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

2015 and 2016

## Good Practice Case Studies Report – Australian examples of student engagement

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# Introduction

Responses to our survey of student engagement practices in Australian universities (Varnham & ors 2017c), and stories volunteered to the project team at conferences, made it apparent that there were initiatives and existing practices at Australian universities that are already providing opportunity for students to have a significant representative role in decision making processes. Consequently, with the approval of the relevant institutions, we conducted interviews and focus groups with key personnel and students to gain an understanding of what these practices look like and how they are experienced by staff and students. Our aim was to create a body of exemplars that institutions keen to further develop their student engagement practices might draw on for ideas and implementation. Many of these practices are quite new. Consequently, we do not consider it appropriate to cast them as best practice as yet. Nonetheless, they show what universities who have taken on championing student voice have been able to achieve so far. Challenges have been identified. These issues reflect the need for continuing development of the relevant processes and are useful also to institutions considering working on their own practices.

Interviews and focus group sessions were audio-recorded and the recordings transcribed to provide a record of the practices explored at each institution. These transcripts were used to create the synopsis of each case study that is presented in this guide.

A willingness in some institutions to develop greater expertise led to an opportunity to conduct a pilot project relating to the use of staff student consultation committees. This practice is adopted overseas as well as in some Australian institutions and is seen to be highly valuable as a path to building a culture of student engagement and allowing both students and staff to gain expertise in student representation.

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 International Research Report (Varnham & ors 2017b), the Project Final Report (Varnham & ors 2017a), and the Australian Survey Report (Varnham & ors 2017c).

# University A: Student Staff Consultative Committee (SSCC)

This university provides SSCCs operating at the program level. The SSCCs enable students to have real input into their study program in meetings held to discuss program-related issues such as:

- course and program structure
- teaching methods
- timetabling
- workload
- access to resources and facilities
- class sizes.

One of the University's responsibilities set out in its Student Charter is *to Support student organisations and include student voices in decision making*. The SSCCs, established here many years ago, are one way of accessing student voice. The university has separate processes to deal with issues such as student appeals, or grievances against staff or students.

## Student representatives can self-nominate

Students can nominate themselves as SSCC representatives and if more than one nomination is received the relevant School will hold an election. All students in the program are eligible to vote. Often the student representatives have been encouraged to nominate themselves by friends who are already student representatives or have been tapped on the shoulder by a teacher in the program. Student representatives are a diverse mix of domestic and international, undergraduate and postgraduate, full time and part-time students.

*'Initially I guess my hand was kind of forced to become involved in SSCC. But since then I guess I've got a lot of personal growth out of it and have found that the more I get involved the more I gain and the more I can contribute to the university as a whole. It's not - I've found it's not necessarily going to change what happens while I'm here. It's about the future students.'* (student representative)

There are Guidelines for the operation of SSCCs that are provided to student representatives. The Guidelines include the required meeting quorum of two members of academic staff and a minimum of half of the student members. Meetings are generally held twice per semester, with the option of calling additional meetings under specific circumstances. There is also a SSCC Student Representative Manual, setting out information and tips such as 'Get

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connected to other students' to support and guide SSCC student representatives.

The student representatives are the 'voice' of the students in the program and they consult their peers to learn about program-specific issues which are of concern to students. A wide range of communication options, including social media, are employed by student representatives to reach their student constituency. Student representatives provide feedback to their peers on the outcome of the discussions at the meetings. The SSCC may make recommendations with an accompanying action component setting out the action and the person responsible. The Guidelines set out a list of suitable persons responsible for carrying out recommendations, including the associate PVC teaching and learning, or nominee.

## **Visibility of student representatives to the student body**

Each program/course has its own method of publicising the opportunities to become a student representative and how to contact a student representative when a course issue is causing a problem. Some courses use the University online learning management system while others introduce the student representatives during classes. Student representatives aim to be as visible as possible by attending class and making themselves known to the student body. Social activities arranged for a particular course are another opportunity for student representatives to make themselves known and available to other students. In some courses social media are also used. Even with what appears to be extensive promotion of the role of the student representative, students in some courses remain unaware of the role of student representatives and so as yet no perfect method of communication has been identified.

## **Training provided by the University is offered to student representatives**

The training is a free, three-hour interactive session designed to provide the knowledge and skills required for the role and to develop further employability skills.

University A has a strong Student Union and in 2016 the Student Union introduced a new staff member to resource SSCC student representatives with advice on areas of policy that they might need assistance in understanding. The Union has also held a SSCC Student Leadership Summit which included a Keynote address by the Vice Chancellor and President, Leadership and Critical Feedback Workshops as well as peer discussion to share experiences.

Training is not provided to staff but instead staff members are given a briefing pack.

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## **Incentives for recognition of representative roles**

Student representatives can have their role as a student representative formally recognised with a certificate from the University. To be eligible to receive the certificate, a student representative must attend the training session and complete a minimum of seven to eight hours of activities relating to the work of the SSCC.

Another incentive promoted is the direct opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the student representative's own program of study. Some matters raised at SSCC meetings were addressed immediately and student representatives reported that this was a very effective incentive as it made them feel that their commitment to the SSCC was making a difference. Student representatives found that it was much more effective raising a matter at a SSCC rather than through any of the Subject Feedback Surveys they completed. Some students recognised that sometimes the improvements being made would benefit future students rather than the current cohort, especially when representing a course of one year or less.

Individual student representatives often had personal incentives for becoming a student representative. This included gaining more confidence; learning about Australian culture and seeing how universities work (from an International student); making a contribution and connecting with other students.

The opportunity for leadership and skills development in the role with resulting benefits to employability is promoted widely to students. The role is seen by both the university and students as a good way to gain experience and confidence to take on student representative roles on other committees and boards of the university.

## **Wider student representation – changing culture**

Students reported a changing culture at this university. A recently arrived VC with a clear view of the importance of the student voice has had a big impact. The new VC is bringing the student experience to the centre. Students reported feeling as if they were now involved in the actual decision-making.

*'We sat down and we gave a list of priorities on behalf of the student organisation but also on behalf of all students of things that we've heard over time and as first hand of things we'd like changed. We were blown away by the fact that he wrote every single one of those down, hand by hand and then passed them on to be student experience KPIs. It was absolutely phenomenal.'* (student representative)

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# University B: Student Campus Council (SCC)

University B has a Student Representation and Participation Policy with a stated purpose of

Student representation at the university to provide students with an opportunity to voice their views, suggestions and concerns through a proper and efficient process. The voice of the student body is important in the governance of the University; ... student representatives suggest, develop and implement solutions that are campus specific and university wide.

