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The Value of Working with Students as Partners

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Introduction

Many universities have worked hard to ensure student voices are included at every decision-making level institutionally. In New Zealand, students have long been valued members of various boards and committees at all levels within our universities. Yet, student voices are sometimes unheard or tokenistic, collaboration amongst student representatives themselves (let alone with staff) is often minimal, and student involvement in wider

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curriculum projects and change initiatives is limited. Furthermore, student voices are barely present at all (as authors) in the international research literature on student experience. The challenge is to move beyond representation and voice, towards partnership.

In this chapter, we reflect first on the student voice and student engagement literature and then provide a brief overview of the growing students as partners approach, arguing that partnership offers a meaningful move towards reciprocal learning that benefits all involved. Welcoming students as partners in curriculum design, research and university-wide change initiatives allows the sharing of different kinds of expertise, professional development for both staff and students, and the development of critical thinking and analysis skills for all partners. Our chapter itself reflects this model of partnership in that the authors are themselves from different communities: academic, undergraduate student and professional staff.

In this chapter, we offer a take on student voice from New Zealand. We highlight New Zealand research that has informed international debates on voice and engagement, and we describe the historic context and our hopes for its future. We pay particular attention to what is happening at our own university, with the hope that others may be similarly inspired to work towards partnership models at their own institutions.

Values

To begin, we draw readers' attention to the title of this chapter. It stresses the *value* of working with *students as partners*. But what do we mean by these terms? Universities worldwide are well ensconced in neoliberal political environments and funding models (Larner & Le Heron, 2005; Roberts, 2009). In this milieu, universities can often appear to put "neoliberal values of entrepreneurialism, competition and market forces, fiscal responsibility and accountability, managerialism, performance measurement, and productivity ahead of the traditional academic values of collegiality, investigation of truth and critical inquiry, academic freedom, openness, and contribution to knowledge" (Sutherland, 2018, p. 28). We do not want to construe "value" in this chapter in solely economic terms; we are not arguing that working with students as partners will save insti-

tutions money or generate profit (although that may happen). Rather, we see partnership as valuable for all the joys, challenges, inspiration, and transformation it can bring all those involved. Perhaps, we really mean "value" as in "ideal", as described by Batchelor (2012):

> Ideals are a person's answer to the question of what his or her highest values are, what he or she finds most excellent. They are navigation aids, giving direction and inspiration and holding out an incentive to make something special of one's life…. Listeners' own values underlie qualities in listening that seek to hear the voice of values and ideals in students. The complex reciprocal relationship of listening to students' experiences also reveals and probes listeners' values. (p. 604)

In "students as partners" models, some of those values include respect, responsibility and reciprocity (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014), the last of which we address later in this chapter. For now, we want to emphasise that we see partnership as moving beyond merely "representing" or "hearing" students' voices. Instead, partnership should be an institution-wide ethos (National Union of Students [NUS], 2015; Varnham, Olliffe, Waite, & Cahill, 2018), where everyone listens to each other. Partnership encourages an environment where, contrary to Alexander's experiences in Chapter 2, everyone cares about teaching and learning. In a university with a partnership ethos, students are fully involved from inception and design, construction and creation, through to implementation and evaluation (and even reimagining and discarding, where necessary) of all aspects that affect student learning, well-being and lives. Below, we provide a brief overview of the literature on student voice and student engagement that leads to a consideration of the emancipatory potential of student–staff partnership in twenty-first-century universities.

Student Voice

A substantial literature on student voice in higher education now exists, particularly from the UK (and is well-cited elsewhere in this book), and also from Australasia (Alkema, McDonald, & Ryan, 2013; Varnham et al., 2018). However, the concept is misunderstood in the literature, and in

practice, its focus and purposes are not easily agreed upon, its ideologies and antecedents are not often enough acknowledged, and it is not well problematised (Freeman, 2016).

Too often, conceptions of the student voice are confined to providing fodder for institutional research: student voice is treated as "students' opinions" and collected through surveys, evaluations and research projects for "evidencing impact, (in TEF provider submissions), validating institutional work (in OFFA access statements), supporting professional development (for HEA fellowships) and in the reward and recognition of individuals (for the NTFS)" (Austen, 2018). This conception of the student voice does not necessarily lead to or equate with any sense of empowerment for students over their own learning (their voices are mere data points). Indeed, some student researchers actually found when investigating students' own perceptions of student voice that students had felt more empowered and engaged in high school (Dickinson & Fox, 2016). Nor is "student voice" often enough pluralised or inclusive, as Alexander's story in Chapter 2 implies, to the point that some students perceive it as exclusive, a luxury for a minority of the student population, even as a "myth" (Dickinson & Fox, 2016).

