

Starting a Conversation about student voice

STUDENT VOICE
IN UNIVERSITY DECISION MAKING



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

October 2015

Foreword

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

As this study unfolded it became apparent that there is a wealth of experience with student engagement and partnership in other countries that we can draw on. At the same time we have seen that some Australian tertiary education institutions are already implementing similar practices with their own student cohorts.

A challenge in embedding good student engagement practice here in Australia arises from the different types of institution providing tertiary education. A one size fits all approach will not suffice. However whatever the specific needs and constraints particular institutions confront we believe that there are lessons to be learnt from international experience and our collective Australian experiences in engaging students in decision-making.

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

About the “student voice” project

This project is about enhancing the student experience through the development of a more systemic inclusion of student voice in decision making and governance in Australian universities. It investigates the case for deeper engagement of the views of diverse student bodies and considers how this may be achieved at many levels of institutional decision-making. Ultimately it aims to provide mechanisms for better defining student expectations in the evolving higher education environment. It is imperative now that universities work proactively to identify and address the wants and needs of students in order to provide appropriate and relevant student experience, and to recognise the value of their input in their investment. The spectre of a deregulated environment remains as an important driver. In addition, a wider perspective suggests that an inclusive culture embracing student participation in decision-making is essential to the development of citizens and leaders in a democratic society. It is timely in a changing regulatory environment to identify, refine and trial systemic processes by which this may be achieved.

This project is an Office for Learning and Teaching *Strategic Priority Commissioned Project* supported by a grant from the Office for Learning and Teaching and by the University of Technology Sydney. The project is a part of the OLT 21st century student experience cluster. Other projects within this cluster can be found on the Office for Learning and Teaching website (www.olt.gov.au/) under 2014 strategic priority commissioned projects.

The project team

The chief investigator for the project is Sally Varnham who is a Professor of Law in the University of Technology Sydney, Faculty of Law. Sally has extensive experience in governance roles within higher education as Chair of Academic Board, representative on University Council and Student Ombud and in mentoring student representatives on governance bodies. Sally has a longstanding interest in education and the law. Relevant research and initiatives that Sally has undertaken previously include the ALTC project *Student Grievances and Discipline Matter 2009* which produced a Report and Good Practice Guide used by a number of Australian universities in reviewing their student grievance rules and procedures.

Associate Professor Bronwyn Olliffe, former Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning) in the UTS Faculty of Law and former Student Ombud is a member of the project team along with Katrina Waite an academic developer with the UTS Interactive Media and Learning unit. Bronwyn and Katrina bring considerable relevant experience and expertise to the team including working with students in representative roles.

The project manager is Dr Ann Cahill, who has both taught and researched within the UTS Faculty of Law and has qualifications and extensive experience relevant to management.

Reference group

The project is supported by a reference group comprising senior university managers with expertise relevant to student engagement along with student leaders and representatives.

Reference group members
Professor Paul Wormell *(Western Sydney University)
Professor Sally Kift (James Cook University)
Professor Rick Sarre (University of South Australia)
Professor Nick Reid (University of New England)
Professor Margot Hillel (Australian Catholic University)
Dr Lisa Cluett (University of Western Australia)
Ms Gwen van der Velden (University of Bath)
Professor Dominic Verity (Macquarie University)
Dr Grace Lynch (project evaluator) (RMIT)
Mr Harry Rolf (President Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations)
Ms Rose Steele (President National Union of Students)
Ms Jade Tyrrell (former President National Union of Students)
Mr Dean Mattar (President UTS Student Association)
Ms Hannah Tsui (UTS student representative)
Ms Ashleigh Barnes (UTS student representative)
Ms Alison Whittaker (UTS student representative)
Mr Abhishek Loumish (UTS student representative)
*(Reference Group Chair)



