Value of Student Representation in University Governance

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.

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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.

USASA Student Voice

Setting and Managing Expectations

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Why Setting Expectations Matters

The setting of shared expectations amongst group members is a fundamental part of establishing effective working relationships. This is particularly important for University decision-making groups where there are inherent power imbalances between colleagues, such as staff and students.

Students new to these settings will naturally look to more experienced members of the group for guidance on social and professional norms. By taking the time to explicitly address expectations and norms from the outset, it reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings between members, and will ensure that the environment can foster mutually respectful and productive group dynamics.

It can also reduce the risk of inadvertently othering group members, such as students, due to a lack of understanding of established group norms. Because student members are far less likely to share space or hold conversations with staff colleagues outside the prescribed meetings, they will usually take longer to reach levels of comfort that enable them to participate at their full potential. By explicitly addressing gaps in experience through inductions, mentorship, and clear expectation-setting, the process will be mutually rewarding and lead to better outcomes.

Setting Expectations at the Recruitment Stage

Before inviting student members to a decision-making or advisory group, you should carefully consider what you will expect from them both in and out of sessions. In its barest form, this should include:

- Time commitment (in and out of session)
- Meeting schedule (if known prior)
- Location of meetings and whether remote attendance is possible
- Purpose of committee and member involvement
- Whether compensation or remuneration is provided

Ideally, these matters will be communicated with the student at the recruitment stage and you can find a more detailed checklist in the resource **Recruitment Checklist for Students in University Governance**. This will likely be the first touchpoint for student members and the way an opportunity is first communicated will shape their expectations immensely.

You should also consider the scope and limitations of individual roles and the overall purpose of the group. Often this will be expressed in the form of a Terms of Reference, but for more ad hoc processes it may need to be drafted in a less formal capacity. For example, if you are establishing an advisory group, the potential influence of this group should be made clear. If the group has no decision-making capabilities, say so. If you are inviting a student member to fulfill a governance requirement, considering referencing the rationale behind why student membership was included by policy makers in the first place.

The language used should also be considered. For example, the difference in scope and function between 'working groups', 'advisory groups', 'steering groups', 'boards', 'committees', 'councils' etc. can be mystifying even to experienced staff, so make sure this is clearly explained.

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Managing Expectations after Recruitment

A student member may not have sat on a decision-making group before and may be new to the whole experience. They may be unfamiliar with governance terms (e.g. 'quorum', 'chair') and may not have been exposed to formal meeting protocols. It is recommended that when introducing a new student member to these processes they are also provided with an explanation of the meeting procedures. This may include contact details of all committee members, clear processes for apologies or absences, the location of minutes and agenda, and the decision-making protocol. A glossary explaining key terms or acronyms and a handover with previous student members may also be beneficial. Using a central location such as OneDrive, SharePoint, or Teams to host such documents may also be helpful, but you will also need to consider whether student members have access to any such software.

Specific expectations, such as whether student members can initiate agenda items or will be asked to undertake additional research or seek data from their peers should be made explicit. Additional resourcing for such activities should also be considered, as it is generally not realistic to expect student members to take on out-of-session workloads disproportionate to other members, especially if they are there in an unpaid capacity. The process for initiating agenda items should be explained whether or not you expect a student member to do so as it provides context for the decision-making process.

Equally important is to define what is not part of the student's role. Without clear expectations, students may feel obliged to take on additional work or conduct additional research in an attempt to prove themselves. This pressure or lack of understanding can result in students focusing on the wrong things, dedicating time to out of scope initiatives, and even lapsing into avoidant or all or nothing behaviours. These situations are generally avoidable but can create unnecessary tension if not anticipated or acknowledged.

What Should Staff Expect from Students?

Staff should expect the level of commitment that was communicated to the student at the time they accepted the role. This is one of the main reasons that getting recruitment communications and inductions right is so important.

