research considered the spectrum of representative student engagement, ranging from less formal interactions, such as representation at the class and course level, to more formal interactions where student representatives participate at senior levels of governance on faculty and university councils and boards.

The objectives were to understand student engagement in comparative sectors in order to inform the Australian research and provide Australian universities with the tools and knowledge to implement processes to facilitate and embed effective student participation.

Documentary evidence

This study included analysis of an extended body of documentary evidence relating to the development and practice of student engagement. An important resource was the QAA-commissioned review of current practice in the area by the University of Bath accompanied by a Good Practice Guide for Higher Education Providers and Student Unions (Pimentel-Botas & ors, 2013). The report concluded that there was necessarily a huge range and differentiation between institutions in the types and extent of engagement. It was clear 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. This study provided a valuable template for further Australian research.

In the UK, following the expectation and indicators for student partnership in universities created by Chapter B5 of the Quality Code for Higher Education, the newly established Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) created *The Principles of Student Engagement: The student engagement conversation 2014'*. The principles matched the indicators in Chapter B5, and 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).

In Scotland, student engagement was one of the five 'pillars' of the Quality Enhancement Framework (2003). The Student Engagement Framework formulated by sparqs, following extensive collaboration with the sector, establishes a model of principles and processes adaptable to the Australian sector. The report, *Celebrating Student Engagement: Successes and opportunities in Scotland's university sector* (2013), is the sparqs chronical of the steps to embed student engagement as a key part of decision-making in institutions and in the sector, and its success in quality enhancement and improved learning experience for students. This project had the advantage of the knowledge and experiences of the Scottish sector 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.

In New Zealand, the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations and Ako Aotearoa (the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence) 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).

The project also referred to material developed by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), for example 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). This 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.

A good place to conclude this brief summary of the student partnership literature is the UK National Union of Students' (NUS) Manifesto for Partnership (2012). This states that at its

roots partnership is about investing students with the power to co-create not just knowledge or learning but 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).

Interviews and focus groups

Interviews and focus groups were conducted at the following institutions and sector agencies:

- **UK (England and Scotland)** – University of Bath; National Union of Students (NUS); Quality Assurance Agency (QAA); Higher Education Funding Council for the UK (HFCE UK); student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs); Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIAHE); Oxford Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (OXCHEPS)
- **Belgium** – University of Antwerp; Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
- **New Zealand** – Victoria University of Wellington; Auckland University of Technology; Massey University; New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA).

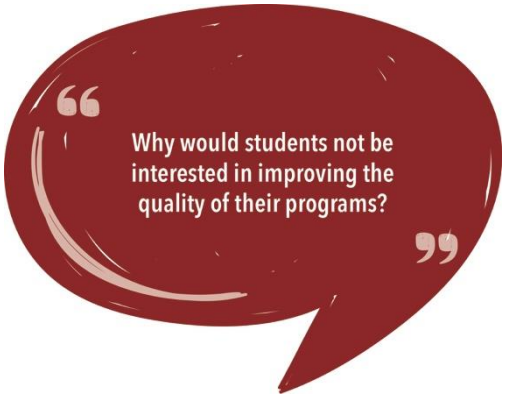
Interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders were recorded with their permission. The interviews were semi-structured using a series of prompt questions while maintaining flexibility in relation to the actual questions asked and their order. The use of a semi-structured format enhanced the exploration of the interview subject matter unhampered by a structured series of questions (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

The interviews and focus group recordings were transcribed and the transcripts were subject to a thematic analysis by members of the project team. Each person identified themes which were compared and consensus was reached on a set of relevant themes.

Themes

The resulting set of themes depicts how institutions can create genuine, relevant and effective student engagement in decision-making and governance. Like themes were coalesced and relabelled as appropriate to succinctly reflect the key concepts embraced by each theme. Short explanatory descriptions for each theme were developed.

1. 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.

Why would students not be interested in improving the quality of their programs? … it could only be because they think they're not going to be listened to or it's going to be ineffective. Why should I spend my time on this and nothing's going to happen? (NZUSA officer)

2. 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 tension 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 organisation 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.

Professional staff … someone like me in the student associations. We used to call them an educational coordinator … I think the primary function should be supporting the high level representatives…If there's a single person who's working with them and correlating them, then … I think they could actually be better equipped to deal with things … (NZUSA officer)

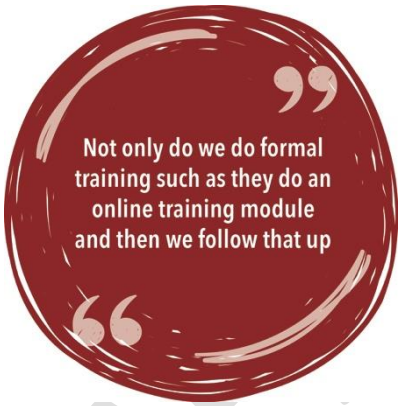
3. Capturing every student's voice

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.