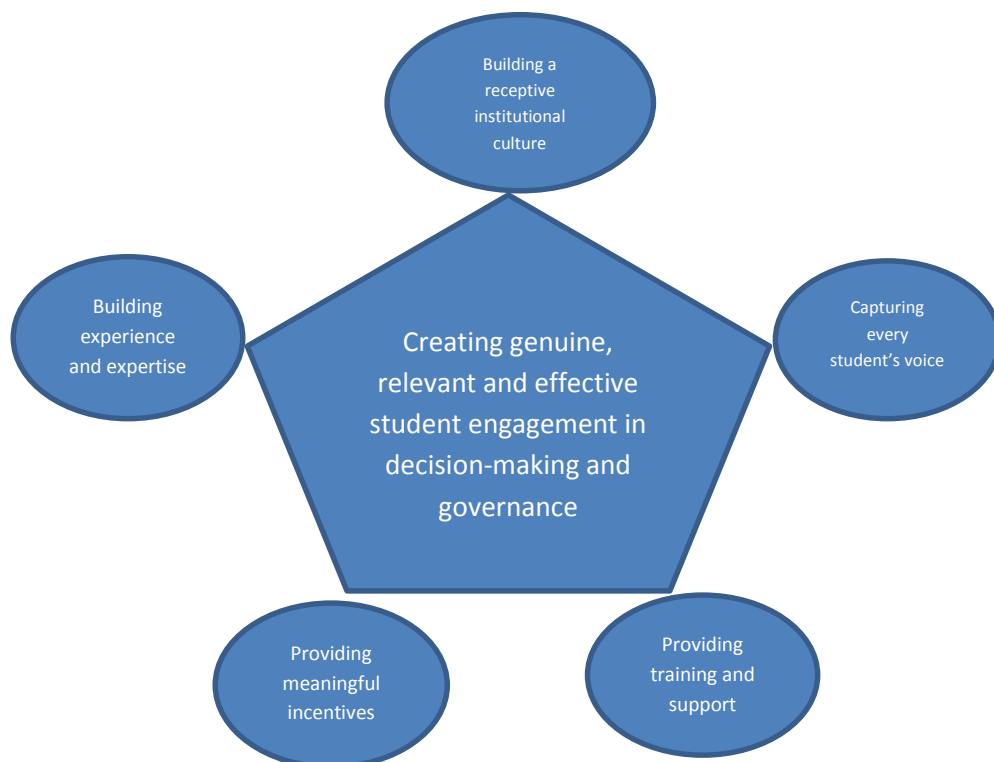
International research

The first phase of the “student voice” project examined international experience with student engagement in university governance. This was intended to provide tools and knowledge that could be drawn upon in facilitating and embedding effective student engagement in governance and decision-making in Australian institutions. Ultimately the project envisages inclusive and responsive

universities which value the student voice, and enhance the student experience by understanding and meeting student expectations. Work to date has revealed that Australian institutions are far from a blank slate.

Interviews were conducted in England, Belgium and New Zealand with representatives from both university management and student bodies as well as higher education agencies. The interviews were analysed to identify key principles, practices and issues that inform the provision and context of student engagement in decision-making in these countries.

From those interviews we identified key themes that define the environment in which effective student engagement in decision making and governance can take place. Those themes are illustrated in the following model.



Building a receptive institutional culture- valuing student engagement, providing opportunity for genuine engagement on issues that matter to students, ensuring students have timely access to relevant information from their first contact with the institution, creating policy that recognises the importance of student voice

Capturing every student's voice-engaging underrepresented groups, ensuring representation reflects attitudes and concerns of the whole student cohort and not just those of the representatives or particular causes they support, ensuring representatives provide timely and relevant feedback and feedback to the student cohort

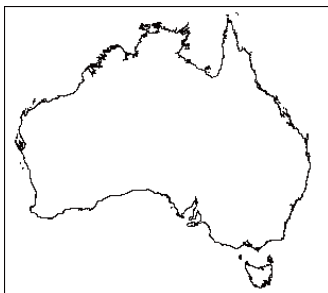
Providing training and support-providing and funding training programs, mentoring, and support for student representatives to enable them to participate effectively as representatives without compromising their studies or personal well being

Building experience and expertise- building from the bottom up by providing representative opportunities from the class level through to senior institutional bodies to allow students to build experience and confidence in representative roles.