This Policy sets out clearly the guiding principles to be followed and in accordance with those principles University B has established support structures for student representatives. The details for the implementation of this Policy are found in The Student Representation Procedures.

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

The SCC terms of reference of SCCs are set out in the Student Representation Procedures and include:

- promoting the interest of campus students;
- providing a communication channel between students and the university;
- publishing a newspaper/newsletter to communicate to students;
- liaising and working closely with all university staff including the Campus Provost.

## Diversity of student representatives

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

Each SCC member is elected for one year with the term commencing on 1 January and finishing on 31 December. Elections are held towards the end of the year. If there are any casual vacancies at the beginning of the year, then by-elections are held to fill them.

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Meetings are scheduled at least once per month and unless there is a specific need to hold the meeting elsewhere, it must be held on the home campus of the SCC. The quorum is 50% + 1 of the total number of voting members of the Council with no special requirement as to the composition of the members present.

Students become representatives in a multitude of ways, most often because they know someone who was or had been a representative and they were encouraged to apply. Others had held positions at previous institutions or wanted a view to be represented that they identified was missing in the then current representation.

## **Visibility of student representatives to the student body**

Student representatives see that an important part of their role is to spread the word of their existence to the whole student body. The myriad emails causing information overload for students make it very hard to maintain good communication with the student body. At this University, the members of the SCC use every opportunity to remind students of the existence of the SCCs and what each has achieved. The SCC offices are marked on university maps so students can find their representatives. The SCCs have regular branded events where they hand out pizza, chat to students and make sure that the students know who is handing out the pizza. Certain SCC offices have been identified as being in prime locations for accessing students as they are in areas where students pass by. An open door policy encourages students to drop by and chat on impromptu visits.

*'So we run small events from time to time - try and have them as regularly as possible just doing things like handing out pizza and trying to engage people in conversations on campus. We've got big table cloths which have the SCC logo on them and stuff, so it's quite clear - we try and make it very clear who we are. We do have offices which are marked on maps and stuff.'* (SCC member)

## **Training and support – general induction and handover**

Students receive training in the form of a general induction provided by the University. Each student representative is given a comprehensive Leaders Resource Guide. The training is offered once a year over several days at the end of the year and then one day at the beginning of the next year. This training covers multiple student representative positions. There is specific training for those students taking on roles as secretaries and chairs. The training is not compulsory. Handover from the outgoing members of the SCC to the new members is encouraged and the outgoing cohort is invited to the induction of the new group of representatives.

*we do have the end of the year about three days, the training, or a couple of days, and then there is one whole day once before we start next year in February. (student engagement officer)*

A University position, Manager, Student Representation and Participation is in place to support the operation of the SCCs (and the Student Representative Council). This position provides advice, support and guidance on all strategic and procedural aspects to the student representatives.

An additional university position is that of Student Voice Officer. This position was created to support and resource student leaders and to facilitate the student voice in university decision-making.

### **Incentives – tangible and intangible**

In recognition of the commitment made by students to take on representative roles, University B pays sitting fees to student representatives. A further loading is paid for student members of the SRC. The sitting fee is intended to compensate the students for the time they commit to their role and the impact this has on their capacity to undertake paid employment. Some student representatives nominate for the position without being aware of the amount of the sitting fee and others are unaware of its existence.

In advertising student elections University B describes the opportunity for students to play a key role in the life of the campus and to contribute to decision-making at the university. In addition, the professional skills development which comes from being a student representative and which are the same attributes actively sought by employers is promoted to students to encourage nominations for the roles.

## **University C: A regional university embracing a number of student engagement initiatives**

University C has multiple regional campuses and a significant population of Distance Education (DE) students. There is wide variation between campuses and student cohorts both of which pose challenges for student engagement. There are three initiatives of interest underway at University C:

- Student Representative Councils (SRC)
- Student Leadership Conference
- Competencies for Student Members of senior governance bodies

### **SRCs on each campus**

The university's student charter provides that students can expect opportunities to contribute to the organisational and cultural life of the University and to be represented and actively involved in relevant University committees, as well as opportunities to provide feedback for the improvement of the University.

Each campus has a Student Representative Council (SRC) and there is a SRC Senate with representatives from all campuses. The SRCs are intended to be responsible for ensuring a student voice and for funding student clubs and social events on campus, and to provide opportunities for leadership, university engagement, community engagement and the opportunity to practice skills directly relevant to the workplace.

However, there is a view that members of SRCs and Student Senate are mainly occupied with organising social and sporting activities. Students with issues with courses etc. take them to a student representative on a school or faculty board rather than the SRC. There appear to be no clear pathways between whole student bodies and SRCs.

At University C there is no course representative system currently operating. When it did run in the past, it seemed to work quite well with bigger courses. There was an induction booklet for course representatives but possibly no other training for these positions. Student representatives on school and faculty boards are very isolated and academic attitudes towards student representatives are not very encouraging.

A focus group of SRC representatives, professional staff who are responsible for administration of the SRC structure and other student representatives on committees and boards; governance officers and the Chair of the university senate (Academic Board) provided insight into some of the challenges confronting SRCs.

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Communication is a big issue. The students felt the university was missing valuable opportunities by working solely through committees. They said that students become much more involved in discussion forums when they are implemented using social networking tools.

*'the two things that we've used that have helped a bit is looking at the technologies or mechanisms we use rather than just relying on committees all the time, and to make things topical or issues based, rather than just generic governance processes. When you're here today to approve all the grades, you're here today to do this. That stuff people don't really get engaged with. Whereas, you say, you're here today to talk about this new plan the university has to do this. That focusses people's attention. You're here about an issue, here's an issue.'* (student engagement officer)

The SRC Senate is highly structured and students worry about getting protocols right. This is a barrier to students fully engaging. Formal structure is recognised as important for learning how to engage with committees, however, so a combination of formal committee structures and social media tools is seen as useful for generating input for consideration by committees.

There can be difficulties in supporting student representatives who are so spread out. Identified issues included non-alignment of election timing and a lack of readily available resources for students who want to know about leadership options. This has highlighted the need for an effective communication strategy which in turn gave rise to the Student Leadership Conference.

## **Student Leadership Conference**

A Student Voice think-tank was convened including presidents of the SRCs, the Presiding Officer of Academic Senate, Student Liaison Officers, the University Secretary, and the Dean of Students. This meeting reinforced the importance of student involvement in university governance to the success of the university, the university community, and to the professional development of the individual students involved. The message of 'everybody wins', needed to be communicated more effectively to students to increase student engagement.

The concept of a Student Leadership Conference as a vehicle for students from different campuses to meet to build a 'whole of university student leadership culture' emerged. The conference also provided an opportunity to build skills to allow representatives to work more effectively in their positions and the opportunity for the students to meet with and question some of the senior staff leaders of the university.

