



**AMPLIFYING THE STUDENT  
VOICE & THE MELBOURNE  
STUDENT FORUM AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE**

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UMSU POSITION PAPER NO. 1  
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## INTRODUCTION

The University of Melbourne is not just a body corporate – but *a body politic*. The University’s governing act of parliament establishes that students are a defined constituency of the University, and Regulation 19 of the University of Melbourne [Council Regulation](#) explicitly recognises the role of democratic student organisations. This is why there must be student representation in institutional governance. Students are members of the University, in the same way that staff and senior executives are, and they are equal participants in an academic and social community that depends on their engagement and participation.

UMSU’s position is that the notion of *constituency* is the thread that ties students together. Constituents have rights and responsibilities associated with membership of the body politic and the legitimate expectation that their participation will be welcomed and encouraged. Importantly, this right to participate is unfettered – there is no role for other constituents of the University to limit or define the role of another unilaterally.

[UMSU’s mission](#) is “to connect with every student, elevate their voices and provide them with an unforgettable university experience”.

The University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) is the largest student representative body at the University of Melbourne, representing over 55,000 students across the University’s campuses. We are an incorporated association governed by students independently of the University, with over 100 student representatives democratically elected annually. These student representatives work, in collaboration with staff at UMSU, to meet our constitutional purposes which include:

- The advancement of the welfare and interests of students.
- Representation of students of the University both within the University and to the broader community.
- An independent framework for student social and political activity.
- A democratic and transparent forum in which students’ affairs and interests can be governed in an effective and accountable manner.

These aims frame UMSU’s approach to representing the rights of all enrolled students at the University.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The document entitled *Amplifying the Student Voice 2022* sets out six areas of activity. Five of these are mapping, review and development focused, one is to establish a new focus group called the *Melbourne Student Forum*.

This is not the first initiative to enhance the ways in which the views of students are collected, considered and included in university decision-making processes. The *Student Lifecycle Review* a decade ago had effectively the same terms of reference.

UMSU sees the development of a Melbourne Student Forum before the other five activities are complete as conclusory and pre-emptory. UMSU believes that the University should first complete the research, mapping and consolidation activities which could inform whether the Forum is required or best practice.

The Melbourne Student Forum is modelled on the Kings 100 and the RH 100 which were rolled out in several UK universities six or seven years ago. However the totality of the UK tertiary experience is characterised by recognition and respect for independent student organisations, and University initiatives to enhance student experience have benefitted from genuine partnerships between institutions and the student unions.

UMSU believes that the University’s contention that student voices need amplifying is perhaps well intentioned but nevertheless based on a deficit model which some students will find patronising. It will be the experience of many that students have been voicing views for decades, but no one seemed to be listening.



Rather than requiring amplification, the University needs to start *listening*. Moreover, the power-relationship and barriers to meaningful student contribution to decision-making must be recognised and addressed to avoid tokenism and rubber-stamping.

Prior to embarking on the establishment of a Melbourne Student Forum, UMSU invites the University to review and strengthen existing student representative opportunities and partner with the student union. This will deliver more than a focus group to provide platforms for meaningful student contribution.

In order to avoid tokenism and create meaningful opportunities for students to give feedback and contribute to university decision making, the University must be prepared to genuinely share power. This involves ensuring that students are properly resourced and supported in their interactions with university decision making and consultations, and that UMSU is properly resourced to provide that support to students.

UMSU believes that the student voice is best elevated via student representation. Positions advanced through student representation can be inherently diverse and comprise a number of disparate experiences and identities. In 2023, the influence of identity politics and intersectionality embedded in students' understanding of representation, means that collectivism can cope with the heterogeneity of students' concerns.

UMSU provides invaluable resources towards training, support and mentoring of student representatives. It is this resourcing that assists students to level the power-imbalance and maximise their effectiveness as representatives. UMSU calls on the University to build an authentic partnership with UMSU based on the following principles:

1. Commitment to avoid tokenism and embedding meaningful involvement of students in governance, decision-making fora, and co-creation.
2. A genuine commitment to power-sharing.
3. Recognition of the critical role of staff in student-led organisations in training and resourcing students to participate equally in university decision-making and co-creation activities.
4. Commitment to enhanced resources for UMSU to continue to develop our work towards robust and meaningful student engagement with the University.
5. Establishing a meaningful partnership between UMSU and the University which respects UMSU's independence and facilitates the goal of elevating the voices of all students.



