Student representatives engaging in opportunities and...

.... negotiating barriers to participation in tertiary governance

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Overview

Learning from the Literature

Student Voice

Powerful Metaphors
Changing New Zealand Context

- The Education (Polytechnics) Amendment Act, 2009
- The Education (Freedom of Association) Amendment Act, 2011 (“VSM” Act)
- Education Amendment Act (No 4), 2011
The Literature

• Places student voice in the context of broader trends
  – changing academic community
  – neo-liberalism, marketisation, globalisation, accountability
  – learning as a private good purchased by students as consumers
  – active citizenship and
  – learner involvement to improve student outcomes

• Research into student voice and representation
  – Patchy, focussed on pedagogy, and limited in the context of decision-making and governance.
  – mostly qualitative -descriptive case studies
  – often based on data are gathered from institutional staff rather than seeking student voices.
  – often embedded in projects focussed on wider aspects of higher education

A recent focus on student voice

Changing perceptions and conceptions - but little consensus on meaning

- a vehicle to support accountability, marketability and reputation on the one hand (transactional); and

- to support the institution as a learning community and democracy in education on the other (transformational)

…..“the student-university relationship is more nuanced and more reciprocal than a simple customer-provider relationship... we are active participants rather than passive consumers”

National Student Forum, 2010, p. 29

General: Bragg, 2007; Ruddock, 2006; Seale, 2010; Smyth 2008
UK: Walker & Logan, 2008; Trowler 2010; Trowler & Trowler 2010
Australia: Lizzio & Wilson, 2009
New Zealand: Gordon, MacGibbon, Mudgway, Mason, & Milroy, 2011
Common threads

• a wide range of motivations for involvement as student representatives - focus on advocacy as well as personal benefits.

• opportunities for participation range from active to more passive functions

• wide variations within and between institutions

• commonly identified barriers faced by student representatives include
  – difficulties connecting with other students as constituent
  – the lonely, ambiguous, and challenging nature of the role
  – often reliant on good relationships with senior staff members

• training and support are important for success
Student Voices: How do student representatives engage in opportunities to participate in tertiary education governance and negotiate the barriers which limit their participation?

we do like having our voice... not necessarily having a strangle grip on it, but steering it in a direction that students want....

I think that student reps don't know how much power they have.
Motivation

I'm very vocal in class about certain issues and everyone just came to a consensus that I'd be good for it... it has to be a democratic process.

I volunteered - no-one else would do it, no-one likes to do things like that.

It will help everyone and help the whole cause, so it's a little bit of the humanitarian side of me.

I was sort of interested in having a bit more say into what happened around the place.

right place, right time

active citizenship

personal commitment, advocacy

making positive improvements to the institution for students

developing student culture

having a say in decisions
Perceptions of the role 1

- What did student reps think the staff saw the role as?

I think [the staff] see the role as I do, as in a voice for the students, because they say to me, [name] what's going on?

- Varying staff awareness of the role

- Advocacy and supporting students to deal with issues and complaints

- Staff are keen to hear about issues and work collaboratively to resolve these
Perceptions of the role 2

• What did student reps think other students saw the role as?
  - A support person
  - An intermediary
  - A way of raising, reporting and attending to concerns about the learning environment
  - A link to pastoral support

people seem to know what we do and what its about which is good
Perceptions of the role 3

How do student reps themselves see the role?

• Advocate for student as customer/consumer
• Representative in decisions for students as stakeholder,
• Partner in a learning community

...and I will go along and make sure you are heard as a student, these are the things that we pay for...
Dual perceptions

...a consumer on one level because we are paying for something and getting something in return....

...but we also see ourselves as - we work together with our lecturer as well, yeah, we are working with them when they're teaching us

Consumer (customer) and/or partner in a learning community
Students [are] the key stakeholders... ultimately there is no tertiary institution without a student... a customer really has no.... there's no power to the word.

Dual perceptions

...[staff member] absolutely adores the work we are doing... his door's always open if you pop past and [ask] "do you have a minute?" "Yeah, absolutely, absolutely..."

