

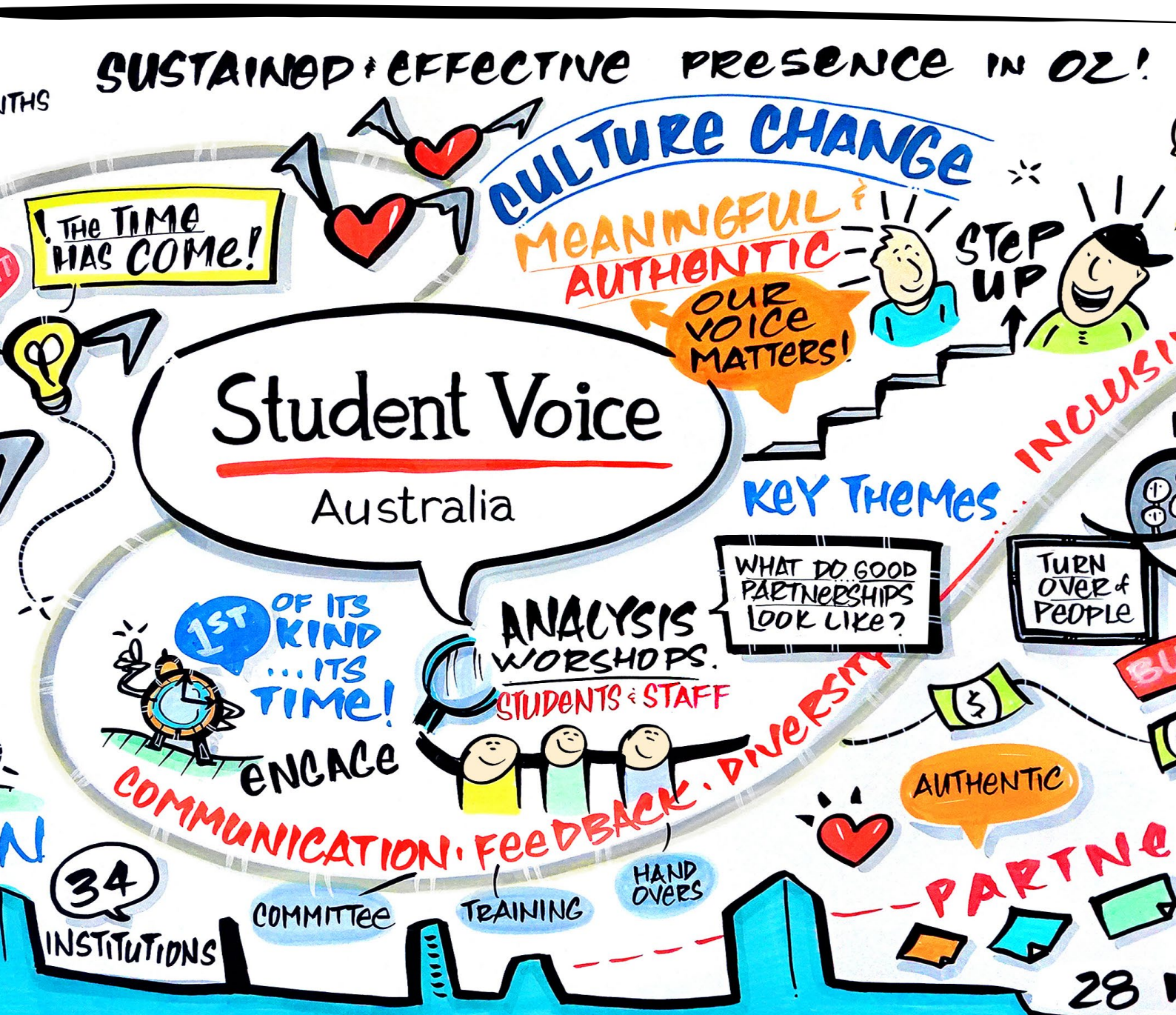
“Making sure that the students aren’t just a tick box”

Evaluating the Student Voice Australia Pilot

A report prepared in collaboration with the The Australian Alliance for Social Enterprise and Student Voice Australia

Jonathon Louth, Kate Walsh & Ian Goodwin-Smith

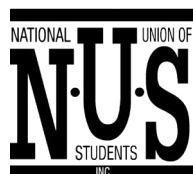
November 2019



Pilot institutions



Supporting bodies



I think seeing SVA as that sort of peak body that takes on the role of training and advocacy gives legitimacy to all of the other student bodies who are trying to attain those goals because they have someone to say, well, these guys are behind us, they're helping us they're giving us you know, those tools within ourselves. So it's not just fighting that battle by yourself.

Student, focus group

I have deepened my passion to work for students and work with them as expert learners.

Staff, participant survey

The Pilot demonstrated a good vision, and promotes an important sector-wide change that is needed.

Institutional response, survey



above: 2019 SVA Symposium

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank the project team and the SVA steering committee members who contributed to this research.. We especially extend our gratitude to Alison Jaquet, Angela Griffin, Philippa Levy, Sally Varnham, James Brann and Finlay Nolan. We also extend our thanks to all of the participants for their contribution to this research.

This project was funded by Student Voice Australia.

Acknowledgement of Country

The authors and project team acknowledge the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we conducted this research. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present. The Australian Alliance for Social Enterprise and Student Voice Australia are committed to honouring Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.

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TAASE Report 1-11/2019

Picture on front cover

Symposium scribe image, 'SVA Pilot Reflection' by Rachel Dight, 2019

Design

Hazelnut Creative

Suggested citation

Louth, J., Walsh, K. & Goodwin-Smith, I. (2019). "Making sure that the students aren't just a tick box"
Evaluating the Student Voice Australia Pilot. University of South Australia and Student Voice Australia, Adelaide and Sydney.



**University of
South Australia**

Student Voice
Australia

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Executive Summary

The Student Voice Australia Pilot has been an ambitious initiative. It brought together ten institutions to investigate how a cross-sector engagement with students, staff, tertiary institutions, national agencies and student representative bodies could generate and support authentic student informed decision making and governance.

In all, 34 institutions, five national student bodies, one national agency and over 350 staff and students engaged with the Pilot. Considerable data emerged noting the importance of the SVA Pilot experience and the need for funding certainty moving forward:

- **Over 80%** felt that their institution had benefited from their involvement in the Pilot;
- **Over 90%** of participants who were surveyed thought that their institution would benefit from future involvement in SVA;
- **Over 95%** of participants and **81% of institutions and national agencies** thought SVA should be supported to further develop its national presence across the tertiary sector; and
- **90% of institutions and national agencies** considered investment to strengthen student partnership in governance and decision making to be important.

For a pilot to be established in a short timeframe and to achieve a high level of enthusiasm and visibility, should be considered a success in its own right. The findings also identify the need to focus on core business (training, resources, support) and the co-development of outcomes that focus on *process* over outputs and *meaningful* relationship building between institutions and students.