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*'I think raising the profile of student leadership is definitely happening.'*  
(student engagement officer)

The conference was a day and a half of networking, developing leadership skills and brainstorming about the future of University C student leadership. The conference was funded by SSAF (Student Services and Amenities Fee) and travel, accommodation and meals were all covered for the students who attended. Students travelled from their different campuses to attend. The Student Leadership Conference has resulted in many more people standing for elections and it is planned to continue and build on it as a yearly event.

*'We've had far more students put their hands up for those positions than in days gone by.'* (student representative)

## **Board Competencies for Student Members of Academic Boards and Committees**

At University C, induction into University Council for student representatives is 'extensive and very good'. There is a two-day induction for all Council members including the student representatives. To enhance financial literacy, the university sends student representatives to the Australian Institute of Company directors' financial directors' course.

*'So that's I think a two-day induction that all council members do. So I did that. That goes through everything from your legal responsibilities to how the university works, the structure of the university. So that kind of covered a lot of stuff which was full on in the two days. But it was really, really good to start with.'* (student representative)

Students generally do not seek to become involved in senior governance bodies because the positions are not advertised widely, students are unlikely to see the benefit, and they are typically time and financially poor. Representation is not generally seen by them to be part of their learning experience but they might do so if it was a smaller commitment and if positions were funded.

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

University D has a dedicated non-profit entity that provides a range of non-academic services and facilities and social, cultural, recreational and sporting programs. Its activities cover a wide ranging spectrum, from the operation and management of commercial venues in the university, to discipline clubs in faculties and schools and diverse sports clubs. Its stated goals and objectives cover providing a range of services, products and venues that anticipate and respond to university needs, the delivery of welfare services, and activities which enhance and support social and cultural development in the university community. These activities include providing leadership opportunities for students through programs run, governance and advisory positions. This entity seeks to engage all members of the university community – students, staff and alumni – in its activities and holds effective collaboration to be of primary importance.

In addition to funds from commercial activities, the entity receives funding from the university through SSAF monies.

### **Majority of student directors on the Board**

The entity has a Board that has a majority of student directors (7 out of 13 Board members) which include the President and Vice-President. All student directors are elected for a two-year term by the whole student body, while the other Directors are appointed by the University Council. There are a number of permanent staff led by a Chief Executive Officer. The Board has a several committees whose memberships include student directors, for example, the Marketing Committee, the Programs Committee and the Sports Management Committee.

This entity distinguishes itself from the Students' Association as a non-political university organisation, rather than a student organisation and, while it has a majority of student directors, it exists for the benefit of all members of the university community. The Students' Association, on the other hand, exists to represent students in educational and political matters.

There is no differentiation between student directors and other directors of the entity, and all have a number of specific duties under various statutes. All directors are obliged to attend monthly Board meetings. Importantly all meetings must have a quorum of at least 7 members, meaning that there must be at least one student director present. Student directors have equal voting Student engagement in university decision-making and governance – towards a more systemically inclusive student voice

rights with other directors. Student directors feel both that their voice is effective and that their role provides benefits for their personal development.

While there are seven student directors on the Board, the leaders of sports, social and cultural clubs, as well as student accommodation and school and faculty clubs are engaged in activities conducted by and through the organisation. Each club and society has a student leader executive. Some of the sports clubs are affiliated to community based clubs and students are on their boards also.

Knowledge of the organisation as a whole, and views on the impact of student voice generally through the organisation varies with role, for example, sports clubs tend to focus on their club activities rather than the activities of the entire entity. There is also variation in perceived support from faculties for the course/discipline societies and their benefit in liaising with relevant staff members.

## **External Training provided**

All new student directors attend a one day “Governance for Directors’ Course run by the Australian Institute of Company Directors. There is also a full-day induction workshop where student directors are taken through every aspect of the company – its mission, values and objectives. This workshop is attended by the CFO and company lawyers: *‘You are a director not a student director’*.

Leadership, governance and financial training and support is also provided for sports and other affiliated clubs and societies.

## **Visibility of Student Directors to the whole student body**

The student directors use the organisation website to facilitate student engagement and interaction. They are currently undertaking a review and benchmarking with other similar university organisations. The website now contains a ‘Student Leadership’ page aimed at promoting student leadership, encouraging nominations and showcasing the governance model. The Student President and a director also compile a Meet the Candidates Handbook to publicise the nominees to the student body. There are also plans to facilitate an Inter Varsity Student Director Forum to lead to productive discussions among counterparts from other universities.

Elections are held in August and Student Directors play a strong role in publicising the opportunity for nominations, currently through an Election Nominations Video to promote nominations as well as holding information sessions for prospective candidates.

Student Directors’ terms are rolling – electing three in an even year, and four in odd years. There is reported to be an increasing knowledge of the roles in the

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wide student community. In 2015 there were 20 nominations for four positions. There is now an affirmative action policy included in the Constitution to counter the previous struggle with female participation.

*'We firmly believe that meaningful engagement and meaningful student voice for our company is why we are doing so well within the university... We are a leader in our sector'. (manager)*

There is a strong focus by the CEO on effective student perspective and student capability and competency, and a third of her time is spent on student director engagement on a regular basis. On the strategic planning day, they have a section for student outcomes and student deliverables and assets and resources are allocated to the goals.

*'And we do all the 'fun' stuff for orientation' (manager)*

## **Incentives – expenses, honoraria and experience**

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

There are also other less tangible incentives, the importance of which differ between students. Some value their role as something to include on their CV. There is also kudos in being young and responsible for a substantial organisation. This is particularly attractive to business students who can *'apply all the theory we hear in class'*. The opportunity to become involved in huge projects is a key driver. Being a director enhances key graduate attributes and skills that industry finds valuable - *"leadership, the ability to effectively communicate with peers, to work within a team, the ability to engender support and enthusiasm from multiple stakeholders towards a common goal."* (manager)

## University E: Student Guild Structure and Education Council

University E was chosen as a case study because of their model of student leadership through their Student Guild structure and the part played by student voice through their Education Council. The Student Guild has an undergraduate student president who is elected for one year. The Guild President works alongside an elected postgraduate student president. The Guild President represents students across the university and is assisted on post graduate issues by the elected Post Graduate Student President – they may sit on different committees and co-sit on other university committees to provide both focuses.

Guild elections are held annually to elect the President and other office bearers, and Guild Councillors – all for a one-year term. The same elections elect one student member of the University Senate.