In a study conducted by researchers at Griffith University, Lizzio and Wilson (2009), found that the most frequent causes of breakdowns in student participation with university decision-making is "role ambiguity". Particularly, they noted that refers to 'a lack of clarity regarding expectations, but also to the type and extent of the authority they experienced in the role' (Lizzio and Wilson 2009, p 78).

It is also relevant that in most cases, student members of committees are the only people in the room not being financially compensated for being there. The ability to manage their time is something students will need to assess when they accept a role, but the reality is that many students will be juggling any volunteering around study, paid work, and other personal obligations. If a student has to decide between studying for an exam and attending a meeting where they do not feel like they add value, they will naturally prioritise their study or other obligations.

This is not to say that absenteeism is justifiable or acceptable, but it is an important reminder that students are navigating a highly complex set of priorities when managing their time, and that taking steps to eliminate role ambiguity is a way to mitigate this risk. In this sense, it is recommended that staff try to avoid perceiving instances of non-attendance as a lack of interest or evidence against having students involved in processes, but as a reminder to look inwards and ask "what can we be doing to ensure that student members have a sense of purpose and capacity to attend?"

This includes setting expectations early, meeting these expectations, fostering relationships where students are comfortable to discuss matters such as role ambiguity, and not to let past performance of individual student representatives negatively shape our perceptions of future dealings with students.

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. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802602000

USASA Student Voice

Induction Checklist for Committees with Student Members

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.

Before the first meeting:

Send an **email** to the student(s) that includes:
- ☐ A formal invitation or confirmation of their position on the committee
- ☐ Length of meetings and estimated time commitment out of session (if applicable)
- ☐ Whether the position is remunerated and, if so, the process for administering this
- ☐ General housekeeping, including:
    - ☐ Location of meetings (if on-campus, consider whether student will need card access to get there and, if so, what the access arrangements will be)
    - ☐ Appropriate attire
    - ☐ Whether meetings will be catered
- ☐ An explanation of the scope, purpose, and structure of the committee (include copy of Terms of Reference if applicable)
- ☐ The location that committee documentation will be stored (if using anything other than email or Teams, check that students have access)
- ☐ Process and contact person(s) for:
    - ☐ Communicating lateness/absence
    - ☐ Submitting agenda items (if applicable)
- ☐ Provide contact information for:
    - ☐ Committee Chair
    - ☐ Mentor (if applicable)
    - ☐ Other student members of committee (if applicable)
- ☐ Meeting schedule – if this has not been set, ensure the student's specific availability is considered
- ☐ Glossary of key terms or acronyms
- ☐ Invitation to set up meeting with Chair and Mentor (if applicable) prior to the first meeting (Ideally this will happen after agenda and papers have been disseminated)

Hold an **informal meeting** with student member(s) and Chair, Secretary and/or Mentor to discuss:
- ☐ Introductions and general welcome to the committee
- ☐ Explain purpose of mentor relationship and discuss how this will work
- ☐ Answer any questions the student has about the processes outlined in the induction email
- ☐ Briefly reiterate scope, purpose, and structure of the committee and explain where it sits within the wider University structure
- ☐ How to read agenda, papers, and how meetings will be run
- ☐ Summarise current and ongoing business or projects of the committee
- ☐ Explain the confidentiality requirements of committee business and explain how confidential materials should be dealt with (including locations of secure waste bins if applicable)
- ☐ Answer any questions the student has about the content of the meeting papers and agenda
- ☐ Arrange a follow-up meeting to be held after the first meeting has occurred

USASA Student Voice

During the first meeting:

The **Chair** should:
- ☐ Introduce the student members to the committee and invite other committee members to briefly introduce themselves and their roles
- ☐ Reiterate the importance of student voice to decision-making processes and university governance
- ☐ Ensure that students are given opportunities to give their opinions and take part in discussions

Note: Being singled out to speak up in a room full of staff can be intimidating, especially for students new to these environments, so do not assume that the student is disinterested or disengaged if they decline to comment, as they are likely to be processing the information and forming opinions.