This evaluation evidences an emergent roadmap for how institutions can work together to achieve outcomes for students *and* staff. The SVA project has shown how a cross-institutional approach to developing and enhancing genuine and authentic student partnering is possible and desirable for the tertiary sector. Moreover, it provides an insight into how the tertiary sector can collaborate to develop applied citizenship and governance experiences for students in real world settings.

The findings and recommendations herein are a **call to action to the sector to support and invest in a sustainable, resourced and appropriately funded student voice model.**

Key findings

This evaluation notes the following key findings:

1. Participants reported an overwhelmingly positive experience of the SVA Pilot;
2. There is a need to reach more diverse and representative student cohorts;
3. Working *with* existing student representative bodies is vital for any SVA model going forward;
4. SVA's core business of events and activities have been important sharing, networking and skill development opportunities for staff and students;
5. SVA workshops have proved invaluable for identifying gaps and creating a levelling environment for staff and students;
6. That process, not outputs are the most important factor for students. This is a recognition that engagement must be genuine and meaningful;
7. Tertiary institutions noted the need for continued funding, but require further evidence of the Pilot impact, the funding mix and the sector appetite; and
8. That there is overwhelming support for the continuation and expansion of SVA.



above: SVA Advisory Group 2019

Introduction

In 2018, ten tertiary institutions came together under an agreement to fund the Student Voice Australia Pilot. Reflecting an international movement, the aim was to build and implement practices to facilitate authentic student engagement through partnership in institutional decision making and governance.

The establishment of SVA has been a collective enterprise – a co-creation between staff and students working together for mutual benefit and with shared goals. For the Pilot this has meant embracing iterative and collaborative approaches to harness the unique and varied expertise of all participants.

This report and the accompanying recommendations capture the opportunities and challenges moving forward. The SVA Pilot has been about testing ideas, discovering and learning what works and what needs to be done differently (as any good pilot should do). The key lessons and themes that have emerged from this evaluation can inform the *co-development* of a future and *sustainable* model for the SVA network.

Through participating in this evaluation process, the sector (which, of course, includes students) has contributed to helping determine the parameters

within which SVA can plan for the future. In particular, a core learning has been developing a shared understanding of what authentic partnership means and how it translated into an everyday understanding. Some key lessons from the Pilot that encapsulate this include:

- Acknowledging that there is strength and opportunity by embracing collective knowledge;
- That expertise and capacity needs to be co-developed. Knowledge and 'know how' is not unidirectional; and,
- Students and institutions benefit when working collaboratively both across and within institutions.

What is clear from the evaluation of the Pilot is the importance of cross-institutional collaboration and sharing and celebrating good practice cannot be underestimated. By acting on these lessons, an expanded SVA network could provide the foundation to create a more sustained and effective presence across the country. All of which only makes for a stronger sector.

The Student Voice Australia Pilot has established at least one clear path: that there is a clear appetite to work towards developing and sustaining an ethos of partnership as normal – as common sense – as simply 'the way things are done' in the tertiary education sector across Australia.

Or, as one student said in a focus group: "Making sure that the students aren't just a tick box."

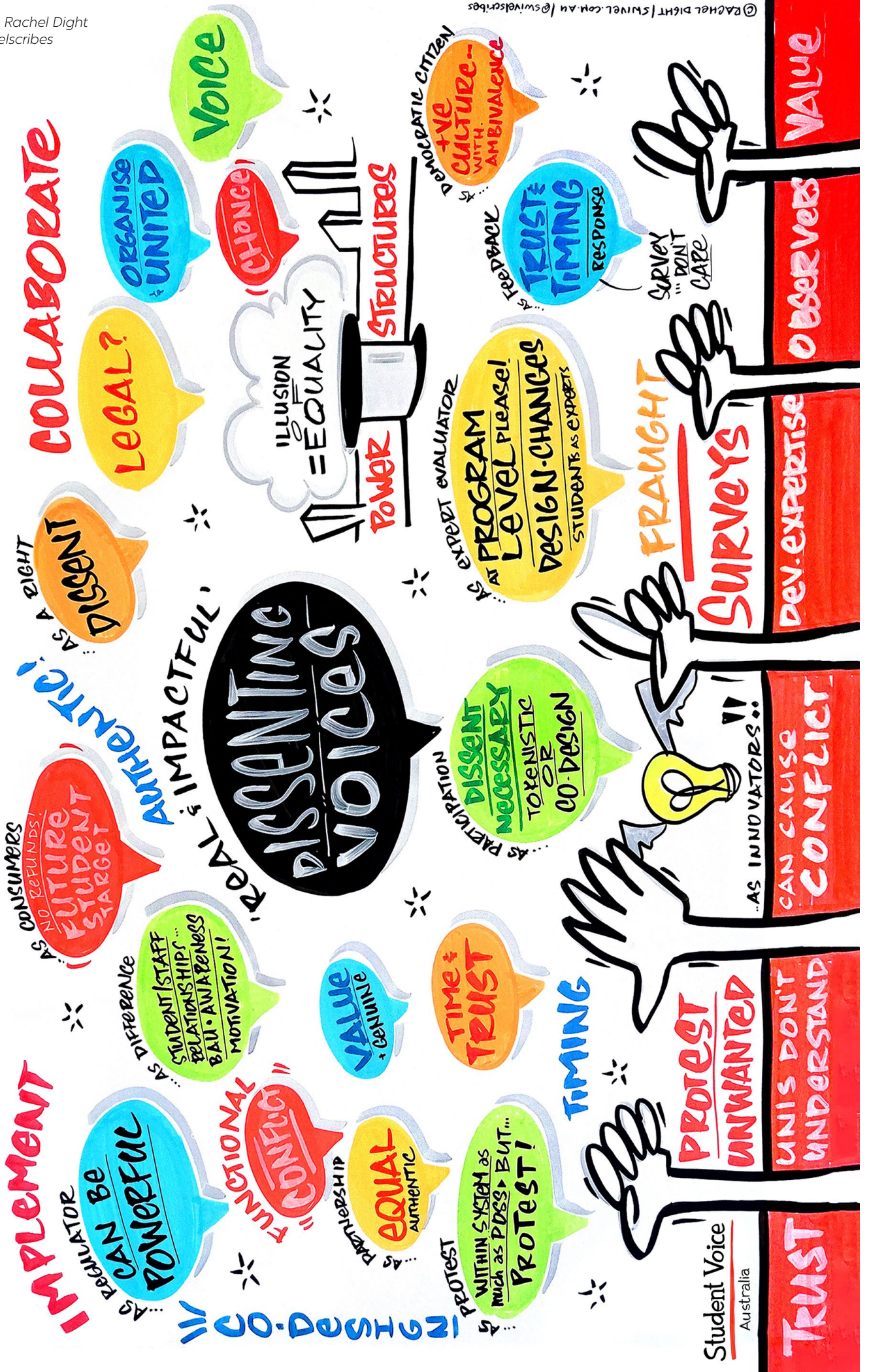


above: SVA Analysis Advisory Group meeting



above: Analysis Workshops





Background

What do we mean by Student Engagement, Student Voice and Partnership?

