

# **Student engagement in university decision-making and governance: How does Australia compare internationally?**

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This paper presents outcomes of research and dissemination undertaken for the OLT Strategic Priority Project “Student engagement in university decision-making and governance - towards a more systemically inclusive student voice” (2015/2016). The project addresses concerns about student engagement on governance bodies, and involved a survey of Australian Universities and qualitative research within the UK, Europe and New Zealand. Within the UK, the research comprised semi-structured interviews with policy-makers, student-leaders, and student engagement personnel. In Australia a survey was sent to each higher education institution on the OLT’s Table A and B. The survey was based on a UK survey commissioned by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (van der Velden et al, 2013). Follow up interviews and focus group discussions were undertaken at universities which expressed an interest in providing further information. Policy documents from the UK and Australia were compared. Survey questions were analysed in terms of frequencies. Interview and focus group texts were analysed for themes, in particular those themes which had been determined important within literature. The data highlighted the relatively inconsistent level of institutional support for student representation by Australian universities in comparison with the UK and Europe. Although there appears to be less systemic support for student representatives in Australia, interviews and focus groups have highlighted exemplary cases of student partnership where appropriate support has been provided. These exemplary cases disrupt the often-used construct of “student apathy” as an explanation for low levels of participation in representative activities. The research shows that the nature of representation appears to be better accounted for by the relatively low levels of institutional support. Dissemination activities indicate that there is an interest in developing student partnerships further and in broader adoption of the exemplary practices. The presentation will include preliminary guidelines for developing a more systemic approach to student representation. The comparative research also highlighted the relatively low level of policy guidance on student representation in Australia, compared with the detailed guidelines, typically developed in collaboration with national student bodies, in the UK. As the international higher education market is highly competitive, the research highlights a need for a more coherent sectoral approach to student partnership within Australia.

Student Voice in University Decision Making Project Website <http://www.uts.edu.au/partners-and-community/initiatives/student-voice-university-decision-making/overview>

van der Velden, G.M., Naidoo, R., Lowe, J.A., Pimentel Botas, P.C., Pool, A.D. (2013) Student Engagement in Quality Management Practices: A Study of UK Practices. [Project report](#), commissioned by the Quality Assurance Agency, University of Bath