The Student leadership in curriculum development and reform project

Elizabeth M Deane
University of Western Sydney, Sydney
e.deane@uws.edu.au

Kylie Stanley
University of Western Sydney, Sydney
k.stanley@uws.edu.au

Abstract: Both in the Australian Higher Education sector and internationally, the student voice plays an important role in helping universities improve the overall student experience. This paper explores the role of student leaders in influencing and enhancing teaching and learning in Australian Universities. It pays particular attention to the skills, knowledge and personal characteristics required in student leaders as well as the role their home institutions can play in training, supporting and recognising this valuable student contribution. This work speaks strongly to development of graduate and work relevant skills.

Keywords: Student leadership, curriculum development, student voice

Introduction

In Australia and internationally the massification of the Higher Education sector has changed the numbers of students pursuing post-secondary University-based learning and has manifestly influenced the way in which Universities interact with individual students and the broader student body.

At one extreme, students are positioned as customers and consumers of knowledge, with large sums dedicated to market analysis, profile raising and competitive marketing strategies. Furthermore, student satisfaction surveys and publications, such as the Australian and UK-Based *Times Good Universities guides*, often play a significant and public role in influencing students' choice of institution and program of study. Simultaneously, and in contrast, there is a steady and growing expansion of the roles students play at all levels of their institutions, including contributing to formal governance, social and cultural life, improvements in the curriculum and generating new knowledge (Allin, 2014; Barnes, Golding, Bestwisk, & Wood, 2001; Carey, 2013). It is these increasingly important roles that drive the need for critical assessment of how student contributions can be best articulated, supported and recognized to achieve optimal benefits to the higher education institutions and to the students themselves.

One key aspect of the above scenario is the role played by student leaders. Universities clearly value good leadership and this valuing is evident in University policies and processes and in the large body of research dedicated to identifying and supporting staff leadership capabilities (Anderson, Johnson and Saha, 2002; Aziz, Mullins, Balzer, Frauer, Burnfiled, Lodato, Cohen-Powless, 2005; Coates, Meek, Brown, Friedman, Noonan &Mitchell, 2010; Scott, Coates and Anderson, 2008; Scott, Tilbury, Sharp & Deane, 2012). Much of this research has clearly established that, to be effective, leadership must be exercised at multiple

levels in a university, from lecturer to senior management. However, little has been done to investigate mechanisms for transferring this knowledge to harness valid student leadership and supporting student leader in their capacity to influence institutional improvement, particularly in the areas of learning, teaching and curriculum.

The Student Leadership Project broadly examines the multiple dimensions of student leadership evident in Australian Universities. As with studies of staff leadership, these leadership roles have been broadly scoped to include more formal representative positions, such as Association Presidents through to more fluid roles closer to the heart of educational practice, in subjects and discipline areas. This project has the specific intent to hear from student leaders about their capabilities, experiences and contributions and their need for support and recognition. This information, contextualized in international research and practice-based initiatives, will be used to develop a framework to guide Universities in empowering their students as leaders particularly in their contributions to learning, teaching and the curriculum.

The following quote aptly conveys this intent:

> "There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that 'listens' to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011, p.?)

In achieving the above objectives, the project seeks answers to the following key questions:
- To what extent, and in what ways, do institutions currently engage and empower students to contribute to learning, teaching and the curriculum?
- How do institutions judge that the mechanisms they have in place are effective and valid?
- What institutional structures and processes are most and least productive for supporting and empowering students to contribute productively to learning, teaching and curriculum enhancement?
- What capabilities and skills underpin effective student participation in curriculum development and reform?
- To what extent are the roles, effectiveness indicators and capabilities of student leadership roles common across higher education systems and across countries?
- To what extent do student leadership capabilities, roles, expectations and support needs align with the findings from earlier studies of academic leaders?
- What forms of professional learning and support are most and least productive for student leaders participating in curriculum development and learning and teaching improvements at a variety of levels (subject/program/faculty/institution) within the institution?
- How can existing structures and processes be improved to support and empower students to make valid contributions?
- What are the implications of this research for the recruitment, development and support of students as leaders contributing to curriculum?