In recent years, there has been a growing international focus on the authentic engagement of students using partnership approaches in decision making and governance within tertiary institutions. Engagement through partnership is now widely discussed and understood in Australia and is gaining traction in institutional strategic planning, policy development and in practice (Healey et al., 2014; Varnham, 2017). The establishment of the SVA Pilot reflects this movement within this Australian context.

Yet the term 'student engagement' is not a fixed concept. While a number of definitions and frameworks exist (see Trowler & Trowler, 2011; Coates, 2008; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009), definitions and frameworks need to be amenable to the specifics of each institutional setting. The SVA Pilot has been cognisant of this need and applies a broad understanding of the term to cover activities ranging from those within learning and teaching to those that extend into other aspects of student life, such as how students interact with institutional structures, strategies and processes (Carey, 2013a).

The Student Engagement Framework for Scotland (2012) has been an important touchstone for SVA to unpack the different elements and features of student engagement. In particular, the framework has provided guidance around the role students play in shaping the direction of their learning, their involvement in formal mechanisms for quality and governance, and in influencing the student experience at a national level. It is also important to note that the divisions between the key elements of student engagement outlined in the framework are often blurred (as in practice), and the relationships between them are complex.



Student Voice

Student Voice – though a widely used term – is similarly contested. For example, the use of the singular 'voice' fails to capture the richness and diversity of student voices across the tertiary education sector and can signal the privileging or preferencing of some student voices over others (McCleod, 2011; Seale, 2014). Additionally, within different settings there is often a lack of dialogue or consensus about the purpose and use of student voice, which may mask conflicting interests and values (see Bragg, 2007; Bishop, 2018; Fielding, 2004; Freeman 2016).

While acknowledging that the term is contested, it is important to have a workable definition as a marker for the work undertaken. A recent QAA Scotland definition captures some of the core elements that are often ascribed to the concept:

Student voice entails the engagement of students in shaping their studies and study contexts through expressing their views, needs and concerns. It puts students into working relationships (including, but not limited to, partnership) with policy makers, providers, practitioners and other agencies, and challenges organisations to respond appropriately to the issues student voices raise (Trowler et al., 2018).

While useful, the definition does not wholly capture how students can shape their wider education experience outside of their studies and direct educational settings. For SVA, student voice refers to a more meaningful engagement with students' lived experience. This means striving for authentic, effective and inclusive strategies to work with students across all levels and all cohorts to enhance the quality and standards of the institution and the students' university experience.



above: SVA Symposium

Student Partnership

Using a partnership approach to student engagement, SVA aims to shape cultures within institutions where student voice is valued and respected. Central to the Pilot's mission is to work collaboratively with staff and students to bring their different perspectives and expertise together. The purpose of this shared approach is to improve the education experience for all and to create and foster an environment where students and staff thrive. For SVA, partnership is:

... a process of student engagement which has at its core staff and student working together in all aspects of an institution's operations, to foster enhancement of student learning and teaching, and the student experience (Varnham, 2017).

Moreover, it is imperative that a student perspective on partnership and what meaning students might bring to the idea of partnership is incorporated. A student only event for SVA Advisory Group members produced the following definition:

[Partnership is] a collaboration of equals ... not top down, but a meeting in the middle ... with accountability and transparency. Partnership involves going on a journey together from the beginning.

From the outset, SVA has championed working in partnership with students. Integrating students as partners is an important repositioning away from a consumer or customer approach, to seeing education as a shared endeavour to enhance learning and teaching and the university experience through active and genuine collaboration (Carey, 2012b; Healey et al., 2014; Wijaya Mulya, 2018). A partnership approach empowers students to be actively engaged and share the responsibility for shaping their own education.

The focus of SVA has been on student partnership in governance and decision making as distinct from partnership in learning and teaching (although there are inevitable crossovers and similarities in using a partnership approach. See Cook Sather et al., 2014; Matthews et al, 2018, Matthews 2017).

Partnership in governance and decision making is not unproblematic and there are points of tension (see Bragg, 2007; Seale et al, 2015; Tamrat, 2019). With pre-existing student representative structures and processes, for example student unions and associations, SVA has taken an approach of working closely to align activities, noting that this will be an ongoing and iterative process (see Rochford, 2014). Indeed, student unions are increasingly recognising the benefits to a partnership approach (e.g. NUS UK, Manifesto for Partnership, 2012) with a number of Australian universities having formed Student Partnership Agreements with their student unions/associations (See [UWA](#) & [ANU](#)).

For me, I think student partnership is going beyond that cursory consultation and working in a direct and meaningful collaboration. And so, when you're looking at governance structures, it's making sure that the students aren't just a tick box, but their voices heard and also listened to. Students should be involved as actual partners from the inception of an idea or a change as opposed to just being brought in to approve it at the end.

Student, focus group participant



above: SVA Symposium

Lessons from overseas

The establishment of SVA follows in the footsteps of other national level initiatives. Pre-eminent examples include [sparqs](#) (*student partnerships in quality Scotland*), [TSEP](#) (The Student Engagement Partnership) in England and [NStEP](#) (National Student Engagement Project) in Ireland. New Zealand are currently investigating the possibility of establishing a national student voice presence as an outcome of a government led [national consultation process](#) around student voice.¹

While Australian universities have a long history of working with student representatives (through student unions and associations), the representative structure and process is rarely embedded across all levels within institutions. Lessons from overseas show that supported systemic change is a vital component to better enable student involvement (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). This is the impetus behind the need to set up a dedicated and properly resourced national agency. A national student engagement presence supported by the sector was seen as a necessary next step in Australia to sustain and strengthen the culture of partnership to support and build capacity in tertiary institutions, staff and students (Varnham 2017). Drawing from international experiences, creating a national body would (see Varnham et al., 2018):

- Enhance the sharing of experiences and best practice (which are vital aspects of facilitating, strengthening and sustaining partnership);
- Identify best practice;
- Create a suite of practical tools to support partnerships;
- Encourage collaboration and sector wide innovation; and
- Support collegiality.

A number of international publications developed by sector organisations have led the way in linking student voice and representation with quality enhancement through advocating a partnership approach. These publications are noted in the [reference list](#) at the end of the report.

The Australian context

As noted, student partnership is gaining momentum in Australia. Many institutions are now developing processes to work together with their students, from within learning and teaching to institutional governance, direction and strategy. There is a growing body of evidence establishing the nature of authentic student engagement that leads to partnership, how may it be achieved, and why is it desirable (Cliffe et al., 2017; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Farrell & Savage, 2017; Johnke et al., 2018; Dollinger & Vanderlelie, 2019; Matthews et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2017; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; also see [SVA Symposium 2019 Case Studies](#)). Importantly, it indicates that student involvement in decision making is of value to institutions for the enhancement of quality and the student experience; and for students in their professional development and ability to shape their own learning experiences.

