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Student engagement in university decision-making and governance: towards a more systemically inclusive student voice 2015-2016

International Research Report 2015

Lead institution: University of Technology Sydney
Professional Experience Program project

Chief Investigator: Professor Sally Varnham



www.studentvoiceaustralia.com



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Requests and inquiries concerning these rights should be addressed to:

Learning and Teaching Support
Student Information and Learning Branch
Higher Education Group
Department of Education and Training

GPO Box 9880
Location code C50MA7
CANBERRA ACT 2601

<learningandteaching@education.gov.au>

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Executive summary

At the beginning of 2015, through the University of Technology Sydney's (UTS) Professional Experience Program (PEP), chief investigator Sally Varnham had the opportunity to conduct research into student engagement in the United Kingdom, Belgium and New Zealand.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted

Funded by the University of Technology Sydney, this investigation has become a foundation item of research for the OLT project led by Professor Varnham exploring and promoting the benefits of student engagement in university decision-making and governance. This report is part of a set of four publications on the topic. The other publications are a project final report, survey report and good practice case studies report.

The importance of a culture or ethos of student partnership emerged as a dominant feature. Student representation beginning at class/subject/course level stood out as key to this development. This process 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 typically started out as class representatives and progressed through the ranks.

Clearly evident in this research was the centrality of strong student leaders who saw themselves in professional roles acting in partnership with the university to facilitate student engagement at all levels.

Training, coaching and support are important aspects of how student representation is managed and promoted. Student leaders in the universities visited and in the interviews conducted generally saw their leadership role in student representative terms. In particular, they were in partnership with the universities in training, mentoring and support of student representatives at all levels in the university. A central concern was how to engage with different student groups, particularly those groups who are under-represented or whose needs may differ significantly from those of most students. A further question concerned whether all institutions should approach student voice in the same way and the need for flexibility to accommodate different types of institutions and differing student demographics.

Access to the practitioners interviewed in this study opened up a vast array of documentary evidence around the practice and development of student engagement in these countries and this information is also considered here.

This report details the project findings relating to how student engagement in university decision making and governance operates in comparative sectors internationally. The goal is to inspire a sector-wide conversation and ultimately, a collaboration to agree a set of principles and a framework for good practice in Australian universities.

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Student engagement

The concept of student engagement in higher education covers activities ranging from those within the realm of learning and teaching such as active participation in learning to those that extend into other aspects of student life such as how students interact with institutional structures, strategy and processes (Carey, 2013a). Here the term is used in the latter context to mean 'engagement through representation' and 'partnership through engagement'. More particularly it denotes student participation in decision-making processes and representation at different levels within universities, including on university committees and governance bodies.

Student participation in this context includes less formal interactions such as representation at the class and course level widely used in the United Kingdom and New Zealand (the term course is used to denote a collection of subjects fulfilling the requirement for award of a particular qualification). Representatives may engage with lecturers, subject coordinators, head of schools and faculty representatives as appropriate to their particular role. It also includes highly formal interactions as elected faculty and university wide representatives who participate at senior levels of decision-making and governance on councils and boards. The latter is a feature of student engagement in the United Kingdom, Belgium and New Zealand which also exists to varying degrees in Australia. In the sectors studied students may be representatives within student associations, unions or guilds or student representative councils or they may be elected separately to decision making bodies. The survey of Australian higher institutions conducted in the OLT project show that student representative bodies in Australia are diverse - some are tied in with the prevailing student union, association or guild but others are independently elected student representative councils or are appointed or elected independent of these types of structures. In the sectors studied, representation may also extend beyond specific campuses and institutions to state and national student bodies that lobby on behalf of university students across institutions, and to membership of national quality agencies.

The Student Engagement Framework for Scotland, discussed in more detail below, 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

In turn the features that guide the elements of engagement are:

- A culture of engagement
- Students as partners
- Responding to diversity
- Valuing the student contribution

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- Focus on enhancement and change
- Appropriate resources and support (sparqs, *'Celebrating student engagement, successes and opportunities in Scotland's university sector'*, 2013).

Project rationale

The examination of international experience with student engagement was undertaken to provide Australian universities with the tools and knowledge to implement processes for facilitation and the embedding of effective student participation. Ultimately the project works towards building inclusive and responsive universities which value the student voice, and enhance the student experience by understanding and meeting student expectations. This report relates to the findings from the international research.

This report is part of a set of four publications produced by Professor Varnham and her team that explore and promote the benefits of student engagement in university decision-making and governance. The other publications are the Project Final Report (Varnham & ors, 2017a), the Australian Survey Report (Varnham & ors, 2017c), and the Good Practice Case Studies Report (Varnham & ors, 2017d).

What the study involved

Interviews were conducted in England, 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 and the purpose in interviewing them was to establish what comprises good practice in this field.

Acknowledged limitations

Available resources have necessarily limited the range of institutions and people within those institutions that were available for consultation. Where possible the information gathered through interview has been supplemented with information sourced from publicly available reports and information published by the universities.

Ethics approval

The research is the subject of ethics approval provided by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee under approval number HREC 2012-459A.

Institutions and other bodies involved in this study

University of Bath

University of Antwerp

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Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Massey University, New Zealand

Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education in the UK, Reading

National Union of Students (NUS) London

Oxford Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, New College, Oxford, UK

Quality Assurance Agency UK

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

Student partnerships in quality Scotland

New Zealand Union of Students' Associations

Interviews

Interviews with key people were recorded. These recordings were made with the permission of the people interviewed who provided informed consent for their interviews to be recorded. The interviews were semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews use a series of prompt questions but maintain flexibility with respect to question order and whether all questions need to be asked at each interview. The use of a semi-structured format enhances the exploration of the interview subject matter (Bryman and Bell 2003). In carrying out the interview the aim is to prompt the interviewee to address each issue and provide their views unhampered by an overly structured series of questions which might prevent full exploration of their experiences and opinions.

Transcription and thematic analysis

The recorded interviews from Belgium, the United Kingdom and New Zealand were transcribed by a transcription service and the transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) by members of the project team. Each team member initially reviewed the transcripts independently and identified themes present in the transcripts. These themes were then compared and consensus reached regarding a complete set of relevant themes. The initial analysis of the interview transcripts is reported below.

Documentary evidence

In addition to the opportunity to interview key participants in student engagement, this study provided access to an extended body of documentary evidence regarding the development and practice of student engagement in the countries visited. Insights into Student engagement in university decision-making and governance – towards a more systemically inclusive student voice

student engagement practice provided by these documents are discussed alongside the interview materials to further develop understanding of the key issues in creating effective student engagement.

The UK experience

To contextualise the UK interviews it is useful to discuss some of the background to student engagement there as described in documents identified by some of the interview participants.

Organisations dealing with student representation

In the UK national entities that support student representation include organisations such as student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs) (sparqs.ac.uk/); the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (qaa.ac.uk), Wise Wales (wisewales.org.uk), the Higher Education Academy and the Guild of Higher Education (hea.ac.uk, guildhe.ac.uk/), and The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) (tsep.org.uk/). To a large extent student engagement in the UK has been driven by the quality enhancement agenda with the ultimate aim of an improved learning experience.

Scotland and sparqs

It is important to note at the outset that higher education in Scotland remains essentially government funded with no fees for local first time students. This renders the sector immune to some extent from 'marketisation' and the 'student as consumer' characterisation which confronts higher education in England and Wales following the introduction of fees. Experience of student partnership in Scotland however provides valuable knowledge and insights for this research in terms of institution and national sector approaches.

