WORKING WITH STUDENTS FOR STUDENTS: PARTNERSHIP FOR QUALITY ENHANCEMENT IN AUSTRALIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

SALLY VARNHAM[†]

Student engagement in institutional decision making and governance: what, why and how?
These questions have been recently considered by research funded by the Australian Government under an Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) Strategically Commissioned Priority Project and a National Senior Teaching Fellowship. The Project investigated the case for more systemic inclusion of student voice in decision-making in Australian universities against a background of research, policy, and practice in the UK, Europe, and New Zealand. It set out to consider how there may be authentic engagement of students' views at all levels and of all cohorts across the wide diversity of Australian universities and their student populations. The study was motivated by the need for a deep consideration of how embracing student voice may effectively enhance the quality and standards of the institution, students' university experience and their professional development. It determined that while Australia was behind in engaging its students in decision-making, there were pockets of exemplary practice and a strong interest in the sector in doing more. The ensuing Fellowship then enabled a sector-wide collaboration to develop Principles and a Framework to facilitate student partnership in the broad range of tertiary institutions across the Australian sector. This paper[1] discusses the Project[2] and Fellowship and the way forward to sustainable student voice.

I INTRODUCTION: THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT – THE FRAMEWORK OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Australia is a federation of states and territories under the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900* (the Constitution). Lawmaking is shared between the governments of the five states and two territories and the federal (commonwealth) government. Education generally falls within the legislative powers of the states and territories but increasingly the federal government controls higher education. The exercise of this power is enabled by its control of funding and its constitutional power to make laws with respect to corporations under s 51xx of the Constitution.

Importantly, control is exercised through the regulation of higher education by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) set up under the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (Cth). All higher education providers must be accredited or registered with TEQSA and must meet threshold standards formulated under the TEQSA Act (Pt 3). The *Higher Education Provider Standards Framework* (*Threshold Standards*) *2015* makes provision for the requirement of student engagement in Clauses 6.1.4 and 6.3:

[†]*Address for correspondence:* Professor Sally Varnham, Professor of Law, Faculty of Law, University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway, Sydney, Australia NSW 2007.
Email: sally.varnham@uts.edu.au,. website: www.studentvoiceaustralia.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-7966-6096

Cl 6.1.4. The governing body takes steps to develop and maintain an institutional environment in which freedom of intellectual inquiry is upheld and protected, students and staff are treated equitably, the wellbeing of students and staff is fostered, *informed decision making by students is supported and students have opportunities to participate in the deliberative and decision making processes of the higher education provider.*
6.3. Students have opportunities to participate in academic governance.

Australian universities all operate under their own legislation, passed by the respective state governments, with the exception of the Australian National University, which is in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and incorporated under Commonwealth legislation. Within the legislative framework for governance and management of universities are by-laws made pursuant to university statutes, together with particular policies and procedures.

In addition, various states have legislation which provides for the governance of institutions such as the *Universities Governing Bodies Act 2011* (NSW). Institutions are able to decide the composition of their own governing bodies, typically doing so with varying but generally small numbers of students elected to representative roles on faculty and university committees. Often this is just one student per committee or board. Outside of these formal bodies, the mindset for student engagement is traditionally by way of feedback and consultation, with management deciding how and when it responds to feedback and the grounds on which to consult students.

Partnership goes further by aiming to engage the voices of students from the beginning of proposals and work together with them on all the permutations and issues. It may also involve asking students for their ideas to act as 'agents for change'. It may range from areas of learning and teaching, for example in course or curriculum development or delivery, through to matters of institutional governance, strategy or direction.

Research both abroad and in Australia points to the fact that students desire to become involved more than 'top down' representation on governance bodies and 'ad hoc' representation on working groups and reviews (for example, Carey (UK), Bergan (Europe), Luescher-Mamashela (South Africa))[3] and this current research. As Arnstein articulated in her ladder of citizen engagement, true participation entails more than sitting on committees and consultation in the latter stages of change.[4] The 'top-down' approach is often viewed as 'tokenism' and affording of very little opportunity for meaningful participation.

Australia has an increasingly diverse student demographic.