To varying degrees Australian universities all enable students to have input into decision making and governance, particularly through the involvement of student representatives in institutional boards and committees. The TEQSA Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 provide an external driver (as a minimum standard) for all higher education providers to involve students in decision making and governance processes.²

The Student Voice Australia Pilot was established following a National Senior Teaching Fellowship undertaken by Sally Varnham. Entitled *Creating a National Framework for Student Partnership in University Decision making and Governance (2017)*, the project involved a sector-wide collaboration to develop a set of principles to facilitate and support student partnership in tertiary institutions in Australia. A focus for the SVA Pilot has been to build capacity in the partnering institutions around the STEPUP for Quality Enhancement principles that were developed through the Fellowship (Varnham & Cahill, 2017). The principles provide shared aspirational guidance for institutions and are intended to support institutions to develop a strategy of student engagement across the broad spectrum of an institution's operations (Varnham, 2017).

¹ SVA has been fortunate to establish relationships with these international bodies and to develop a collegial and shared purpose. Over the course of the Pilot, the SVA Project Manager travelled to the UK twice to attend conferences, training, meet with counterparts and to present on the work of the SVA pilot. Additionally the project manager (report co-author Kate Walsh) was interviewed for an article on the Pilot by sparqs for their series '[Talking Student Engagement](#)'.

² TEQSA Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015: Clause 6.1.4: 'The governing body takes steps to develop and maintain an institutional environment in which ... informed decision making by students is supported and students have opportunities to participate in the deliberative and decision making processes of the higher education provider.' Clause 6.3.3 further provides that 'Students have the opportunity to participate in academic governance'.

The focus of SVA on student engagement in governance and decision making distinguishes the Pilot project from other research and initiatives in Australia primarily concerned with student-staff partnership in learning and teaching (see Matthews, 2015; Matthews, 2016; Bell, 2016; Peseta et al, 2016). However, there is an acknowledged synergy with this research and with other projects and initiatives across Australia (e.g. [Students as Partners Roundtable](#) held annually) and internationally which deal with the transformative power of the engagement of students as partners in the learning and teaching sphere.

Student Voice Australia

Over the past 14 months, the SVA Pilot has worked with ten tertiary institutions to build and implement practices to facilitate systematic student involvement in institutional decision making and governance. Jointly funded through an agreement between the ten participating institutions and supported by TEQSA and the national student bodies, the Pilot aimed to increase an understanding of partnership and embed partnership approaches to student engagement in the participating institutions.

Pilot institutions:

- Charles Sturt University
- Curtin University
- Flinders University
- Holmesglen Institute
- La Trobe University
- University of Adelaide
- University of New England
- University of New South Wales
- University of the Sunshine Coast
- University of Technology Sydney

Supporting organisations:

- NUS – National Union of Students
- CAPA- Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations
- UATSIS – Union of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students
- NATSIPA – National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association
- CISA- Council of International Students Australia
- TEQSA

SVA has not only engaged the ten institutions who fund the Pilot in its activities but also institutions more broadly. Overall, SVA has directly engaged 34 tertiary institutions (including 30 Australian universities, one New Zealand University, two private providers and two TAFE institutions), five national student bodies and TEQSA. This indicates significant interest and commitment from the sector.

Aims of Student Voice Australia:

- To strengthen institutional commitment to authentic student involvement in decision making and governance and develop a shared understanding of student partnership principles and good practice across a diversity of tertiary education settings;
- To enhance student capacity to engage in governance and decision making structures, quality assurance and partnership at all levels of the tertiary education system;
- To support institutions in developing processes, structures and activities which facilitate authentic student engagement with a diverse student body and strengthen the value of having a strong and informed student voice across all areas of the institution;
- To provide a mechanism for networking and sharing knowledge, practice and experience of authentic student engagement, between Australian tertiary institutions and with comparative sectors abroad; and
- To demonstrate the value of Student Voice Australia beyond the pilot phase as a national presence to sustain and strengthen the culture of student partnership and to support and build capacity in tertiary institutions, staff and students.

SVA Governance

The governance structure of SVA comprised of a Steering Committee and Advisory Group. Both operate within specific [terms of reference](#).

The aim of the SVA Steering Committee is to ensure successful delivery of the project, inclusive of maximising the benefits to the participating institutions and sector from the Pilot. The Steering Committee is composed of three senior staff representatives and three student representatives from different participating institutions and is chaired by Sally Varnham.

The aim of the SVA Advisory Group is to inform successful delivery of project activities including maximising the benefits to the participating institutions.

The Advisory Group includes at least one staff and student representative from each participating institution as well as representation from each of the national student associations (NUS, CAPA, NATSIPA, CISA, UATSIS) and TEQSA.

The SVA Advisory Group met twice in Sydney (31 January and 20 May). A separate day (1 February) was also organised for student members of the Advisory Group following the January meeting to allow students to better acquaint themselves, learn more about SVA and commence initial planning for the Student Summit.

SVA Activities

Institutional Strategic Analysis Workshops

Over 250 staff and students took part in an Institutional Strategic Analysis Workshop (ISAW) at their institution as part of the SVA Pilot. A workshop was offered to each of the Pilot institutions to provide an opportunity for students and staff at all levels to come together. The aim of each workshop was to discuss what partnership looks like within their specific setting and to explore opportunities to develop their approach and current practice. Seven Pilot institutions ran an ISAW, two institutions ran modified versions of an ISAW and one institution did not opt for a workshop to be delivered.

Each day-long workshop was structured to be interactive and generative – with students and staff working together to discuss concepts, share ideas and set priorities for a way ahead. These workshops were also a chance for institutions to map out current student engagement initiatives and approaches already in place and explore different motivations for working in partnership – both as individuals and as a broader institution. Through the deployment of a range of activities each institution (the staff and students present) generated a number of key themes for future development within their own institution based on where they identified gaps or opportunities to build their practice. SVA used a number of tools to identify good practice – including the [STEPUP Principles](#) (see page 11) and the student engagement continuum (see page 11). The latter is an adapted community development model from the IAP2 Institute, this model translates well for common student engagement processes within institutions by demonstrating the difference between informing, consulting, involving, partnering and student control.

The following themes were most commonly identified as needing further development across all institutions where a workshop was delivered:

Key themes for development across institutions:

1. Communication
 - Improving transparency and access of information shared across the institution (management/staff/students).
 - Communicating opportunities (both formal and informal) for students to engage in governance processes and decision making.
2. Feedback
 - Closing the feedback loop – demonstrating what happened (or didn't happen) in response to feedback.
 - Providing timely responses.

3. Diversity & Inclusivity
 - Engaging different student cohorts in governance and decision making activities and increasing the diversity of student reps.
 - Varying opportunities for students and staff to work in partnership or participate in decision making processes.
4. Training for student representatives
 - Ensuring all student reps receive training relevant to their roles.
 - Encouraging handovers between reps to maintain institutional knowledge and smooth the transition between student reps.
5. Developing authentic partnership practice
 - Building a culture of partnership across the institution.
 - Creating structures, processes and support to enable effective student representation.
 - Generating a shared understanding of partnership.
6. Staff Training and Professional Development
 - Developing an understanding and practice of working in partnership with students.
 - Assisting staff to provide support for student representatives in their roles.

