

Student voice in Australian university decision-making: From misrecognition to a systemic model

Project context

In 2014, the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching awarded \$239,000 for the project “*Student Engagement in university decision-making and governance: Towards a more systemically inclusive student voice*”. This funding facilitated the first sector-wide study of student representation in decision-making processes within Australian universities against a background of comparative international research. The project was initiated by the project leader, drawing on her experience of student engagement in university representative bodies, and her interest in the role of student leaders. She was concerned about the development of a more active student voice in university decision-making, and found that her concerns were shared by other senior academics across the sector.

Referring to the increasing focus on positioning students at the centre of university decision-making within the UK context of higher university fees, and the UK Government White paper – Students at the heart of the system (2011), the project sought to consider student representative practices which could be of value within the Australian sector.

Methodological approach

The researchers view themselves as “insider researchers” in the higher education sector. They have adopted a Bourdieusian reflexive sociological approach (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) to problematize their positions in relation to the site of study, and to consider how these relative positions facilitate dissemination and change.

During 2015 and 2016, the project team undertook a mixed methods study which included:

- Comparison of policy documents in the UK, Australia, and Europe
- Comparative international research – interviews with senior sector managers, and student leaders in the UK, Europe, and New Zealand
- A survey of student representation practices across the Australian university sector adapted from the UK research undertaken by Van der Velden et al within the UK (2013)
- Interviews, focus groups, and collaborative ideation processes with student leaders and staff of Australian universities
- Development of good practice case studies
- Active dissemination with policy makers, senior academics, and student representatives – focused networking

Misrecognition – Student apathy or limited systemic support?

Prior to the study, and anecdotally, Australian students would often be referred to as “*apathetic*” in relation to student representation. This epithet was even used by a leading higher education journalist in an article on the project (Hare, 2015). As an explanatory concept, Bourdieu’s theory of practice suggests that participants in a field of practice are influenced by the *exigencies* of the field - the practices of the field itself influence the perceptions of the participants. This can lead to what Bourdieu refers to as *misrecognition* of the nature of a problem. Through the research undertaken across Australia, and the comparative international research, we have been able to demonstrate that

behaviour which may appear to indicate “*apathy*” is better accounted for by the relatively low level of focused support for student representation, and a minimalist policy framework.

In particular, the comparative research highlighted the need for the following in Australia:

1. A developmental approach to student representation from course/subject level through to high level institutional, and student representative bodies
2. Resources for training and support of student representatives, and appropriate funding models for training and knowledge transfer
3. Processes for the engagement of students in curricular design, and involvement in a continual process of enhancement of courses and the university experience –a quality focus
4. Processes which capture the voice of a broad representation of the student body, particularly from the beginning of major university initiatives
5. The provision of meaningful incentives for student engagement, which minimise the barriers to engaging in representation for underrepresented groups

In addition to the identification of areas for development, we have also uncovered exemplary cases of student partnership, and highly engaged student representatives in Australian universities. With effective institutional support, students have been able to contribute effectively to university strategies, and in some cases, initiate strategic innovations. These findings further suggest that, within Australia, issues relating to student representation have been “*misrecognised*”.

A systemic model of layered practices – depicting the “field”

The findings of the research have now been synthesised into an actionable systemic model. Building on Gherardi’s concept of “*textured practices*” (2015) and Bourdieu’s (1992) concepts of “*field*”, we have developed a layered model of the field of student representation practice in Australia. This may be used within individual institutions to further develop the student voice in governance and decision-making, and as a model of the sectoral field of student representation practices, including the relationships - evident and absent - between these practice layers. This model forms the basis for conversation within the sector and the collaborative development of a national framework.

Towards a national framework for student partnership in university decision-making and governance.

From a proposal led by one academic, this work has resulted in significantly increased engagement of both academic managers and student leaders across the sector. Through the various project activities there is an increasing acknowledgement in the sector of the need to examine a more systemic approach to student representation and support of student representatives, and to consider a national framework for student partnership.

Our international research had uncovered a number of frameworks which have some relevance to the Australian context. However, in the interviews undertaken with participants in the production of these policies and frameworks (in Scotland and England), one particular issue is highlighted – *that adoption of the quality codes and frameworks by universities is strongly related to the collaborative and inclusive nature of their development.*

The project leader has now been awarded an OLT Fellowship of \$250,000 to continue this work and to work with staff and student leaders to develop a national framework. From a virtually non-existent field of scholarship within Australia, and a relatively undeveloped shared understanding, a new momentum is developing across the sector.

References

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