

Value of Student Representation in University Governance



Staff
Resource



This resource has been prepared by the USASA Student Voice team to **assist** staff and students involved in governance processes at UniSA. The USASA Student Voice team aims to provide current **best-practice** advice and support to all members of the University Community looking to **enhance** their outcomes by involving students in decision-making.

For the purpose of this document, "committee" refers to any governance or decision-making body with membership from both students and staff. This may include, but is not limited to: working groups, steering groups, councils, and boards.

Actively seeking to involve student voices in University decision-making is a worthy endeavour. There is value to both staff and students in these processes, and therefore to the University as a whole.

First, it provides clear opportunities for students to become engaged with the administration of the University and the way teaching, learning, and academic services are delivered. This provides an immediate benefit to the students involved as they learn about the University environment, develop professional skills, and gain a sense of belonging and investment in the outcomes of the institution. For staff, it allows opportunities to develop their own professional skills in mentoring and learner development. For UniSA, it allows enactment of the democratic values that underpin Australian Universities, ensures decisions have been made with respect to wider stakeholder engagement, and cultivates a community where staff and students can connect and learn from each other beyond the classroom.

However, only by having an organisational culture that values student voices can the value of student voices be realised. As we explore in **Factors to Consider when Recruiting Students for University Governance**, students who seek to be involved in University governance are generally juggling this alongside their studies, paid employment, and personal lives. With so many competing priorities, the desire to be involved (or stay involved) in governance processes will depend on the extent to which

their expectations match the experience they receive while participating. In this sense, it is not enough simply to appoint students to committees; success also requires that the University's words and actions meet these expectations. Students should be empowered to be genuine actors in the processes they are involved in, which may require the University to acknowledge and address the inherent power imbalances in environments where staff and students work together as genuine collaborators.

It should also be noted that there is no such thing as "the student voice". The student body at UniSA is widely diverse, and each student will have their own unique take on things.

Although student members of committees are called "Student Representatives" they cannot always represent the views of all students.

In the same way that no one staff member can authentically represent the views of all other staff, it is important to remember that the input of individual students on committees will likely be a representation of their personal experience and values, combined with that of their social circle. If wider student views are sought, resources should be allocated to support them capturing feedback and consultation more broadly.

There are barriers to student engagement that can be addressed by enacting best-practice processes, but there is no magic formula that can be applied. Cultivating a culture that enables these objectives to be realised will take effort and hard work on behalf of all stakeholders; however, the initial investment in fostering collegial environments will be well worth it for the benefits received by all members of the University community.