Student Voice Summit

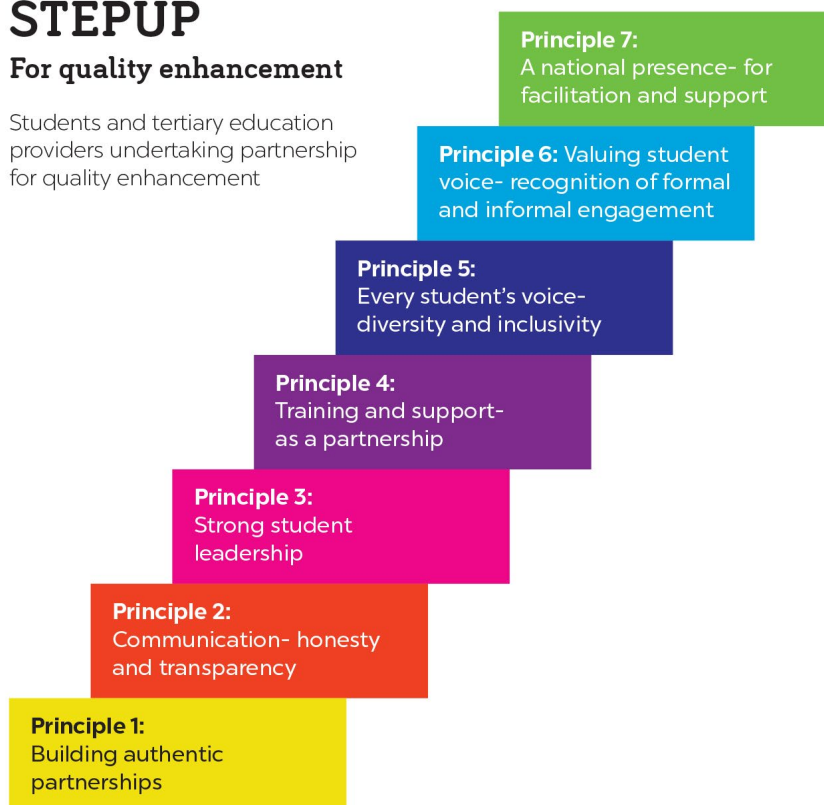
On 21 May 2019, over 100 students from 26 tertiary institutions attended the Student Voice Summit at the University of Technology Sydney. This one-day student only event enabled students to come together to share and develop their ideas of what effective student representation and engagement looks like to them. With an emphasis on exploring partnership approaches, students worked through the associated benefits, challenges and opportunities when working in partnership and how this is reflected within their own institutions.

A particular focal point for the Summit was on how to broaden opportunities for participation and ensure that a diverse range of students can engage and be heard. Drawing on the day's activities, the Summit concluded with students working together to develop their 'terms of engagement' for enabling and growing successful student staff partnerships.

STEPUP

For quality enhancement

Students and tertiary education providers undertaking partnership for quality enhancement



STEPUP Principles, Varnham & Cahill, 2017

| | INFORM | CONSULT | INVOLVE | PARTNER | CONTROL |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | | | | | |
| GOAL | To provide students with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and solutions. | To obtain student feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions. | To work directly with students throughout the process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood. | To partner with students in each aspect of the initiative from identification to solution. | Students design and lead initiatives that matter to them and are in control of final decision-making. |
| STYLE | "Here's what's happening." | "Here are some options, what do you think?" | "Here's a problem, what ideas do you have?" | "Let's identify the issues and work together to develop a plan and implement a solution." | "You care about this issue and are leading an initiative, how can we support you?" |

Adapted by Student Voice Australia from © International Association for Public Participation Spectrum of Public Participation www.iap2.org

Practitioner Network

The cross-institutional Practitioner Network was established early in the Pilot. The purpose of the network is to connect staff who have roles working or managing student-staff partnership development or work with student representatives within their institution. With the practitioner experience in mind, the network is designed for staff to share good practice, discuss national issues, and provide collegial support and guidance. At this stage of its development it operates exclusively via an online platform.

The network has met five times and has involved more than 20 staff from 17 institutions. The main themes for meetings have been:

1. Partnering with student organisations to achieve successful representation and engagement;
2. Engaging online/off campus students in shaping the quality of learning and teaching and the student experience;
3. Changing staff perceptions of student representation at the University of Queensland;
4. What does student partnership look like in your institution? How does student representation fit within a framework of partnership?; and
5. Implementing and reviewing the Students as Partners Governance Structure at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

SVA Symposium

Over 100 students, academics, professional staff and leaders from 28 tertiary institutions, national agencies and national student bodies from both Australia and New Zealand attended the Student Voice Australia Symposium on October 11 2019 at the University of Technology Sydney.

The Symposium was an opportunity to showcase the achievements of the SVA Pilot project and to further explore good practice in working in partnership with students. The program also provided space to openly and honestly examine some of the challenges associated with working in partnership in order to better understand how students and staff can collaborate more effectively.

Working groups and the Development of Good Practice Guidelines

By the end of the year, SVA will publish a set of Good Practice Guidelines around the following themes:

1. Student Partnership Agreements (developing SPAs within institutions)
2. Student Representative Structures (supporting student representation at all levels of an institution)

3. Training for student representatives (supporting students to participate professionally and effectively in decision making and governance processes)

The Guidelines are intended to support institutions to build a culture of authentic student engagement within an Australian context.

SVA is also benchmarking the STEPUP principles to provide guidance on where institution can grow their practice (see where they are doing well and where they might need to develop further).

The Good Practice Guidelines were developed by the working groups made up of staff and students from Pilot institutions. Working groups were established mid-way through the Pilot to provide institutions with the opportunity to engage in more detail with a particular area of interest and work in collaboration with other institutions who share this interest. Each Pilot institution was asked to pick a theme to work collaboratively on over 2019 (with each working group co-lead by a staff and student member). The aim being to co-create the Good Practice Guidelines and accompanying resources, ensuring that they are suitable for a diverse sector. The Guidelines and associated resources will be available on the SVA website at the conclusion of the Pilot and, as such, are not a part of this evaluation.

Methodology

This evaluation was undertaken as a collaborative project between SVA and TAASE. This study rejects traditional, exclusionary and non-collaborative approaches where the evaluation process is controlled by external researchers. Instead, this evaluation blended practitioner and evaluator roles, while ensuring that protocols were in place to ensure appropriate levels of protection, confidentiality and anonymity for participants (see Cousin & Whitmore, 1998).

The approach is also enabling. Evaluations are expensive and require specific skills that can be burdensome for small organisations. By partnering with TAASE, SVA were able to recruit specific evaluation skills and analysis that could then be blended with their own knowledge and expertise.