- ☐ Consider what resources will be provided for support before any specific out-of-session work is actioned to student members (including seeking wider student feedback or consultation)

After the first meeting:

The **Chair** or **Mentor** should follow up with the student to:
- ☐ Debrief the experience and whether it matched their expectations. This may include:
    - ☐ Checking whether there was anything they didn't understand or would like further clarification about
    - ☐ Requesting feedback regarding their role in the meeting, especially with respect to participation and contributions. For example, did they feel comfortable participating or being called on to comment? Was there anything that they wanted to say but did not have the opportunity or were unsure if it is was appropriate?
- ☐ Thank them for their participation and provide positive reinforcement for speaking up (if applicable)

Things to remember:

- ☐ The process of developing students to be effective operators in university governance does not end after the completion of this checklist
- ☐ Be mindful that students may be struggling with imposter syndrome and may need more encouragement and support than junior staff members of the committee would
- ☐ The greatest threats to student engagement in university governance are role ambiguity and the sense that their involvement or contributions are tokenistic or not genuinely considered.
- ☐ To ensure that students stay engaged, ensure that expectations are met on both sides and that feedback loops are always closed.

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Factors to Consider when Recruiting Students for University Governance

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Primary Considerations

Many advisory or decision-making groups at UniSA have student members. The membership might be defined in policy, or it might be the decision of a group with delegated authority, or even the establishment of a formal working group or ad hoc advisory group. In any case, the task of identifying students interested in taking on these roles is not always apparent.

When seeking to recruit students for a particular committee the following questions should first be considered:

- Is what I will be asking of the student members within the bounds of what I would feel comfortable asking myself or another staff member to do?
- Does the role require a significant contribution that requires financial compensation?
- Is there a specific cohort of students I am pitching at? (e.g. undergraduates or postgraduates, regional etc.)

By asking yourself these questions from the outset, you can ensure you appropriately define and pitch the position and begin the process of setting and managing student expectations. (For more on this, see **Setting and Managing Expectations).**

Considering these factors can also allow barriers to participation to become clear, including (but not limited to):

- Time students spend on campus;
- Timing of placements and assessments; and
- The need for students to engage in part- or full-time work whilst studying.

Compensation and Incentivisation

Despite adding value to processes and bringing unique perspectives, the reality is that student representatives are often the only committee members who are not being financially compensated for their time. This is not to say that non-financial benefits, such as experience gained or community involvement are non-commensurate in all cases, but it is an important factor to consider at the recruitment stage and an important part of managing expectations of performance and workloads (for both students and the University).

Further, although this may not be applicable to all committees, financial compensation (whether a monetary sum or in the form of a voucher) is a potential strategy to incentivise student participation and may be ethically required if the role requires significant ongoing time and work. Depending on the nature of the committee, tasks beyond just attending meetings might also include undertaking additional readings and research or gathering opinions and evidence through forums or social media surveys. The required preparation time required outside meetings should also be considered and included in recruitment communications and other touchpoints where expectations are set.

It is also important to consider the potential opportunity costs, as time invested by student representatives may be at the expense of their study obligations or part-time work. This is generally a matter for the student's own time management, but it highlights a need for timely communication of expectations and mindfulness of assessment and placement obligations on the part of staff establishing and administering committees.

For some students, highlighting what they can gain in personal experience, networking and contributing to positive outcomes for other students may be all that is necessary. Students who are undertaking the UniSA+ Leadership and Self Development Program may be incentivised by the ability to count time in committees to their award.

Demonstrating the benefits gained, such as certification, accreditation or networking opportunities may also help to incentivise positions.

The altruistic rationale for both staff and student representatives of aiming to improve the student experience should not be underrated, but it cannot be wholly one-sided either.

Who is your target audience?

The purpose and scope of the committee will help determine the cohort best suited for the audience of recruitment processes. For example, a committee established to review current examination procedures would benefit more from a student whose courses have exams (e.g., Business) to those that don't (e.g. Journalism); even within a single Academic Unit.