The approach

Accessing the valid student voice
The Student Leadership project foregrounds the student voice on student leadership. To achieve this it adopted approaches that maximized opportunities for such contributions.

Namely, students, via the presidents of their peak representational bodies, the National Union of Students (NUS) and Coursework and Postgraduate Association (CAPA), were key members of both the project team and expert advisory group. As such, they worked collaboratively to formulate and guide the project's direction. For example, in the initial stages of project development, the input from student leaders through workshops at annual meetings of NUS and CAPA, through focus group consultations on partner University campuses and through an online site, seeking input form students who identified themselves as student leaders. This approach led to the identification of key issues and themes for investigation.

International perspectives

This information was complemented by an analysis of related staff-based research, noted above, as well as a scoping of international initiatives. This process identified two initiatives of particular interest to the current project. The first is the recent UK Higher Education Academy project (https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/workstreams-research/themes/students-partners) that places specific emphasis on the role of students in "enhancing learning and teaching practice and policy" as well as their practical "engagement in learning teaching and research" (p?). The second is the well-established empowering of students in representational roles in Scotland, which notably requires students as panel members in Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Enhancement led Institutional reviews (ELIR) (http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/enhancement-led-institutional-review)
 as well as supports the training of student leaders through Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs), itself with a specific mandate to "support student engagement in the quality of the learning experience" (http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/)

The survey

The resultant student leadership questionnaire was promulgated via the Australian partner student associations and through the offices of Australian University Deputy Vice Chancellors. The survey sought responses and commentary on past and current leadership roles and experiences, role statements, expectations and training, factors impacting the performance of the role, personal capabilities and capacity, skills and knowledge required in the role, measures of success as well as challenges and support needs. The questionnaire also sought practical examples that could be used as exemplars to support institutions in achieving positive student leadership outcomes.

Delineating student leaders

One of the first issues to be addressed in this project was that of delineating student leaders and leadership, particularly as it pertains to learning, teaching and the curriculum. Definitions and nuances of leaders and leadership occupy a highly contested space (Gunter, 2001). For the purposes of this study, student leaders and leadership was broadly scoped to include formal representative positions with explicit roles and contributions to educational policy, procedures and program accreditation through to students who may lack positional authority but see themselves as influencing academic activities at the subject and discipline levels.

Consultation with student leaders, as described previously, expanded this group to include student leaders in what could be deemed extra or co-curricular learning, including student clubs and societies.

The findings

Student leadership roles

Student representation on committees is widely viewed as a key mechanism for involving students in educational improvement (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Appraisal of publicly available information on the governance and policy frameworks of Australian universities shows that all institutions make explicit provision for student representation on their councils and various academic and education committees. Just over 45% of student respondents to the survey identified as having representational leadership roles on University and Faculty committees with the remaining roles spread across areas such a volunteering, welfare support, mentoring and small working parties. No students identified their role as directly influencing teaching and learning or as having an impact on curriculum.

The following table presents a summary of responses to the question on the importance of various aspects of student leadership roles.

Table 1: Survey results on % importance of roles

Roles	Not important at all	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Relationships with university staff and students	1.18%	1.18%	8.24%	29.41%	60.00%
Understanding how my university operates and how different groups can influence certain situations	1.18%	1.18%	11.76%	41.18%	44.71%
Involvement in the development and implementation of university policies and processes	2.35%	3.53%	27.06%	37.65%	29.41%
Participation in the review of courses and/or programs	3.53%	5.88%	32.94%	40.00%	17.65%
Being involved in overall decisions about the quality of teaching and learning at your university	4.71%	3.53%	15.29%	37.65%	38.82%
Dealing with student concerns related to studies	1.18%	2.35%	15.29%	36.47%	44.71%
Participating in training and support in student leadership	1.18%	9.41%	17.65%	44.71%	27.06%
Involvement on university committees as student representative	3.53%	1.18%	12.94%	40.00%	42.35%
Your own personal and professional development as a student leader	3.53%	5.88%	18.82%	40.00%	31.76%
Having input into a subject or program's curriculum	4.71%	16.47%	28.24%	29.41%	21.18%

