

A framework to give students a voice in institutional decision-making

1. Summary of the impact

Although many universities have processes and programs in place to foster student engagement, it is often viewed as tokenism rather than genuine collaboration. To change the culture and increase the recognition of students as valuable partners in institutional governance, UTS Law Professor Sally Varnham was awarded a National Senior Teaching Fellowship to develop the National Framework for Student Partnership in University Decision-Making and Governance.

The framework and Principles are based on previous research conducted in the UK, continental Europe and New Zealand. They were developed through a sector-wide collaboration and are called Students and Tertiary Education Providers Undertaking Partnership (STEPUP) for Quality Enhancement. They outline 7 key principles which form the foundation for a culture of student partnership.

Based on this Framework and Principles, a pilot program has been launched and 10 Australian institutions have agreed to implement it, resource it and employ a project manager to co-ordinate the rollout.

2. Problem

According to Professor Varnham, the old philosophy of 'students are to be seen and not heard' on tertiary institutional and national matters misses the considerable benefits to be gained by educational institutions and students as well as wider society. The top-down approach to education, in which teachers claim to know what is best for the

students, is not taking advantage of the opportunity for the personal and professional development of socially and environmentally conscious citizens.

While there has been a shift towards more student engagement on faculty and institutional boards and committees, Professor Varnham argues that it is often implemented poorly and has seen the rise of student representatives as tokens rather than genuine leadership partners.

In the university sector in particular, students have often been characterised as 'consumers' who are disempowered and operate on a complaint culture rather than being recognised as insightful change agents who could play an active role in decision-making and governance.

3. Beneficiaries

The STEPUP Framework and Principles are beneficial both for students in tertiary education as well as the Australian higher education sector as a whole.

First and foremost, through the activities and principles outlined in the framework, students receive a genuine opportunity to be recognised as key stakeholders and participate actively in decision-making. This ensures that students feel included, engage in their own learning, shape the direction of teaching and have an overall positive experience of being a student.

Moreover, the framework is intended to integrate these student voices to support institutional development across the broad spectrum of an institution's operations, from learning and teaching to direction and strategy.

4. Approach to impact

Professor Varnham recognised the need for a student partnership framework early on in her career. She remembers lecture rooms in which it was virtually unthinkable to have a discussion or make a suggestion, which she believes resulted in poor learning outcomes for students. Although students were invited to forums and academic boards,

they were not truly participating and were rather considered necessary tokens in the room.

While working at the UTS Faculty of Law, Professor Varnham embarked on a research project which would eventually lead to the creation of a framework to change this culture and move tertiary education institutions towards a more inclusive ethos.

In 2015, driven by a desire to see how we could do student engagement more authentically, she investigated student engagement in the UK, continental Europe and New Zealand. In particular, she was interested in determining what effective student engagement in decision making looks like and what steps would need to be taken to embed a culture of student partnership in the Australian sector.

Upon completing this research, Professor Varnham was awarded a National Senior Teaching Fellowship to develop a Framework for Student Partnership in University Decision-Making and Governance.

The framework outlines seven key STEPUP principles for quality enhancement.

- **Principle 1: Building authentic partnerships.** Staff and students at all levels collaborate and promote a culture of partnership.
- **Principle 2: Communication – honesty and transparency.** This principle is important in building mutual trust which is vital in maintaining a positive relationship
- **Principle 3: Strong student leadership.** In order to provide strong leadership, the handover between outgoing and incoming leaders must be coordinated effectively so that knowledge can be transferred.
- **Principle 4: Training and Support – as a partnership.** Professional representation of students is a vital aspect of the framework and requires appropriate training, support and resourcing. Similarly, staff must be supported in effectively building partnerships with students.

- **Principle 5: Every student's voice – diversity and inclusivity.** It is particularly important that institutions provide opportunities for underrepresented student groups to join and participate in the partnership.
- **Principle 6: Valuing student voice – recognition of formal and informal engagement.** All forms of engagement should be valued and the importance of their involvement in positive outcomes should be made clear.
- **Principle 7: A National Presence – for facilitation and support.** National rollout and support are needed to sustain and strengthen the culture of student partnership and build capacity at tertiary institutions.

The framework also outlines specific activities which tertiary institutions can implement to work along these principles.

The STEPUP Principles and Framework referred to above were launched at the Fellowship Symposium at UTS on 1 September 2017.