# AMPLIFYING THE STUDENT VOICE

The document entitled *Amplifying the Student Voice 2022* prepared by Professor Sarah Wilson, Pro Vice Chancellor (Student Life) and Professor Pip Nicholson, Deputy Vice Chancellor (People and Community),<sup>1</sup> was circulated to UMSU student representatives in July 2022. The paper broadly lays out a program of work designed to grow the culture of student engagement at the University.

UMSU welcomes university initiatives to improve student engagement and experience. Our position is that these initiatives must respect the difference between democratic student representation and individual student feedback. In the former context, representatives speak both for students collectively, and as students themselves with lived experience of studying at the University. Conversely, individual students will provide feedback which represents the views of that student alone.

This position paper sets out the importance of recognising the student voices which are already established, and recommends the program first aims at capitalising on existing but underutilised sources of student voice, and building a meaningful, respectful and sustainable partnership with UMSU in order to further its initiative to better listen to students.

This initiative to amplify the student voice starts at the same place as the program arising from the *Student Lifecycle Review 2013* promised a decade ago. The project involves six areas of activity:

1. A mapping exercise to identify student representation on university governance and policy development bodies and student involvement in a range of other co-design and co-creation activities at the University.
2. A review of best practice and research in the area.
3. Developing guidelines for a whole-of-University position on student representation on committees.
4. A more developed approach to embedding students in the co-design of all University projects.
5. Determining the most appropriate ways in which student feedback is communicated and acted upon by the University.
6. Developing a “Melbourne Student Voice Forum”.

UMSU supports the first five of these activities and looks forward to contributing to them on behalf of our many constituents.

However, UMSU sees the development of a Melbourne Student Forum before the other five activities are complete as conclusory and pre-emptory. It cuts across the activities which involve research, development and consolidation and has the potential to put the authenticity of these review activities into question. Rather than proceeding from a local evidence base, the establishment of the Melbourne Student Forum appears to be predicated on a conclusion which impugns the bona fides of the other five activities.

The establishment of the Student Forum as the first priority among a number of other specific outcomes anticipated by the program of work appears to cement the University’s intention to proceed with this forum without first completing the research and consultation which could inform whether the forum is required or best practice.

In 2013, the University’s *Student Lifecycle Review Report* identified a requirement for the University to become more “student-centric” in its communications with students and in its service provision to students. As part of the University’s efforts to become more student-centred a key aspect for consideration was to be the ways in which the views of students are collected, considered and included in university decision-making processes.

A decade later, improvements to student engagement seem to have been re-invigorated by the University’s results in the 2021 Quality Indicators for Teaching and Learning (QILT) [Student Experience Survey \(SES\)](#).

At the time these results were published, the [UMSU President](#) noted that the University’s approach was like Freud’s famous ‘woman question’ ... always answered by men. The “University had been busy asking itself for a long time what do students want? And then answering it for us.”

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Sarah Wilson, Pro Vice Chancellor (Student Life) & Professor Pip Nicholson, Deputy Vice Chancellor (People and Community), *Amplifying the Student Voice 2022* July 2022.



In this context, UMSU is hopeful that the University will start as it means to go on, and genuinely engage with students in a manner that recognises the power-imbalance inherent in the University-Student relationship. To that end, this Position Paper raises a number of important challenges facing honest engagement with students and posits several principles which should underpin activities in this area.

## THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

As the *Amplifying the Student Voice 2022* paper notes, the idea of university embedded student engagement and student partnerships is not new.

In the UK, some universities have established focus groups of 100 university-selected students to provide feedback on various matters.

### THE RH 100 AND KING'S 100

The Royal Holloway University of London established the RH 100 in 2016, as 'a diverse group of 100 students reflective of the University community' convened in an ad hoc way to "tackle challenges facing the institution, co-create university programs and initiatives and ensure student concerns and aspirations are consistently understood". Importantly, the RH 100 documentation notes that the "Panel is not intended as a feedback mechanism for academic departments or professional services, nor is it a student representation group".<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the King's 100 is a "diverse group of 100 students, reflective of the King's community, to co-create student experience projects and initiatives".<sup>3</sup>

Importantly, the information about these bodies note that they are *focus groups*, which are not suited to provide feedback on all areas of university life. In student engagement literature the term "student partnerships" is often used as an alias for focus groups. Focus groups are a social research (or marketing) technique using a small collection of people, generally a group considered demographically representative of a larger cohort, to obtain "perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards a product, service, concept, advertisement, or idea".<sup>4</sup>