Student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs) was set up in 2003 by the tertiary education sector in Scotland to underpin its commitment to student engagement. Sparqs assists and supports students, student associations, institutions and other tertiary education bodies (universities and colleges) to improve the effectiveness of student engagement in quality at the course, institutional and national levels. The focus is on quality enhancement rather than quality assurance.

The Student Engagement Framework for Scotland (SEFS) (sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/SEFScotland.pdf) identifies the importance of a formal representative process in engaging student leaders within institutional processes to deliver student engagement at the highest strategic level. There is also recognition of the need for representation closer to the learning and teaching interface, the need to engage underrepresented student groups and the focus on supporting student representatives. The merits of both formal and informal processes are recognised (sparqs '*Celebrating student engagement, successes and opportunities in Scotland's university sector*', 2013).

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Critical to this model is partnership:

In Scotland's universities student engagement has never been intended to be something that students demand and universities provide. Vice Principals are just as likely as senior student officers to approach the enhancement of learning and teaching by wanting to know how best students can be involved in decisions. (sparqs, 2013)

The role of student associations and student leaders in supporting representative roles in partnership with institutions is recognised. This partnership in turn has capacity to generate a more effective relationship between institution and student associations across a range of activities including providing training for student representatives. Sparqs in turn provides a national training program which focuses on the specific task of enhancing student learning experience, engaging student trainers in this process and providing 'train the trainer' programs for universities. It provides ongoing support, training and resources for institutional trainers, including toolkits for use in developing training.

At the same time sparqs notes a shift in the way in which student associations see themselves. An increasing focus on their role in enhancing student learning experience has facilitated the forging of a relationship which is 'a mature and professional partnership between the university and the students' union'.

The relationship at the highest level between students' associations and universities has been increasingly characterised by a strengthening partnership (sparqs, 2013).

Clear definition of roles and expectations for student representatives together with formal recognition of their engagement, are recognised as important dimensions in developing student representation. The Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), (www.hear.ac.uk) which was established to create a standard national record of individual student achievements, has scope to capture representative activities for each student.

The need to provide representatives with opportunities for collaboration beyond their representative duties and training is recognised. Representative forums and conferences allow for exchange of experiences, ideas, clarifications, trouble-shooting and extending knowledge bases.

Work at sparqs has also focussed on ensuring that feedback provided by students is used effectively and that outcomes from that feedback are communicated clearly back to students. This closing of the feedback loop had remained a vexed issue across a number of reports but the tide has turned and many institutions are utilising a "you said... we did..." approach to providing feedback to students.

Recent initiatives include supporting the development of student partnership agreements within institutions and reporting of recognition and accreditation of academic representatives. The 2013 sparqs document *Guidance on the development and implementation of a Student Partnership Agreement in universities* (sparqs, November 2013) Student engagement in university decision-making and governance – towards a more systemically inclusive student voice

was published to assist universities in developing partnership agreements with students as a practical way of progressing dialogue with student bodies around the enhancement activities taking place and how students can be involved in that process.

In considering incentives for students to become representatives, the sparqs report *Recognition and accreditation of academic reps- Practices and challenges across Scotland's colleges and universities* (sparqs, November 2015) observes that altruism alone is not enough and that while many students are inspired to work towards improving learning outcomes, there are important factors that make this approach alone inadequate. The report recognises the increasing diversity of student bodies so that students are often juggling employment and family with their studies. It is important that their representation is recognised in a partnership context to reflect the value the university accords it. This information may assist student representatives in many ways including their employability. Other tangible recognition may range from payment and expenses, bonuses and rewards, through to accreditation within institutions and externally.

Scotland has a longstanding practice of engaging students in national committees. The need to provide adequate support for students in these roles has been recognised as critical to facilitating this representation and ensuring that students come to the table as equals in this process.

England

Tuition fees for higher education were introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 1998, and increased to a cap in 2012. Immediately prior to this (in June 2011), the UK Government released its White Paper *'Students at the Heart of the System'* which heralded a new focus on determining the needs and expectations of widened and diverse student bodies. The introduction of fees was accompanied by what is referred to as 'marketisation' and the 'commodification' of education leading inevitably to the 'student as consumer' characterisation prevailing in the sector. This is the climate in Australia also.

So while in Scotland the focus has clearly been on partnership, this relationship is relatively new in the UK. In the 2009 Report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England prepared by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (<https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/ch/E4%20Report%20to%20HEFCE%20on%20student%20engagement.pdf>) the Open University noted a divergence in approach between student unions and institutions. Whereas student unions tended to emphasise the role of students as partners in a learning community, there was a tension for institutions between seeing students in a consumer role and regarding student engagement as central to enhancing the student learning experience. The extent to which this is so seemed to vary between disciplines.

The partnership 'was clearly set out in 2012 in the Expectations and Indicators contained agenda' in the QAA Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B5 Student Engagement:

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Expectation: Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience, the indicators of sound practice are:

Indicator 1

Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, define and promote the range of opportunities for any student to engage in educational enhancement and quality assurance.

Indicator 2

Higher education providers create and maintain an environment within which students and staff engage in discussions that aim to bring about demonstrable enhancement of the educational experience.

Indicator 3

Arrangements exist for the effective representation of the collective student voice at all organisational levels, and these arrangements provide opportunities for all students to be heard.

Indicator 4

Higher education providers ensure that student representatives and staff have access to training and ongoing support to equip them to fulfil their roles in educational enhancement and quality assurance effectively.

Indicator 5

Students and staff engage in evidence-based discussions based on the mutual sharing of information.

Indicator 6

Staff and students to disseminate and jointly recognise the enhancements made to the student educational experience, and the efforts of students in achieving these successes.

Indicator 7

The effectiveness of student engagement is monitored and reviewed at least annually, using pre-defined key performance indicators, and policies and processes enhanced where required.

(The UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality Chapter B5).

With this Code and the many initiatives in England pressing the partnership agenda, it is moving towards gaining universal traction.

The process of student representation is recognised as multifaceted, focusing on making students aware of the need for and benefits of representation, what the role involves, recruitment, training, mentoring, execution and feedback. It is recognised as being most effective at institutional and course level but more difficult at the faculty level.

Representation is at multiple tiers and use of staff-student liaison committees in disciplines is common.

Effective feedback is also seen as an issue but improving significantly. The challenge for institutions is the need to develop a cohesive approach to student representation across the different institutional levels so that communication gaps do not arise. Closing the feedback loop is seen as a critical aspect of effective student representation.

Many institutions provide some form of formal recognition for student representative activities. Institutions also offer training, handbooks and support and the introduction of student representation coordinators into student unions has improved student awareness and uptake of training.

Ensuring that the voice of all students is represented and in particular representing the interests of part-time, post-graduate and international students was recognised as a challenge.

In 2013 a team led by Bath University produced a Report for a QAA-commissioned study: *'Student Engagement in Learning and Teaching Quality Management: A Study of UK Practices. Research Findings'* (Pimental-Botas & ors, 2013). One of the outputs was a *Good Practice Guide, 'Student Engagement in Learning and Teaching Quality Management - A good practice guide for higher education providers and students' unions'* (Van der Velden G M & ors, 2013) commissioned by The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

which mapped practices against the key indicators set out in Chapter B5 of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

Using these indicators as a measurement, the guide highlighted the importance of the adaptation of student representation to suit individual institutional needs, and the involvement of student input in this process. The Guide notes that effective representation typically provides opportunity for student input at both the course and strategic levels within an institution. Importantly, this process and the ongoing operation of student representation requires collaboration within institutions with their student associations. In a collaborative relationship, the student union can be an important source of information about the views of students which in turn can be used to inform policy and strategy.

