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Developing and enacting student governance and leadership training in higher education. A Practice Report*

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Abstract

Despite increased attention placed both in and outside Australia on student participation in university governance, there remains a gap in practices and programs that help support students to contribute across various governance groups, councils, and representative roles. This practice report explores two aspects of developing student partnership in governance at a research-intensive university in Australia. We will showcase a set of rationales co-created between students and staff on why partnership should be a critical aspect of higher education policy and governance. Secondly, we will provide an overview of a specialised training program that aims to provide students with foundational working knowledge of university governance practice, policies and language to bolster engagement within their roles. We will further discuss anticipated impacts and advance research and future practice in this area by highlighting key areas that require further exploration to further student engagement in governance structures.

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Introduction to student governance in Australian universities

Student participation in higher education governance is prevalent throughout the Australian context. On a national level, the Tertiary Educational Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) encourages Australian universities to adopt democratic principles of equity and shared decision-making (TEQSA, 2017). Audits by TEQSA further evaluate universities on the scale and scope of student representation (Higher Education Standards Framework, 2015). Additionally, on a university-level, student unionism in Australia can be found throughout all 41 research-intensive universities.

However, despite the widespread practices that involve students across national and university-level governance mechanisms, there is growing concern that these roles and activities may only be tokenistic and superficial (see Carey, 2013). For example, while TEQSA advocates for student representation, there is little clarity about what is considered the role of the student representative and how representation can and should be measured (e.g. student numbers, across membership groups, and corresponding roles and responsibilities). Scholars have noted that awareness about student participation in governance is low and that this extends across accrediting bodies, and also within university leadership and more widely across the student body (Nair, Shah, & Morison, 2014). Emerging research to address these concerns include the *Student Voice Australia* Pilot Project, a collaboration between ten Australian tertiary education institutions to explore practices that can support student engagement in institutional decision making (Student Voice Australia, 2019).

From this analysis one can ascertain that Australia is making positive developments towards supporting and encouraging student participation in governance, yet there is still

work that needs to be done. One area that is particularly absent from current discussions are the support mechanisms that allow students to feel confident and capable within student representative roles (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). In the following sections, we will present an initiative at a university in Australia to develop a governance and leadership training program for students across various roles of representation and committee membership.

Overview of the initiative

This initiative is currently underway at La Trobe University, a large research-intensive university in Melbourne, Australia. The activities are supported as part of a larger strategic imperative to improve student partnership within the university and foster better communication between students and staff (La Trobe University, 2018).

Part 1. Co-creating rationale for student partnership

In a series of iterative meetings (four meetings over approximately one month) an academic from the university, with student representatives and several professional staff who work closely with students (e.g. student advocates, international student support coordinator), helped develop the rationale for framing student partnership at the university. To encourage wide participation in the process, invitations to all meetings were sent to any student (n=25) who currently served as a representative across working parties affiliated to the Student Success portfolio of the institution. Student participants came from a range of qualification levels (e.g. Bachelors, postgraduate), disciplines, country of origin, study status, regional status, and backgrounds. Students and staff co-created the rationales through back and forth discussions and drew upon scholarly literature (for example, Matthews, Dwyer, Hine, & Turner, 2018) as a basis for the development of rationales and

their wording. These rationales, and many of the issues and challenges of student participation in governance that were discussed in relation to them, helped form the basis for the subsequent curriculum for the training sessions.

The developed rationales (detailed below) highlight a diversity of views and perspectives on why student partnership is a critical component in higher education decision-making. Some correspond to ideas of student participation as quality assurance (e.g. improve teaching quality), while others relate to ideas of social equity and distributive justice (e.g. students are equal). Some rationales further point to partnership as a mechanism for community building and/or belongingness. Another notes the shared responsibility between students and staff in the higher education space, and thus, the need to support process transparency and communication to students (see number 5).

Rationale included:

1. We have a duty of care to listen and respond to the concerns and needs of our students
2. Students are equal to staff members within the university community and they contribute to the university through their effort, time, and resources
3. Staff decision-making often relates to changes that will impact students, therefore, our decisions should be informed by those affected (i.e. our students)
4. Students have on-the-ground, relevant suggestions and ideas on how to improve the student experience that could impact critical outcomes such as attrition, student development, teaching quality, and student satisfaction
5. The student experience is a shared responsibility between students and staff

and should be supported with communication and transparency

6. By partnering with students, we have the opportunity to strengthen our university community

Notably, fee-payments as a rationale for partnering with students was not raised during the sessions. While research has pointed to growing consumerism in higher education and its impact on student participation in governance (Williams, 2013), student participants echoed some scholarly opinions, as they believed consumerism was not a key rationale for student partnership (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2015).

Part II. Developing governance and leadership training

Considering the various rationales for supporting student partnership at the university across decision-making (i.e. governance, policy formation, practice) a specified governance and leadership training curriculum was developed. The program is designed for delivery across all campuses of the university and is offered to students that already hold a student representative and/or committee membership role and students who may be interested in a role in the future. The curriculum was developed in partnership with the student associations (e.g. Student Union, International Student Association), and students provided feedback and suggestions for improvement. The specified curriculum includes five distinct modules. An overview of each module is provided below.