Picking up on the desire for a more inclusive and capacious conception of student voice, John Canning's (2017) interpretation is helpfully broad:

> I not only understand student voice to be plural (students' voices) but also that certain student voices are not always heard or articulated. Student voice encompasses everything [from] the feedback students give universities through formal and informal structures, staff-student partnerships, through to campaigning and protest. (p. 520)

Similarly, Batchelor (2012) identifies more than one dimension to the student voice. She argues that students have and should be nurtured to discover, explore and use, their "epistemological voice, or a voice for knowing; a practical voice, or a voice for acting and doing; and an ontological voice, or a voice for being and becoming" (p. 597). We ascribe to a similarly broad view of student voice that recognises the whole student and embraces not only the desire for inclusion in the quality assurance aspects of the neoliberal university, but also the right to critique the very structures

within which one is learning. In the next section, we turn to some key issues from the student engagement literature, which is often conflated with student voice literature, sometimes obscuring our understandings of both terms (Canning, 2017).

Student Engagement

Student engagement is a multifaceted, vague and contested concept. As Ashwin and McVitty (2015, p. 343) note, "the fact that it would be very difficult to be against student engagement is testament to its vagueness". Debates abound in the research literature, to which NZ authors like Nick Zepke and Ella Kahu have contributed significantly. These debates include issues with definitions (Buckley, 2018; Zepke, 2017), influences (Trowler, 2015; Zepke, 2014), purposes (Baron & Corbin, 2012), antecedents (Kahu, 2013) and objects (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). An entire recent issue of *Higher Education Policy* (Volume 30, 2017) was devoted to "critical or alternative perspectives on student engagement" (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 2). There is also a lack of clarity about its counterpoint, with the opposite of student engagement being presented variously as apathy (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017), non-engagement (Vuori, 2014), alienation (Kahu, 2013) and disengagement (Baron & Corbin, 2012): all subtly different.

Writing from an Australian context, Baron and Corbin (2012, p. 765) argue that because changes in higher education have led students to be often viewed more "as (passive) consumers, rather than as (active) partners in a learning community" student engagement has become a "quality control indicator, subject to formal quality assurance mechanisms, rather than a subject of meaningful dialogue". In such environments, students may have a voice but no agency, and no meaningful engagement either cognitively or psychosocially (Kahu, 2013), let alone politically (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015).

Several researchers (Buckley, 2018; Varnham et al., 2018; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013) have made the connection between the student voice literature and the student engagement literature, but the two corpuses do not often speak directly to or with one another. Buckley

(2018, p. 719) in a recent essay on the ideology of student engagement questions "whether they are two sides of the same coin, or fundamentally different ideas that share a name". On the one side is student engagement with learning activities and curricula, for example, and on the other side, student participation (and voice) in decision-making. Arguably, though, student engagement can be, and should be, "concerned with issues like feedback, representation, and involvement in curriculum design, *and* [be] closely related to the concepts of student voice and students-as-partners" (Buckley, 2018, p. 729, our italics).

In this chapter, we conceive of student engagement broadly as "holistic, lifewide and…not confined to classrooms or formal curricula" (Zepke, 2017, p. 226). Following Ashwin and McVitty (2015), we also see its purpose as the formation of knowledge, through students' "behavioural, emotional and cognitive involvement in their studies" (Buckley, 2018, p. 719), the formation of curricula, *and* the formation of community. We also agree that student engagement requires "whole of institution" approaches (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Kahu, 2013; National Union of Students [NUS], 2015). One potential "whole of institution" approach is the growing "students as partners" movement, described below.

Students as Partners

In 2016 and 2017, two new journals appeared with the aim of publishing the growing research on students as partners (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014a), co-creators (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011), co-producers (Carey, 2013), co-researchers and co-constructors (Bellinger, Bullen, & Ford, 2014), co-inquirers (Bell, 2016) and change agents (Kay, Dunne, & Hutchinson, 2010). The RAISE Network (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement) launched the *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal* in 2016, described on their website as publishing "research, theory, practice and policy about student engagement…[including] all forms of work around student voice, student participation and students as partners" (SEHEJ website). Then, in 2017, the *International Journal for Students as Partners* was launched, with the vision of publishing "new perspectives, practices, and policies regarding

how students and staff…are working in partnership to enhance learning and teaching in higher education" (IJSAP website). The appearance of these two journals is testament to the rapid growth of the "students as partners" movement in higher education, a concept that its proponents claim is less outcomes-focused than it is "process and values-orientated" (Matthews, 2016, p. 3):