Focus groups have a legitimate role in social research, feedback and planning. Kings College acknowledges that no "individual student perspective is representative of all" but do form "sources of insight", particularly for students who have not yet managed to link into larger representative voices.<sup>5</sup> UMSU employs Town Hall meetings, holds the *UMSU Assembly*, and a range of other ad hoc fora as focus groups for campaigns and for quality assurance and feedback. However, UMSU recognises an important limitation of these small-scale research exercises is that social research techniques are inherently undemocratic in form and function. They cannot be relied upon as the sole source of truth because, depending on the methodology used, they are notoriously prone to the skewing effect of handpicking by the researcher.

## THE RECOGNISED ROLE OF STUDENT ORGANISATIONS

*In developing partnership with students it is important to recognise the issues relating to perceptions around position, power and influence. The roles of representatives are important in supporting the individual student within large and complex institutions, as are activities which encourage all students to feel part of the partnership.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Royal Holloway University of London, *Find out more about how the RH100 works*

<<https://intranet.royalholloway.ac.uk/staff/tools-and-links/rh100/the-rh100-panel.aspx>>

<sup>3</sup> King's College London, *Finding my voice, building connections and shaping the student experience at King's*

<<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/students/finding-my-voice-building-connections-and-shaping-the-student-experience-at-kings>>.

<sup>4</sup> ANU Social Research Centre <<https://srcentre.com.au/research-participants/focus-group-and-interview-participants>>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Student Engagement Framework for Scotland (SEFS) *A Student Engagement Framework for Scotland*

<<https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/SEFScotland.pdf>> p 10.



In the UK, student unions have been calling for better platforms for student voice and the development of respectful partnerships between the University and student unions for some time.<sup>7</sup> The UK National Office for Students “set out expectations for providers to meaningfully engage with students as partners in their widening access and participation activity, stressing the importance of diverse voices and collaboration with students’ unions”.<sup>8</sup>

The UK experience has evidenced that University partnerships with student unions have the capacity to build stronger platforms to improve the student experience and amplify the student voice.

The [Student Engagement Framework for Scotland](#) (SEFS) established in 2003 by Scotland’s tertiary education sector via Students Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs) also recognises that a formal representative process is fundamental to “engaging student leaders within institutional processes to deliver student engagement at the highest strategic level”.<sup>9</sup> Sparqs reports that many UK institutions have invested more in their student unions over the last decade and are now reaping the benefits in improved engagement and student satisfaction across the board.<sup>10</sup>

The UK’s Higher Education Academy cites a case study on the development of Student Partnership Agreements (SPAs) in the Scottish higher education sector. In this setting the “development of SPAs is seen as a negotiation and collaboration between institutions and their students’ union / guild / association (as the collective voice of students)”.<sup>11</sup>

The [Student Engagement Partnership](#) is a highly successful collaboration between the National Union of Students (UK) and the UK Higher Education sector. In 2008, Birmingham City University, in collaboration with its Students’ Union, created its Student Academic Partners (SAP) scheme. In 2010, when the SAP scheme won the prestigious Times Higher Education award for outstanding support for students, the University acknowledged that the “strategic partnership with the Students’ Union in co-creating the initiative was important in gaining the THE award”.<sup>12</sup> At the University of Winchester, the University has partnered with the student union to deliver the *Student Fellows Scheme*,<sup>13</sup> an initiative that has won recognition and critical acclaim across the sector.

The UK experience features a wealth of evidence that partnerships formed between institutions and student unions are highly effective at increasing student engagement and meaningful student contribution. If the University is looking to the UK for inspiration - rather than borrowing ideas for focus groups – it would do better to look to the initiatives of sparqs and NUS UK for guidance.

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<sup>7</sup> Maisha Islam, Tiffany-Lily Burnett & Sarah-Louise Collins, ‘Trilateral partnership: An institution and students’ union collaborative partnership project to support underrepresented student groups’, *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 5 (2021) 76.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p 77.

<sup>9</sup> Sally Varnham, *Student Engagement in University Decision Making And Governance: Towards a More Systemically Inclusive Student Voice: An OLT Strategic Priority – Final Report* (2016), p 6.

<sup>10</sup> Student Participation in Quality Scotland, *Celebrating Student Engagement: Successes and opportunities in Scotland’s university sector* <<https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/UNI%20CELEB%20REPORT%20SPREADS%20FINAL%20.pdf>>.