4. 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.



But the key thing for us is that they are very, very well briefed by the Students' Union. That's the absolute key. So they come knowing about the issues that are going to be raised and are therefore able to have a really valuable input. (UK university student engagement officer)

So not only do we do formal training such as they do an online training module and then we follow that up. We have something called an academic reps conference … (UK ex- student sabbatical officer)

… we invest a lot of time in terms of making sure that those student representatives have the skills and pre-briefings and things like that to be able to engage in the process. (NZ student leader)

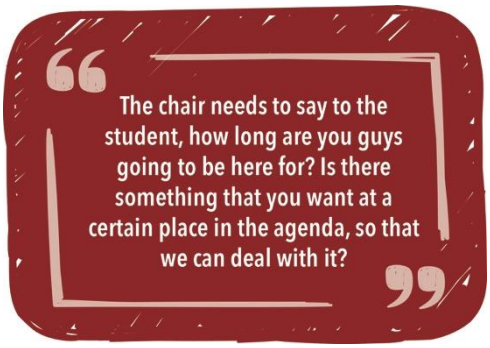
5. Building experience and expertise

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.

6. 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.

… institutions do need to be really conscious about students being time poor and about the impact that asking them to help with … essentially the quality enhancement and quality assurance of the institution imposes. …if you're going to have a three hour long meeting, that 99% of the people are paid to attend and you can't place the same requirements on the unpaid person. … So for example, the chair needs to say to the student, how long are you guys going to be here for? Is there something that you want at a certain place in the agenda, so that we can deal with it? (NZUSA officer)



7. 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 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. These surveys were developed from the survey conducted by the University of Bath as part of their commissioned research into student engagement in the UK carried out for QAA (UK) (Pimentel-Botas & ors, 2013).

Student leader survey

Overview

As one of the main objectives of the project was to garner responses, student associations at Australian universities were surveyed to find out what student leaders think about current student engagement. The student survey questions were based on the University of Bath survey, modified as a result of preliminary consultation with Australian students. With a response rate of around 50% of our sample (14 responses) from diverse institutions across the country, the findings are potentially representative of what is happening with student engagement in decision-making in Australian universities from a student perspective. All but one of the respondents were elected student leaders and around half were involved in student associations, university councils and academic boards. Only one was involved at faculty level.

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 effective 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 surveys

Overview

The outcome of international research together with the survey conducted by the University of Bath into student engagement were used to inform the development of a survey that was sent to staff across Australian tertiary education institutions to examine what is happening in Australia with respect to student engagement in university decision-making and governance.

The response to the survey was strong (53%) with 27 responses received from 47 institutions. 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.

The following headings reflect the survey questions.

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, as shown in the graph below with 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 would motivate them.

Case and pilot studies

Introduction

Responses to the survey of student engagement practices in Australian universities together with stories volunteered to the project team at conferences revealed initiatives and existing practices at Australian universities that are already providing opportunity for students to have a significant role in decision-making processes. Consequently, with the approval of the relevant institutions, the project team conducted interviews and focus groups with key personnel and students to gain an understanding of what these practices look like and how they are experienced by staff and students. These cases studies cover the experiences at a range of Australian universities, and demonstrate the successes and challenges of initiatives in the field. The examples span relatively new initiatives to more established ones.

Many of these practices have been recently implemented and are thus not cast as best practice. Nonetheless, they show that the sector is interested in engaging students in

decision-making, and what the universities who have championed the student voice have achieved so far.

Interviews and focus group sessions were audio-recorded and the recordings transcribed to provide a record of the practices explored at each of the nine universities examined. These transcripts were used to inform detailed analysis of each case study, presented in a separate guide (see Appendix F). While the overall experiences were beneficial, these initiatives were not without challenges, and the more extensive treatment permitted in the guide provides an opportunity to discuss these issues in a deeper context as well as elaborate on specific processes and views underpinning the initiatives. Briefer synopses appear below (as University A, etc.).

The willingness to develop greater expertise in some sector quarters led to the opportunity to conduct a pilot project relating to the use of student staff consultative committees (SSCCs)(essentially the same type of body as those referred to in other institutions as staff student liaison committees (SSLCs)). This type of practice, used overseas as well as in some Australian institutions, is highly valuable in building a culture of student engagement and allowing both students and staff to gain expertise in student representation. This pilot study is also reported in detail in the guide.