> partnership is understood as fundamentally about a relationship in which all involved – students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students' unions, and so on – are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together. Partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself. (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014b, p. 12)

Influenced by Arnstein's "ladder of citizen participation" which places citizen control and power at the top of a ladder, and manipulation and non-participation at the bottom, the students as partners concept is well summed up in Bovill and Bulley's (2011) "ladder of student participation". Their ladder moves from teachers controlling decision-making at the bottom, to students in control at the top. It acknowledges the role that students *can* play in making decisions about and co-creating their own learning experiences. They can be not just learners, but also partners in the co-design and co-construction of their learning. But partnership requires reciprocity and trust: staff are on the ladder, too. And those staff are not just academics, but professional and support staff as well. Furthermore, the partnerships are not just about teaching and learning, but about the wider student experience (SPARQS, 2011). As the National Union of Students (2015) has argued, "at its roots partnership is about investing students with the power to co-create, not just knowledge or learning, but the higher education institution itself" (p. 8).

Embedded in the students as partners concept are several values that all partners not only need to be aware of, but adhere to, embody and promote. They include respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). We pick up on the second of these three values; in particular, by describing the attempts our university is making to honour a partnership ethos, especially in a country with biculturalism at its core.

New Zealand: Some Context

The Treaty of Waitangi, signed between the British Crown and indigenous Māori rangatira (chiefs) in 1840, is a broad statement of principles that founded our country in partnership (NZ History, 2018) and that underpins a bicultural approach to most aspects of life. For example, the Māori Education Strategy, *Ka Hikitia—Accelerating Success,* embeds this partnership model through the principle of "ako"—a "two way teaching and learning process…where the educator and the student learn from each other in an interactive way. Ako is grounded in the principle of reciprocity" (Ministry of Education [MEdu], 2013, p. 16). This reciprocal approach extends to an expectation that our tertiary education institutions will work "in partnership with Māori" (Ministry of Education [MEdu] & Ministry of Business, Innovation andEmployment [MBIE], 2014, p. 7) to support not only the educational success of Māori students, but also the growth of Māori language, customs and knowledge for *all* New Zealanders. Later in the chapter, we describe one example of an "ako" partnership model. Below, we outline the current situation in terms of national "student voice" and partnerships with students in national quality assurance, decision-making and curriculum development.

While other regions have long-standing student engagement and/or experience surveys, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, NSSE (North America) and the National Student Survey, NSS (UK), NZ has experimented with, but not settled on, a national survey of students. The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, AUSSE, an adaptation of the NSSE, ran in NZ from 2007 until 2012, with all eight universities participating at least once, but never all in the same year. Since 2012, various universities have trialled other student surveys including Student Experience, Student Opinion and Student Barometer surveys. Nationally, we are not systematically (i.e. all using the same tool) collecting or benchmarking student experience data. Universities are required, however, to report their student completion, retention and progression rates to the funding body, the Tertiary Education Commission, the TEC, in order to receive funding for teaching and learning.

In NZ, the TEC funds eight universities, sixteen institutes of technology and three wānanga (Māori teaching and research institutions), and

the sector also comprises many industry training organisations and private training establishments. Many of the state-funded institutions have student unions or associations who are, in turn, members of the NZ Union of Students' Associations, NZUSA. Section 229A of the Education (Freedom of Association) Amendment Act 2011 came into force from the beginning of 2012 and states that "no student or prospective student is *required* to be a member of a students' association". This effectively created a situation of voluntary student unionism, a problem recognised in Australia (Baron & Corbin, 2012) and NZ (Alkema et al., 2013) as a threat to the power of the student voice at a national level. Encouragingly, however, the NZUSA has maintained a functional membership and is recognised by the government as the peak student representative body. This recognition extends to student representation on the two key national quality assurance bodies through which NZ universities cooperate nationally. The Committee on University Academic Programmes, CUAP (Universities NZ, 2018, p. 7), aims to "maintain and advance standards" in relation to the development, accreditation and moderation of new courses and programmes. The Academic Quality Agency, AQA, is "a body operationally independent of Universities New Zealand, set up by the universities to ensure the quality of their academic activities" (Universities NZ, 2018, p. 3).

While students are represented on both, AQA has very recently moved beyond mere student representation towards including students in a partnership approach to quality enhancement. They conduct quality assurance academic audits of all universities on a 7–8 yearly cycle. For the first time, students or recent graduates will be included in the 2017–2023 cycle as *auditors*. In July 2017, the President of NZUSA and the Executive Director of AQA signed a memorandum of understanding to this effect, acknowledging the shared objective of "having an authentic, enduring, diverse and effective student voice that contributes to academic quality and quality assurance in NZ universities" (AQA, 2017).