There are large numbers of international enrolments, widening participation policies, distance education, and a greater enrolment of mature and second-degree students from a wide range of occupations and backgrounds. The provision of tertiary education in Australia ranges from big city institutions with large populations of local and international students mainly on campus and school-leavers, to rural and regional institutions with significant numbers of off-campus students. Both also include cohorts of undergraduate and postgraduate students, indigenous or those who have particular characteristics such as they are first in family, part time, or are mature age. There is no longer the 'homogenous' student body for which tertiary institutions were able to predetermine motivation and requirements. The expectations and access needs of all the different cohorts may now be best understood through engaging students in the issues.

The sector is strongly focused on retention and success. Developing and embedding better student representation could work towards addressing concerns relating to high attrition rates particularly among lower socio-economic status and Indigenous students. Research shows that the best chance for success is a sense of belonging to an institution as a community of learning.[5]

In recent decades the influence of high fees and the international education export 'industry' has lent itself to the corporatisation and commodification of higher education and the characterisation of students as consumers. Although, in theory, this enables dissatisfied students to seek recompense through consumer protection channels, there is a strong sense that it has the effect of encouraging passivity on the part of students and a management-centred attitude of institutions. The view that this characterisation is inappropriate is reinforced by the almost universal lack of success of students in various state and federal consumer protection tribunals. Instead, the relationship is rightly one of students being members of the learning community together with academics and management and with public good as the common purpose.

Student voice has often been framed in terms of negative feedback and complaint rather than positive as integral to the university community and its decision making. If student engagement is sought, it has traditionally been on management terms such as in 'consultation' often after all the permutations of the idea have been worked through. While there may be places for students on faculty and university bodies, traditionally there is very little expectation of their input in a manner which may affect decisions made. Student associations within institutions were severely disempowered by the government enacting Voluntary Student Unionism (VSA) in 2005.[6] This resulted in seriously diminished membership of institutional student organisations and their affiliation to national bodies.

Student leaders have had difficulty establishing themselves with credibility sufficiently to work in partnership with their institutional officials but this may be changing. There are indications that where institutions are moving towards greater engagement, student bodies are gaining in strength and professionalism, and stepping up to be part of the drive towards partnership. This is evidenced by the Memorandum of Understanding entered into in 2017 between the five national student leaders and TEQSA discussed below.

Evidence suggests that the best opportunity for enhancing the professional and personal development of students is to engage them in decision-making, from course and curriculum development to strategy, direction and governance. The benefits are reciprocal, students are 'expert learners' and to embrace their views can help enhance course standards, quality and the experience the institution provides. The rapid pace of technology and its disruptive influence on the delivery, role, and purpose of higher education is both exciting and concerning. The world in which our graduates will be making their way requires new approaches. While deep knowledge of specific disciplines continues to be important, increasingly significant is the role of tertiary education in equipping students with the skills of critical thinking, innovation, leadership to enable them to become global citizens in their professional and personal lives.

II   Approaching the Issue

This research, which examines the place of student voice in Australia, began in 2016 with a consideration of the experience of comparative sectors abroad against current policy and practice in the wide-ranging and diverse sector here. It asked these questions:

What is 'student engagement' leading to 'student partnership' in university decision making?

Why is it important to consider processes for student engagement in the functions of today's universities in terms of value to institutions, their students, and the sector as a whole?

How can the sector most effectively embrace student engagement within its policies and processes to enable the development of a culture of student voice?

Following the completion of this OLT Project, a National Senior Teaching Fellowship entitled '*Creating a National Framework for Student Engagement and Partnership*' enabled a sector-wide collaboration in higher education in Australia. The study thus led to the development of a set of Principles and a Framework suggested for the effective and authentic inclusion of student voice towards student partnership in all tertiary institutions.

This article provides an overview of this research and its outcomes. It begins by outlining the consideration of comparative sectors with similar challenges, examining how they are developing policies and practices leading to an ethos of working with students for students. The paper next asks what can be learned along with why and how students' experiences can be contextualised in higher education in Australia.

A Lessons from abroad and their importance

The strategy of the Australian Government is aimed at ensuring the excellence and competitiveness of its universities by enabling the sector to be more 'adaptive, innovative and engaged, globally and nationally' (Australia's first *National Strategy for International Education 2025*, released April 2016).[7] In the competitive international higher education environment it is essential that Australian universities look to the experiences of comparative sectors to achieve this aim.