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

Discipline clubs work directly with their school or with unit co-ordinators and their students. They feed issues up to Faculty Societies, which in turn feed up to the Education Council. The Education Council meets monthly to discuss campus wide issues which may be taken up by the Education Council President and the Guild President. The Education Council is a place where representatives from faculties collaborate and skill share to enhance the education of all students. Education Council oversees lobbying of faculties, the University and government.

Campaigns are run by the Education Action Network (EAN) which is a group for all students of the University committed to understanding issues relating to higher education and improving education provided at the University. The EAN runs campaigns on matters such as fee deregulation, and long term projects like rights at work, they do student-friendly guides to university policies and respond to university-wide issues.

There are two other sub-councils of the Guild – The Public Affairs Council and the Societies Council – all have their own presidents. Below this there are around 13 other representative based portfolios. This structure provides not only student input on education issues but also comprehensive student input into 'university life areas such as orientation, residency, staff awards etc. The

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Guild operates a large number of sports, social and cultural clubs and societies and commercial operations on campus.

Guild officers, such as the President, have ex-officio positions on university governance bodies, such as Academic Council and the Academic Board has six student members. The Guild President and Postgraduate President also have ex officio positions on Senate, and there is a third elected student member.

## **Formal training and informal succession practices**

Each incoming Guild President is required to attend governance, risk and financial management training conducted by the Australian Institute of Company Directors and funded by Senate. Training is also offered to specific Guild officers in relation to their specific roles. There is an informal 'succession' of student Guild leaders whereby the incoming President is likely to have performed a series of other leadership roles being mentored by the preceding experienced student leaders. The Guild also has a very formal, structured handover process – as well as the incoming President 'shadowing' the outgoing one, the Council receives training and there are handover packs distributed to affiliated bodies.

*'Most of the learning happens by us starting off in a smaller role then getting sort of mentored and taught by the more experienced members of the society and then if you decide to – you know, want to keep getting involved, then as you go into different roles you keep being mentored by those higher. You get better skills, you get handover and so eventually ...' "It's just the normal – like accession from like a fresher rep where you're really new and you don't know what's going on, to putting forward a more meaningful contribution in a more senior role, if that makes sense?" (student president)*

Faculty Society Representatives receive training, funding and support from the Guild, and many faculty societies run their own training days for the committees internally.

## **Perceptions of university commitment to student voice**

Students were generally positive about the university's commitment to student voice but at the faculty and discipline levels there were variations:

*'It also depends very much who's on the particular committee that you're taking it to. Within our faculty, we have different committees that are very responsive and appreciate student feedback and do make changes based on our suggestions whereas we have others that aren't as responsive. So it's – that has a big influence – the person.'* (faculty student representative)

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There is a culture of student voice but there is a hierarchy of who and what the university will listen to. Deans are reportedly happier to talk to Faculty Society representatives than discipline clubs; and the University Executive are happy to meet with the Guild President but it's *'a lot harder for a faculty society representative to get a meeting with a member of the university executive'*. At the Faculty level, representatives on the education committee and Faculty Board will be asked for views if there are changes being considered. An example was given by a Science club representative of the faculty listening to students' suggestions on a course review.

## **Visibility of student representatives – faculty societies and Guild involvement in systemic issues**

Reportedly most students would not have much idea of the Guild and its educational functions unless they engage at faculty society level. Faculty societies promote themselves on orientation day. They also rely on academics promoting the student representative function to their students – this varies widely. Promotion is driven largely by Deans, academics and student support officers.

*'So we meet every month and we bring up education issues, just organisational stuff because we collaborate on a lot of different things. So you feel like you have a really good conduit without waiting until the end of the course ... and bad mouthing the course in your feedback. We meet regularly and have good relationships where we're able to bring up problems as they arise and generally they get solved really quickly, because we've developed a really good relationship over the years with the faculty.'* (student faculty representative)

The Education Council and the Guild become involved in systemic issues. When there is a significant change being contemplated, the Guild President and Postgraduate President are invited to sit on a student concerns working group and work directly with faculty societies to get their input. Student surveys may also be used to get input from all students. These inputs are communicated to the working group. The working group in turn advises Academic Council. Academic Council keeps the Education Council updated on progress.

There is a strong culture of listening to students on important changes/issues affecting the whole university. There had been a feeling that the university doesn't listen to postgraduate students but there is evidence of that changing.

# University F: Academic Student Representatives (ASR)

The case study considers an initiative aimed at encouraging student involvement and engagement to facilitate the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning outcomes.

For the students, it is aimed at giving them 'deeper insight' into the operations of the university and to help develop their skills of communication, leadership and teamwork, and '*development as professionals*'.

The Academic Student Representative (ASR) Program itself currently operates in four schools in one Division (Faculty) and was predominantly piloted in 2014. It was instituted by the Dean and is led by an 'Experience Plus Support Officer'.

## The structure and recruitment of ASRs

Each program has an ASR and this includes undergraduate, Honours year, and postgraduate coursework. Each school is responsible for the recruitment of students – co-ordinating School Board selection process (see below), arranging orientation sessions and ensuring attendance at these sessions by appropriate school staff members; ensuring Program Directors convene meetings with ASRs (4 x year) and that they report to students and responsible staff on what transpires and recognizing the contribution of ASRs at end of term.

There are published Recruitment Guidelines for ASRs which provide that there should be one for every year level of a program. The Program Director is responsible for developing the process for appointment of ASRs within their program and election is preferred within Week 3. Before the election, the nominees are to be given the opportunity of addressing the class or they may produce an online statement. Every year, representatives for the School Boards are elected from the ASRs.

Each Program Director organises quarterly meetings each year with a report from the ASRs as standing items on the agenda. The meetings are attended by a School Academic Team professional staff member. The notes from each meeting are distributed via email to all students, the Head of School, the Associate Head of School, the Teaching and Learning Team Leader and program academic staff.

## Training – orientation and guidance using previous ASRs

Orientation is required for the ASRS and there is a Student Representative Handbook. This provides for matters such as: an overview of the role of ASR, advice on dealing with issues, strategies for collecting peers' ideas, suggestions and techniques to communicate this in meetings. It also provides school

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specific information, e.g. the operation of committees and boards and the selection process for the School Board Representative.

It is important that ASRs have the opportunity to talk to the year below *'things I wish somebody had told me'* and talk at open days and orientations – and that the role is taken seriously with Program Directors providing guidance.

## **Incentives – seeing impact of views**

Consideration has been given to how to encourage students to get involved – coffee vouchers, tee shirts and certificates have been suggested. Feedback from students was that Coles vouchers are preferred to book vouchers.

The main incentives for students were recognition that their views were listened to and in some cases acted upon and they could see that. Also important was developing socialisation and communications skills, getting to know program directors, other ASRs and students generally.