This national partnership is reflected institutionally. Our university, for example, has a robust and long-standing commitment to student representation at each level of the quality assurance process, from individual class representatives for every course to student representatives on faculty and university committees and on the university's governing body, the University Council.

International research has lauded this level of representation in NZ (Varnham et al., 2018), and locally funded research emphasises "positive trends in relation to student engagement with representative systems, with numbers of representatives increasing and greater interest being demonstrated in participation in training" (Alkema et al., 2013, p. 34). But there is some concern that while engagement is increasing, partnership is still not realised. In a stocktake of codes of practice in NZ universities, "70% of surveyed organisations noted that they considered students to be learning partners" but only 4% indicated that "students are integrated into the [teaching and learning] policy-making process at all levels" (Gordon, MacGibbon, Mudgway, Mason, & Milroy, 2011, p. 41). People involved in the work of students' associations across the country are working hard to rectify this (as evidenced by the memorandum of understanding described above). However, considerable work still needs doing for partnership to become an ethos, not merely a commitment on paper. We provide a student perspective on these desired shifts from representation to partnership, below, and then outline our university's efforts in this regard.

Student Representation

Below are three different student views, written from the authors' own experiences and taking the reader chronologically through some shifts in student representation.

> *Historical (Kathryn): When I was a student in the 1990s, students' associations were politically active and noisy. They organised us to protest in the streets over government plans to introduce a user-pays system of higher education. To no avail, as from my second year of university, I paid fees that rose, on average, 13% a year for the next decade. While my abiding memory is of student reps focusing on political activism, I also recall students being represented on most of the important decision-making bodies at all the universities I attended. Indeed, I served on several university committees as a student, myself, though I don't really remember having the courage or opportunity to say much at all. I have no recollection of the deeper level of engagement possible through the class representatives systems we have today, nor of any type of 'students as partners' approach to curriculum development.*

Outsider (Charlotte): I completed both my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the US, but was not a member of a students' association. I vaguely remember elections, but do not think I ever voted. The extent of my involvement in the Graduate Students' Association was to show up on Tuesday because it was free bagel day. The irony is not lost on me that I moved on to become the Student Representation Coordinator at Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association (VUWSA). However,my position is very much separate from the political side of VUWSA – I am not on the executive; I am staff. My job is not to inform the student executive what to campaign about; rather, I help them think of practical ways to make their voices heard.

Current student (Isabella): I have been a student at three different NZ universities, and am currently one of two student representatives on the University Council. I am also the national student representative on CUAP (the NZ-wide committee mentioned earlier). Despite this wide experience, often it is hard to fully embody the idea that my voice has validity. As a young, non-qualified, 21 year old in a room full of very highly qualified academics, it can be hard to feel confident in speaking and telling our stories. There are also instances of feeling completely tokenised and patronised.

The rhetoric is that "we are the experts in being a student". Whilst this is true, the university often seems to think that because we have a lived experience of being a student it means that we can speak for ALL students. This is never the case. I have been in meetings where the attention is turned to me and I am asked, "what do the students think?" When this happens, I preface my answer with the justification that one academic would never be asked to speak for the entire academic body (as evidenced by the wide representation of staff on the committee), so I should not be expected to speak for all students – I can only speak for my *experience as a student.*

Beyond the challenge of hearing multiple student voices, funding pressures resulting from voluntary student unionism mean that students' associations rely more on universities for money. While this creates more collaboration, it also puts funding at risk if student associations are too oppositional.

Student Activism as Voice

Student associations are known for their political activism, and the "student voice" was historically often confined to this role. Student unions have

occupied a radical space, which has seen very important and significant changes to NZ society. For example, students were instrumental in lobbying on health reforms, and wider social issues, including the Vietnam War and homosexual law reform (NZUSA, 2014). Without diminishing the scale, energy and dedication required to carry them, these are the "glamorous" issues. They excite students and build unity, with media often willing to get behind as well. The successes are celebrated and tightly woven into the history of students' associations. However, the unglamorous day-to-day work of students' associations also focuses on issues of academic quality within the institution: student representatives pushing for small amendments to student workload, for example, or questioning the value (to students—not the monetary or status value to the university) of new programmes, or lobbying for the halt of programme cuts. This work can go unnoticed, undocumented, and is not necessarily deemed worthy of celebration, despite being one of the primary concerns for NZUSA and local students' associations. The trail of student participation in such academic developments is often lost in history. In the next section, we outline the steps our university is taking towards an embedded partnership approach that honours all participants' contributions.