University A: student staff consultative committee

This university provides student staff consultative committees (SSCCs) operating at the program level. The SSCCs enable students to have real input into their study program in meetings held to discuss program-related issues. Student representatives are a diverse mix of domestic and international, undergraduate and postgraduate, and full-time and part-time students.

There are guidelines for the operation of the SSCCs that are provided to student representatives. There is also a student representative manual. Training provided by the university is offered to student representatives. In 2016 the Student Union introduced a new staff member to provide SSCC student representatives with advice on areas of policy that they might need assistance in understanding. The union also held a SSCC Student Leadership Summit which included a keynote address by the Vice Chancellor and President, leadership and critical feedback workshops, as well as peer discussion to share experiences.

University B: student campus councils at a multi-campus university

University B has multiple campuses and each campus has a student campus council (SCC). In addition to each SCC, there is a Student Representative Council which includes three members of each SCC and deals with university-wide issues. In place of either a Student Association or a Student Union, University B uses the student representation and participation (SRP) model.

To ensure diversity in representation, membership of each SCC is specified and consists of six general representatives, one postgraduate student representative, one international student representative, one residential student representative, and two clubs and societies representatives. It is open to an SCC to appoint non-voting office-bearers to assist in particular areas where assistance may be required such as women's or Indigenous issues.

Students receive training in the form of a general induction provided by the university. Each student representative is given a comprehensive Leaders Resource Guide. A university

position (Manager, Student Representation and Participation) is in place to support the operation of the SCCs (and the Student Representative Council). An additional university position is that of Student Voice Officer. This position was created to support and resource student leaders and to facilitate student voice in university decision-making.

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

University C has multiple regional campuses and a significant population of distance education (DE) students. There is wide variation between campuses and student cohorts, both of which pose challenges for student engagement.

Each campus has a student representative council (SRC) plus an associated senate with representatives from all campuses. The SRCs are intended to be responsible for ensuring a student voice; funding student clubs and social events on campus; and providing opportunities for leadership, university engagement, community engagement and practising skills directly relevant to the workplace.

A student voice think tank led to the concept of a student leadership conference as a vehicle for students from different campuses to meet to build a 'whole' university student leadership culture. The conference also provided an opportunity to build skills to allow representatives to work more effectively in their positions and the opportunity for the students to meet with and question some of the senior staff leaders of the university. It was considered to be so effective that it will be held annually.

There is a two-day induction for all council members including the student representative. To enhance financial literacy, the university sends the student representative to the Australian Institute of Company Directors to undertake a course.

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

University D has a dedicated non-profit entity that provides a range of non-academic services and facilities, as well as social, cultural, recreational and sporting programs. Its activities cover a wide spectrum, from the operation and management of commercial venues in the university to discipline clubs in faculties and schools, and diverse sports clubs. This entity seeks to engage all members of the university community – students, staff and alumni – in its activities, holding effective collaboration to be of primary importance.

The entity has a board that has a majority of elected student directors (7 out of 13 members) which include the President and Vice-President. All new student directors attend a one-day course on governance for directors run by the Australian Institute of Company Directors. There is also a full-day induction workshop where student directors are taken through every aspect of the company.

The President is reimbursed for expenses incurred, and both the President and Vice-President receive an honorarium.

University E: Student Guild and Education Council

The Student Guild has an undergraduate student president who is elected for one year. The president works alongside an elected postgraduate student president, representing

students across the university and assisted on postgraduate issues by an elected postgraduate student president.

Below the guild is the Education Council which is made up of representatives from all faculty societies. This council ensures that students from each faculty have a voice on education issues. Below faculty societies there may be discipline clubs whose membership is made up of students from particular disciplines within faculties. Some faculties do have a course representative structure but this is not common throughout the university.

The Education Council meets monthly to discuss campus-wide issues which may be taken up by the Education Council President and the Student Guild President. The Education Council is a place where representatives from faculties collaborate and skill-share to enhance the education of all students. The council oversees the lobbying of faculties, the university and government.

There are two other sub-councils of the guild, The Public Affairs Council and the Societies Council, with presidents. Below this there are around 13 other representative-based portfolios. This structure provides not only student input on education issues but also comprehensive student input into university life areas such as orientation, residency, staff awards, etc. Each incoming guild president is required to attend governance, risk and financial management training conducted by the Australian Institute of Company Directors and funded by the senate. Training is also offered to specific guild officers in relation to their specific roles. There is an informal 'succession' of student guild leaders where the president is likely to have performed a series of other leadership roles while being mentored by the preceding experienced student leaders. The guild also has a very formal, structured handover process – as well as the incoming President 'shadowing' the outgoing one, the Council receives training and there are handover packs distributed to affiliated bodies.