## **Staff Perspective**

Interviews were conducted with the Dean of the Division who is the main instigator and driver of Program and the Experience Plus Support/ Administrative Officer. The Dean started the program because of a feeling that the Students Association was ineffective and it was thought that an ASR scheme could be 'melded' with the university wide student representative system. It was designed with a simple format and a small cohesive team. Program co-ordinators came on board and the program developed from there. The concern was a lack of proper channels for feedback and it was decided to institute the system in part for this purpose, based on one which was already operating in one school in the Division.

The focus groups held for Program Directors discussed teething issues, including some Program Directors feeling threatened and others not allowing ASRs opportunity to talk to the classes. Currently there is a feeling that there are greater resources needed for it to operate effectively. Now that the student union has found its feet and student representation is happening better there is the thought that the whole campus based system could be combined with the ASR program and they could be responsible for training and support. The relationship between the ASR program and the Student union is *'tricky'* - *'we're trying to step away from saying, you've got your ideas let's collaborate'* - *'so we're still trying to negotiate and get over that, the past history of our two organisations'*. *'So things that I'm thinking about is if we keep our program year level reps and they feed back into the campus reps that they have at each campus, and then they take all that feedback and go to their school boards and all the other things they go to.'* (student engagement administrator)

ASRs are not advocates but *'vessels to push the message across'*.

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The Program Directors said that those who did get involved felt they really benefitted from it in many ways: course improvement, ideas, dealing with issues before they escalated etc. They also talked about how their students (architecture) had become involved in things like the design of the new student lounge – ‘... *the students are dealing directly with the university – the Vice Chancellor – all the way through to facilities management – and the Student Engagement Unit, so that there’s a big consultative process involved with other students as well*’ (student engagement administrator). They said that while it was sometimes difficult to recruit students, it was gaining momentum as other students can see peers putting hands up. There was a view that: ‘*We have to really sort of head hunt, I think one of the challenges with student reps is the sort of changing culture of universities – of students at university ... no longer a strong culture of being on campus and hanging round and working on campus... So truly representing your peer group I think is difficult*’ (academic course coordinator). There was a variation in disciplines and year groups – some have eagerly contested elections and the effectiveness of programs varies widely. It was stressed that the Program Directors need to generate enthusiasm and be willing to meet with students on a regular basis - to see their role as being as a conduit with ASRs and to encourage contact through email or visits. The ASR program has helped to ‘*iron out a few large issues*’

*‘I think in terms of developing a good culture with the group – the student group – it’s been really good’ ‘I think culture has a huge effect on the quality of the teaching program, on satisfaction of staff and students’.* (academic course coordinator).

It does depend strongly on the buy-in of the Program Directors and there is a wide variation in terms of their advising classes of the system, calling for nominees, letting nominees talk to classes and conducting elections, giving elected ASRs chances to address the whole class. However, it is a new phenomenon and they are ‘*finding their way slowly*’.

The main benefit is on culture and thus satisfaction of all which increases quality of teaching program.

## **A focus group with students helped to gain their perceptions**

Some feel the role to be largely ‘tokenistic’

*‘The way I believe the role was – is – is that we would be able to bring any student issues to the senior academics or to the people that run the school essentially. The reality is I feel it was a tokenistic role is that we came in, we sat on three meetings in one year and they told us what was going on. We told them what needed to change’.* (student ASR)

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There was no documentation and they didn't know what the outcomes were and this lack of communication was seen as a flaw in the system.

The students echoed the view that it was hugely dependent on the buy-in of the Program Directors, for example there was one who took notes and emailed points to students and had been willing to change things. Others had started a Facebook group as a forum.

Generally, the role was seen as liaising with students to see if positive ideas can be put forward but often students only communicate with ASR if they have a complaint.



## University G: Co-creation of a major student facility

A student facility was created through a project of co-creation with students actively engaged in the process of determining what would be in the centre and how it would work. But the university did not get it right all in one go and the mistakes they made at first instance were important to how they revised their approach and the success they ultimately achieved.

Historically service delivery at the university was fragmented across the schools. To improve this situation service teams were formed and when a new building became available university management took the opportunity to create a service centre populating the lower level with service delivery. The process was essentially around redesigning the service delivery and then installing it in a space. A customer relationship management system was also put in place so that the students could access quite a few services online which freed up academic time and enhanced service consistency and quality. At the same time spaces were created where students could study and engage in other activities. The resulting student space was quite corporate and turned out to not really be what students wanted. It wasn't used by students in the manner anticipated.

Subsequently, the university received a grant to produce student-related space. This time the university decided to engage in a formal process of co-creation. A transforming student experience committee was formed which along with the property and services building committee that managed the physical development of the building reported to an executive group. Reference groups were formed to feed into that transforming student experience committee. One of the reference groups was the student union which was perceived as entrenched and antagonistic towards university management, viewing university management as trying to take advantage of the students.

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

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## Gathering input from all students

A big plexiglass wall was set up. Questions would be put up on the wall and students passing by could grab a pen and write up their answers. At regular intervals the wall would be photographed to record student responses. The wall would then be cleaned and a new question posted.

Social media was used as a communication tool with two student ambassadors appointed to moderate blogs and talk to the students.

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

The brief was cast as aspirational rather than being based in concrete details of what the space would physically look like. The process was about really teasing out what is important about being a student at the university. Concepts included sense of community, sense of belonging, wanting to be with other people, the need for good coffee. But also important was the need to have a non-corporate, safe environment that could be open at all hours.

Architects were included in the process so that they could listen to what the students had to say. They were keen to design an award winning building but that was not necessarily relevant to what students wanted.

A lot of time was spent drawing the aspirational brief. Within a few months the student union had added the project link to their website which was a watershed moment. Management was no longer the enemy, management and the student union were working together on something. Important to this development was the appointment of a union president who embraced participating in the co-creation process and was willing to work collaboratively with university management.

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

Commitment to listening to students was readily apparent in this phase of the project:

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*we were together looking at some of the architect's stuff about having a big tree in the middle of the thing. We looked at the price and I looked at the students and I said, well what do you think? They went; no, let's not go with that. So end of story. The fact that I could say to the architect, no we're not going to do that, it's really funky, but do you know what - no... they've seen me make those changes that responded to what they said... you'll win that particular debate every time you do something that hardens their conviction that you're on their side, I think.(manager)*

One of the things students clearly wanted was a kitchen which was opposed by property services. Management made a deal with the students that they could have a kitchen as long as they managed it well. There has never been a problem with the management of the kitchen and students take pride in making sure that new cohorts understand that they need to look after the kitchen in order for students to continue to have access to it.

## **The end result – instant population**

The facility opened in September 2011 and was instantly populated by students, not just the ones that had, in one way or the other, co-created the space. The project was something that people didn't believe could work and then it did.