Participatory evaluation

This project employed a participatory evaluation approach. It is methodology that is informed by participatory action research, where there is

a genuine commitment to the emancipatory potential of “cooperative inquiry” (King, 2007, p. 84). This is an acknowledgement that stakeholders, participants and the researchers are all experts and offer genuine and varied expertise.

This inclusive understanding of expertise builds capacity, reinterprets the ‘evaluator role’, improves evaluation design, and supports negotiated decision making, data collection, analysis and reporting (O’Sullivan, 2012). Indeed, when developing research instruments or examining data an external and removed evaluator will have a limited understanding of the evaluation context (Lusky & Hayes, 2001).

For this evaluation it meant that *deep* participation, control of the work and interpretation was a shared prospect (Cousin & Whitmore, 1998; King, 2007). The process was one of active and ongoing iterations, with co- design and co-analysis defining the working relationship between SVA and TAASE (see Lusky & Hayes, 2001; O’Sullivan, 2012).

Finally, participatory evaluation improves the *utilisation of findings*, as there is an informed and contextual balance between rigour, practical application and a sense of ownership by stakeholders (Ayers, 1987). It is an inclusive methodological approach that democratises input, expertise and authorship.

Project team

The project team drew together external researchers, the SVA project manager and two members of the SVA Advisory Group:

- Prof Ian Goodwin-Smith, Director, TAASE, University of South Australia. (*Author*)
- Dr Jonathon Louth, Research Fellow, TAASE, University of South Australia. (*Author*)
- Ms Kate Walsh, Project Manager, Student Voice Australia. (*Author*)
- Ms Angela Griffin (student), SVA Advisory Group, University of New South Wales.
- Dr Alison Jaquet (staff), SVA Advisory Group, University of Sunshine Coast.

The final document was then presented to the SVA Steering Group at a special meeting in Adelaide to review and co-develop the final set of recommendations to ensure that they are realisable and actionable.

Methods

A mixed method approach of surveys and focus groups were employed for this evaluation. As per participatory evaluation methodology, the

surveys and focus group protocol were iteratively co-designed by TAASE and SVA project team members.

Institutional survey:

This survey asked for a single response from tertiary institutions and relevant national agencies from across the sector. These responses were not anonymised. The survey was constructed with questions specifically for the 10 Pilot institutions and a series of general questions aimed at the sector more broadly.

Participant survey:

This was an anonymous survey that sought input from any staff or students who had taken part in SVA events or activities. An information sheet that explained the project was emailed to SVA participants. The survey was accessed via an electronic link that landed on a survey consent page. Clicking on the ‘start survey’ button was considered consent. This was an anonymous survey with no names recorded.³ The anonymised and aggregated data was shared with all project team members for analysis.

Focus groups:

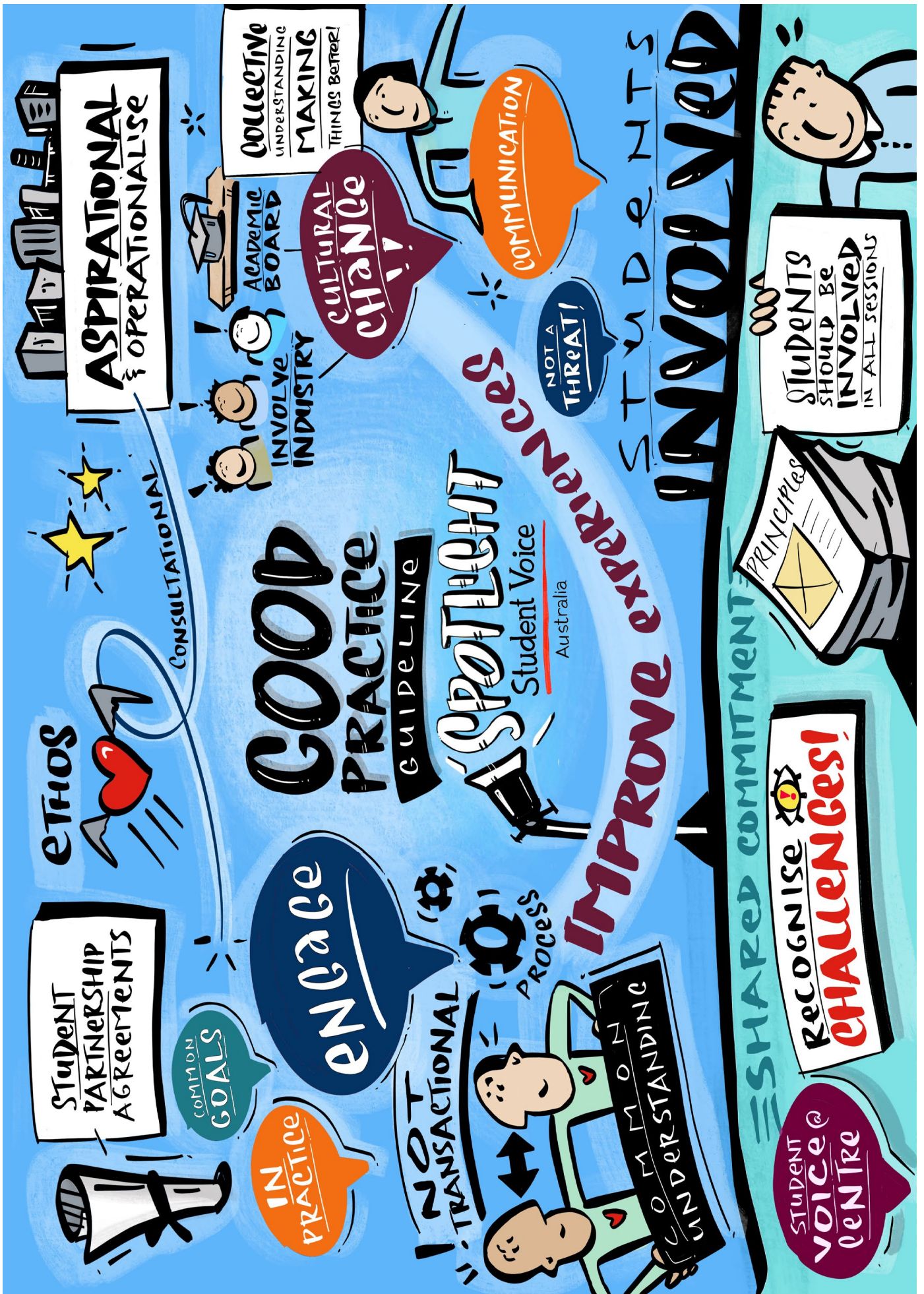
Two focus groups were conducted at the University of Technology Sydney on 10 October 2019 (prior to the SVA Symposium). The focus groups consisted of SVA Advisory Group members. In order to diminish any power relations and to garner alternative points of view, staff and student members were invited to take part in separate focus groups.

For reasons of confidentiality, only the TAASE researchers had access to the raw data from the focus groups. All focus group contributions have been de-identified; however, participants were made aware that confidentiality could not be guaranteed due to the nature of focus groups and the cohort size.

Ethics

The evaluation project was assessed as negligible risk by the University of South Australia’s Business School Ethics committee (protocol no: 40/2019).