In the UK sector-wide collaborations led to the formulation of principles contained in the National Quality Code for Higher Education (Chapter B5)[8] and the formation of The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP). Student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs) was established in 2003 accompanied by the development of the Student Engagement Framework. Ireland now has a National Student Engagement Programme, NStEP, underway across the tertiary education sector. New Zealand also has a sector-wide system of student academic representation driven by the New Zealand Union of Students Associations in partnership with institutions. Nationally, students in New Zealand sit on advisory groups and have memoranda of understanding with the main sector regulatory body, the Academic Quality Agency (AQA).

Tertiary education in Australia is comparable to the sectors in the UK and New Zealand in its ever-increasing demands for both its accessibility and retention as well as its accountability. All share a drive towards student-centred learning accompanied by policies and processes embracing 'students as partners' in learning and teaching. Driven by co-operations between national sector and student agencies, the UK and Ireland have taken partnership outside the classroom and into the wider university decision making and governance. While Australian institutions generally have been less inclined to such collaborations and slower to institute policies and processes for embedding authentic student voice outside the classroom, this research indicates that this may be changing.

III The OLT Project: 'Student Engagement in University Decision-making and Governance: Towards a More Systemically Inclusive Student Voice'

This project aimed to stimulate a 'student voice conversation' involving all stakeholders in tertiary education. Its object was to elicit from international experience ideas as to how and why student voice may be incorporated effectively on a broader basis across institutions.

Stage one was directed at this international research, beginning with analysis and synthesis of International Project Reports, for example, the Bath University/QAA '*Project Report and*

Good Practice Guide'; student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs) *'Celebrating Student Engagement'*, and the Ako Aotearoa/the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA) Report *'Student Voice in Tertiary Education Settings'* (all 2014). Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were then conducted with top-level university and sector personnel and student representatives.

Against this background, the Australian research involved an analysis of university policies and procedures, surveys of institutions and student leaders. Focus groups and a wide process of dissemination led to a set of case studies of current practices in nine institutions.

This section of the article starts with a short account of the international research and then moves to the Australian context.

A International Research

1 The UK experience

Student engagement in the UK is driven by the quality enhancement agenda with the ultimate aim of an improved learning experience. The project considered Scotland, England and Wales, forerunners in student engagement to partnership. Since the Project was completed, Ireland has joined the trend, with a National Student Engagement Pilot Programme (NStEP).

Tertiary education in Scotland remains essentially government funded with no fees for local first time students. This renders the sector immune to some extent from 'marketisation' and the 'consumer' characterisation which confronted tertiary education in England and Wales following the introduction of fees which are also a factor in Australia. Scotland was the forerunner of student partnership in the UK and its experiences provided valuable knowledge and insights for this research in terms of institutional and national sector approaches.

Student partnership in quality Scotland or sparqs was set up in 2003 by the tertiary education sector there as a collaboration between the National Union of Students (NUS), the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Scotland, to underpin commitment to student engagement. It assists and supports students, student associations, institutions, and other tertiary education bodies such as universities and colleges to improve the effectiveness of student engagement in quality at the course, institutional, and national levels. The focus is on quality enhancement rather than quality assurance and has a broad reach across institutional operations.

The Student Engagement Framework for Scotland (SEFS)[9] identifies the importance of formal representation in engaging student leaders within institutional processes to deliver student engagement at the highest strategic level. There is also recognition of the need for representation closer to the learning and teaching interface, the need to engage underrepresented student groups and the focus on supporting student representatives. The merits of both formal and informal processes are recognised.[10]

Student associations and their leaders are seen as key to generating a more effective relationship between institutions and student associations across a range of activities including providing training for student representatives. Sparqs provides a national training program focused on the specific task of enhancing student learning experience while providing ongoing support, training, and resources for institutional trainers through a Train the Trainer program, including toolkits for use in developing training. It notes a shift in the way in which student associations see themselves, forging relationships of mature and professional partnerships between institutions

and student bodies. As was noted by QAA, the relationship at the highest level between students' associations and universities has been increasingly characterised by a strengthening partnership.[11]

The need to provide representatives with opportunities for collaboration beyond their representative duties and training is recognised by representative forums and conferences for sharing knowledge and experiences. In addition to representative training, the other focuses of sparqs are promoting a "you said… we did…." approach to providing feedback to students – essential to close the loop; the development of student partnership agreements within institutions; and reporting of recognition and accreditation of academic representatives.[12] These initiatives include careful consideration of incentives for students to become representatives as these reflect the value the university accords it and in turn assists employability for student representatives.[13]

A recent report, *Celebrating Achievement*[14] details the developments of student partnership practices in institutions across Scotland. It concludes that they have continued to ensure that 'students remain central to shaping their education and helping deliver an educational experience that works for each and every student', and that 'Student engagement is at the heart of the way we ensure and enhance quality in Scotland.'