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Regular review of the representation system is also important. This review process can be facilitated by appointment of students as researchers investigating and reporting on specific aspects of representational structures and practices.

A central issue is how best to engage all students. The Guide grapples with the question of whether expecting students to engage through traditional means such as committee structures is effective. Issues of recruitment and attendance are noted alongside the opportunities that the use of new teaching technologies presents with respect to capturing student input. Recognition that student voice may be more accessible through virtual and mobile technologies presents interesting opportunities for better and potentially more comprehensively engaging student voice.

Communication is key. Where there is student engagement in committees it needs to be more than 'tokenistic' and student representatives need to be properly briefed and supported to be able to function effectively in this environment, particular at senior levels where the issues addressed may be complex. It is important to ensure that student representatives on student unions are truly representative and appropriately briefed and supported in carrying out their roles. Emerging from this need is a greater effort on the part of senior management to engage both formally and informally with students and their representatives. There has also been a focus on ensuring that information is accessible as needed.

How to recognise and reward student representatives also features in the guide. An open and frank dialogue about expectations on both sides emerges as critical.

In 2013 The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) was created following the introduction of Chapter B5 (above). TSEP operates in partnership with sector organisations including HEFCE, AoC, QAA, GuildHE and NUS and its role is to assist in furthering the expectation that students should be active partners in their education and in their student experience. It supports the sector in enabling students to be actively involved in the development, management and governance of their institution, its academic programs and their own learning experience in line with the seven indicators set out in Chapter B5.

Outputs from TSEP have included *'The Principles of Student Engagement: The student engagement Conversation 2014'* Quoting from QAA reports, that document observes:

[where] student engagement is highly developed, pervading institution culture and clearly recognised by staff and student alike, these institutions tended to be those where related features of good practice were found. (QAA, 2014)

and

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 2012)

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The document emphasises the benefits that a partnership approach has for students and institutions alike.

In collaboration with GuildHE, TSEP has also produced '*Making Student Engagement a Reality - Turning theory into practice 2015*' (TSEP, GuildHE, 2015) demonstrating the impact of student engagement on student experience through a series of case studies. Importantly, a culture of partnership was shown to facilitate changes in curricula and policy and teaching and learning as well as supporting creation of robust course representative systems. Case studies discuss projects implemented in particular universities that are actively promoting student-institution partnerships, to provide guidance to other institutions in what can be achieved and how it can be done. One such initiative is the Student Fellows Scheme which provides for training and support for groups of students annually to work alongside academics and professional staff on education development projects. TSEP has also collaborated with the Association of Colleges in creating frameworks and toolkits for implementation of student partnerships within colleges.

Another example given is at Ulster University, where the Centre for Higher Education Practice (CHEP) and the Students' Union have championed a partnership approach to enhancing the student experience - HEA Students as Partners Change Programme Student engagement: a catalyst for transformative change University of Ulster Case Study, May 2013 https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/sap_case_study_03_ulster_new_1.pdf). Curriculum design has been influenced by student workshops and focus groups. Students have joined with academics and other professionals in working parties addressing topics such as Ulster's *Principles of Assessment and Feedback for Learning*, feedback, and the development of online study skills resource for staff and students.

The Higher Education Academy's *Framework for student engagement through partnership* (heacademy.ac.uk/frameworks-toolkits) provides a detailed analysis of the different aspects of student engagement. An accompanying toolkit is provided to assist institutions in implementing the findings and processes identified in the Framework.

Student organisations

Student associations at individual universities are also represented at the national level. In the United Kingdom the National Union of Students (NUS) comprises groups representing the interests of students in the nations of the United Kingdom- England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (<https://www.nus.org.uk/en/who-we-are/how-we-work/>). NUS Scotland is an autonomous body formed in 1971 through merger between NUS and the Scottish Union of Students.

The National Union of Student's (NUS) '*Manifesto for partnership*' (NUS, 2012) considers that at its roots partnership is about investing students with the power to co-create, not just knowledge or learning, but within the higher education institution itself:

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... 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 (NUS 2012, 8).

Interviews findings from the United Kingdom

The findings from analysis of the UK interviews and focus groups are reported here with relevant quotes to illuminate the issues identified. The analysis was broken up into nine thematic areas with sub-themes where appropriate.

1. Areas of engagement

Student engagement embraces diverse aspects of university life including quality assurance and enhancement, course review, class and course representation and university governance. The task of preparing for and providing student engagement is recognised as a substantial exercise. As a result, some institutions focus their activities in particular areas whereas in other institutions engagement with students across the various levels at which decision making and review takes place is comprehensive.

...you do not have a committee without students and we do not have teaching innovation without students in it ...

... You do not have any seminars about where the direction goes without student representatives being involved. You do not send information or data out any more...without the Student Union getting it. When you prepare for the next student survey you do it together with the Student Union. [ex-student sabbatical officer]

Governance

Engagement of students in institutional governance has evolved from roles as observers to full participation in some institutions. There is recognition that student interest must be both sought and fulfilled. Some institutions have students on all their major decision-making bodies and the student representatives actively contribute in those bodies. The extent to which this is the case may vary between institutions and may depend on the interests of the vice chancellor and senior management. Some institutions have embedded student engagement while others are reportedly still taking a 'quite old-fashioned approach'.

Faculty

In faculties there are examples of Student Staff Liaison Committees which bring together staff and students at a course or module level to talk about courses being delivered, and to identify any issues that need to be addressed. Identified practices include course representatives sitting down with a course leader early in the semester and having a conversation about what the course aims to achieve. Some institutions employ students to review courses. The faculty representative role was seen as an opportunity for students who had enjoyed a class representative role to get more involved. Some institutions provide for

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student led teaching awards involving students in the reward and recognition of what they perceive to be excellent teaching.

There are examples of departments or academics wanting to finding ways for students to work together or for students and staff to work together to enhance courses or departments and genuinely seek to find new ways to improve the learning environment. In some institutions, this happens in every department and is connected to a broader strategy or vision about student engagement and about an approach to enhancement.

A lot of the roles of academic reps is in supporting the work that departments are doing. Or helping departments identify if you're going to do one thing what should that be to make the biggest difference. I guess that's where it comes back to the whole, the informed student voice so being quite clear about what needs to prioritise if we're going to prioritise anything. Actually, I think it drives a bit of innovation, doesn't it, having no money or anything. [ex-student sabbatical officer]

Grievance procedures

Students are involved in decision-making panel on appeals and complaints. This role may be filled by a full-time sabbatical officer. There may also be students involved as student advocates to assist students appearing before these panels.

2. Who is engaged?

It was apparent that there were diverse approaches to who may fulfil the role of a student representatives on formal faculty and university bodies. Commonly it was seen that student representatives were senior undergraduates particularly where they are involved in institutional governance.

Where there is opportunity for students to be involved in student staff liaison committees or as course representatives these students may be more junior and they are likely to develop the expertise to go on to be involved in university governance. For roles such as student reviewers there is a tendency for these students to have been full-time student union sabbatical officers, because of the level of experience and knowledge needed.

Distance students are not necessarily excluded from engagement and there are instances where their engagement is actively sought in, for example, online student staff liaison committees.

Engaging overseas students was recognised as presenting challenges around how students are organised and cultural issues that may need to be considered. Weighting of representative roles towards full-time undergraduates at the expense of part-time, distance, and mature learners is a recognised issue.

Some institutions ensure that both undergraduate and postgraduate students are represented on particular bodies.