It can be noted that 75% of student leaders ranked the importance of contribution to overall decisions about the quality of teaching and learning as very important to extremely important whilst a much lower ranking was given to having input into a program or subject curriculum (50.6%) or onto participation in review of courses or programs (57.7%). Greatest importance was given to roles relating to building and maintaining relationships and supporting other

students. Such data may reflect the actual roles of the respondent leadership cohort and/or indicate an area of contribution where universities may need to more overtly focus on, support and acknowledge the need for student input, as suggested by (ref to wider lit).

Capabilities, skills and measures of success of leadership
Student leaders were asked to reflect on differing capabilities and skills sets they deemed necessary to fulfill their roles. These included areas of personal, interpersonal and cognitive capabilities, skills and knowledge relating to University operations, including teaching practice. Personal capabilities of having energy, enthusiasm and passion for the job and wanting to achieve the best outcomes possible were ranked as extremely important (72.5%), as were the interpersonal skills of working productively with and respecting the views of others (61.25%).

With respect to cognitive capabilities, having a personal sense of a clear and achievable direction was most highly valued with 48% of student leaders ranking this capability as extremely important. This was closely followed at 44% by the ability to identify core issues and opportunities. The least relevant capability based on % scores of not important to slightly important was the ability to organize daily work (6.7%). Compared with the aforementioned staff leadership studies there is commonality of importance in the capability areas of strategy, critical thinking capability and adaptability.

Table 2: Markers of success for student leaders by % of survey results

	Not important at all	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Establishing positive relationships between university staff and students	1.39%	4.17%	9.72%	36.11%	48.61%
Introduction of improved policies and procedures	1.39%	8.33%	19.44%	36.11%	34.72%
Creating significant improvements in learning and teaching quality	4.17%	11.11%	15.28%	34.72%	34.72%
Receiving positive feedback for your leadership performance	2.78%	6.94%	20.83%	29.17%	40.28%
Being invited to represent students at key events	5.56%	8.33%	29.17%	23.61%	33.33%
Increasing evidence of student voice being heard	2.78%	1.39%	15.28%	31.94%	48.61%
Increasing student contributions to curriculum improvement	8.33%	1.39%	15.28%	36.11%	38.89%
Achieving goals set for your own personal and professional development	1.39%	9.72%	22.22%	34.72%	31.94%
Successful implementation of new student initiatives	1.39%	1.39%	12.50%	38.89%	45.83%
Having high levels of support from staff and students	0.00%	5.56%	15.28%	27.78%	51.39%

As noted previously, student leaders saw the most important measures of successful student leadership as those related to developing positive relationships, increased visibility of the student voice and successful implementation of student initiatives (Table 2). Of lesser import

was contributing to curriculum (8.3% stating it was of no importance) and significant improvements in teaching and learning quality (4.2% stating it was of no importance). The above data suggests that student leaders do not readily see themselves as having a role in influencing teaching, learning and the curriculum. This is of particular note given (i) the emphasis that universities place on gathering and responding to student feedback on units of study and teaching quality and (ii) the fact that Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) Threshold Standards make explicit the necessity to take heed of the student voice in reflecting on and improving university learning, teaching and student outcomes.

And can we be sure there are shared understandings?

> There are certain bits when I could have done with a dictionary… It was almost like we got our point across as students, and then we'd start looking at each other as lecturers talked across the tables using these acronyms and abbreviations. (Carey, 2013)

The above findings suggest that for institutions to reap the benefit of student leaders' contributions to this area they will need to make explicit the opportunities for student leaders to contribute at all levels, focus on common understandings of expectations and build student leaders' capabilities to contribute.

The challenges for student leaders

The majority of open-ended responses identified time management as the biggest challenge student leaders encountered in their role. Juggling workload, study and life responsibilities was very difficult. Student leaders also highlighted other challenges such as working with a diverse range of staff and students, finding it difficult to say no, disseminating information and problem solving.