³ As a thank you for time and effort given, all individuals who completed the participant survey were eligible to go into the running to win one of four \$50 cash cards (allocated through a random draw).



Findings and Discussion

Participant Survey

Participants (staff and students) in any SVA Pilot activity (Institutional Analysis Workshop, Practitioner Network, Student Voice Summit, etc.) were invited to complete an online survey to ascertain their views and experiences of the Pilot and ideas for future SVA models.

There was a significant response rate to the survey with 80 responders and an overall completion rate of 79%. Seventy-seven of the responders affiliated with a university, with the remaining three identifying a representative body as their primary affiliation. Among responders there was a significant youth cohort (30% within the 18-24 age bracket), with a relatively even distribution across all other ages, except the 54-65 bracket (5%). Fifty-six of the responders were female, 23 were male, and one non-binary. Two responders were

Indigenous (2.5%). Thirty-six (45%) were students, with eight identifying as postgraduate and five as international students.

The survey responders were drawn from a broad cross-section within institutions. Figure 1 shows a high level of participation from professional staff, but with a healthy and proportional involvement from senior staff. Student representatives were also highly represented, outnumbering those who identified as a student only.

The participants were overwhelmingly positive when asked about the benefit of being involved with the Pilot. This was irrespective of whether their response reflected institutional or individual involvement, with the findings showing that:

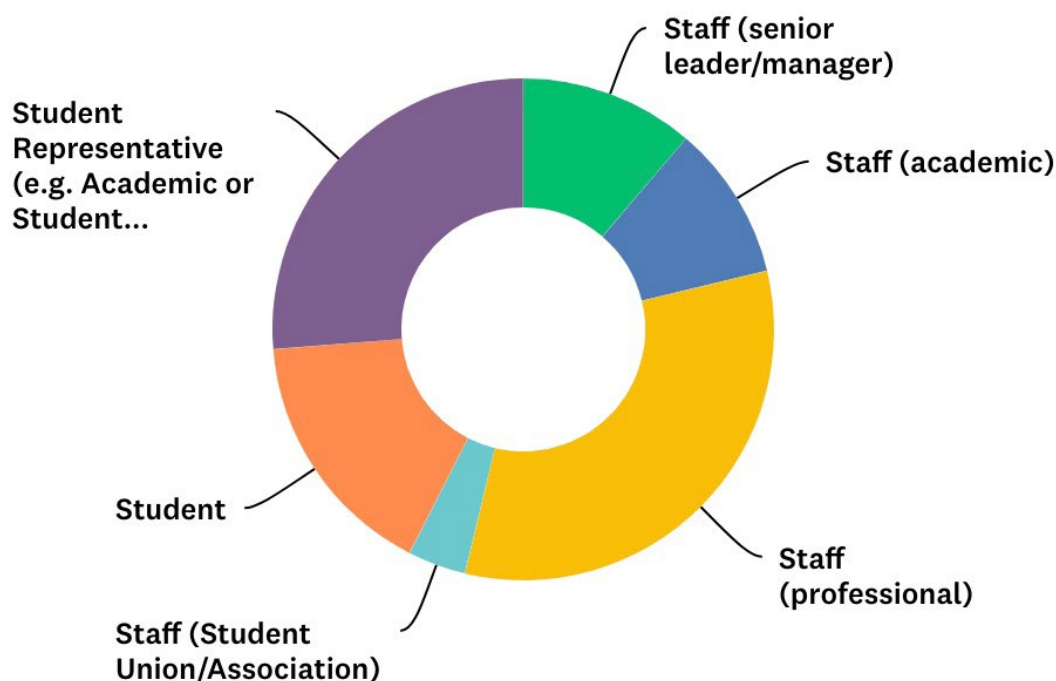


Figure 1: Participant role or position

- **Over 80%** felt that they had benefited from being involved (with less than 5% disagreeing);
- **Over 72%** thought that their institution benefited from their involvement (with a disagreement rate of just over 3%);
- **60% of responders** indicated that students (other than themselves if already a student) benefited from the Pilot (with a high neutral vote and with disagrees at just over 3%);
- **Nearly 82%** of responders strongly agreed or agreed that the student summit should be held every year (with only 3% disagree); and
- **Over 92%** of responders strongly agreed or agreed that their institution would benefit from ongoing or future involvement with SVA (see Figure 2).

It is worth noting that not a single 'strongly disagree' result was recorded in the above results.⁴

Respondents had interacted across a breadth of the Pilot activities, with the highest level of participation on the Strategic Analysis Workshops. The summit (given this was predominantly a student only event) and the symposium also scored highly. Importantly, there was also a high engagement rate from Advisory Group members. The Practitioner Network, while a small cohort, produced rich data and revealed a high level of enthusiasm.