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There was a strong view that students' organisations cannot assume they are speaking on behalf of students in every case. A lot of the work of a students' organisation has to be about pushing power downwards to the places where students are actually engaged themselves.

3. Training

Training plays an important role in ensuring that student representatives can contribute effectively.

Training for representative roles generally

Some institutions have structured training for student representatives. These activities include skills development around writing papers, how you assert yourself effectively, time management, leadership and such like. Information sessions and campaigning sessions may also be provided. Training delivery may be differentiated to suit the needs of different student groups. For example, delivery may include online training and repeating sessions during lunchtimes and evenings to improve student access. The training itself may be differentiated to reflect the needs of different groups. In relation to representation of female students, for example, initiatives such as women in leadership conferences may be used.

... this notion of the informed student voice. 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 – [I am] talking about our academic representatives rather than other representatives at the moment - which we run loads of sessions academic staff, students' union staff. [ex-student sabbatical officer]

We have people from external bodies, ex-students, who am I missing? Those type of people. NUS come down and do lots of sessions talking about the background to issues. So, when students get to the table in meetings they already understand the grey areas in between the black and white of an issue.

Yeah, it's lots of skills development. So, we do stuff around writing papers, how you assert yourself effectively, time management, leadership, those type of things. Then we have alongside that a lot of information based sessions. We do some campaigning sessions. The information based ones are probably the most [unclear]... [ex-student sabbatical officer]

The method by which this training is delivered varies between institutions. Provision of employed trainers is an important initiative. These trainers may be employed by the student organisation, by the university itself or both student organisation and university may be responsible for delivery of training. Trainers play an important role in helping student representatives to understand the political context in which they need to carry out their representative role as well as understanding meeting protocols, the particular issues they need to discuss and how to present their arguments.

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However comprehensive training is not always available and in some institutions only limited, basic training is provided. This sort of training is likely to cover fundamental concepts such as the need to consult with the group you are representing, meeting protocols and some basic context around the institution itself and its operating environment. More extensive training and preparation may be provided for student representatives on more senior governance bodies.

The creation of a toolkit to be used in training student representatives was also described.

Induction

An important aspect of the training process is induction for specific roles or generally, creating an understanding of what the student representation process is about in different contexts and how students are expected to engage with the institution. The induction process presents a challenge since student cohorts are continually moving through institutions requiring the induction process to be continually repeated. One group characterised this process as talking to students in induction about the importance of the informed student voice through a short presentation to all new undergraduate and postgraduate students about the ethos of the institution, where it puts the student voice and how student voice is at the heart of the system.

I think in terms of what we would do differently at the national policy [level] - in the first few years we concentrated very much on making sure that the student voice was heard, that it was representative and that it was informed. Those three things. What we forgot and realised I think just in time but maybe a little bit too late for some of the students at the beginning was the realisation that you need to make absolutely evident to students how they matter. [ex-student sabbatical officer]

Meeting preparation

But the key thing for us is that they are very, very well briefed by the Student's 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. It's not just students being there who are lost by all of the detail. (UK student engagement officer)

So, where students are going to meetings we sit down and we go through the papers at a minimum and help them decide what they're going to do. That's like a touch point so they can ask any questions or they can talk about perhaps a particular member of staff who may be is a bit prickly and that means that we can then speak to other staff members who work with them and say ooh, any idea about this. [ex-student sabbatical officer]

Preparation of students to participate effectively as partners in meetings was discussed with emphasis on the need for good briefing beforehand. This preparation may include going through the meeting papers and deciding how to approach particular issues as well as Student engagement in university decision-making and governance – towards a more systemically inclusive student voice

meeting dynamics. This briefing may be provided by the student organisation and/or the university. Effective development for the university or student organisation personnel who provide this briefing was recognised as important as these personnel may be in their role long term whereas turnover of student representatives is high. The importance of trainers having sound experience rather than simply being fresh graduates was also discussed. Independence is fostered by an education officer being provided by the student organisation was also mentioned as there is the view that university-provided education officers may be biased towards their employer's perspective.

National Conferences

National conferences also provide useful training opportunities across institutions introducing participants to student engagement and the issues on which they are providing representation. The conferences may be aimed at both student and employed participants in the student representation process.

4. Incentives

In many instances student representatives are volunteers. The time commitment for representative roles can be significant yet students frequently need to balance this with their studies and with the necessity to work to support themselves. In this scenario engaging students in representative roles can be challenging. This raises the question as to what incentives are there for students to commit to representative roles.

Payment

Examples of students being paid to take on representative roles were cited. Some students get paid a substantial amount or have their fees waived to be a representative. This can be useful in recruiting students to take on roles that might be perceived as quite boring but of course depends on the institution or student body as having the resources to pay. It may however have the potential to attract student representatives from under-represented groups such as mature aged students where payment might for example cover child care costs.

Other places have chosen - because, let's be honest, some parts of quality assurance are quite boring, and it's quite hard to find people to want to do it, so some providers that have got the capacity have decided to pay people to take part in things. (QAA officer)

There is a question as to how impartial a paid representative might be. In some instances, however involving periodic review panels, degree program reviews or department reviews the appointment of paid representatives involves an application process administered by the student union.

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I also talked to the student reps about sort of professionalising student reps, if you like, giving them more training and [unclear]. So, I think there's a debate about giving them expenses. Would you get more, better, different types of student reps if they weren't doing it voluntarily? So, for instance, if you want a mature student who's doing it part-time and has childcare issues, would covering their childcare costs help? Or having meetings at different times? There are different things to incentivise different types of people. (HEFCE officer).

A valued activity

Where an institution clearly demonstrates that it values student views and feedback students tend to be more willing to stand for election.

by setting out the principle early on that we as an institution value student's feedback and you can be involved in this community that we have and we value your opinion the students tend to be quite willing to stand for election [ex-student sabbatical officer]

Personal development

Personal development was also cited as a motivator for students who want to understand how the university operates, gain new skills or enhance their curriculum vitae. The latter is particularly true where students are focussed on employability and gaining lots of skills and having lots of experiences. Student representation provides an opportunity to both develop and demonstrate leadership and effective committee participation.

Some see student representation as a source of status. Others are keen to serve their community. Volunteering opportunities may also enhance employment prospects and there was a report of integrating student representation with other recognised voluntary activities that were considered to have increased student participation in representative activities.

Whereas the faculty reps are probably the sort of middle ground. They're people who feel very passionately about being a rep and have enjoyed it and want to get more involved and they tend to be a really great engagement ... [ex-student sabbatical officer]

I guess here there is an element that maybe we don't have at other institutions where students are quite focussed on employability and gaining lots of skills and having lots of experiences. So being able to demonstrate leadership and that they sat on committees in itself is part of the incentive. [ex-student sabbatical officer]

Academic and other recognition

Some universities are reported to provide academic credit for student representative activities. To gain the credit student representatives must attend meetings and put

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together a portfolio. There is also the Higher Education Achievement Report which provides an opportunity for recognition (www.hear.ac.uk).

5. Recruitment Process

Variability was also reported in the way in which students are recruited to representative roles.

Elected representatives

Student representatives are frequently elected to their representative roles. Elected positions include course representatives, students who sit on departmental learning, teaching and quality committees, faculty representatives, full time elected student officers within students' organisations and student representatives on the university senate. While variations between institutions were reported it was noted that typically student organisations are in favour of democratic processes and the appointment of representatives through an election process. Sabbatical officers are elected in public institutions but for other roles and in private institutions students may be co-opted by staff in response to, for example, pressure on them from their department head to appoint a student representative to a particular body.