Partnership Case Study: Victoria University of Wellington

Partnership Commitments

Our university has a very clearly *espoused* commitment to partnership. We have a Student Charter[1] that acknowledges partnership as the bedrock of our approach to supporting the student experience. Our new Learning and Teaching Strategy, Te Rautaki Maruako,[2] also embraces a "working in partnership" approach, to the extent even that students co-designed and co-authored the strategy itself.

Students are represented at every level of the decision-making ladder, from individual course level through to faculty committees, up to university-wide boards, and on the University Council. We have had a class representatives system[3] in place since 1997, and, as far as we are

aware, we are the only university in New Zealand with a *full-time* student representative coordinator whose focus is completely on supporting student representatives (roles at other universities are part-time and/or focus also on clubs, engagement or advocacy).

Partnership Realities

Recent surveys show that students are satisfied with their overall student experience at Victoria, but less than two-thirds (around 60%) strongly agree or agree that "Victoria works in partnerships with students listening to the student voice".[4] While the class reps model is widespread, long-standing and incredibly beneficial when both parties to the partnership are proactive, it is otherwise a fairly reactive model, snapping into action only in response to problems.

We try to mitigate some of this risk by providing training and support for the hundreds of class reps who volunteer each year, all coordinated through the student representation coordinator. While training and support for class reps is clearly important, arguably academic staff also need such support. In 2018, for the first time, the student association produced a short "refresher" video for academics on the important role that class reps play, as well as an invitation video to attract class reps to step up. We could be doing much more, however, to support academics to develop successful partnerships.

Similarly, we could be doing more to create real partnership in co-construction and co-design of our curricula, inviting students not just on to review panels (after programmes are set), as we currently do, but also on to curriculum design teams (*before* a programme is developed). Real partnership sees students welcomed as *proposers* of new ideas, programmes and policies, and fully involved from the moment of conception, not just consulted as part of a review process.

Our Learning and Teaching Strategy, co-designed and co-authored with students, embraces six key values that give voice to the teaching and learning goals and actions for the wider university. All of these values, but three in particular will, we hope, bring us much closer to the partnership ethos: akoranga (the reciprocity of teaching and learning), manaakitanga

(supporting and respecting each other, particularly in relation to the generous fostering of knowledge) and whanaungatanga (acknowledging and nurturing close connections and providing a sense of belonging). One manifestation of these values in practice is our nascent staff–student lecture observation and curriculum development programme, called Ako-in-Action. This programme has been co-designed and is being co-constructed and co-delivered with students as full partners from inception. We look forward to reporting on its development and hopeful success in coming years.

While there is no easily adaptable "partnership" model that will fit all institutions, several resources provide excellent guidelines and suggestions. We conclude by encouraging readers to embark upon a "Partnership Maturity Audit" to work out just what kind of ethos their university currently embraces.

Conclusion

In the Ako Aotearoa and NZUSA-sponsored report on student voice in NZ, the authors note that "Staff at most organisations viewed students primarily as fee-paying customers but also saw the 'students as partners' model as an ideal, preferred or future state" (Alkema et al., 2013, p. 4). To work towards this, we first need to take stock of where we are, and the following questions (adapted in part from Alkema et al., 2013) should help readers and their institutions to assess their own levels of partnership "maturity".

Does my institution…?

- Have a range of representative systems that enable students to have a voice at all levels of decision-making?
- Fund and resource students adequately to undertake representative work in supported, meaningful and knowledgeable ways?
- Have good uptake by students of the various student representation systems available to them?
- Include students in the co-design, construction and creation of new programmes and curricula *as well as* in quality assurance and evaluation?

– View students as co-producers and partners in curriculum, policy and change initiatives?
– Codify and embed student representation in policy, in constitutions of committees and boards and in their terms of reference, etc.?
– Recognise and reward student AND staff (academic and professional) contributions in partnership initiatives?
– Support and train students AND *all* staff in developing and sustaining successful partnerships?

Raising questions such as these, and listening to the answers of staff *and* students, will demonstrate a move towards partnership. Then, working respectfully with each other and taking shared responsibility for next steps in any planned approach will see voices turned into reciprocal action that enhances the learning experience for *all* involved.

Notes

1. https://www.victoria.ac.nz/learning-teaching/partnership/student-charter.
2. https://www.victoria.ac.nz/documents/policy/strategies/learning-teaching-strategy.pdf.
3. Class Reps serve as a liaison between the students in the class and the lecturer/s teaching the course. Their role is to 'assist communication between staff and students in relation to course matters and to provide a point of contact for students', https://www.victoria.ac.nz/documents/policy/academic/class-representative-policy.pdf.
4. https://www.victoria.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1197138/student-voice-have-your-say.pdf.

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