England, Wales, and Northern Ireland introduced tuition fees for higher education in 1998, increasing them from 2012. Immediately prior to this increase, in 2011, the UK Government released its White Paper *'Students at the Heart of the System'* which heralded a new focus on determining the needs and expectations of widened and diverse student bodies. Despite this sentiment, 'marketisation' and the 'commodification' of education' prevailed in the sector. Partnership is relatively new in England and Wales and the tension is noted between student unions who emphasise the role of students as partners in a learning community and institutions who see students in a consumer role.[15]

Since 2012 the Quality Assurance Agency *Quality Code for Higher Education* sets out the expectation of student partnership in Chapter B5 Student Engagement. This is followed by seven indicators. Although Chapter B5 is now under review by the newly constituted Office for Students, the sector-wide outrage at the proposed 'watered down' provisions is an indication that student partnerships have already gained universal traction.

A Report and Good Practice Guide[16]mapped practices against the key indicators set out in Chapter B5. It highlighted the importance of the adaptation of student representation to suit individual institutional needs, and the involvement of student input in this process. Importantly the Report notes that effective representation typically provides opportunity for student input at both the course and strategic levels within an institution and this process requires collaboration between institutions and their student associations. In such relationships, student unions can be important sources of information about the views of students, a valuable perspective informing policy and strategy.

Engaging all students is central. Committee structures and other traditional means may need to give way to virtual and mobile technologies which present interesting opportunities for better and potentially more comprehensively engaging student voice.

Communication and transparency is highlighted with proper briefing and support needed for students to function effectively in the institutional decision-making environment, particular at senior levels.

In 2013, the key sector organisations created The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) to assist in furthering the expectation and the reality of students as active partners in their education

and in their student experience. Its report *'The Principles of Student Engagement: The Student Engagement Conversation 2014'* observes:

> [where] student engagement is highly developed, pervading institution culture and clearly recognised.by staff and student alike, these institutions tended to be those where related features of good practice were found.[17]

A recent report, *'Architects of their experience: the role, value and impact of student academic representation systems in Higher Education in England'*[18] provides a new consideration of the value and impact of systems of Student Academic Representation in classes, courses or years within institutions. The word *'architects'* was used to convey the meaning of students as being responsible for inventing or realising 'a particular idea or project' within their learning environment. It confirms that student academic representation can inform change at a local level in module design, assessments, and teaching quality, to institution-wide learning and teaching strategies and policies for example, timetabling, and dissertation supervision, for example.

2 New Zealand

Much smaller, New Zealand is analogous to that of Australia particularly in terms of legislative changes which impacted on the strength of students' associations and democracy within institutions. Voluntary membership of student associations was introduced by changes to the *Education Act 1989* (NZ)[19] and reduction in the size of university governing bodies with no requirement for elected student and academic representation was legislated in 2015.[20] Interestingly, New Zealand universities continued then to have student and staff membership after wide consultation with their communities.

The tertiary sector in New Zealand demonstrates a real commitment to the genuine engagement of student voice in governance and decision making. Student associations continue to receive institutional support, and the operation of the national body, the New Zealand Union of Student's Associations (NZUSA) is funded collectively by New Zealand universities and for much of its research work it is funded by and works collaboratively with Ako Aotearoa: the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence.

In 2012, research commissioned by these bodies showed that the institutions studied had representation processes for feeding student voice into university governance which started at different levels within the institutions. This was commonly 'at grass roots' with well-developed class representative systems. These student academic representatives then fed into program, faculty, and university governance structures with student leadership through student associations playing a big role. Institutional culture, how students are perceived within their institutions, was central, with consumerist characterisations of students being the antithesis of partnerships:

> Seeing students as customers has the potential to constrain student voice, placing it in reactive rather than proactive mode. Organisations may then only react to complaints, rather than seeking the input of students into larger issues related to actively improving teaching and learning. Where there were examples of true partnership in action, students made a significant contribution to quality enhancement at the class, faculty and committee level. This worked when students were perceived and treated as equal partners, the students themselves were well prepared, and worked in a consultative way with other students to ensure that the views they were putting forward were representative, and when organisations acted on student input and communicated this back to students.[21]

The next step in this research journey was to consider how to contextualise all this information for Australia's unique and diverse climate of tertiary education.