It will vary wildly between different places, but as a general rule, you'll find that because student unions are big on democracy, it's in their DNA, most of their reps will usually go through some sort of election process. Certainly, the sabbatical officers have to be elected in the public sector, but other ones you will find people being co-opted by staff because there's pressure on them from their department head, (QAA officer)

Nominated representatives

The role of student reviewers within the Quality Assurance Agency is an example where the recruitment process involves nomination. The role is filled by current students by a process of nomination. A letter of commendation from their institution is required. The student must have completed a year of their degree. Postgraduate students can be nominated as well as undergraduates. The student representative must be able to fulfil the time commitment alongside their studies. However, many nominees are sabbatical officers as it is recognised that to be a good reviewer requires experience at quite a high level at your own university or college to have a grasp of what both representation and quality assurance means. After graduation, the nominee can remain a student reviewer for two years.

Informal representation

An example of informal representation was reported in which regular large group student meetings are held that are attended by about 200 students. Lunch is provided, there are

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discussions about current issues and the students' feedback is gathered. The students receive a certificate for participating.

6. Styles of engagement

Not all institutions approach student engagement in the same way. Where student engagement is mandated, student representatives are appointed but are not always engaged, their appointment in some instances being tokenistic. However, in other instances student engagement is genuine, across all decision-making bodies and students may even take lead roles in particular bodies.

I think initially it's a difficult concept. I think the sector, we, others, NUS even sometimes, I think struggle with the concept of student engagement. Not in what we want it to be but articulating exactly what it is and how you recognise it and how you codify it and what you need to pass on and is that even appropriate because we know there's a lot of good stuff going on out there in institutions but it's a very individual sort of thing. (HEFCE officer)

Where we are now is that there is no committee in the University left that has anything to do with learning and teaching or the broader student experience where there is no student representation, and these are elected student representatives not co-opted.... [ex-student sabbatical officer]

The style of engagement is also influenced by the size and nature of the institution. The procedures adopted in large high-ranking universities may not necessarily be relevant or appropriate for smaller alternative institutions. Student engagement is more likely to be inclusive where the relationship between institution and student is perceived as a partnership.

7. Roles that support engagement

The interviews revealed that there is provision of a number of roles to assist and support the process of student engagement. Some of these roles are provided for within student organisations whereas others are university roles.

The provision of a dedicated manager or coordinator within the university or student organisation with responsibility for student representation and engagement matters is becoming increasingly more common. The potential for conflict between university appointed coordinators and student organisations was noted. The coordinator will typically assist with preparing students for their roles as student representatives.

The opportunity to have sabbatical officers within a student organisation enhances the commitment to student engagement activities that can be provided through ensuring that representatives can commit the required time to their role.

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Champions of the student engagement process within the institution were identified as significant contributors to the success and embedding of student engagement. Success is also assisted through clearly defined roles that support each other without creating duplicated effort.

the strategic leadership buy-in into student engagement tends to have an effect. So, if you look at somewhere like Lincoln and their VC is very hot on student engagement, it tends to then be developed more into their structure. (QAA officer)

Lead student representatives have been used effectively in review processes to coordinate student input, to report and to liaise with other stakeholders in the review process.

Staff student liaison committees were also seen as a beneficial initiative. One university member said that each department has a staff student liaison committee which is made up of elected student representatives (generally one or two per year per program) and key academic and professional services staff. These committees meet about four times per year to discuss key issues that are coming up, problems that students have, and to ascertain students' views.

8. Processes which benefit an ethos of student partnership

The research showed that there is a number of processes that benefit student engagement. A collaborative working relationship between the institution and the student organisation is beneficial as is transparency, ensuring that student representatives have access to relevant information. Flexibility is also important in order to gather the views of different student cohorts and the feedback process needs to be approached in different ways for different student groups. In addition, processes for checking the effectiveness of approaches to student engagement were seen as valuable.

...seven years ago, now we made a conscious decision between the Student Union and the LTEO trying to talk to students in induction about the importance of the informed student voice.

So, myself and now the Education Officer, the [sabbatical] officer responsible for academic issues, do a 20 minute, half an hour presentation to all our new undergraduates and our PGT and our PGR students to talk about the ethos of the institution and where it puts the student voice and how it's at the head of the system. So, they get that grounding from day one when they arrive on campus ... (UK university student engagement officer)

Benchmarking against similar institutions in terms of how students are supported and the wider experience of the student organisation was also seen as beneficial.

The provision of a dedicated agency that supports student engagement across institutions was emphasised as a useful model. This was identified as a key driver for success in facilitating student partnership across the sector and is discussed in the project report *Student engagement in university decision-making and governance – towards a more systemically inclusive student voice*

conclusions. The documentary evidence examined above details the outputs of these bodies.

9. Culture

Institutional culture is clearly significant to the success of student engagement. Institutions where student engagement is effective demonstrate commitment to the process and readiness for it.

At the same time, the ethos of the student body is important to success. Effective student engagement occurs in environments where students seek an all-round education wanting not just to study but also to gain as much experience and skill as possible. Providing for diverse engagement and ensuring effective representation of all student groups is also important.

So, anything that we produce, especially if it's sector, if it's in partnership with the sector, it tends to be quite guidance focused rather than directive. (NUS officer)

... they also introduced a national student listening program which included a kind of National Student Council to advise the higher education minister that wasn't part of us but we had the opportunity to appoint most of its members. (NUS officer)

The culture within student organisations appears to have shifted with student organisations becoming more professional in the way that they do things. This move, combined with a university's commitment, means that institutions and their student bodies often have a shared agenda. This agenda is reflected in an attitude to the student role which sees it as a partnership in education rather than students being viewed as consumers of educational services.

For partnership to exist, trust must be at the centre of the relationship. Creating consistency of commitment and practice across faculties, is also seen as important with the more space given to students on learning and teaching committees the more important and the more valuable their input.

Student engagement in Belgium

Due to the complexities involved in the vast range of countries and higher education sectors within the European Community, it was not possible and indeed would have been fruitless to conduct an investigation into student engagement in university decision making in Europe generally. This project however had the opportunity to discuss student representation in Belgium where generally students are included in all bodies that determine university and country-wide policies concerning higher education, and there is a strong focus on student leadership in institutions and wider national and European bodies (through the Bologna system). Interviews and focus groups were conducted with

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representatives of Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and the University of Antwerp. While acknowledging this is a very small sample, its value was that it provided perspectives from two different universities within the European community to compare with the UK research. In conducting analysis of the Belgian research under the same themes, it became apparent that most approaches are shared with the UK. Without examining the divergent historical roots of the university/student relationship and the particular challenges arising from a number of national languages, it seems that the concept and practice of partnership is accorded similar importance although the UK is in earlier stages of development. European students generally have historically been more vocal about their place as partners in higher education.

Interview findings from Belgium

The interviews and focus groups were analysed using the same themes as the UK research.

1. Areas of engagement

Student inclusion in all accreditation and governance issues was again noted. Student engagement is both formal and informal and engagement is genuine. Student engagement is embraced at all levels of decision making starting with the program level. Relevant bodies include faculty council, faculty boards and central governors

. One institution reported that every faculty has at least two representatives on the student council and student representatives are found on every board or committee that has to deal with students. Student representatives on most senior bodies take on significant responsibility in spite of a lack of skill and expertise at the outset.