The facility has students everywhere and the place buzzes with learning - people at computers, people with books, people reading, people talking about projects, people in project rooms. The next phase will involve creating additional project rooms because student feedback says that there are not enough. These are learning spaces which are unstructured, self-guided and for students. Staff cannot run tutorials in these project rooms. Students cannot hold demonstrations in the facility but are free to do so on the steps outside. Apart from cafes there are no retail activities in the facility.

There is comfortable modular seating. The ground level is fairly noisy and active. The next level is quieter with project rooms and maths and writing support provided. Physics and chemistry tutorial support is to be added because use of the tutorial services has escalated since it has become so available.

There is a facility manager. The facility was designed around the students so the services were reconfigured so they would work in this space. Staff from different areas of service administration rotate through the facility depending on the season. At enrolment there is a lot of staff available to prepare student cards and to advise students. Mid-year there is a big push for study abroad, so the global learning team is there. There is an information desk and a one stop one step philosophy which is that the student will either have the answer straightaway or they'll be sent to the one place where the solution is.

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*in the end [it] was a 40 million project, so we put much more money than just the 15 million we got from government. But it's a touchstone. It is in the middle of the campus and it is a demonstration of the commitment of the university to do things for and with students. (senior manager)*

## **The future – continuing co-creation**

Moves are afoot to further increase space and facilities leveraging the social capital and trust built with the students over the project. The student union would like to have a home in or near the facility since the union building is somewhat out of the way. This would create opportunity to co-create future use of the union building. What is envisaged is a cultural and sports precinct that will provide students with a reason to go there. In exchange those services that the union provides, for example counselling, will be available around the facility. The precinct will have an improved gym and a basketball court, because international students want to be able to 'shoot some hoops'. Student commitment to this process is apparent in their willingness to allocate SAF funding to it.

A virtual co-creation concept was pursued across 2012 with the same committee, the same logic, the same system. This project identified a significant number of issues that impacted student experience. These issues were addressed one by one and have provided for improved student experience through e-commerce, a timetabling App, compatibility with different devices, improving Blackboard functionality. This Virtual project was about delivering what would make the university virtual environment, a more student friendly one in which they wanted to spend more time.

## **The process has led to a cultural change**

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

The project has given rise to a new language on campus. Students now refer to consultations as doing a [name of facility]; shorthand for the co-creation process. The students are really keen to go back to that same experience.

*'you've got to be authentic. So that's been my red thread through everything... when in doubt, ask a student. If it's about learning and teaching, ask a student ... I am not the target market. I'm not currently enrolled in this university. In fact, I don't have a degree from this university so I am the least qualified person to talk about the student experience. But I know I'm the most qualified person to get that*

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*information from them.... So what you have is to actually have that element of trust that I'm going to give you my opinion because I know you'll hear it.'* (senior manager)

Facility and services managers had this to say about how they engage students in ongoing co-creation activities:

*'we'll involve hundreds or thousands of students in our consultation as opposed to one or two or three elected people...So when we survey, we survey hundreds. When we want to bring people together to ask them a question, we go and buy 60 or 80 pizzas and we make an announcement.... We go up to the mezzanine and anyone who wants a free lunch can come up on the condition they participate in whatever we're doing, which they do... we pre-plan it, but we don't pre-advertise it. So if you advertise you're going to be doing this in six weeks' time, you tend to get people with an agenda get together and come along and dominate those things. But we'll tend to give 10 minutes' notice. We'll just make it - and so we get the people who are in the [facility] now, and the people who are in the [facility] now are representative of the group who use it. We'll get 300 or 400 who come to that .... We call it flash focus groups.... Or pizza for comment, we call it both.... Sixty pizzas attract people, but we find if we do one of these group things, the pizza runs out, we've got all the answers we want to go away, but if you go back an hour later, the students are still sitting around debating these things.'* (university property manager)

## **Positive impact for the university**

The managers also commented on how this co-created facility has impacted the university:

*'One of the big things I guess is the international student barometer that measures international students' feedback on all these things. For us, this university was normally bottom in the Group of Eight. .... Since the [facility]'s been here the surveys that have been done, we're number one or two in the Group of Eight, but normally number one. .... The last couple of years we've been number six or seven in the world out of 180 universities that are surveyed ...Well they're directly relating that to the [facility].'* (university manager)

# University H: Embedded leadership practices at an old university

## Special value placed in developing Leadership Skills

University H is one of the oldest universities in Australia and has a long tradition of active student representation. It has an engaged student association at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It places a special value on leadership and there is a view that it is ‘front and centre of everything University H does’. As part of the valuing of leadership skills University H offers its students encouragement and support to develop their leadership skills. There are several ways that it does this.

## Leadership Course/Subject for academic credit

University H offers a course, *Leadership and Influence*, for academic credit. It is one of the courses known as a Vice-Chancellor’s course and is interdisciplinary with a peer-learning ethos. It is available to students from second year onwards who have an elective available. The course guide notes that:

Students will develop a strong sense of their individual efficacy in pursuing self, social or organisation change and development. One of the assessment tasks is a group project to develop an idea to “pitch” at the end of the course to the Vice-Chancellor on how to enhance the [University H] student experience.

## Vice-Chancellor’s Student Leadership Program

The Vice-Chancellor’s Student Leadership Program has an undergraduate version and a postgraduate version. Students who are in or intending to apply for university student leadership positions are strongly encouraged by the university to apply. The Program is completed within one semester and places are limited to 18 students. Topics which have been covered in these Programs include *Models of Leadership, Influencing and Motivating Others* and *Influencing and Managing Yourself*. Students are required to attend a series of workshops and to develop and work on a Leadership project in which they play a leadership role. As part of the Program students are assigned a senior member of staff as their mentor. On completion of the Program students are presented with a Certificate by the Vice-Chancellor. Students can complete both the Leadership Course for academic credit and the Vice-Chancellor’s Leadership Program.

*‘They have an individual mentor and they meet once a fortnight focusing on skills [value base so the] leadership approaches. This year out of the SSAF funding the postgraduate students said this is such a good idea*

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*they wanted to put some money aside for students to implement some of those ideas.’ (senior manager)*

## **Student Leadership Forum**

The Student Leadership Forum is held towards the end of the year and is a gathering of those students who have been elected for student leadership positions in the following year. The speakers at the 2015 Forum spoke on a range of topics with the primary focus on the subject of student leadership and responsibility. The incoming VC shared his view that student leaders set the example and tone of a university and were responsible, together with the VC, for the culture of the university. Student leaders were seen to have power and be able to have an impact and to create change. Strategies addressing how to manage challenges while in a leadership position, were provided to students. Students were encouraged to look after themselves and support each other throughout their terms. Leadership skills were promoted as important and valuable lifelong skills. The Forum is one part of the training student leaders receive.