While some students reported having good relationships and open communication and support from academic staff, many respondents spoke of the difficulties encountered in dealing with university staff and universities' systems and processes, with some noting that they did not feel supported or encouraged by staff. Some did not feel they had sufficient opportunities to convince people about new initiatives or areas for improvement. They noted that it was difficult to deal with staff who did not appear to act on student feedback or want to shift their views to consider changes or meet student expectations.

Small focus groups also raised issues of what could be described as the social ecology of the institution. Participants talked about Australian universities being largely places to obtain a qualification, with most students prioritising their commitments outside of university. Comparisons were made with students in some overseas universities who live, work and study on campus and who are thereby more immersed in the university community life and the associated opportunities for supported leadership.

Some students indicated that training and support was not provided specifically for their leadership roles and indicated this would have been helpful prior to beginning (and continued throughout) their leadership role. Some other students reported having support and training, and referred to the benefits of being involved in leadership programs and attending training in interpersonal skills and intercultural competencies. Students noted that by having formal leadership training they were more confident to contribute effectively.

Finally, students noted the lack of motivation of their fellow students in other leadership positions? and the lack of opportunities to elicit their feedback, or even keep up their enthusiasm for their period of tenure. Other responses commented on a lack of position descriptions or role statements of expectations, remuneration and support during transition periods.

Framing student leadership and moving forward

The many dimensions of student leadership in Universities can be brought together in a model that delineates their current and future roles and may assist institutions to focus on practical means for ensuring contribution as follows:

- **Student leaders as evaluators** includes those processes through which the institution and external bodies listen to the student voice in order to drive change;
- **Student leaders as institutional decision makers** emphasizes institutional commitment to greater student involvement and leadership in institution-wide improvements to teaching and learning and curriculum development. This particularly speaks to the role of student leaders in governance;
- **Student leaders as experts and partners** emphasizes active student engagement as co-creators of knowledge at the very heart of curriculum development and its improvement;
- **Student leaders as drivers of change** requiring a move from institution-driven to student-driven agendas and activities.

(adapted from Dunne & Zandstra, 2011)

There are several challenges to progressing this agenda and developing valid, productive roles for student leaders in curriculum enhancement. Not least are the issues identified to date in the Student Leadership survey, particularly the recognition by student leaders themselves that they do have a part to play in improving curriculum. This could be more broadly encompassed to include addressing issues of role ambiguity, lack of experience, poor student training for leadership, the attitudes and expectations of staff and systemic difficulties, including unaligned policies, poor committee structures and other governance related activities (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

Internationally there is recognition of the unrealized potential and importance of harnessing student input into curriculum. School, College and University based studies have demonstrated the positive outcomes of student engagement in institutional governance structures and processes that support learning and teaching and in the practice of teaching (Kezar, 2006; Kezar, 2010; Kocolowski, 2010; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Mitra, 2004; Murphey et al, 2009). The UK HEA *Students as Partners* Project has exposed a wealth of good practice examples demonstrating how students can work with institutions at all levels to create knowledge, improve curriculum and enhance teaching practice (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014; Trowler, 2010). An extensive synopsis of this area of work, with an extensive actively managed repository of relevant publications can be found at http://www.mickhealey.co.uk/resources.

Conclusions
Student roles are being reinvented, with descriptors such as student centric learning, which still place students as passive actors are being replaced with notions of partnership in learning, in knowledge creation and in governance.

Students are active participants at all levels of representation in University governance maps and policies. The student voice is solicited, most frequently through a raft of national and local surveys and Faculty are expected to respond and act in a constructive and respectful manner. Active student learning and participation in creation of knowledge is also increasingly seen as highly desirable, if difficult to achieve.

There is possibly little debate that students should be empowered to be active participants in the governance of their institution and in their contributions to their learning environment. The debate and the practicalities lie in the extent of that empowerment, in defining the dimensions of their role and supporting and ensure that all is practically achievable and acceptable.

