Starting a new conversation- towards a national framework

- To what extent is the student voice embedded in your institution’s processes and structures?
- What evidence shows that the student voice has made a difference to decisions and the quality of provision?
- How is an active and independent student voice encouraged?
- How does your institution demonstrate that it is listening to student voice? Do you consult students early in decision-making processes? Do you ask them at appropriate times? Do you give them enough time to respond? Do you incorporate their views into the decision?
- Are student representatives trained, supported and well informed and prepared for their role. How do they work with other students to ensure the views they put forward are genuinely representative?

The answers to these questions are of critical importance for all Australian higher education institutions, student groups and higher education agencies. Australian universities operate in uncertain times where it is imperative to keep the interests of students, course quality and the student experience uppermost.

OLT funded research led by Professor Sally Varnham (UTS) into student engagement in university decision-making and governance (2015-2016) has shown that in comparative sectors the systemic participation of students in decision-making and governance in universities is developing strongly. There is now evidence of positive outcomes for universities in partnering with students in decision-making processes. Student engagement opportunities exist in Australian universities and many have introduced partnership initiatives. However, representation is not embedded through all layers of decision-making and the extent of representation varies greatly between institutions.

“Student partnership is an ethos not an activity”

Effective student engagement requires more than inclusion of student representatives on committees and asking students what they think after plans have been formulated. Evidence from abroad shows that there are a number of factors that contribute to successful student engagement leading to partnership:

1. Effective and valued student leadership in partnership with universities:
   Strong student leadership at all levels is shown to be pivotal with a strong focus on partnership of student associations and student leaders with the university.
2. A developmental approach to student representation from course/subject level through to high level institutional bodies
The importance of development of student representative capability from the early years of students’ programs emerged universally as an important driver.

3. Resources for training and support of student representatives
Training and support is essential and may involve student trainers. Training can be a partnership enterprise between universities and student associations.

4. Processes for the engagement of students in curricular design, and involvement in a continual process of enhancement of courses and their university experience.
Student engagement within the classroom context is clearly integral as an important path to the development of a culture of student partnership.

5. Capturing every students’ voice - engaging underrepresented student groups to ensure engagement of the whole student cohort
A big challenge lies in capturing the voices of all student cohorts – international, indigenous, distance students, full-time and part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate – and there is a need for sector-wide collaboration to share ideas.

6. Considering the provision of meaningful incentives for student engagement
The development of appropriate financial and nonfinancial support for student representation needs consideration.

7. National Entities Supporting Student Engagement
In the comparative sectors studied, a key role is played by strong national entities which support student engagement. They have permanent staff to assist with research agendas, with training and support and in the case of elected student organisations they provided knowledge transfer, essential with a transient student body.

There is a need for a common understanding towards creating effective student representation or engagement at all levels of university operations in a diverse sector. Low levels of student engagement in university governance and decision-making is often attributed to student apathy but behaviour which may appear to indicate “apathy” may be better accounted for by the relatively low level of systemic support for student engagement.

These research findings are being progressed by an Australian Learning and Teaching Senior National Teaching Fellowship awarded to Professor Sally Varnham for 2016/2017. The fellowship is pursuing sector-wide collaboration to develop an agreed set of principles, a framework for student engagement and ultimately toolkits to assist universities in the implementation of these principles.

Innovations underway in many Australian universities show a readiness in the sector to embrace principles of student partnership. Fellowship workshops in major centres are being run to capture input from all stakeholders into shaping these agreed principles and Framework. It is hoped that the sharing of knowledge, experiences and insights will help to facilitate processes to better capture student voice within Australian institutions.