On the other hand, steps should be taken to ensure that the process is not needlessly exclusive. For example, It might be assumed that students performing at a higher academic standard are better equipped to deal with complex policy decisions than those who aren't, but grades are not always a reflection of ability. Further, the experience of high achieving students may not reflect the diverse range of student voices in the cohort.

An unintended consequence of setting minimum GPAs, for example, might be that certain demographics of students that might be able to offer valuable and unique perspectives are inadvertently excluded from participatory processes. Such practices, whilst well intentioned, might merely embed homogeneity without any evidence of returns on engagement.

How will you advertise the position(s)?

Whether you have identified a particular cohort of students to target, or will be promoting opportunities more generally, it will be important for you to reach the right audience. Emails or messages on LearnOnline might be your first port of call, however students receive a high volume of communications and the noise may make it difficult for your message to cut through. Students are generally adept at filtering messages and ignoring those they deem irrelevant. This includes communications that have been designed or drafted for staff.

If you are sending bulk emails, ensure you tailor the contents for students and that your promotional material clearly states the intended recipient, e.g. "A message for third year Education Students", or "Calling all JUS Students – Panel Members wanted for Justice and Society Advisory Group".

USASA Student Voice can provide assistance in advertising your vacancies through the Student Voice website and mailing list. This list is comprised of students who self-identified as wanting to hear about opportunities to get involved in University decision-making. Staff can submit vacancies using the simple form at **USASA.sa.edu.au**/**StudentVoice** and can receive free assistance from USASA Staff about what to include.

USASA Student Voice

Recruitment Checklist for Students in University Governance

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1. Consider the purpose of student involvement:

There is a lot to be gained from engaging student voices in decision-making, but there may also be situations where it is not appropriate or necessary. When engaging students, especially in unpaid roles, you should meet at least one of these criteria:

☐ Does the subject matter directly impact students?
☐ Will this involvement be capacity-building for the students and staff involved?
☐ Is this required by policy?

2. Identify your target audience:

Involving student voices in decision-making should be inclusive and diverse. However, there might be times where you are seeking views from specific cohorts.

☐ Does the subject matter directly impact students?
☐ Students from a particular Academic Unit and/or program
☐ Students from particular year levels (first year, second year, final year etc.)
☐ Students from different careers (undergraduate, postgraduate, HDR etc.)
☐ Students with different enrolments (on-campus, external etc.)
☐ Students with specific study experiences (international students, domestic students etc.)
☐ All students
☐ Other_____

3. Consider your timeline:

☐ Work backwards from when you want to hold your first meeting. Date: _____
☐ Consider the academic calendar, especially exams and peak assessment times
☐ Factor in an induction date for student reps if it can't be held during the first meeting
☐ Give yourself adequate time to promote the opportunity
☐ Give yourself adequate time to do the administrative work behind your chosen appointment method

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4. Select appointment method:

The most appropriate appointment method will vary for each group. Selecting an appointment method will require a combination of practical considerations and values.

☐ Anyone who is interested may be involved

☐ Selected by other students via an election

☐ Selected by USASA Board or other students via application and appointment process

☐ Selected by staff via application and appointment process

☐ Other _____

5. Promote the opportunity:

Promotion of the opportunity is the first touchpoint for setting expectations and clarity around the role. As well as targeting the right audience, ensuring that potential student representatives understand what they are signing up for will help you avoid disengagement due to role ambiguity later down the line.

If you are unsure how to craft the perfect role description, get in touch with the USASA Student Voice team for advice. We can also list your opportunity on the website, and notify students on our direct mailing list.

☐ Write a short description about the position, including purpose, scope, time commitment, whether it is paid/voluntary, and the closing date for applications/nominations

☐ Promote via your internal channels

☐ Promote via USASA Student Voice website and mailing list

6. Receive nominations:

This step will depend on the appointment method selected.

☐ Ensure panel has been arranged to assess applications/nominations if required

☐ Notify students of the outcome

7. Hold induction:

Download **Induction Checklist for Committees with Student Members** at **USASA.sa.edu.au/StudentVoice**

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