University F: academic student representative

An academic student representative (ASR) program currently operates in four schools in one division. It was instituted by the Dean and is led by an Experience Plus Support Officer.

Each program has an ASR and this includes undergraduate, Honours and postgraduate coursework. There are published recruitment guidelines for ASRs which provide that there should be one for every year level of a program. Orientation is required for the ASRs and there is a student representative handbook.

Positives for students were recognition of their views; developing socialisation and communications skills; and getting to know program directors, and other ASRs and students generally.

University G: co-creation of a major student facility

A comprehensive student facility was established through a project of co-creation with students actively engaged in the process of determining what would be in the centre and how it would work. When the facility opened it was instantly populated by students, particularly those who had contributed to the space.

A virtual co-creation concept was pursued the following year with the same committee, logic and system. This project identified a significant number of issues that impacted student experience. These issues were addressed individually and led to improved student

experience through e-commerce, a timetabling app, compatibility with different devices and improved Blackboard functionality.

The success of the project created institutional awareness of the value of investing in the student experience.

University H: embedded leadership practices at an older university

University H is among the oldest universities in Australia and has a long tradition of active student representation. It has an engaged student association at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

University H offers a course, Leadership and Influence, for academic credit. It is one of the courses known as a vice-chancellor's course and is interdisciplinary with a peer-learning ethos. It is available to students from second year onwards who have an elective available. The course guide notes that: 'Students will develop a strong sense of their individual efficacy in pursuing self, social or organisation change and development'. One of the assessment tasks is a group project to develop an idea to 'pitch' at the end of the course to the vice-chancellor on how to enhance the student experience.

There is a vice-chancellor's student leadership program that has an undergraduate and a postgraduate version. Students who are in or intending to apply for university student leadership positions are strongly encouraged by the university to apply. As part of the program students are assigned a senior member of staff as their mentor.

A student leadership forum is held towards the end of the year and is a gathering of those students who have been elected for student leadership positions in the following year.

University I: staff student consultation committee pilot project

A pilot project was initiated in the law faculty at University I, working with students and staff engaged in the undergraduate LLB program to determine whether this type of engagement with students would be beneficial to staff, students and the program.

The pilot project was well received by the students involved. They liked the opportunity to work with staff, raise student concerns and have those concerns addressed in an open, collaborative discussion. Students benefitted from gaining a better understanding of university processes and recognising that some decision-making is centralised and therefore not controlled by the faculty. Understanding the reasoning behind policies and processes was beneficial. Students appreciated the changes that were implemented as a result of their comments and advice that matters that could not be actioned immediately would be pursued. Students also appreciated this opportunity to enhance communication and transparency while engaging with students from other years of their course.

It was beneficial for the faculty to meet students in a collaborative environment and hear from a 'new group' of students representing their peers rather than depend on those students who were active in other student bodies. Better briefing and training of academics prior to the first SSCC meeting may have increased positive responses from some academic members.

University J: embedded student representation processes at a private university

University J is relatively small and has a very active student body. Student representation is embedded and supported at all levels of the university from class representation to university council. Student representatives have been the initiators of university-wide administrative changes. For example, when a member of the student association proposed a change to the student evaluation system, to extend the time for responding until after exams, and the proposal was eventually passed at the next meeting.

University K: student representative systems at a young university

A young regional university is a 'greenfields' site for embedding a culture of student partnership in decision-making and governance. This case highlights the challenges in developing the structures which support a culture of student representation when that culture has not previously existed within the student body. Communication issues were at the forefront particularly in relation to the means used by the university to advise both potential student representatives, and the student body as a whole, of election processes. It was seen that development of an SRC required a delicate balance between student autonomy and management guidance. Management is committed to the development of a representative culture and is engaged in further review and development.

Development of a systemic model of student engagement in university governance and decision-making (Appendix J)

The project work has allowed the production of a model representing a systemic view of student engagement in university decision-making and governance. Prior to this project, the primary concern was with the issues of increasing engagement within the higher-level deliberative bodies of universities, such as senates, councils and academic boards. The research work and extensive contact with student leaders has shown that the development of a strong student voice in decision-making requires attention at all levels of the sector, from subject and course representation to policy. The relationships between the various bodies, in some cases portrayed through the image of an incomplete 'ladder', suggest that the relationships may not yet be sufficiently developed.