B Australian Research

1 The Method - this work entailed:

- Desk research of university policies and processes available on their websites;
- A survey directed at senior managers of university and private institutions;
- A survey of student leaders at Australian universities;
- Focus groups of students, academics, managers and professional staff at several institutions;
- Development of a Good Practice Guide which was a set of case studies of current practices in nine institutions and an account of a pilot study in the Law Faculty of the University of Technology Sydney.

Very little rich information was yielded by a comprehensive scoping of all universities' policies and processes further than the framework of university legislation, bylaws, and policies. Surveys of Australian tertiary institutions, student leaders, and focus groups aimed to delve further, to begin an understanding of what is happening here with respect to the incorporation of student voice.

Institutional response to the survey was strong (53%) with respondents generally indicating their receptiveness to active roles for students in decision-making and governance. A strong outcome from the institutional survey was that there are pockets of good practice throughout the Australian tertiary education sector but a systemic approach is lacking.

Student leaders were surveyed, with focus groups first being held for students to help design and customise the survey instrument. The response rate to the survey was around 50%. Students reported they were engaged in a range of decision-making opportunities across their institutions most notably as members of senior decision-making bodies such as council and academic board or senate. There was concern, though, that this participation is tokenistic. The students surveyed saw less engagement with students in decision-making closer to teaching activities, at the course and faculty level.

From the students' perspective institutional and staff attitudes to student representation were compliant with their being regarded as customers or stakeholders. The respondents reported little in the way of formal incentives and recognition provided for student representatives probably resulting in their being moderately difficult to recruit. They came predominantly from the ranks of full-time, undergraduate, local students. Little training was provided, either by the student associations or university authorities.

The students expressed the view that communication was central but there was a divergence in how institutions share information with their student body. This was both in relation to the institution itself and also how students can become involved in representative roles through various sources.

As a result of this research, which was accompanied by a wide process of dissemination, it became clear that while there was a developing interest in student engagement and partnership in the sector there was uncertainty among institutions as to how to go about it. Many were beginning to institute processes to work towards making student participation more effective.

The Case Studies and a Pilot Study aimed to assist an understanding and knowledge of practices through sharing those currently being undertaken in Australian universities.[22]

C Project reflections

Student partnership is an ethos not an activity[23]

Returning to address the fundamental questions - the 'What, Why, and How' of student engagement to partnership in institutional decision-making and governance:

1 What is student engagement?

The project found that perceptions and understanding of student engagement ranged widely within the five elements identified by the Student Engagement Framework for Scotland:

1. students feeling part of a supportive institution,
2. students engaging in their own learning,
3. students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning,
4. formal mechanisms for quality and governance, and
5. influencing the student experience at national level.

The project's focus was primarily on elements 3-5. However, it was clear that a culture or ethos of student partnership was 'a way of doing things' in institutions which embraced all five elements.

The sector in Australia is now developing an understanding of not only the concept but the workability and implications of student partnerships through engagement along with an appetite and readiness in the sector to embrace practices in a wide range of university operations. This enthusiasm was evident not simply from university management but importantly from institutional and national student leaders, and the national regulator of tertiary education, TEQSA.

2 Why is student engagement to partnership important?

The Project used the international research and practice to advance the benefits of engaging students in institutional decision-making and governance across the sector.

Involving the voice of students as 'expert learners' provides institutions with valuable material to inform the enhancement of courses and the student experience. It could serve to transform the traditional relationships in higher education from a 'we know what's best for you' standpoint to the development of institutions as self-sustaining communities with shared goals and values. Conversely, institutional reputations could be enhanced by being seen as being 'in touch' with their students and their views and being relevant it what they provide.

For student representatives and the wider student body, evidence now suggests that a feeling of belonging assists retention and success. For students to see that they have a voice that is listened to and valued, and to witness changes secured on their behalf helps to give rise to a connection which comes from that empowerment. Importantly, authentic engagement of student voice in institutional decision making can assist in the development of the vital skills of critical thinking, innovation, leadership needed for their professional and personal development and their employability.