As momentum has gathered, Professor Varnham has been asked to present and run workshops at many institutions and tertiary organisations across Australia. This points towards developing and sustaining a collective understanding and embedding of student voice across the sector. During the Fellowship she also wrote a regular blog to provide updates and suggestions, and now continues to travel across the country to present her research and framework at conferences and seminars to get more institutions on board.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

After launching the framework, Professor Varnham was delighted to see that many institutions across Australia approached her to request help in implementing the new framework and improve student engagement in their decision-making processes. While the initial focus was on Australian universities, there has been a significant demand for all types of tertiary education providers to be included.

Building on the interest and enthusiasm to pursue student partnership further, Professor Varnham proposed a one-year pilot program to assist those institutions who wished to participate in implementing the STEPUP Principles and Framework and to set up a national presence for the networking and sharing of ideas, knowledge and experience and to work towards a sector with student partnership as 'the way we do things'.

10 tertiary education institutions across Australia agreed to join this pilot, make financial resources available and appoint a program manager. Initially it is running from October 2018 to October 2019 but there are proposals to extend and widen it out to more of the sector.

The pilot program was named Student Voice Australia for which Professor Varnham launched the website <http://studentvoiceaustralia.com/> where education providers can access the framework, updates in a newsletter, and a wealth of other useful resources.

Student Voice Australia is housed in the Faculty of Law at UTS and is managed by Kate Walsh. Kate is involved in undertaking institutional analysis workshops to identify gaps and challenges for student engagement as well as developing or improving student representation systems.

Furthermore, a pilot program has been rolled out at the UTS Faculty of Law and student feedback indicates that it has already been very successful in improving the student experience.

5.2. Impact

As the programs are still in their pilot stage, it is not yet possible to measure a tangible impact. As the pilot nears its end an independent evaluation has begun and will be completed by the end of 2019. In the meantime, much heart may be taken from the rising interest and motivation across the sector (for example, 26 institutions sent 100 of their student leaders to the Student Voice Summit held at UTS in May 2019).

Professor Varnham argues that getting the conversation going is a very important first step in changing the 'consumer' status of students and shifting the culture at tertiary education institutions. In her own words, student participation is an ethos, not an activity – and this requires a collective understanding and a long-term commitment to achieve change.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

Professor Varnham is internationally recognised as a leading expert in both Australia and New Zealand in law and policy relating to all sectors of education. She has researched and written widely on issues in compulsory education, including the right to participation and practising citizenship in education. She was a Chief Investigator on a project on student grievances funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council which led to the creation of a Good Practice Guide used by Australian universities in reviewing their policies and procedures in this area.

Furthermore, she has been the representative providing input from Australia on the global steering group of the European Network of Ombudsmen in Higher Education (ENOHE), the US Education Law Association and is a past President and Director of the Australia and New Zealand Education Law Association. From 2011 to 2014 she was Chair of the UTS Academic Board and this has led to her current research on student engagement in decision making and governance. More recently she was an elected Academic representative on University Council (until November 2018).

In addition to her research, knowledge and professional experience in this area, Professor Varnham says it is also the 'not taking no for an answer' gene that has helped her in persevering and staying motivated. It is also the overwhelming enthusiasm from staff and students at different institutes which continuously fuels her desire to make a change in this area.

6.2. External enabling factors

One of the key contributing factors was the National Senior Teaching Fellowship which enabled Professor Varnham to undertake a collaboration involving all members of the sector to create the framework and principles. Her previous research overseas, titled "Student Engagement in University Decision Making and Governance: towards a more systemically inclusive student voice", was funded by Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT).

Professor Varnham recognises that UTS's commitment to social justice was instrumental in receiving the support and resources needed to roll out the pilot project which is now actively running at the Faculty of Law. Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Education and Students) Professor Shirley Alexander has been actively supporting the pilot program at UTS.

7. Challenges

One of Professor Varnham's key concerns is sustainability - 'not losing momentum'. Her worst fear is for her Project and Fellowship reports to gather dust on library shelves rather than actually making a difference. While the framework was well-received and is successful in its rollout thus far, working with over ten universities and their constituents, national student bodies and national agencies such as TEQSA is no small feat and understandably results in delays.

Professor Varnham warns that this framework can only be impactful if education providers remain committed, continue to resource it and continue to promote it nationwide. It is her visits, workshop delivery, research, blogs and energy which currently keep the program going and expanding. She hopes that her current efforts will continue to build the network and a changing culture so that it continues even when the time comes to hand it over.

8. Associated research

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9. References

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