In part this discussion would encompass how universities can adapt their current governance models and policy to provide more participation in area of curriculum, not just at the top but also throughout their institutions. There also needs to consideration given to pursing a cultural shift whereby academic staff who have the most power to accommodate student contributions can be helped to be more open to understanding the changing roles of student leaders, their motivations, capabilities and changing student expectations of teaching and learning. Teaching staff are best placed to offer guidance and opportunity for students to foster leadership interpersonal, personal, cognitive capabilities, as well as essential skills and knowledge not only to become effective leaders but to gain valuable life skills that align with graduate capabilities and desired professional skills of future employers.

Acknowledgements

References

Allin, L. (2014). Collaboration between staff and students in the scholarship of teaching and learning: The potential and the problems, *Teaching and Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal* 2(1), 95-102.

Anderson. D., Johnson, R. & Saha, L. (2002) *Changes in academic work: Implications for universities of the changing age distribution and work roles of academic staff*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. at http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/57E92071-C591-4E15-879C 468A9CDE80A1/910/academic_work.pdf

Aziz, S., Mullins M., Balzer, W., Frauer, E., Burnfield, J., Lodato, M. & Cohen-Powless, M. (2005) 'Understanding the training needs of department chairs', *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(5), 571-593.

Barnes, E., Goldring, L., Bestwick, A. & Wood, J. (2011). A collaborative evaluation of student-staff partnerships in inquiry-based educational development, in Little, S (ed) (2011) *Staff-student partnerships in higher education* London: Continuum pp.16-30.

Bovill C., Cook-Sather, A., & Falten, P. (2011). Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design and curricula: implications for academic developers. *International Journal for academic development*, 16 (2), pp. 133-145.

Carey, P. (2013). Student as co-producer in a marketized higher education system: a case study of students' experience of participation in curriculum design. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 50(3), pp.250-260.

Coates, H., Meek, L., Brown, J., Friedman, T., Noonan, P & Mitchell J. (2010). *VET leadership for the future: Contexts, characteristics and capabilities*, LH Martin Institute and Australian Council for Educational Research. Accessed at http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=higher_education

Dunne, E & Zandstra, R. (2011). *Students as change agents - new ways of engaging with learning and teaching in higher education*. Bristol: A joint University of Exeter/ESCalate/Higher Education Academy Publication. http://escalate.ac.uk/8064

Healey, M., Flint, A & Harrington, K. (2014). Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education. York: HE Academy 76pp

Gunter, H (2001). Leaders and Leadership in Education Sage Publications, pp198

Kezar, A. (2006). Redesigning for collaboration in learning initiatives: An examination of four highly collaborative campuses, *Journal of Higher Education*, 77(5), 804-838.

Kezar, A. (2010). Faculty and staff partnering with student activists: Unexplored terrains of interaction and development, *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(5), 451-480.

Kocolowski, M.D. (2010). Shared leadership: Is it time for a change *Emerging Leadership Journeys*, 3(1), 22-32.

Lizzio, A., & Wilson, K. (2009). Student participation in university governance: The role conceptions and sense of efficacy of student representatives on departmental committees, *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(1), 69-84.

Mitra, D. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing 'student voice' in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record*, 106(4), 651-688.

Murphey, T., Falout, J., Elwood, J., & Hood, M. (2009). Inviting student voice, *Asian EFL Journal*, 36, 1-25.

Scott, G., Coates, H., & Anderson, M. (2008). Learning leaders in times of change: Academic leadership capabilities for Australian higher education, University of Western Sydney and Australian Council for Educational Research. Accessed at http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/UWSACER_CarrickLeadershipReport.pdf

Scott, G., Tilbury, D., Sharp, L., Deane, E. (2012). Turnaround leadership for sustainability in higher education Accessible at http://www.academia.edu/1409510/Scott_G._Tilbury_D._Deane_L._Sharp_L._2012_Turnaround_Leadership_for_Sustainability_in_Higher_Education_Australian_Government._Office_for_Learning_and_Teaching_Canberra_Australia._pp.89

Trowler V. (2010). Student engagement literature review, report to the UK Higher Education Academy. Accessed at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/studentengagement/StudentEngagementLiteratureReview.pdf