Module 1. Welcome and introduction to partnership

To begin the training sessions, students are provided with a brief history of the University, including student participation in governance. From this, the students discuss their understanding of the values of the University,

and how they have been shaped over time. Students are also given an overview of the various ways students can participate in formal and informal governance at the University, as previous research in this area has uncovered that many students are unaware of how to participate in university decision-making (Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999).

Module 2. Finding your place at the University

The second training module was the most requested by both students and university staff. It begins with an overview of the university structure, including critical but often assumed and understood roles such as Vice-Chancellor, Chancellor, and Academic Board. Students are also introduced to some of the key language and terms they may need to be aware of to fully engage in representative roles including terms of reference and agenda items.

Additionally, students are given copies of the University Strategic Plan. This is included to help students understand the strategic direction of the University so they are able to better reflect on where, from their unique perspectives, they believed the University should focus in the future. As not all participating students were members of the Student Union, an overview of student unions and associations, and their roles and responsibilities are also discussed.

Finally, students are given a demographic overview of the current population of the University including age, gender, discipline, and socio-economic status. This is provided to support students to position themselves in the context of the greater student population. Previous research has uncovered that student leadership roles are often not representative of the general student population and are often filled based on students' personal networks (i.e. strong ties with friends who vote for them) (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2015). While the voting

patterns of students was outside the scope of this project, to address this, the curriculum strove to provide students with a baseline understanding of who they were representing.

Module 3. Expectations of your role

The third module of the training session digs deeper into the responsibilities and expectations of student members and representatives in formal meetings. Previous literature has highlighted that role ambiguity of student representative roles may be a challenge to active student participation (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). To support role clarity, the curriculum covers topics such as how to prepare for meetings, expectations of attendance, and how to be an active participant in meetings (i.e. ask questions and offer suggestions). To allow for active learning, the curriculum also includes several role-plays of meetings and panel scenarios (note: many students also are asked to participate in student panels), which allows students to play-out what they are learning and apply new knowledge. In this module, issues or challenges that may arise for them are also covered, for example, if meetings diverge from agreed upon topics. Some ordinary expectations of students are also covered and discussed, such as responding to calendar invitations and pre-reading agendas and minutes before meetings take place.

Module 4. Working with others

To further support student engagement in representative and campus leadership roles, the fourth module supports students to take on alternative perspectives and make compelling arguments to help others see their point of view. Role-play scenarios assist students to gain experience in managing communication and anticipating the perspectives and/or goals of others whilst maintaining an openness to new ideas. In this module it was further stressed to students that university staff may operate within constraints that are not transparent to

students (e.g. budgets, timelines) and it was useful to understand these constraints.

Module 5. 21st century leadership skills

To end the training, the final module provides students with general non-governance specific skills they can enact in any leadership role or position. We encouraged students to reflect on their leadership style and experiences and set leadership goals for the future. The transferability of these skills for numerous jobs and situations is discussed and it is reiterated to students that participating in decision-making within university will help prepare them for future work.

Impact of practice and key areas for future research and practice

This initiative is in active implementation with detailed evaluation planned across 2019. There are several anticipated benefits, some of which are currently emerging. For example, there is anecdotal evidence from students' committee Chairs that students currently holding committee membership and/or representative roles have begun to display higher levels of active engagement and professionalism in their roles. Students who took part in the training who did not already have a formal role have further requested information regarding future opportunities. This has been a positive outcome, as the program has also raised awareness amongst staff regarding the benefits of having students as consultative members on working groups and other formal committees.

There are further additional benefits from the program towards supporting a stronger connection between students (including student associations) and the university executive. Through launching the program, there has also been an increased awareness of the importance of supporting student governance and leadership training, which is a positive step for the university. As the program

continues to develop, we anticipate that both students and staff will communicate the effective progress the training has supported so as to move the university past tokenistic student representation towards collaborating with students as partners.

In summary, the review of our emerging initiative has several key areas of significance. First, through our framing of the rationales for student partnership at the university, we have learned that students see collaboration between students and staff as an important mechanism to support quality student experiences. Similar to the findings of Matthews, Dwyer, Russell and Enright (2018), when speaking to leaders on their conceptions of students as partners, it seems that students and leaders alike see student partnership as a form of quality assurance. However, students also see student partnership as an activity to support social justice rationales, such as equity and access. Therefore, it appears that from the student perspective, student partnership can both challenge the long held higher education paradigms (see Wijaya Mulya, 2018) and support neoliberal activities such as quality assurance and marketisation (see Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, forthcoming).

Future research in this area is required to continue to unpack the support resources and training students may need to thrive in student leadership roles. In addition, as the La Trobe training program continues to expand and develop, it will be critical to ensure that the program continues to support equity and diversity in student leadership.

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