# **University I: Staff Student Consultation Committee Pilot Project**

Staff student consultation committees (SSCCs) have not been widely used at University I. A pilot project was initiated in the law faculty working with students and staff engaged in the undergraduate LLB program to determine whether this type of engagement with students would be beneficial to staff, students and the program.

## **Seeking approval and participation – online notice for recruitment of students**

The possibility of running the pilot project was canvassed with the faculty executive who approved it. The Associate Dean Education agreed to chair the SSCC. At the faculty meeting, staff were briefed on the process of using SSCCs using a short PowerPoint presentation based on a bank of slides available through student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs). Individual academic staff teaching within the LLB program, and others with various administrative roles pertinent to programs of study and students, were approached to join the committee.

The opportunity for students to participate in the committee was advertised through online student notices with the permission of the faculty executive. Students interested in participating were invited to attend a training session that would explain in detail how the committee would function and what the responsibilities of student representatives would be.

## **Initial training session for students**

The training session was run twice to maximise opportunity for students to attend. Students could opt out of the committee if they decided they did not want to participate after attending the training. The training was run by two trainers each delivering content supported by a PowerPoint presentation once again based on the bank of slides available through sparqs. The session included a short video presentation illustrating the role and benefits of student representation and a series of scenarios for students to discuss. These scenarios were chosen to help students recognise the types of issues they could be asked to deal with as course representatives, those that were outside their role, where they could direct students for assistance for those matters that were outside their role and evaluating how urgent particular issues might be. Students were also provided with a student representative manual based on a manual produced by Victoria University Wellington Student Association.



## **Introducing the diverse range of student representatives to their cohorts and their gathering feedback**

All students participating in the training agreed to participate in the pilot project. The student representatives were from all years within the program and represented diverse courses of study including various combined degrees. Prior to the SSCC meeting the student representatives were introduced to the student cohort through student messages with contact email addresses provided. The students collected feedback from students regarding issues they wanted to raise in relation to the LLB program. The committee met twice during the teaching period for an hour and a half each time. Student representatives who could not attend a meeting were encouraged to share their feedback with other representatives to raise at the meeting. Some chose to forward their issues by email to the minutes' secretary together with their apologies.

## **The first meeting was structured around various aspects of the student experience**

These were:

- Endorsement of good practice
- Quality of the LLB
- Learning and teaching methods
- Assessment methods
- Feedback on assessed work
- Provision of study skills support
- Resources
- Other student learning experience issues.

Once staff and students had introduced themselves, these various issues were discussed. Staff explained the significance of each of these issues from a university perspective and student representatives had the opportunity to comment on their experiences and relevant issues that had been raised by other students. The discussions were minuted and the minutes circulated to all participants. Student representatives were required to report back to students on the various issues raised at the meeting. Staff identified that a number of initiatives had been put in place and that students had identified some misconceptions staff had had around how best to communicate with students.

## **The second meeting – opportunity to raise issues for discussion**

The process was repeated at the second meeting but with a truncated agenda so that students who had not attended the first meeting had the opportunity to raise issues in relation to any of the topics and the student representatives who

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had attended before focussed on the topics where they wanted to raise new or additional feedback. Staff representatives were able to report back on how they had addressed student concerns.

## **Following up - staff and students' perceptions**

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

*'Students are well aware of the issues and the aspects they desire changes but may not understand the comprehensive range of complex and difficult barriers and issues that must be considered and solved before changes can be made'. (student representative)*

Students felt that at the outset they were not entirely clear on what the SSCC would do and how it would work and they also felt it needed greater promotion with the student body so more students were aware of what it was, what it did and how they could raise questions and concerns. Clear differentiation between this forum and faculty board was also seen as important. Facilitating feedback to students on the outcomes of SSCC meetings needs to be further developed. It is anticipated that if this forum was adopted by the faculty these issues would be addressed.

Students were in favour of the SSCC continuing. There was interest in a greater number of meetings and in extending the process to other courses within the faculty and to provide opportunity to address the needs of students in different combined degrees.

There was a range of responses from the academics involved in the SSCC. There was a concern that adding another Committee to the number of meetings that academics attended was not a good use of time and that the aims of the SSCC could be incorporated in other Committees that were already established. Another concern expressed was that the evidence base was anecdotal making it difficult to assess the extent and significance of some of the suggestions. Others found it a very positive experience prompting good self-reflection on

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current practices and reported being impressed by the professional approach of the student representatives. It was beneficial for the Faculty to be meeting these students in a collaborative environment and to be hearing from a 'new group' of students representing their peers rather than be dependent on those students who were active in other student bodies. Better briefing and training of academics prior to the first SSCC meeting may have increased positive responses from some academic members. The Faculty is exploring the SSCC concept with a view to introducing it more widely.

## **University J: Embedded student representation processes in a private university**

A private Australian university has developed a strong culture of student representation and partnership in university leadership and decision-making. Student representation is embedded structurally, and is embodied as a cultural ethos. Use of the word “embodied” reflects the importance of physical presence of student representatives at many levels across the university.

### **A developmental approach to student representation**

Student representation is supported at all levels of the university, including first year. All classes nominate or elect a class representative. Lecturers then forward the representatives’ details to the Student Association which provides class representative training. While the experience of class representation may vary across the university, the intention is that the representative system provides multiple channels for feedback throughout the semester. The representative is invested with a level of authority to speak to the lecturer on behalf of the class. If an issue were to arise which the representative felt that they could not raise directly with the lecturer, then they, as a class representative, may contact a senior manager, or raise the issue with the student association who may then play an advocacy role.

*‘If we have good class reps and the students are participating well then really it’s a good early warning signal if there’s something going wrong in the subject. Or I guess quite happily in a lot of circumstances good affirmation of things that are working well as well.’ (senior university manager)*

Progressing from class representation, students have the opportunity to be elected as Faculty Representatives. Students are elected to the University Council and to the Students’ Association. Two Student Association office bearers represent the interests of students on the Academic Senate and various committees, including curriculum review committees.

### **Governance procedures demonstrate respect for the student voice**

As a sign of the importance of the student voice within the deliberative bodies of the university, the governance procedures include specific student quorum requirements. If the specified number of students is not present at the Senate meeting, the meeting is not considered “quorate”. Discussion may continue, but the decisions will not be ratified until the next meeting. It is highly unusual for this situation to occur, as student representatives are highly engaged and

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proactive. This is a further example of the value of the physical presence of students in university decision-making.