We have student representatives in every board or committee that has to deal with students of course. So they all are student representatives and some of them sit in the board of the student council. (Belgian university student engagement officer)

2. Who is engaged

The extent to which students are willing to become involved in student representation was reported to be limited. This in turn increases the workload for those students who do take on representative roles. Students who participate in, for example, the central students' council are students who have been involved in faculty council. Alumni may also take on roles as student representatives. Having joined the student organisation as a student a member may not necessarily leave as soon as they have finished their studies so alumni can stay engaged especially if they have relevant expertise and they are still young. This varies between institutions. Sometimes the age limit is 29 and sometimes 35.

3. Training

Student representatives are trained. The most common centralised European training is provided by European National Quality Assurance (ENQA) on an annual basis. Importantly, teaching staff and the heads of institutions are invited as well as student representatives. In addition, informal training and advice may be provided to student representatives in faculties by the student council to ensure that faculty representatives are well briefed and can contribute effectively. Many initiatives start at the faculty level and it is rare for students to start as representatives at the central or higher level. One university reported that its general assembly would not elect a student who has not had some experience in student representation.

4. Incentives

The question of incentives was accorded equal consideration and was similarly challenging. Payment is provided in at least some instances and there is a view that this assists with recruiting the most appropriate representatives as it compensates for taking the representatives away from study or work. Some students are motivated by being able to include their student representative experience on their curriculum vitae. Others are motivated by a desire to create a better community.

...CV - yeah, it's really great on my - but that is not the reason why I do it. That's also a very personal thing of course because there are people that do it for their CVs. There's nothing wrong with that if they do their job well. But I do it because I truly believe in creating a better community. So... (Belgian university student leader)

[There was indeed] a request by the students a couple of years ago on get extra credits or special credits and the governing commission of the university refused this idea for several reasons. I can say it's more - you are more free. You are more autonomous. You can do it totally in your own discretion. (Belgian university student leader)

Where there is no payment the role was seen to be quite a burden particularly in the case of those more senior, while roles at more junior levels are not seen as onerous or time consuming. Faculty representation takes about three hours per month.

We still have a lot to do. The only thing is the mandate itself becomes unbelievably heavy for students. Because it's an extracurricular activity. It's not paid in any way. Or we don't get extra things because we do it. (Belgian university student president)

5. Recruitment

Similar to the UK, student representatives are most commonly elected. Central student representatives are elected by faculty student group representatives and faculty student representatives are elected by students. The number of faculty representatives depends on the size of the faculty. One university reported that the faculty student representatives attend a fortnightly general assembly which determines how central representatives will vote and represent their student constituents.

Every year it's a battle. ... So for faculties it's really hard to get students that ... because some are afraid that it will influence their...results. I guess it is a lot of work or they are afraid of the teachers. They are afraid that it will influence their results in the end. If you have a conflict that they will be accounted for. While in my experience it's really not an issue ...Be on a professional level, not on a personal level. So if you have a conflict it's professional. (Belgian student engagement officer)

Not all student representatives are elected. There are some representative roles that are filled by selected experts. Some roles are of limited duration.

6. Styles of engagement

Student engagement is at multiple levels from faculty to senior governance and in some instances the level of student representation on a particular body is significant. For example, an education council was cited as comprising one third professors, one third teaching assistants and one third students. The compulsory nature of student consultation in one institutional policy was cited as another example.

We advise the university of all matters student related. So if there is a decision made and it's about students, we can - we have the right to advise the university. We're always listened to and... always get the feeling we were listened to. Of course, we don't always get what we want. But it is taken into account. (Belgian university student leader)

7. Roles that support student engagement

The student organisation at one university includes an employed education officer in a half time role. Because the student organisation does not want the education officer to have more power than the board of the student council they are only appointed for two years. This provides continuity within the council and training. The education role is referred to as a student coach in at least one institution. Former student representatives act as advisors to current representatives.

8. Beneficial processes

Senior bodies such as Executive Board and Academic Council that are populated by members of the university community actively engage with student representatives and seek their input on issues under discussion.

9. Culture

It was observed that the opportunity for students to be proactive may differ between years. However, an inclusive culture was observed in at least one institution.

When you have meetings of the education committee in the faculty or of a working group of the education council then it's important that you give a sign that the students - that you expect them. That they are welcome - not only welcome, but you expect them to debate, to give their opinion... (Belgian university student president)

In some instances, students are not considered to particularly understand the issues at hand especially if they are new to the institution. This was contrasted with more central roles where the appointed students are more experienced. The senior management of the university was identified as particularly important to the way in which student representatives are received. Thus, the representative role can vary between being structurally embedded in the decision making process to having very limited engagement.

The only thing that becomes really difficult is when your student representation is [not] embedded in the system. It also becomes more and more something which happens on the background which means you can have problems with legitimacy. Which we always try to work on. We try really hard and sometimes you just go to the point that students say, but I don't care just do what you want to do. That's the terrible part of the situation. But it is an extra pitfall for student representation and they can't be real leaders anymore in the more inspiring part of leadership. (Belgian university student president)

Approaches in New Zealand

New Zealand provides a different context from that in the UK and Belgium and is perhaps more similar to the Australian sector. This is particularly the case in terms of legislative challenges to the strength of students' associations and democracy within institutions. This is shown on two fronts. First, changes to the *Education Act 1989* (NZ) since 2009 have had the potential to impact student engagement in decision-making and governance. Secondly, in common with Australia, voluntary membership of student associations has led to a diminution in their size and representative function and it can no longer be said that they represent all students (section 229A *Education (Freedom of Association) Amendment Act 2011*). Further, the *Education Amendment Act (No 4) 2011* impacted how student amenities fees could be used (sections 227A (1) and 235D (1)) by delineating the types of service to which they could be applied and the right of the student body to be consulted in deciding which services would be funded.

Recent legislation further reduced the size of university governing bodies and removed the requirement for elected student and academic representation (*Education Amendment Act 2015*). Universities grappled with how this would be dealt with and continued with student and staff membership following wide consultation within their constituencies. Heart could also be taken from the introduction of a private member's Bill known as the *Education (Restoration of Democracy to University Councils) Amendment Bill 2015* in October 2015 but this failed to progress past the first reading in the National majority legislature.

Despite legislative intervention, the higher education sector and tertiary institutions in New Zealand continue to demonstrate a real commitment to the genuine engagement of student voice in governance and decision making. Student associations within universities generally continue to receive institutional support, and the operation of the national body, the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA) is funded collectively by New Zealand universities. Much of the research work of this body is also funded by Ako Aotearoa: the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence (the Australian Government Office of Learning and Teaching¹).

New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA)

The commitment to student partnership is influenced, to no small extent by NZUSA. This is an association of university student associations and while having a clear political aspect it also has a strong education focus particularly in relation to the role of student voice. In 2012, NZUSA and Ako Aotearoa (the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence) commissioned research into student representative systems in New Zealand, and how they

¹ The Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching ceased on 30 June 2016. The Australian Government Department of Education and Training continued to administer its Promotion of Excellence in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PELTHE) Program
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contribute to quality enhancement in tertiary institutions. The research investigated two universities, four institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), one wānanga (Maori tertiary institution) and two private training establishments (PTEs). The resulting 2013 report, *Student Voice in Tertiary Education Settings: Quality Systems in Practice* identified a well-developed system of representation present in institutions that formed part of the study. All the institutions had arrangements for representation which allowed them to feed into university governance. Representation was provided at different levels within the institutions starting 'at grass roots' with well-developed class representative systems which then fed into program, faculty and university governance structures. Student leadership through student associations plays a big role in this in terms of facilitating information from class representatives upwards and working in partnership with the institution in training and support of representatives. The report identified important characteristics of effective student engagement systems not least of which is institutional culture and how students are perceived within the institution. While the presence of consumerist characterisations of students could impact their representative role, generally the representative systems seemed to be working for those organisations and the student representatives.