As to university staff, the value of seeking and embracing student voice lies in the providing of ideas for collaborative processes in learning, enhancement of learning and teaching, the understanding of student needs, learning from and incorporating diversity,

Importantly, the authentic incorporation of student voice is seen as assisting greatly in developing relationships in universities as communities of learning.

3 How can students be authentically and effectively engaged as partners across the diverse Australian sector?

Two propositions emerged: There needs to be

- A common understanding of partnership in institutions and more widely across the sector; and
- The understanding that institutional and a sector commitment to working with students in partnership is vital.

Importantly, it is not so much about compliance but about developing an understanding of the value of the views of students to all members of the sector, and embedding processes and policies to enable this engagement. Throughout all the research the themes that clearly stood out as essential elements of effective and meaningful student/ university partnerships were:

1. Effective, valued, and supported student leadership working together with universities;
2. A developmental approach to student representation from course/ subject level through to high-level institutional bodies;
3. Resources for training and support of student representatives;
4. Processes for engaging students in curricular design , involving them in a continual process of enhancement of courses, and their university experience;
5. Capturing every student's voice, engaging underrepresented student groups to ensure engagement of the whole student cohort; and
6. Appropriate financial and nonfinancial support and incentives for student representation.

The Project recommended a sector-wide collaboration towards the actualisation of these themes within Australian universities. In fact, because the Project uncovered considerable interest in the sector with many universities giving priority to creating a culture of collegiality and partnership, it proposed a Fellowship to build on this momentum. The Project Report in four parts (Varnham, Olliffe, Waite and Cahill (2018a-d)) may be accessed on www.studentvoiceaustralia. com.

IV The Fellowship: 'Creating a National Framework For Student Engagement And Partnership'

A National Senior Teaching Fellowship enabled a sector-wide collaboration involving senior institution managers and government policy-makers, student representatives, and professional and academic staff. It provided the opportunity to explore and progress student partnership in the Australian tertiary sector by bringing institutions and their students together in a national conversation. While drawing on international experience as above, the focus was on the uniqueness and diversity of the Australian university sector and its student cohorts. It recognised

that there is now in Australia an increasingly diverse student body with an accompanying wide range of expectations and needs - best determined through engaging students in the issues. The national collaboration involved:

1.   A series of workshops in which there was participation from 43 organisations and around 300 higher education staff, student leaders, students' associations, and agency representatives.
2.   Input from workshop groups at a range of conferences with a wide diversity of participants;
3.   Presentations at conferences conducted as conversations with groups of students; and presentations to specific groups within universities, for example, Academic Boards, and Learning and Teaching groups. These all involved significant audience interaction and discussion.

The workshops were accompanied by an online facility for gathering sector input. What follows is a brief discussion of the outcomes.

A Building a partnership culture

There were strongly identifiable themes which emerged from the open dialogue. These may be summarised as:

•   Opportunities for engagement and representation at all levels of university decision making, from classroom to university governance, should be made clear from outset. It is important to include students from the start of ideas or work together with them students on issues towards solutions. Students need to commit to commit professionally to this role, including outgoing student leaders and representatives transferring knowledge to those coming in to the roles.

•   Student leadership has important role in working in partnership with universities and adequate support for their associations should be provided.

•   It is important to have policies which provide for a student representative system in courses, subjects or year cohorts of students. Such a system spreads the capability and confidence over a wide range of students and is invaluable to embed a culture. So also does involving students as partners within the classroom, in their learning and teaching what and how they learn.

•   Insofar as training and support for all student representatives is vital, there is a dual responsibility as a partnership between institutions and student leaders.

•   Communication and transparency in decision-making is essential to build trust at all levels so students can know of opportunities and see their voices count. Because methods of communication are constantly changing, students should be asked what means of communication works for them.

•   A necessity and a considerable challenge is the capturing of every student's voice. Australian institutions are perhaps the most diverse in the world so no 'one size fits all.' It is important for each institution to work with its students to develop opportunities and support for varied cohorts, those who are international, indigenous, undergraduate, postgraduate, part-time, off-campus, and online.