## **Students as initiators of university-wide administrative change**

Student representatives have been the initiators of university-wide administrative changes. For example, a student association representative proposed that there should be changes to the student evaluation system. At that time, students were able to respond to the survey until the last lecture of the semester. The representative made the case that students should have a longer response window – extending until students have completed their final exam. This extension would provide them with the opportunity to comment on the appropriateness of the exam, and the alignment between the learning and teaching during semester and the exam.

The representative worked with the Chair of the Academic Senate to present a proposal, addressing the anticipated objections from academic staff. The Chair allocated the representative a time-slot in the meeting to present the proposal. As expected, there was initial resistance to the proposal. Academics were concerned that students who felt they had performed poorly in an exam would provide more negative evaluations. The proposal did not pass at the first meeting, however, the student representative was asked to address the issues, and in partnership with the Chair, prepared a second proposal which was passed at the next meeting. Student evaluations are now open until after the exam period.

## **Partnership between the university and students on personal development curriculum**

Students undertake a set of core curriculum subjects, including leadership and team dynamics, ethics, and critical thinking subjects. Student representatives participate in the Core Curriculum Working Party which has developed a mandatory but not-for-credit extra-curricular subject which involves individually negotiated personal development. This includes work-related, community and career related activities, including volunteering.

## **The diversity challenge**

Despite the strong commitment to representation from both students and staff, the university still experiences issues with the diversity of the student representatives. While all faculties have student representatives, the university wide representatives are typically drawn from a narrower disciplinary group, Law and Business, who tend to arrive at University looking for representative positions as they consider representative and leadership experience will be a valued and relevant skill in their careers.

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## **Digital presence: Visibility and transparency of the student representative bodies**

The student association has an appealing and informative website which includes not only services available through the website, but easy to access information on the constitution, budgets and minutes of meetings. The website includes professional photos of the current representatives, with their contact details. Clear descriptions of the roles of the representatives are easily accessible, to both prospective nominees and the student body as a whole.

## **Alignment of a cultural ethos with business sustainability towards quality**

Both domestic and international students pay full fees at the university. From the perspective of both students and the institution, the quality of the university experience is extremely important for both student educational outcomes and the sustainability and growth of the university. This alignment is expressed in the university's strategic plan: "Align decision-making between University strategy and student association objectives". While there are clearly business objectives, and some form of transactional relationship from students, (and sometimes their parents) – the practice of student partnership appears to be embodied throughout the university as an authentic cultural ethos, providing benefits to both students and the reputation of the university. Objective measures of these benefits are evident in the university's high performance on quality of the student experience on the QILT website.

## **University K: A young university establishes student representative systems**

A young regional university is a “greenfield” site for developing an embedded culture of student partnership in decision-making and governance. The university has grown from a few hundred students at its inception 20 years ago to nearly 12,000 in 2016, with a current growth rate of around 11%. Developing student representative bodies raises the challenge of developing a broad culture of representation across the student body, and the value of engaging students and staff in ongoing review of the new structures and processes.

### **Growth requires more formalised student representative structures**

The university can no longer be considered a small university. Previously, the campus was compact, and staff and students had significant personal interaction in a relatively informal manner. The footprint of the campus has increased, as have student and staff numbers, and the university has expanded into a number of regional centres. Senior managers have recognised that the structures and procedures for student engagement need to become more formalised *“to ensure that students are integrally part of the university as it grows, and that their voice will be part of the emerging university in five or ten years’ time.”* A senior manager considers this point in time a great opportunity for the development of a culture of representation.

### **Establishing effective structures requires broad cultural change**

At this university, the main student representative body, the Student Guild, had been in abeyance for some time. The recently re-established Guild worked to determine the breadth of its remit. In conversations with the Guild representatives, the new PVC (Students) became aware that the work of the Guild was focused predominantly on social and advocacy activities.

As there was little focus on the student learning experience, and this focus would have required more student capacity, university management established an additional Student Representative Council (SRC) to liaise with the university on issues related to student learning and engagement. Students were able to nominate for these positions but development of a culture of representation is proving challenging. Due to a limited history of representation, and a lack of awareness amongst the student body, few students nominated. Deans of schools were asked to nominate students in the disciplines where none had self-nominated, and the full complement of SRC representatives was appointed.

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## **A holistic communication approach**

As part of the initiative, students and staff have engaged in focus groups to help review and develop a culture of representation, and have engaged in activities related to this OLT project, and others on student partnership. In reviews, communication issues have been at the forefront with students commenting that information on nomination and elections was not obvious, and was not in line with their expectations. From a student perspective, important messages, such as exam timetable reminders were sent by SMS. They preferred that election reminders were also sent through SMS. Further issues were raised about the “depth” of news items on elections and nominations on the website, students seeing these items as important. As this was a new initiative, students would not search for something they did not know about. They suggested a holistic approach to communications on their issues, a “closing the loop” so that the communications team who promoted a student event, or forum, would also communicate the outcomes of the event or forum back to students. This feedback has informed further development of the student engagement strategy.

## **A delicate balance between guidance and autonomy**

In the establishment phase, management drafted a Terms of Reference and chaired the first meeting of the SRC so that it could determine its own goals, and learn how it might obtain resources to support its activities. While management had instigated the establishment of an elected representative body it was clear that students should assume control so that the SRC evolves with student interests at the forefront. This requires a delicate balance between fostering autonomy, and determining when to offer guidance, as evident in the following example. With little formal documentation on the roles of the SRC, the representatives did not have a clear understanding of process. Students were unaware of the appropriate staff member to contact with an issue or complaint. Management saw the need to develop a Student Charter and the SRC promoted this to the student body. The SRC considers the promotion of the Charter one of its early successes.

## **Knowledge transfer – the challenges of continuity and connection**

The culture of student representation at the university is in its early stages - in its current form, a little over a year. As student representatives may hold a position for only one year, the transfer of representative organisational knowledge is a significant issue. The university has determined that the representatives for the SRC will hold office from July until June, to ensure that incoming members have an opportunity to learn from outgoing members, during the main teaching period, rather than changing over during the long summer break. Within one faculty, a representative had taken a pro-active role in mentoring new faculty representatives.

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Managers and staff have the benefit of continuity, and may have opportunities to learn through sharing experiences with other managers of other universities through various forums. However, this opportunity is less available to students. It is easy for students to become focused on local issues related to facilities and food, but with limited external connections to other student bodies, the development of a culture of interest in broader issues tends to be ad hoc. This challenge is acknowledged by management, who support students with training from external bodies, such as the State Ombudsman, and travel to student conferences. However, the development of an independent and proactive student representative body which instigates action to shape the university experience requires significant institutional support, and is acknowledged by management as a further challenge.

## References

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