Seeing students as customers has the potential to constrain student voice, placing it in reactive rather than proactive mode. Organisations may then only react to complaints, rather than seeking the input of students into larger issues related to actively improving teaching and learning. 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. (Ako Aotearoa/NZUSA, 2013)

The report observed that organisations that engage effectively with their students have a culture that values student voice which they demonstrate by a range of representative systems that enable, as far as possible, input from all students. They work to ensure that all student representatives are trained and supported so that they can actively participate in decision-making. Furthermore, students are willing to engage actively in student representative systems where there is a recognition of and reward for their contribution. It is recognised that a lack of resources to enable student representatives to fulfil their roles presents significant barriers to their doing so effectively. Developing clear terms of reference and constitutions of committees were also seen as important.

The report emphasised the importance of communication so that students understood their role as class representatives or on a board or committee and were fully briefed and prepared. Significant also was the importance of communication in terms of making the student representatives aware of what had been done as a result of their input. This conclusion highlights once again the central importance of institutions demonstrating a commitment to and respect for student voice:

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The culture of valuing student voice is the feature of representative systems that underpins the other features, and is critical to ensuring that student voice is validated and valued. Where a positive attitude exists towards student voice, organisations build the systems, practices and processes that will ultimately ensure that students' representative voice is listened to and used in the quality-enhancement process and that students know that to be the case. (Ako Aotearoa/NZUSA, 2013 at p 78)

Interview findings from New Zealand

1. Areas of engagement

Formal representation includes roles within faculties on different committees. There is no consistent model but typically there are class representatives, faculty representatives, teaching and learning committee members, academic committee members and academic board members. Established faculty societies have a seat on the relevant faculty board. There may also be opportunities for society presidents to meet informally with the relevant dean.

The class representative system may be run through a contract between the university and the student association. Each class elects a representative. Large subjects run across multiple classes may have multiple representatives. The class representation system was reported as having developed more systemic student engagement.

The role of academic committee and academic council may differ between institutions although there was some evidence that the extent to which student voice is actually heard at this level may be questionable.

on all of our faculty boards we have student representatives which are XXX [university student association] nominees. So we work through a selection process to find those people. So before someone becomes a Faculty Delegate, they'll meet with either a Student Representation Coordinator or our Academic Vice-President to talk through what that role is. (NZ university student president)

2. Who is engaged

While there are diverse student engagement opportunities, a minority of students engage with election processes and these are typically students who want to be representatives. There are attempts to gain input from different groups within the student body and votes are allocated to important groups. There is a question around the extent to which student organisations effectively represent student cohorts. There was also evidence that for particular roles there are attempts to recruit student representatives with relevant skills and experience.

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3. Training

In at least one institution the student organisation provides an education coordinator. This role allows training of student representatives to be independent of the institution and to develop expertise in debating issues, critiquing proposals and working with different stakeholders as well as understanding meeting protocols.

Training starts early with induction to the student representative system commencing in first year through orientation and through a slide shown in each class at the beginning of the year. This process assists in making students aware that their representatives can advocate for them and should work to seek their views.

Time is invested in building skills and briefings before meetings.

I would say we're quite pleased with how the system works, in terms of it's ingrained, in terms of systemic student representatives at virtually all levels of the academic approval committee processes and things like that. So in terms of the functionality of that as well, 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 university student president)

4. Incentives

Representative roles are unpaid and may take many hours per week at the more senior levels. As a result, many students do not see representation as relevant, they just want to get their degree and move on. The motivation for some students, however, is the belief that engagement enhances their student experience and that of others. Leadership and volunteering programs that lead to recognition of contribution as a student representative may also be of assistance. For some students, the motivation to contribute is that it will look good on their curriculum vitae, however there was a suggestion that where this is identified the relevant students are discouraged.

5. Recruitment

For the most part, student representatives are elected or volunteer particularly at the class representative level. Students may come through the student organisation to all representative roles. There are some roles where students are appointed rather than elected particularly in more senior roles where skills to represent the student body effectively are seen as important. Appointment rather than election does raise issues but the process was justified by a reported struggle to get good representatives. Faculty delegates on the academic committee and board may be appointed through a selection process involving a formal interview.

we like elections to happen to find them and often you might get a case that no-one wants to necessarily volunteer, so eventually the lecturer will ask for any volunteers,

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type thing and if there's a few people that will put their hands up then you might have an election. Otherwise it's, okay, you've volunteered so you'll be the Class Representative, type thing. (NZ university student president)

6. Styles of engagement

Different approaches to student engagement were reported. Some faculties are active in engaging with students while some academics see it as a compliance issue. Attempts to improve engagement with students included a project to highlight the value of class representatives.

Student attitudes to engagement also vary. Some students see it as valuable. Student enthusiasm may depend on the actual student representative and class. Variable attitudes towards the extent to which student voice is sought, listened to and affects outcome were reported.

7. Roles that support student engagement

The most significant role appears to be the education officer that is provided by the student organisation.

we have a fulltime - well, it used to be called an Education Organiser and is now a Student Representation Coordinator, that's what it's called. The whole reason - a little bit of history, it was basically based off a union model of class representatives, delegates, representatives over all these levels in terms of a student union model and that translated into, how does that fit with this particular thing? So, we have - just to outline how the whole system works - Class Representatives. So, we're contracted to facilitate and run the Class Representative system. (NZ university student president)

8. Beneficial processes

The engagement of students at multiple levels across the institution again appears to provide a useful mode for building expertise and allowing greater range of student voices to be heard than might otherwise be possible.

9. Culture

Culture again appears to play a significant role in the extent to which student voice is effective in higher education in New Zealand. Where there is a student-centric approach there appears to be a genuine interest in attempting to ensure that processes are in place that provide for effective engagement with students even if there are recognised limitations in current student engagement.

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A model of student engagement

The findings reported above were used to formulate a model depicting 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 key concepts.

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.

Significance for Australian higher education

Tertiary education institutions in Australia operate in changing times. In any case it is imperative that they keep the interests of their students, course quality and the student experience uppermost. Australian tertiary education is subject to increasingly corporate economic treatment by governments and industry and continuing deregulation is possible. While an intention is to empower students in a learning marketplace, there are also

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potential negative impacts to the tertiary education system in that it can also result in commercialisation and competition leading to ‘student as consumer’ attitudes. This approach encourages a passivity in students that then may miss a purpose of higher education which is to develop future leaders, innovators and critical thinkers. Consumer law could be said to have its place in the protection of students from misleading or deceptive conduct or to provide redress when an education is not ‘fit for the purpose’. Success in this course of action however has been elusive in courts and tribunals, pointing to its unsuitability. Importantly, to classify students as consumers argues against the nature of a university as a community of scholars with all members working together towards the common goal of enhancing education and the educational experience for all.

To adopt the words of European students:

Students are not consumers of higher education, but significant components within it. Consumers are not involved in the management of process, but students are co-responsible for higher education management, as higher education is developed for students. Students are the main beneficiaries of increasing the quality of [higher education]. Students should have more impact in decision-making and governance of higher education, which must be a community of students and professors who are equally responsible for its quality.