This model has been used in sector workshops as a stimulus for participants to consider the student–institution relationships in their priority areas. The model is represented in Appendix J of this report.

Challenges and opportunities

A single-institution project presented both challenges and opportunities:

1. Execution of the project fell to a small team at one institution. While this made for an extremely busy period, it allowed the opportunity to engage with a wide range of institutions and student cohorts. This generated a broader and more coherent picture of current Australian practice.
2. The nature of the university timetable and student election cycles posed considerable difficulties with engaging students in the project. In particular, it was hard to find suitable times to conduct focus groups involving students. This difficulty

was overcome by being flexible in terms of phone interviews and timing of focus groups to fit in with students' timetables. The universities involved assisted greatly in this.

3. Difficulties were also encountered with contacts in university and national student organisations due to changeovers in personnel. Rather than trying to maintain contact with a moving population of office holders in these organisations, it was found to be more valuable to work with individual students and student leaders who had contacted the team or stood out in focus groups and interviews. These students represented diverse student groups including Indigenous, international, postgraduate, disabled and minority groups, and they played an important part in the research and project activities, for example, organising and leading the symposium sessions and gathering students for focus groups.
4. Making contact with the people within an institution who could provide information regarding the institution's student engagement practices was challenging. This challenge was solved by a program of wide dissemination which ultimately allowed far-reaching contact with the right people.

Key findings

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 (detailed above).

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, 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 co-ordinated agency or collaboration underpinning a policy commitment to student partnership.

The findings of this project are to be progressed by an Australian Learning and Teaching Senior National Teaching Fellowship awarded to Professor Sally Varnham for 2016–17. A sector-wide collaboration will work towards the development of an agreed set of principles and a framework for student engagement. It is hoped that this will be followed by the production of toolkits to assist universities in the implementation of these principles.

A model of student engagement

1. **Communication** – of representative opportunities, and of outcomes from student input.

2. Effective, valued and supported **student leadership in partnership** with universities.

3. A **developmental approach** to student representation from course subject level through to high level institutional bodies.

4. Resources for **training and support** of student representatives.

5. Policies and practices for the engagement of students in a continual process of enhancement of courses and their university experience.

6. **Capturing every students' voice** - engaging underrepresented student groups to ensure engagement of the whole student cohort.

7. Appropriate financial and nonfinancial **support and incentives** for student representation.

Strong **sector supported national agencies** were also identified as key to developing systems on a sector-wide basis.

Conclusions and recommendations

Although Australian universities have student representatives on faculty and university bodies, representation does not weave through all layers of the institutions. In addition, the extent of representation varies greatly. There is a need for a common understanding towards creating effective student representation or engagement at all levels of university operations in a diverse sector. Low-level student engagement in university governance and decision-making is often attributed to student apathy as reflected in the headline to an article about the project in the Higher Education section in *The Australian*: 'Mission to reverse student apathy' (11 November 2015) (even though the project was not represented in this way in the interview leading to the article). However, behaviour which may appear apathetic may be better ascribed to the relatively low level of systemic support for student engagement. The comparative international research has highlighted the patchiness of systemic support in Australia and the minimal policy framework.

Nonetheless, the project discovered exemplary cases of student partnership in Australia, with strong support and highly engaged student representatives. With effective institutional support, students have been able to contribute effectively to university functions. There are cases where innovative strategies with significant implications for the quality of student learning have been initiated by student representatives. Commitment and respect are essential to embed principles of a student voice and an ethos of student partnership and this is often embodied in strong student leadership processes. Students must be able to trust the university in order to engage and this comes from the institution demonstrating that the student voice counts. There was more enthusiasm for taking a representative role when students felt they could 'make a difference'.

The innovations underway in many Australian universities show a readiness in the sector to embrace principles of student partnership. The establishment of a separate function of student engagement of NUS and/or CAPA supported by the sector with dedicated permanent staff, or the creation of a separate agency along the lines of sparqs or a collaborative body like TSEP, would show sector commitment to turning the concept of student partnership into a reality in Australian universities.

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List of Appendices

Appendix	**location**
A: *Certification by Deputy Vice-Chancellor (or equivalent)*	Separate document
B: External evaluator report	Separate document
C: Updated impact plan	Separate document
D: International research report	Separate document
E: Survey findings report	Separate document
F: Case and pilot study report	Separate document
G: Posters	Separate document
H: Web and Facebook page screenshot	Separate document
I: Dissemination activities	Separate document
J: A systemic model of student engagement in university governance and decision-making	Separate document
Institutional survey	Included in survey report
Student leader survey	Included in survey report