



## Enabling the Student Voice (Not Just the Loudest Student)

The University of Waikato has always been proud of its system for student representation. But changes to the tertiary sector, as well as a revamp of the University's committee structure in 2012/2013 offered the opportunity to review and improve the system, which had become a little tired and perfunctory. The formation of the new Student Experience Committee provided an excellent vehicle for working through the complexities of enabling the student voice to ensure the student representation system was effective, representative and comprehensive.

Changes in technology have made huge changes to the way we communicate. Expectations from students about the way in which tertiary education providers communicate with them have similarly changed. Also, policy changes from New Zealand government led to the adoption of voluntary student union membership from 2012, and recently proposed changes to New Zealand's Education Act could soon see an end to a compulsory student voice on university Councils. With all these changes, how can tertiary education providers ensure a representative voice from its biggest stakeholder group – the students?

In 2012, Ako Aotearoa and the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA) commissioned research into how tertiary organisations can effectively use the voice of students to improve quality of provision. The resulting report, "Using the Student Voice to Improve Quality", provided a useful reference and benchmark in assessing the University of Waikato's current system for representation, and the resulting changes.

The University of Waikato system for student representation comprises of two key elements: class representatives (one or more students elected as representatives for each paper occurrence) and student members of committees. Formerly quite separate processes, one of the aims of the review was to more closely interlink them, so that the pool of student representatives became the source for the majority of the student committee members.

The review highlighted a lot of positives, but also a number of areas which would benefit from enhancement, including:

- Student buy-in – incentivizing students to take on the representative roles, with outcomes such as annotation of academic transcripts, letters of recognition from the University, service excellence awards, etc.
- Processes and systems – ensuring a consistent University-wide system for electing and recording class representatives, dissemination of information, training and communication
- Cohort representation – ensuring representation from various cohorts of students, including international, Māori, Pacific, distance students and those studying at our Tauranga campus. Postgraduate student representation and the postgraduate student experience

was seen of particular need for review and a separate working group has been meeting in relation to this.

- Effectiveness – ensuring that the student voice is representative, and that communication to and from the student representatives is possible and appropriate.

These areas aligned well with the features of good practice identified by Ako Aotearoa and NZUSA, including ensuring that:

- Organisations have a range of representative systems that enable all students to have a voice.
- Students are resourced so that they are able to undertake representative work in a supported, meaningful and knowledgeable way.
- Students actively engage in student representative systems
- Quality enhancements/actions incorporate the student voice.
- The organisation exhibits a culture of representation that values the student voice.

Improvements made to date have included:

- Use of Google Drive, Moodle (the student intranet), Google sites and Facebook groups to facilitate communication, dissemination of information and consultation with and among class representatives and student committee members
- Improvements to training for class representatives and induction for student committee members
- University consultation documents are provided to students as well as to staff for feedback
- Development of guidelines for lecturers and administrative staff around the processes and principles of student representation

Work is ongoing in relation to recognition on transcripts and providing particular cohort representation. The changes made thus far have been well received by students and staff, and there are a lot more conversations going on around the role of student representation and enabling the student voice. The University of Waikato's motto is "Ko te tangata" – "For the people", and working to ensure a representative voice from our students in a changing tertiary environment is a good example of this in practise.