Providing meaningful Incentives for student engagement - providing recognition of student representative roles and rewards for participation which may include payment, formal recognition in transcripts, academic credit, and internships

Australian institutional survey

Based on the findings of our international research and a survey previously conducted by the University of Bath we designed and carried out a survey of Australian tertiary education institutions to examine the current state of student engagement in decision-making and governance here in Australia. Analysis of the survey data is ongoing. The response rate to the survey has been good [55% to date with outstanding promised surveys taking the response rate to 75%].



What the survey has revealed so far is that there are some excellent initiatives being undertaken by Australian tertiary institutions. These initiatives have given rise to case studies that are being developed as part of this research to showcase good practice in student engagement in decision-making and governance that are discussed below. The

survey itself has shown that there is evidence of student engagement in diverse decision-making and governance roles in Australian tertiary institutions.

Forum	Number of institutions reporting student engagement in that forum
Council	20
Academic board	24
Other institutional bodies	17
Faculty/school	24
Department	18
Course	22
Complaints/ grievances	19
Student association	20

There is also good evidence that in at least some of those bodies, students are fully engaged in decision-making activities:

	Council	Academic board	Other institutional bodies	Faculty /school	Department	Course	Complaint and grievance processes	Student union / association activities
Students participate only when invited to do so	4	2	2	3	0	1	4	2
Students voice their concerns but do not vote	0	1	1	7	6	6	3	4
Students are fully involved in discussion and have voting rights	18	21	14	12	6	6	8	13

Further, some institutions are providing training and support for student representatives:

Trainer	No. of institutions reporting
institution (formal programmes)	15*
volunteers (staff)	2
staff who have this duty included in their work plan	11*
student association (formal programmes)	7*
National union of students	0
current student representative mentors	2
former student representatives	1
employed coaches, coordinators or education officers	1

Source of support	No. of institutions reporting
institution (formal programmes)	11*
volunteers (staff)	3
staff who have this duty included in their work plan	16*
student association (formal programmes)	9*
National union of students	2
current student representative mentors	9*
former student representatives	2
employed coaches, coordinators or education officers	1

However, challenges remain in ensuring that all student groups are effectively engaged:

Student category	Number of institutions reporting limited engagement by this group
undergraduate	1
postgraduate	13*
Full time	0
Part time	16*
Local	0
international	11*
Minority groups	9*
Political aspirants	2

Student engagement and desk research

The project also involves engagement with students through surveys and student forums as well as desk research examining the information institutions are publishing about their student engagement activities and the policy context in which student engagement is occurring. A survey of student leaders is currently running through Survey Monkey

Case studies

It became apparent while conducting the institutional survey that there is good practice already happening in Australia around engagement of students in decision-making and governance. The project team has started work on capturing these good practices and what the institutions adopting them have learnt from their experience. Below we present one story as an indication of the type of practice we have encountered.

University of Adelaide - Hub Central- an exercise in building a receptive institutional culture and capturing the voice of all students

The story of Hub Central at one level is the story of creating a central student space that provides

facilities, learning spaces and access to services however from the perspective of this research the story is one of effective student engagement.

Institutional perspective

Hub Central ("the Hub") at University of Adelaide was created 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.

Co-creation of student space

The university received a grant to produce student-related space. A transforming student experience committee was formed and reference groups were formed to feed into that committee. One of the reference groups was the student union which was perceived as viewing university management as trying to take advantage of the students.

Management started to meet with the president of the union and the president of the student representative council on a fortnightly basis. From the beginning both groups were told that the consultation and the cooperation process would include other reference groups to ensure that as broad representation as possible was achieved. This was not necessarily well received but management continued to stress that all voices were important. The reference groups provided a filtering process to provide information to the transforming student experience committee which could then determine what this meant in terms of the reality of the project.

A plexiglass wall was set up. Questions would be put up on the wall and students passing by could grab a pen and write up their answers. At regular intervals the wall would be photographed to record student responses. The wall would then be cleaned and a new question posted. Social media was used as a communication tool with two student ambassadors appointed to moderate blogs and talk to the students.