<sup>11</sup> Mick Healey, Abbi Flint & Kathy Harrington, *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*, The Higher Education Academy, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Alison Cook-Sather, ‘Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student-staff partnerships’ *Higher Education* 71 (2016) 196, p 7.

<sup>13</sup> Cassie Shaw & Tali Atvars, ‘Two Sides of the Same Coin: A University and Student Union Perspective on Partnership and Risk’ *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* 24 (2018) 1.



## HEARING THE STUDENT VOICE

UMSU represents many voices. The voices have not been quiet, and the suggestion they need amplifying is in some ways suggestive of an unfortunate deficit approach by the University. For the University's newfound commitment to listen to and engage with the student voice to be meaningful, the University needs to resolve the reasons for its failure to do so in the past. Why has it chosen so frequently to ignore or deflect the voices UMSU has been sharing with it for almost 20 years?

### STUDENTS ARE NOT WHISPERING

The principle of 'amplifying the student voice' implies that the student voices are too quiet. In UMSU's experience, students have been voicing their views long and loudly. The question is, does the University want to hear it?

For example, in 2019 the University circulated its Green Paper on a proposed *Melbourne Student Experience Enhancement Project (MSEEP)*. While broadly welcoming any initiative by the University to improve the student experience, UMSU noted that yet again the University was defining the student experience, rather than asking students how they conceptualise their own experience. [UMSU's response](#) to the MSEEP green paper made a number of points, including that students don't define their experience in the way the University had chosen to frame it, and MSEEP's focus on academic experience was too narrowly cast. UMSU's response pointed out that students do more than just study at university, and consequently the student experience relates to all aspects of a student's interaction with an institution.

Unfortunately, UMSU's submission was ignored – not one of our concerns was addressed or even acknowledged in the final whitepaper. There are countless other examples of loud and consistent student voices, but no one listening to them – UMSU has asked for [more](#) compassionate [special consideration](#), for compassionate responses to the [impacts of COVID on student experience](#), that the University trust students are not all out to game the system, for [policies that support](#) rather than [punish students](#) and a [bona fide chance to dispute university decisions](#) rather than dismissing appeals without hearing them.

### NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US – THE POWER OF COLLECTIVISM

Individual student experiences are important. Those experiences should be heard, and individual voices become powerful and compelling when they inform part of a collective roar. Individual's interests and concerns voiced separately and disparately can become diverting, and without common threads it is easy for them to be overlooked, split off, and diluted, disappearing into the cacophony of many other separate individual voices yelling to have their own specific interests heard. No matter how much the University is committed to listening to all these different voices shouting separately at once, it is going to be impossible to hear.

### AN INCONVENIENT VOICE

It is uncontroversial to note that the University, anecdotally at least, responds to student politics as an annoying business, full of budding politicians furthering agendas that the University generally finds inconvenient. However, sidelining legitimate student democracy for focus group-based market research will do nothing to improve the 'wannabe politician' stereotype. The University needs to respect and foster authentic democratic processes for the student voice to have legitimacy.

The reality is that UMSU has over 55 000 members, many thousands of whom regularly engage with the organisation to discuss their experience and seek support with their concerns. The UMSU Advocacy Service assists over 3000 students a year with many more thousands of issues raised with the service annually. UMSU Advocacy has produced comprehensive [service reports](#) for the last decade detailing the problems students face in their day-to-day dealings with the University and recommending ways to improve their experience. The fact that, over this decade of reports, the same issues come up again

and again contributes to the message that no one has been listening. These experiences are not the views of politicians – they are the voices of a diversity of students struggling to engage with the University.

