

Building the argument for more systemic student voice in university governance and decision-making in Australia: Learnings from the UK (0250)

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Australia is moving towards policy convergence with the United Kingdom in the deregulation of student fees, however, approaches to student engagement in university governance and decision-making could be viewed as divergent. This paper presents early findings of what the authors believe to be the first comprehensive study of student voice in university decision-making and governance to be undertaken in Australia. The project has been funded by the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching, as "Student engagement in university decision-making and governance – towards a more systemically inclusive student voice." (Varnham, 2014).

The project was proposed within the context of imminent higher education fee deregulation in Australia, announced in the May 2014 budget, but as at the time of submission, not yet passed by the Senate. As the UK had already moved towards higher fee structures, and had funded a number of projects to address issues that might arise through an increasingly consumer focused student body, (UK Government, 2012) the project aimed to investigate the UK context to determine what outcomes could be of value within the Australian context.

A comparative view of the regulatory /compliance context

In the first phase of the project, the Project Leader visited the UK to undertake semi-structured interviews with senior university personnel, NUS representatives, and representatives from regulatory or quasi-regulatory bodies such as the QAA.

While a great deal of the interview data included examples of exemplar practices from the UK, an important difference between the UK and the Australian context emerged. The research shows that there appears to have been a continuing move towards the development of compliance processes and research-supported guides to support the increased engagement of student voice in university governance and decision-making. Processes are evidenced in documentation such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Chapter 5 in the new Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2012), and the Good Practice Guide for Higher Education providers and Student Unions (Van der Velden et al, 2013).

Within Australia, the comparative higher education quality assurance agency, TEQSA, provides short statements within its Higher Education Provider Standards (Australian Government, 2011). These standards have been subject

to review, and the replacement standards, not yet approved by the Minister for Education, include similar brief statements. Within Australia, universities are subject to both federal and state legislation. A recent change to Victorian legislation removed the requirement for student or staff representation on university governance bodies. Consequently, the pending TEQSA standards now lessen the requirement for student representation with a footnote that states, “this standard does not require, nor preclude student membership of the governing body or other governing structure.” (Australian Government, 2014). It can be seen that while there appears to be a continual move towards more inclusive voice within the UK, the situation within Australia is somewhat less consistent.

Embedded practices of students as partners

From interviews and research of documents, including websites, the discursive construction of student as partner in the co-production of the education experience is clear. Students are represented on the governing body of the QAA, students participated in the production and review of Chapter B5 of the quality code. Student reviewers are included in all QAA reviews. In Australia, student representation on national regulatory bodies is unusual. There is no student representation at TEQSA, and one student on the Award Panel of the Office for Learning and Teaching. There is also no equivalent requirement for training and ongoing support.

Where to now for Australia?

Research within the UK has highlighted many excellent practices which support and develop student engagement in university governance and decision-making. The challenge for our team is to develop a case for the adoption of these practices within Australia. While it is possible that through dissemination processes we will be able to share exemplars with interested university staff, and some may be adopted, it is clear that significant funding commitments are needed for broad adoption.

The question which we have not yet answered, is “What evidence do we need to persuade high level university personnel and regulatory bodies that there is an apparent “business-case” to embrace a more deeply engaged student voice?”. The adversarial nature of the relationship between students and government in 2014 as a reaction to the announcement of fee deregulation has not fostered a move towards deeper student engagement by universities. Yet a comment from one interviewee revealed: *“(Student Unions) were political when they needed to get into the boardroom, but now they're in the boardroom they're playing a different game, and now they've been very much professionalised, which has worked to their advantage, and that has helped them to become the partnership and critical friend.”*

The clear convergence in policies on student engagement in governance, including pressure from ENQA points to the raising of international quality

standards of higher education provision. With the potential of increased fees in Australia, the sector exposes itself to increased international competition. Our UK research suggested that the self-interest of each university is protected through the maintenance of the reputation of the sector in its entirety and is encapsulated in this comment: “(Universities) buy into it because they’re all agreeing with each other that this is what you need to meet that reputation.... So they have self-interest in ensuring that although it’s their competition, that the other providers of higher education meet a certain standard, and I think the quality code really embodies that.”

At the time of submission, Australian Higher Education fees are still regulated. A change in the fee structure is likely to raise competitive pressures that were previously unknown. Perhaps at this time, senior university personnel and regulators may perceive that an enhanced student voice in governance will work towards raising quality and the reputation of the sector.

Further outcomes of this project, not available at time of submission, but available by the conference will include the preliminary findings of a survey of all Australian universities, and an update on the move towards fee deregulation.

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Varnham, S, 2014. *Student engagement in university decision-making and governance - towards a more systemically inclusive student voice* (OLT project website which will continue to be updated as resources are developed)
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