Workshop forums were run with students paid to participate since they were run during the summer break. These forums were attended by students who were interested in participating. The workshops ran over two days. Lunch was provided and the students were asked to think about how they study and what was missing from facilities available on campus. They were asked why they were not studying on campus, and what would make them stay on campus.

Aspirational brief

The brief was cast as aspirational rather than based in concrete details of what the space would physically look like. The process was about teasing out what is important about being a student at the university. Concepts embraced included sense of community, sense of belonging, wanting to be

with other people, the need for good coffee. But also important was the need to also have a non-corporate, safe environment that needed to be open at all hours.

A lot of time was spent drawing the aspirational brief. Within a few months the student union had added link the hub link to their website which was a watershed moment. Management and the student union were working together.

Functional brief

From the aspirational brief the co-creation process needed to move on to deal with the hard facts that the project would not be able to deliver everybody everything they wanted. This phase required the team working with the architects and the students to evaluate costs and priorities. Throughout this process social media, student ambassadors, blogs and The What Wall continued. Over the life of the project student involvement and interest grew.

The Hub

The Hub opened in September 2011 and was instantly populated by students, not least all of the ones that had, in one way or the other, co-created the space. The Hub has students everywhere and the place buzzes with learning - people at computers, people reading, people talking about projects, people in project rooms.

Staff from different areas of service administration rotate through the Hub depending on the season. At enrolment there is a lot of staff available to prepare student cards and to advise students. Mid-year there is a big push for study abroad, so the global learning team is there. There is an information desk and a one stop one step philosophy which is that the student will either have the answer straightaway or they'll be sent to the one place where the solution is; never more.

Cultural change

The success of the Hub created institutional awareness of the value of investing in the student experience. Many students now spend three to five hours more a day on campus because the Hub is there. The Hub is located where the natural flow of traffic means that over 50 per cent of students would walk through it at least once a day. People still walk through there but then they can get good coffee.

Observations on what is happening in other countries

Sally Varnham

At the beginning of 2015 through the UTS Professional Experience Program (PEP) I had the opportunity to interview stakeholders from institutions and agencies in the United Kingdom, Belgium and New Zealand. This study essentially ran into and underpinned the OLT project. One of the things that I identified from the UK, New Zealand and in Antwerp and Brussels is the importance of student representation beginning at class/subject/course level. This helps to build knowledge, experience and expertise in students who act as representatives, as well as helping other students to see the value of participating in decision-making. It helps to develop a culture of student voice. Student representatives in senior roles have typically started out as class representatives and progressed through the ranks.

Training, coaching and support were also clearly important aspects of how student representation is managed. Student leaders in the universities I visited and in the interviews I conducted abroad generally saw their leadership role in student representative terms. They were in partnership with the universities in this training, mentoring and support of student representatives at all levels in the university. Some universities in Australia are already developing a culture of student engagement through embracing student voice in university decision making and university governance in different ways, but there is a way to go before the idea of a student/university partnership is universal. I do feel however that it is an idea that's time has come. The responses I get from many people saying they've been thinking about this but don't know how to do it, renders this project and the Student Voice Conversation both valuable and timely.

Tools for engaging student voice

In examining available resources around student engagement we have identified a number of video resources that highlight some interesting approaches to student engagement. One of the issues that has emerged as a concern in both our international and Australian research is the extent to which students charged with representing the views and concerns of a student cohort actually seek out

those views. A digital resources that helps address this issue is VocalEyes Digital Democracy (<https://www.vocaleyes.org/>). On their website there is a Youtube clip entitled *Case study: Engage Students in decision-making powered by VocalEyes Digital Democracy* which shows the first University to use the 'VocalEyes Digital Democracy' digital platform for student engagement. While this video clip is clearly promoting this tool it provides a useful example of what could be done to comprehensively capture student voice.

Two other video clips we have identified that provide useful perspectives on the student engagement process are: *Developing Student Engagement and Partnership 2014* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hli2_aGMUIQ) and *Become a Course Rep at the University of Hull* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tApmCJ-eKXA>).

Continuing the Conversation

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