Stakeholder and/or collaborative learning partner
Priorities

• The learning environment including teaching, assessment, course structure and learning resources that support learning
• General facilities and services
• Co-curricular activities
• Wider issues about government policy – fees, loans, representation

• Student driven initiatives and concerns rather than institution or staff led initiatives
Who benefits?

**Student Reps:**
- Personal learning and skills useful for the future
- Positive relationships with staff, students and the wider institution
- Personal satisfaction from seeing outcomes

**Other students:**
- Providing students with a say on issues and concerns
- Making improvements on campus for students
The Institution:
Support for student retention
Supporting initiatives that enhance the reputation of the institution

Staff:
Improve staff understanding of student needs and priorities

Courses do change... possibly on the outcome of student evaluation... but probably more from our direct input... they ask "Do you think this is working. Did we get it right this time?" ... And we're not too afraid to say no!

... if one of the institutions doesn't perform too well... if one of us pulls it down it could poison the whole group and reflect badly...
Opportunities

- Using knowledge and experience of both formal and informal processes and relationships to achieve outcomes
- Informal relationships with staff as a means of quick or sensitive resolution
- Formal structures and processes and engagement with senior staff to track outcomes for some issues and initiatives
Barriers

- Hierarchy/power relationships
- Frustration about staff/student differences in priorities and sense of urgency
- Short tenure of the role
- Lack of acknowledgement and promotion of the role
- Concern about lack of commitment of peers
- Linking with other students
- Staff sensitivity to criticism of staff led initiatives/change
- Lack of student interest

Everybody thinks they are so much higher on the poupou and they don't wanna listen to you about all those things...

...they just stuck their names down but don't care and just turn up because it might be something better on their resume... their CV
Lack of student interest

ITPs get to avoid the whole political left/right stuff... it's like because there is not a political aspect there is declined interest so you have the least students who are interested in student politics and stuff.

Managing competing demands on their time

I didn't go in and really sit down and say this and this and this... I didn't have enough time.
What helped?

...yeah, family, friends, staff, executive, tutors...I like to think of them in a way... kind of like a.... bouncy castle. Sometimes you just need to bounce around and.... you need to hit the floor and hit the ceilings, and then kind of come to a rest for a while on the floor, and when you get back into it and you're being flung all around the room ....

yeah it's nice because you know that no matter where you are going you're always going to get a soft landing
What would make a difference?

- Training
- Mentoring
- Access to information
- Communication mechanisms to and from students
- Wider institutional awareness and support of the role and legitimacy
- Acknowledgement and recognition
- Involvement in department/faculty/executive committees
- Clarity of objectives and purpose of student representation at national level
- Institution specific policies and processes to support student representation
- Consistency of approach, and clarity of models
Training – students suggestions

• Clarifying the sorts of issues that are appropriate to raise at different meetings

• The structure and processes of the institution and how decisions are made

• The differences between governance and management
• Opportunities for mixing and mingling with students at their level
• Building open relationships with staff
• Knowledge of and access to information to help undertake the role

• Knowledge of what the job is and the limits and boundaries of the role
Powerful metaphors

• The positions students are ascribed or choose “clearly have implications for the enactment of a representative role” (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009, p70)

• Work in progress towards a framework for thinking about the metaphors used, how students see themselves, and the implications/paradigms connected to these models.....
Student as customer

Student as knowledge creator innovator entrepreneur

Student as independent scholar

Student as learning community partner/member

Economic Value measured as $$ worth

Co-created knowledge = students and academic and industry partnership

Social/Cultural Value measured as community worth

Active citizen Proactive Voice

Transmission of knowledge = academics teach, students learn

Individual – private good

Collective – public good

Consumer Reactive Voice

Student as emerging professional
democratising governance

student learning and engagement

Purpose of student representation?

social justice
identity
social integration

marketing the institution

(Trowler, 2010a, p. 4)
there are no right or wrong answers here: you need to reflect honestly on the location and context of your institution and its particular needs”

(Trowler, 2010a, p. 4)
you've got to enjoy the bounce

Thanks especially to the students whose voices informed this presentation
Selected bibliography