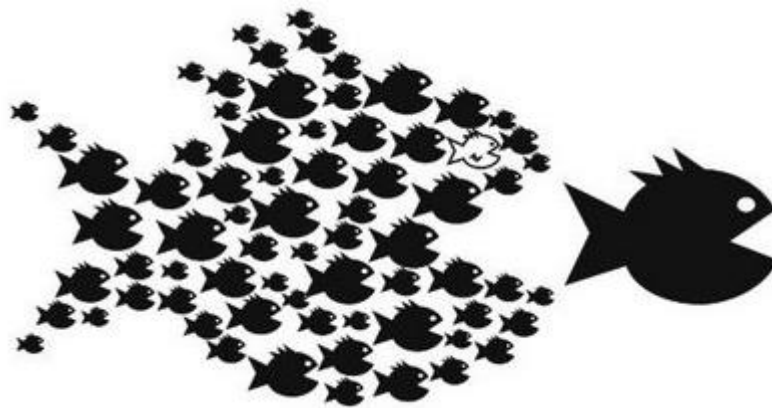
The student departments at UMSU are contacted daily by students from every part of the University voicing concerns and asking for help. On the back of this collective voicing of student experience, UMSU has mounted hundreds of campaigns. In 2020, over 13 000 students in Semester 1 and almost 17 000 in Semester 2 signed [UMSU's petition](#) for a no disadvantage WAM system at the University (WAMnesty). Over the course of the pandemic alone, UMSU engaged with thousands of students regarding the impacts of the pandemic on their studies and mental health, their experiences of impacts on subject quality of rapid shifts to online course delivery, and a host of other matters. All of these issues were raised with the University, through meetings, service reports, petitions to the Academic Board, in policy consultation submissions, and any other opportunities provided for UMSU to raise these matters.

The *Amplifying the Student Voice 2022* notes that “analysis also indicates that these student-led bodies do not connect with all students, and some expressed a desire to connect with the University independently of formal organisations or clubs”.<sup>14</sup> It is, however, unclear where in the cited paper this analysis expressed or discussed.<sup>15</sup> Given the multitude of ways students engage with and express their experience to UMSU, including our significant casework services, it would be helpful to understand more about this assertion and its evidence base.

## UNION BUSTING

In many ways the proposal for 100-120 individual students being selected to have their individual voices amplified mirrors the approach of businesses to singling out workers in bargaining. In this context, vulnerable workers with little or no industrial experience are expected to ‘bargain’ at the table with industrial relations experts and employment lawyers.

Similarly, UMSU regards as deeply flawed the idea that a number of individual students with no resources or support, can effectively contribute to the University’s decision-making processes on an equal footing. The need for support, institutional knowledge sharing and mentoring to address the inherently unequal experience of being a single student in a university decision-making structure is discussed further below.



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<sup>14</sup> Above n1, p 4.

<sup>15</sup> Rimi Khan & Eugenia Zoubtchenko, ‘I can belong to anything I set my mind to: Participation, co-creation and the student experience’, Melbourne Social Equity Institute, University of Melbourne (2019).





## START IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

Prior to embarking on the establishment of a Melbourne Student Forum, UMSU invites the University to review and strengthen existing student representative opportunities and partner with the student union. This will deliver more than a focus group to provide platforms for meaningful student contribution.

### NOT JUST VOICES – MAKING THE STUDENT VOICE MEANINGFUL

*But the key thing for us is that they are very, very well briefed by the Student's Union. That's the absolute key. So they come knowing about the issues that are going to be raised and are therefore able to have a really valuable input. It's not just students being there who are lost by all of the detail.<sup>16</sup>*

In its mapping and review of student representation on university governance and policy development bodies, UMSU recommends the University has regard to the power dynamics between the institution and students. In this context, the University should recognise the vital role played by UMSU in building capacity of students who can think independently and hold their own on decision-making bodies.

It is critical that the University acknowledge the unequal power dynamic between staff who have been employed for their expertise and experience and may have many years of institutional knowledge and students who usually serve no more than a single 12-month term on decision making bodies. Not only does the power disparity risk intimidating and overwhelming students, but it is also undoubtedly a potential source of influence or even duress.

Accordingly, while there are a range of ways support can be provided to the student members of university governance, the integrity of these positions is best maintained by ensuring they are independent and free of the influence of the University, and properly supported by an independent student organisation.

*Independence is fostered by an education officer being provided by the student organisation was also mentioned as there is the view that university-provided education officers may be biased towards their employer's perspective.<sup>17</sup>*

UMSU's role in training, capacity building and resourcing of student representatives is explored further below.

### POWER SHARING OR TOKENISM?

*Participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless.<sup>18</sup>*

Students faced with processes often spanning multiple years must have proper support to enable equal contributions. Unsupported students who serve a single yearly term on university governance bodies are at a clear disadvantage compared to the staff who sit alongside them. Currently, the University view appears to be a deficit model which asserts that students must resign themselves to a reduced capacity to participate meaningfully and equally due to their short tenures and limited institutional experience.