[Budapest Declaration: Governance and Student Participation. 21st
European Student Convention – February 2011]

Professor Varnham’s research shows that in comparative overseas sectors subject to similar market forces and legislative intervention, the systemic participation of students in decision-making and governance in tertiary institutions is developing strongly. A point may be taken here from business and marketing literature which focuses on the importance of listening to customers for business success (see for example “*Listening to customers yields success*” at www.forbes.com/sites/alanhall/2013/05/17/listening-to-customers-yields-success/) with the logical extrapolation that engaging with students will be important to the success of universities. However, the relationship between students and universities cannot be reduced to just a business transaction. Sectors abroad are focussing on how best to engage students as partners so as to make them an integral part of their course development and enhancement - how best to recognise that central to university decision making should be the voices of those to whom institutions owe their existence as viable corporate entities.

There is evidence that Australian universities are moving to embrace the concept of student partnership. These moves are reflected in recent higher education policy. Following sector consultation to formulate the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)* 2011 and its 2015 replacement (from January 2017), the Higher Education Standards Panel included a requirement for student representation. In the first iteration, at Chapter 1.6.8 it provided:

As appropriate to its scale and scope, the higher education provider has student representation within its deliberative and decision-making processes and encourages students to participate in these processes.

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The new 2015 Standards state at CI 6.1.4.:

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.

and CI 6.3.3. further provides:

Students have opportunities to participate in academic governance.

While these provisions recognise students as stakeholders in higher education they lack any clear requirement that students must be represented in institutional decision making processes at all relevant levels.

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) confirmed the importance of student representation in university decision making to improving tertiary education for themselves and for future students. It goes further than the Standards to suggest some of the means by which universities may engage students:

- by encouraging students to participate in meaningful feedback processes, including student surveys;
- by informing students of any actions it takes to improve the quality of education as a result of student input; and
- by having student representation in its decision-making processes about quality improvement and assurance, for example, through student representation on relevant committees or through consultation processes.

(For Students: 'Do students have a voice in the assessment of quality in higher education?' Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (www.teqsa.gov.au/for-students#C).

In comparison to abroad, these emergent Australian expectations for higher education may be compared with those in Chapter B5 of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (2012) which asks that higher education institutions will take deliberate steps to student engagement. The rationale for the Chapter is in the beginning statement which says there is a wide acceptance that 'the views of students, both individually and collectively should inform quality systems for the purpose of improving the educational experience for both current and future cohorts' (p 4) and the suggestion of a range of areas of a university's functions in which the views of students are important. The expectation in Chapter B5 requires that 'higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their education experience' (p 6). It is followed by seven Indicators by which providers may demonstrate that they are doing this (these are set out above). It defines partnership in this context to mean 'joint workings between students and staff' based on the concept that each Student engagement in university decision-making and governance – towards a more systemically inclusive student voice

member brings 'legitimate, but different, perceptions and experiences' and it reflects a 'mature relationship based on mutual respect between students and staff' (p 6).

Practically, student engagement in governance may have clear benefits for both students and institutions in the competitive corporate climate. A body of literature which preceded the United Kingdom's Chapter B5 supports this view (for example, Trowler, 2010; Little & Ors, 2009; Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). This material reports that affording students the opportunity to have meaningful input into the quality of teaching and learning increases the likelihood of improving the effectiveness of the organisation. Further, it states that the student motivation for ensuring that they are receiving value for money lends itself to student involvement in decision-making processes as a valued activity (Trowler, 2010). It follows that institutions that actively engage with their students in decision-making processes are likely to be viewed favourably by students when choosing where to study. Moreover, there is evidence that effective student engagement in decision-making assists in improving quality which again is likely to translate into higher enrolments (Coates, 2005).

Following inclusion of Chapter B5 into the Quality Code, the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) commissioned Gwen van der Velden and others at the University of Bath to undertake research into student engagement practices in UK higher education institutions (University of Bath/QAA, 2012). This research strongly supports the value of student engagement in university governance and suggests that 'a more competitive environment stimulates a strong focus on student opinion'.

The findings from Professor Varnham's international investigations reported here show practices that may be adopted in the Australian higher education sector to provide greater and improved opportunities for student engagement in governance and decision making. While there may be differences in the sectors studied relating to how higher education institutions are structured and funded and how they perceive student organisations, there are converging themes. What stands out is the suggestion that market pressures can drive a need to embrace effective student engagement at multiple operational levels. Examples particularly from the United Kingdom illustrate the interplay and evolution of these aspects of higher education delivery.

With the introduction of Chapter B5 and the establishment of The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) in the UK, the early adoption of student engagement practices by some institutions provided useful models for those now following suit. Valuable aspects of the models available include provision of training to prepare students for these roles, introduction to the concept of student engagement at orientation sessions, opportunity to develop skills through progression from class roles through to roles on governance bodies and differentiated pathways for selecting representatives. Incentives and recognition may also be provided as an important encouragement to students taking on governance roles. There is also recognition that the approach to student engagement needs to fit with differences between type and style of institution.

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In New Zealand higher fees have not yet been adopted. While there is now legislation which could have the effect of discouraging student engagement and weakening student associations, the concept of student partnership is progressing nevertheless. The engagement of students in university decision making and governance is becoming embedded in most universities and increasingly in polytechnics and colleges. This is assisted by the work of the National Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA) which enjoys sector support and performs a training and research role. Students may be engaged as representatives at course level through to senior university management bodies and there are examples of effective preparation of student representatives through training programs and briefing sessions. There are also examples of careful selection of student representatives for participation in senior institutional bodies. An important aspect of the New Zealand context is the relatively small tertiary education sector competing for a smaller student constituency. In this climate, there is a clear need for institutions to be positioned as responsive to student needs and this factor has had the potential to advance the position taken on student engagement in the absence of a mandate to do so.

Conclusion

While the evidence from Professor Varnham's 2015 investigations abroad provides knowledge, experience and insights for Australia, it does not ignore the challenges. Currently, student representation in institutional governance is provided for in the legislation of most states and territories but there is pressure on institutions to reduce the size of their governance bodies and student representation could well be a casualty as was the case in New Zealand. Legislation to this effect was enacted in Victoria but was unpopular with both institutions and students. Subsequently the *Education Legislation Amendment (TAFE and University Governance Reform) Act 2015* (which commenced on 1 January 2016) amends all eight Victorian public university Acts to require that there be at least one elected student on each university council. The weakening of student associations and of the effectiveness of student leaders has been caused in large part by voluntary student unionism, and this needs addressing. For student partnership to progress there is a need for the sector to focus on the role student leaders may play in the representative context, the value of this engagement, and building the university/student relationship as one of trust and mutual respect.

In Australia, higher education institutions are increasingly subject to market forces due largely to anticipated changes in funding policy (<http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/bill/heslamsrathesb20171142/>). Experience from abroad demonstrates that this is best achieved in partnership with students. Hopefully this experience will accompany the growing recognition in the Australian sector of the part student voice may play in achieving better outcomes for both students and universities.

Dissemination

Professor Varnham, during her stay in the UK for the UTS Professional Experience Program project, gave a presentation on Student Engagement in Australian University Decision-making and Governance which outlined the rationale for her research, at a Roundtable organised by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education for England and Wales, at Reading. This was attended by approximately 30 people.

The findings reported here have also been presented in their entirety or in part in:

Varnham S (2015) *Students as partners: the student voice in university decision making and governance – discussion of an Office for Learning and Teaching project*, Higher Education Compliance and Quality Forum, Melbourne, Australia, November 2015

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Varnham S, Olliffe B, Cahill A and Waite K (2015) *Student engagement in university decision-making and governance - towards a more systemically inclusive student voice* Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA), Melbourne, Australia, July 2015

Varnham S, Olliffe B, Cahill A and Waite K (2015) *Student engagement in university decision-making and governance - towards a more systemically inclusive student voice* Australasian Law Teachers Association (ALTA), Melbourne, Australia, July 2015

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