•   How to incentivise student representation is a question which requires a great deal of thought and flexibility. It is essential to recognise the value of the considerable time students may spend. A strong incentive for students must be to see the impact their voice has had in decision making and outcomes from partnerships celebrated. In reality, though, there is also a need to consider tangible incentives such as course recognition or payment at the higher

levels for representation.

Predominantly, the need for an ongoing national presence to sustain and strengthen partnership culture was a strong theme which underpinned all discussion. Such a presence would provide a vehicle for the provision of resources for facilitation of partnership initiatives and the networking for sharing ideas and experiences.

V The Principles And Framework: Stepup For Quality Enhancement

The Principles and Framework developed from the fellowship collaboration articulate both the will and the means for the Australian higher education sector to move forward to embrace student voice in decision-making and governance in institutions and to develop a culture of student partnership in the sector generally. They intend to support an expectation of institutional development of a strategy of student engagement across the broad spectrum of a university's operations, from learning and teaching to direction and strategy.

The Framework: Students and Tertiary Education Providers Undertaking Partnership (STEPUP) for quality enhancement, is underpinned by these principles:

• Principle 1: Building authentic partnerships at all levels of university decision making
• Principle 2: Communication of opportunities and outcomes of student engagement and the honesty and transparency necessary to build trust
• Principle 3: Strong and cohesive student leadership in universities and nationally
• Principle 4: Training and Support of student leaders and student representatives must be undertaken as a partnership between universities and students
• Principle 5: Embracing every student's voice in a call for diversity and inclusivity
• Principle 6: Valuing student voice in recognition of formal and informal engagement
• Principle 7: A national presence for facilitation and support of student partnership

These Principles presented in a format with a stepped level of detail may be accessed at www.studentvoiceaustralia.com.   The third level includes valuable tips and observations for implementation and facilitation of the Principles, together with many insightful and valuable quotes from a members of the sector in the collaborative workshops.

VI Conclusion

The aim of the Project and the Fellowship was to help shape a systemic shift in the higher education sector in Australia by putting students at the centre of what we do. The importance of higher education as a public good for modern society calls for individual institutions and the sector as a whole to be accessible, accountable and relevant in all they deliver.

The *Higher Education Standards Framework* (*Threshold Standards*) *2015* is used by the TEQSA to regulate higher education providers in Australia. The standards clearly provide that students must be given the opportunity to participate in 'the deliberative and decision-making processes' of providers in addition to requiring particularly that students have the opportunity to participate in governance of the institution.

The Principles and Framework embrace these crucial factors by providing a set of aspirations for recognising the centrality of student views to universities as communities of learning. They provide the basis for the introduction of policies and practices to ensure the effective and authentic

engagement of student voice in all university functions, from learning and teaching to university governance.

The research showed that although Australian universities have student representatives on faculty and university bodies, representation is not embedded through all layers of the institution. The extent of representation varies greatly between institutions. The research suggests a need for a common understanding towards creating effective student representation or engagement from all cohorts of students at all levels of university operations in a diverse sector.

At the outset of the project there was an awareness that the anecdotally low level of student engagement in university governance and decision-making was often constructed by university staff as attributable to student apathy or a lack of willingness to become involved. This research turns this view around by demonstrating that behaviour which may appear to indicate "*apathy*" is better accounted for by a relatively low level of understanding and systemic support for student engagement. This view was evidenced by the Australian research undertaken at the beginning of this work which showed a relatively minimalist policy framework supporting the authentic incorporation of student voice in institutional operations.

Still, there are many indications that things are changing. The Australian research undertaken in the OLT Project and the Fellowship uncovered many pockets of exemplary practices of student engagement with strong support and highly engaged student representatives at a variety of institutions across our diverse sector.

At a national level, TEQSA, in 2017, concluded a Memoranda of Understanding with the five peak student bodies and established a Student Advisory Board which shows the value it places on engaging with students as partners at a national level. In 2018 ten institutions formed the Student Voice Pilot Project aimed at developing and sustaining a culture of student partnership across the sector. This work continues to derive both its motivation and support from international experience and insights, particularly England, Scotland, and Ireland.

Keywords: student engagement, student voice, university governance,

Endnotes

1   A paper presented at the ECER Conference in Budapest, Hungary, 26-29 August 2018 formed the basis of this article; it has not been previously published.