*The students who attend those meetings, they don't hold any of the power. [ . . . ] If we are invited to a university meeting, on quality processes, it's inaccessible to most university staff let alone students. [ . . . ] We can't really say that there's equal power. It's not a joint*

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<sup>16</sup> Sally Varnham, Student Engagement in University Decision Making And Governance: Towards a More Systemically Inclusive Student Voice: An OLT Strategic Priority (Appendices) (2016), p 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p 16.

<sup>18</sup> Sherry Arnstein, 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation' *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35 (1969) 216 – quoted in above n 27.



*birthday party if somebody else has organised it all and invited all their mates, but you get to go.*<sup>19</sup>

The Student Precinct Steering Group is a classic case study on the way student participants on university bodies can become rubber stamping and box ticking exercise to assert student involvement in the process. During the ‘co-creation’ of the Student Precinct, UMSU was permitted a single student representative on the Steering Group which featured a range of university staff.

In the years of development between 2016 and 2023, a number of different student representatives from UMSU sat on this Steering Group, often being asked to endorse positions that had been discussed or developed outside their term. Consequently, a range of decisions were endorsed by the Steering Group which did not reflect or account for important operational impacts on UMSU. When these matters were raised post decision, UMSU was advised that the student on the Steering Group had raised no objections.

Subsequently, in UMSU’s Feedback on the Proposed Terms of Reference for the Student Campus Experience Steering Committee, UMSU remarked that while we welcome any opportunity for students to be involved in planning and operational decision making around matters impacting on the student experience, those students must be properly resourced to avoid tokenism.

UMSU argued that the proposed Terms of Reference for the new committee indicated that, like the Student Campus Experience Programming Committee, this committee would have an operational focus. Given this, and as it is the staff at UMSU who are responsible for day-to-day operational matters, we requested the University included a staff member from UMSU as an *ex officio* member of the committee.

While it is critical that students are involved in the governance of student facing areas of the University, student representatives change annually, and sometimes more frequently. This means it can be difficult for students to maintain a meaningful longitudinal line of sight across relevant operational issues, the broader context, and other matters requiring greater institutional knowledge than a student can reasonably be expected to hold during their term of office.

As staff are responsible for the day-to-day operational running of UMSU, this expertise and experience is not always visible to the student governors of the organisation. While UMSU has developed more rigorous handover processes between student representatives which strengthen the transfer of institutional knowledge, university committees with operational focus will generally benefit from input from staff with knowledge of the operational aspects UMSU. It is paramount that opportunities are provided which support student representatives’ contributions and decision making. This has been acknowledged in other committees which include UMSU staff *ex officio*, such as the Student Experience Programming Committee and the *Respect Reference Group* which has included an UMSU staff member for precisely these reasons.

## OF RUBBER STAMPS AND WEDDING CRASHERS

*Research participants have described seeing themselves as a “wedding crasher”: inviting themselves to meetings to get a seat at the table.*<sup>20</sup>

Research into the efficacy and experience of ‘partnership’ approaches in education indicates it is frequently one-sided, with institutions “relying on representatives when it suits them and ignoring their efforts when it contradicts what they want”.<sup>21</sup> Student accounts of existing forms of feedback to the University, such as the Student Experience Survey (SES) reflects an

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<sup>19</sup> Abbi Flint, Hannah Goddard & Ellie Russell, ‘Architects of their Experience: The Role, Value and Impact of Student Academic Representation Systems in Higher Education in England’ 2017 *The Student Engagement Partnership*, p 28.

<sup>20</sup> Above, n 27 p 76.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Carey, ‘Representation and Student Engagement in Higher Education: A Reflection on the Views and Experiences of Course Representatives’ *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 37 (2013) 71, p. 84.



experience of shouting into the void, and “being told that their opinion matters without seeing evidence to support this assertion”.<sup>22</sup>

There are many powerful prejudices at play in individual student to staff ‘partnerships’. These will often manifest in a ‘yes, but we know better’ response to student input and feedback such as “I am happy to respond to their feedback, but I am not sure that I would be happy with them ‘designing’ any substantive module components’, and ‘I would welcome it but not in terms of content as we are the experts’”.<sup>23</sup>

However, power sharing is explicitly required for meaningful student engagement with the University. Research into students’ experience of sitting on university governance speaks to this eloquently:

*...a bit of power has to be relinquished by the provider for positive, effective change to be led by students. I believe that when this happens, we see the truest examples of partnership working and where reps are given space to be those architects.*<sup>24</sup>

## STUDENT VOICE VIA STUDENT REPRESENTATION

*The common thread across the landscape of representation is the idea of collective responsibility.*<sup>25</sup>

Privileging student focus groups over student representation undermines critical systems of elected student representation, and consequently “important questions of who students can be speaking for and about, and the legitimacy of them doing so, are disregarded to the detriment of student voice more broadly in higher education”.<sup>26</sup>

UMSU is an independent, student-led, democratic body, with a strong history of contested elections. Tickets run on policy platforms, are accountable through Students’ Council, reports, via student media, and in their exposure to students one on one.

UMSU also supports seven autonomous departments, each of which run a number of collectives. These collectives have grass root constituencies from some of the most vulnerable, marginalised and generally disempowered groups. UMSU taps into this collective knowledge and experience to set our strategic agenda and focus our campaigns. Tapping the network of collectives provides views and lived experiences of students across the widest possible spectrum.

More than this, UMSU operates several services which provide individual advocacy to students – notably the UMSU Advocacy Service, the UMSU Legal Service and the Sexual Harm Response Coordinators. These services each collect a body of casework data representing thousands of contacts with students annually, and analysis from this data provides a compelling evidence base of student experience, consequences and recommendations.

UMSU has a standing membership (in an opt-in system) of around 55,000 members. Our capacity to survey and engage our constituents means that we are able to provide substantial and meaningful data-driven evidence in virtually any matter impacting on the broad student experience.

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<sup>22</sup> Angela Kehler, Roselynn Verwoord & Heather Smith, ‘We are the Process: Reflections on the Underestimation of Power in Students as Partners in Practice’ *International Journal for Students as Partners* 1 (2017) 1, p 8.

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Murphy, Sarah Nixon, Simon Brooman & Damian Fearon “I am wary of giving too much power to students” - Addressing the “but” in the Principle of Staff-Student Partnership’ *International Journal for Students As Partners*, 1 (2017) 1, p 7.

<sup>24</sup> Above, n 27 p 76.

<sup>25</sup> Kelly Matthews & Mollie Dollinger, ‘Student voice in higher education: the importance of distinguishing student representation and student partnership’, *Higher Education*, 85 (2023) 555.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



“Independence enables effective representation, accountability, and credibility...”<sup>27</sup> Only independent student-led organisations can offer students the end-to-end experience of organisational governance. This is an extraordinary opportunity to develop leadership skills, strategic planning experience and to understand the promotion of collective interests through democratic representation firsthand.

## BOTH A VOICE FOR AND A VOICE OF STUDENTS

UMSU acknowledges it is vital to engage with and give a platform to underrepresented students. This appears to be the intention of a *Melbourne Student Forum*. However, how will the University weight the value of one hundred individual voices?

In 2023, with the influence of identity politics and intersectionality embedded in students’ understanding of representation, collectivism can cope with the heterogeneity of students’ concerns. The promise of collective representation is that it can deliver a diversity of experiences as part of a collective position. Positions advanced through student representation can be inherently diverse and comprise a number of disparate experiences and identities. Student voice literature acknowledges that representational networks such as student unions actively “facilitate authentic student voice as the student partners had been elevated to this position by fellow students from underrepresented groups”<sup>28</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that elected student representatives, as students themselves, can navigate between being a ‘voice for’ and a ‘voice of’ students. A ‘voice for’ describes the collective role of a student representative, while the ‘voice of’ reflects the individual voice of that representative as a student. In any given situation, student members of committees and panels may be asked or able to play both or either of these roles.

## DEVELOPING A GENUINE & RESPECTFUL PARTNERSHIP WITH UMSU

It is difficult to accurately gauge what gaps exist in current platforms for student voice without first seeking to maximise their potential. Before investing in new and untested initiatives, the University should consolidate its current underdeveloped opportunities.

Rather than beginning a new process which risks duplicating or displacing current sources of the student voice, the University should instead focus its effort to improve the student experience by investing more resources in the Student Union.

## UMSU’S TRAINING, SUPPORT AND RESOURCING OF STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES AT THE UNIVERSITY

In 2014, the Student Governance initiative was established by the Provost on recommendations from the University’s 2013 *Student Lifecycle Review*.

The training draws on both the committee secretariats’ perspective – what student representatives ideally need to know and become good at to maximise their contribution in University Governance – as well as sharing knowledge from more seasoned student representatives on their experiences in student governance. With support from the Executive Officers of the various Academic Structures and semi-autonomous bodies of the University, the induction and support has been extended to all student representatives involved in student governance activities across the University.