2   The author acknowledges that this article is a synthesis of the Project Reports, website: <www.studentvoiceaustralia.com>, to the Australian Government Department of Education and Training which is in four parts: Varnham, Olliffe, Waite & Cahill (2018a), '*Student engagement in university decision-making and governance- towards a more systemically inclusive student voice: Project Final Report';* Varnham, Olliffe, Waite & Cahill (2018b), '*Student engagement in university decision-making and governance- towards a more systemically inclusive student voice: International Research Report';* Varnham, Olliffe, Waite & Cahill (2018c), '*Student engagement in university decision-making and governance- towards a more systemically inclusive student voice: Australian Survey Report'*; Varnham, Olliffe, Waite & Cahill (2018d), '*Student engagement in university decision-making and governance: Case Studies Good Practice Guide'.*

3   P Carey, 'Student Engagement: Stakeholder perspectives on course representation in university governance' (2013) Vol 38(9) *Studies in Higher Education,* 1290-1303; Bergan S (ed) *'The University as res publica: Higher Education Governance, Student Participation and the University as a Site of Citizenship'* (2004) Council of Europe Publishing. Accessible at www.coe.int; Luescher☐Mamashela (2010), From University Democratisation to Managerialism: The changing legitimation of university governance and the place of students, 16(4) *Tertiary Education and Management.*

4 Sherry R Arnstein, 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation' (1969) *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35 (4) July, 216-224.

5 Kerri-Lee Krause & Lisa Armitage, 'Australian Student Engagement, Belonging, Retention & Success: a synthesis of the literature' (2014) Higher Education Academy, York, UK.

6 *Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Act 2005* (NZ).

7 <https://nsie.education.gov.au/>.

8 These are currently under review by the Office for Students UK (below).

9 Retrieved from <sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/SEFScotland.pdf>.

10 sparqs '*Celebrating student engagement, successes and opportunities in Scotland's university sector'*, 2013. Retrieved from <sparqs.ac.uk/>.

11 Ibid.

12 Guidance on the development and implementation of a Student Partnership Agreement in universities, sparqs, November 2013. Retrieved from sparqs.ac.uk/.

13 Recognition and accreditation of academic reps- Practices and challenges across Scotland's colleges and universities*,* sparqs, November 2015.

14 sparqs, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/CELEBRATING%20ACHIEVEMENT%20SPREADS%20WEB.pdf>.

15 See <https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/ch/E4%20Report%20to%20HEFCE%20on%20student%20engagement.pdf>.

16 P C Pimental-Botas, G M van der Welden, R Naidoo, J A Lowe & A D Pool (2013) 'Student Engagement in Learning and Teaching Quality Management: A Study of UK Practices'. Quality Assurance Agency UK and Bath University; and G M Van der Velden, A D Pool, J A Lowe, R Naidoo & P C Pimental-Botas (2013) 'Student Engagement in Learning and Teaching Quality Management – a good practice guide for higher education providers and student unions'. Quality Assurance Agency UK and Bath University respectively.

17 Quality Assurance Agency (UK), 2014. See also The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) & Guild HE '*Making Student Engagement a Reality - Turning theory into practice 2015'* (2015); Higher Education Academy UK *'Framework for student engagement through partnership',* heacademy.ac.uk/frameworks-toolkits; and the National Union of Students, '*Manifesto for Partnership'* (NUS, 2012).

18 A *Flint***,** H *Goddard* & E *Russell***,** *Architects of their experience: the role**, value and impact of student representation systems in Higher Education in England.* **(***2017***)** *The Student Engagement Partnership.* Retrieved from http://tsep.org.uk/architects-of-their-experience-research-on-student-academic-representation-systems/.

19 Section 229A *Education (Freedom of Association) Amendment Act* 2011 (NZ).

20 *Education Amendment Act* 2015 (NZ).

21 Ako Aotearoa: The National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Research Excellence and the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations, 'Student Voice in Tertiary Education Settings: Quality Systems in Practice (2013). Retrieved from <https://akoaotearoa.ac.nz/download/ng/file/group-4/student-voice-full-report.pdf>.

22 The case studies and pilot are detailed in the Project Report (2018d) at <www.studentvoiceaustralia.com> and will be the subject of a separate article.

23 M Healy & Ors, 'Engagement through partnership: students as partners in higher education' (2014) Higher Education Academy, UK. Retrieved at <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/enhamce,emts/themes/students-partners>.