The UMSU Advocacy Service now offers training for UMSU and GSA members on university governance committees and as members of Student Discipline panels multiple times a year. The training is delivered via a number of Canvas modules and quizzes, supplemented by in person workshops which give participants a chance to put theory into practice.

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<sup>27</sup> Abbi Flint & Hannah Goddard, ‘Power, Partnership, and Representation: A Dialogue Exploring Student Academic Representation Systems as a Form of Partnership’ in Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot (Eds) *The Power of Partnership: Students, Staff, and Faculty Revolutionizing Higher Education* (2020), p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> Above n 7.



The representatives are further supported with resources developed by the Advocacy Service including the [Student Representatives Handbook](#), [The Handy Guide to Good Decision making on Discipline Committees](#) and [How to Be Credible, Convincing, and Persuasive: A Handy Guide to Writing Compelling Proposals and Position Papers](#).

## UMSU'S GOVERNANCE IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

UMSU has been steadily implementing a range of recommendations arising from our 2021 Governance Review. Among these initiatives are programs that expand the reach and accessibility of the student representative voice, an UMSU anti-racism working group, and the development of the UMSU Reconciliation Action Plan. UMSU's Electoral Regulations specify a number of affirmative action obligations and restricted constituencies which ensure the most diverse representation of our constituents possible.

These initiatives are aimed at increasing the accessibility of UMSU roles to the widest range of students, building better links with Murrup Barak to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other First Nations students to become embedded across the entire organisation, and increasing opportunities for ongoing training and support of student representatives.

## UMSU'S OUTREACH – TOWN HALLS & THE UMSU ASSEMBLY

The *UMSU Assembly* is a development of our previous (pre-COVID) annual program of Town Hall meetings with students across the university community. The *UMSU Assembly* is inspired by and based on the program at Manchester University Student Union known as the Union Assembly.<sup>29</sup> These assemblies run regularly during semester and are designed to hear student input on a range of issues, most notably this year is input into UMSU's submission to the *Australian Universities Accord*.

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<sup>29</sup> Manchester University Student Union, *STUDENT VOICE Liberation, democracy & campaigning* <<https://manchesterstudentsunion.com/union-assembly>>



## UMSU'S POSITION

UMSU's position is framed by the valuable work of the National Union of Students UK. In [A Manifesto For Partnership](#), the UK NUS makes clear that:

*partnership should be between independent entities, such as an institution and the collective student body (the students' union), but it should serve the larger goal of supporting and facilitating the engagement of all students.<sup>30</sup>*

The *Amplifying the Student Voice at Melbourne 2022* paper notes that to enhance the use and visibility of student feedback and engagement "a shared community of practice supporting the Student Voice could be established".<sup>31</sup>

UMSU welcomes the opportunity to become a partner in this community of practice. This aligns with our Strategic Plan 2023-25 and furthers the work we have already commenced in this area. UMSU's 2021 *Governance Audit Report* recommended that:

*the organisation assesses the adequacy and effectiveness of existing university "partnership" fora, including meetings with the Provost and senior staff in Chancellery. Where indicated, seek to address deficits and/or formalise those meetings with terms of reference and agreed aims.*

Accordingly, UMSU would value an authentic partnership with the University to ensure diverse and underrepresented voices are heard and responded to. This would build on the role UMSU currently plays in facilitating student engagement and advocating for improvements to the student experience.

This partnership would be founded on the following principles:

1. Commitment to avoid tokenism and embedding meaningful involvement of students in governance, decision-making fora, and co-creation.
2. A genuine commitment to power-sharing.
3. Recognition of the critical role of staff in student-led organisations in training and resourcing students to participate equally in university decision-making and co-creation activities.
4. Commitment to enhanced resources for UMSU to continue to develop our work towards robust and meaningful student engagement with the University.
5. Establishing a meaningful partnership between UMSU and the University which respects UMSU's independence and facilitates the goal of elevating the voices of all students.

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<sup>30</sup> NUS, *A Manifesto for Partnership* < [https://nusdigital.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/document/documents/60122/5812448b76a931d1011187a8acb373c1/A\\_Manifesto\\_for\\_Partnership.pdf](https://nusdigital.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/document/documents/60122/5812448b76a931d1011187a8acb373c1/A_Manifesto_for_Partnership.pdf) >.

<sup>31</sup> Above n 1, p 9.



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