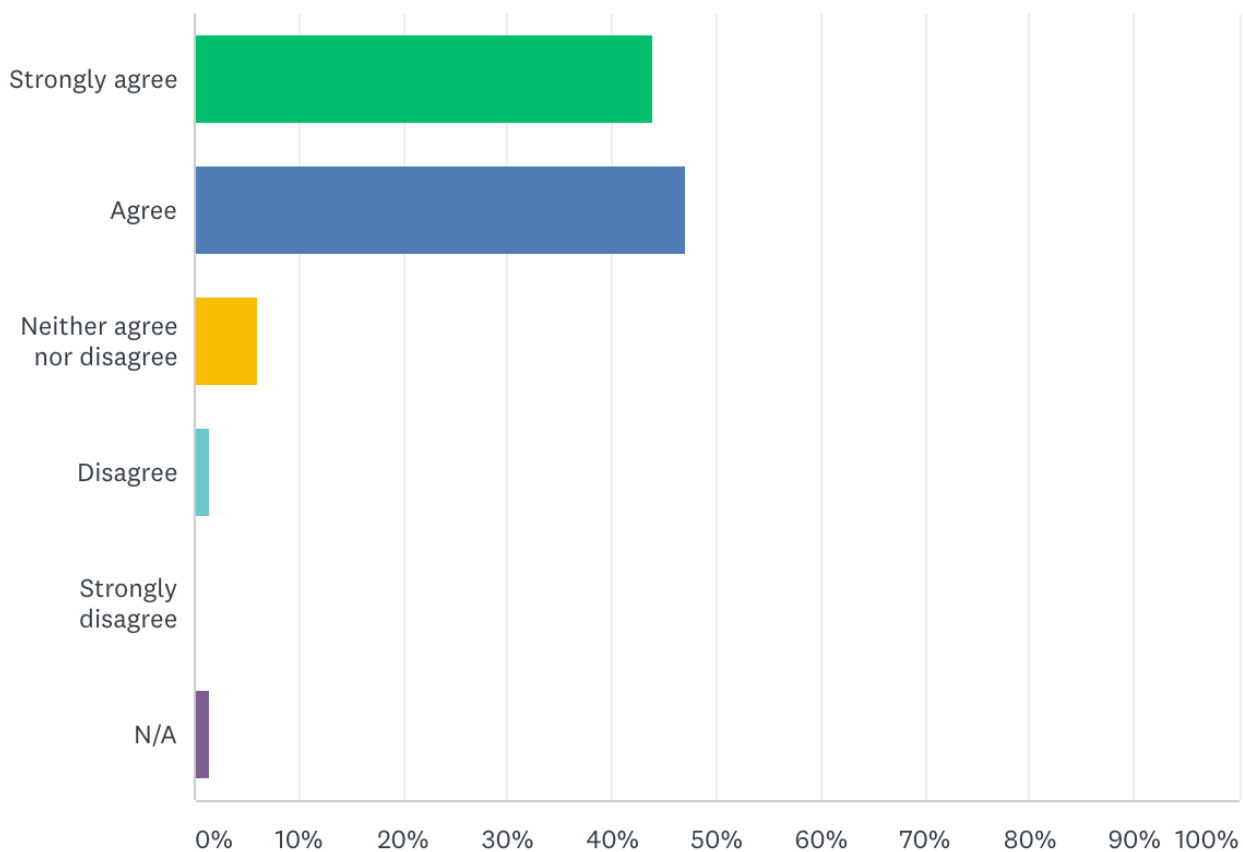


Figure 2: Would your institution benefit from future and/or continued involvement with SVA?

⁴ All N/A results were removed from the percentage calculations.

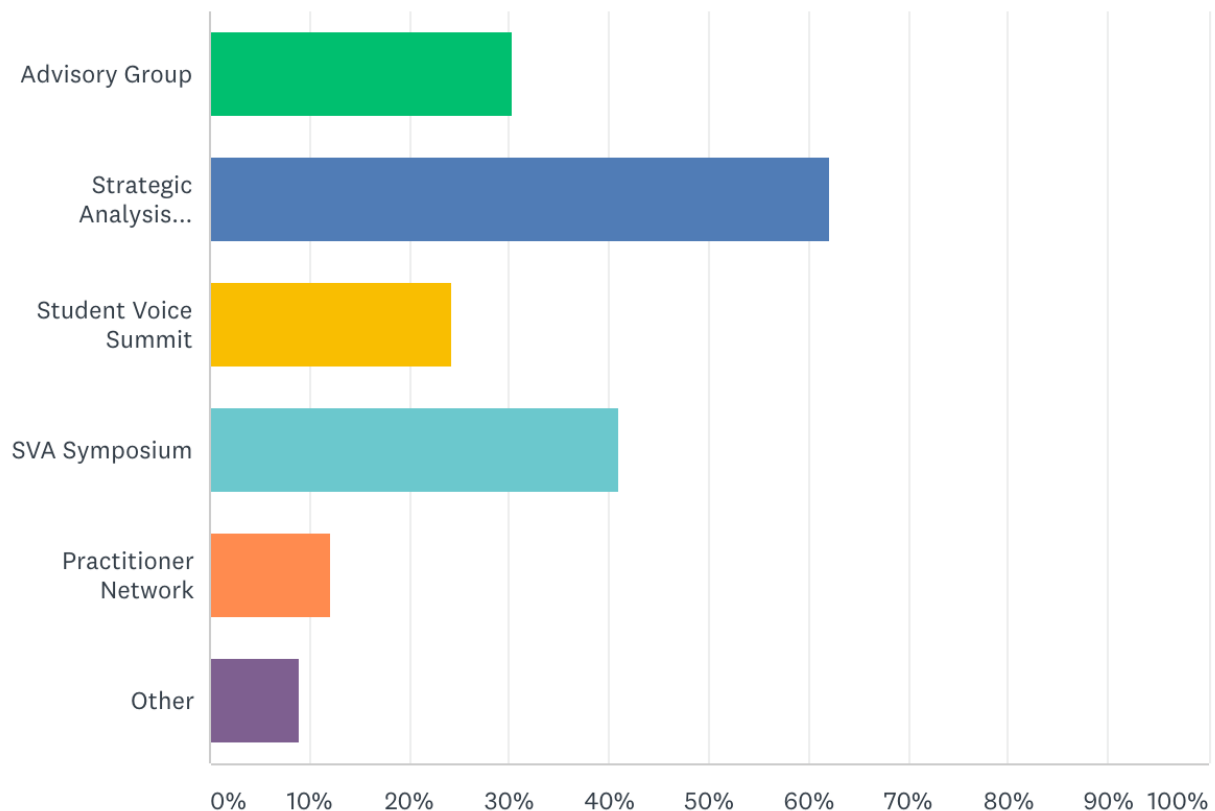


Figure 3: SVA activities that participants took part in

Institutional Strategic Analysis Workshops

Thirty-eight of the responders had taken part in a workshop, with the majority (nearly 84%) indicating that they had identified gaps and opportunities to develop partnership opportunities with their institutions as a direct flow-on from taking part in the workshops (see Figure 4). There was a nil response rate in the negative to this proposition.

Participants provided a range of examples around identified gaps, with the key themes being:

- Students representatives are not representative enough of the whole student body;
- That there is a lack of training for student representatives;
- 'Consultation' often occurs after the fact or as a tick box exercise;
- Students often feel silenced by staff even when invited to participate;
- One responder felt that the workshops revealed a "culture of mutual mistrust between student representative organisations"; and
- That the 'student experience' is viewed differently depending on whether you are staff or student.

One respondent captured the link between the identification of gaps and then shifting to an opportunity mindset. Their response following the analysis workshop and having identified gaps was to:

1. consolidate authentic student partnership through developing a framework for implementation and start by identifying the good practices already existing.
2. increasing presence of student representation throughout all levels of the university
3. Strengthening equity by deliberate focus on diversity and inclusion.

Focusing on opportunities that emerged, the following key themes can be surmised:

- Understanding how to activate genuine and authentic consultation;
- The need to put in place strategies to improve the student voice in projects and decision making;
- The importance of co-design (especially from the beginning of the process); and
- That institutions need to communicate better, including the promotion of university wide support services.

The issue that follows any successful intervention around identifying gaps and opportunities is the 'what next?' question. Thirty percent of the respondents were aware of post-workshop priorities, with the predominant response being the setting up or enhancement of university working. Indeed, there were two outstanding responses that identified changes put in place as a result of SVA activities:

Establishing student consultation groups, led by students. Seeking timely student feedback (rather than as a last minute action), student survey results have been taken into consideration with equal weight to requests from staff in terms of university infrastructure, projects and retail strategy.

Raising awareness of partnership initiatives with college executive; ensuring appropriate representation at all levels of governance; raising academics' awareness of partnership initiatives so students have more 'visibility' of the programs.

right: SVA Analysis Workshop in progress



However, Figure 5 identifies a high level of uncertainty around what occurred in majority of the institutions following the workshops. With nearly 50% not knowing what happened in the post workshop environment indicates that further work is required to support and sustain the momentum that is fostered through SVA activities. Coordination, communication, additional resources and support, both within institutions and by SVA, should be explored.

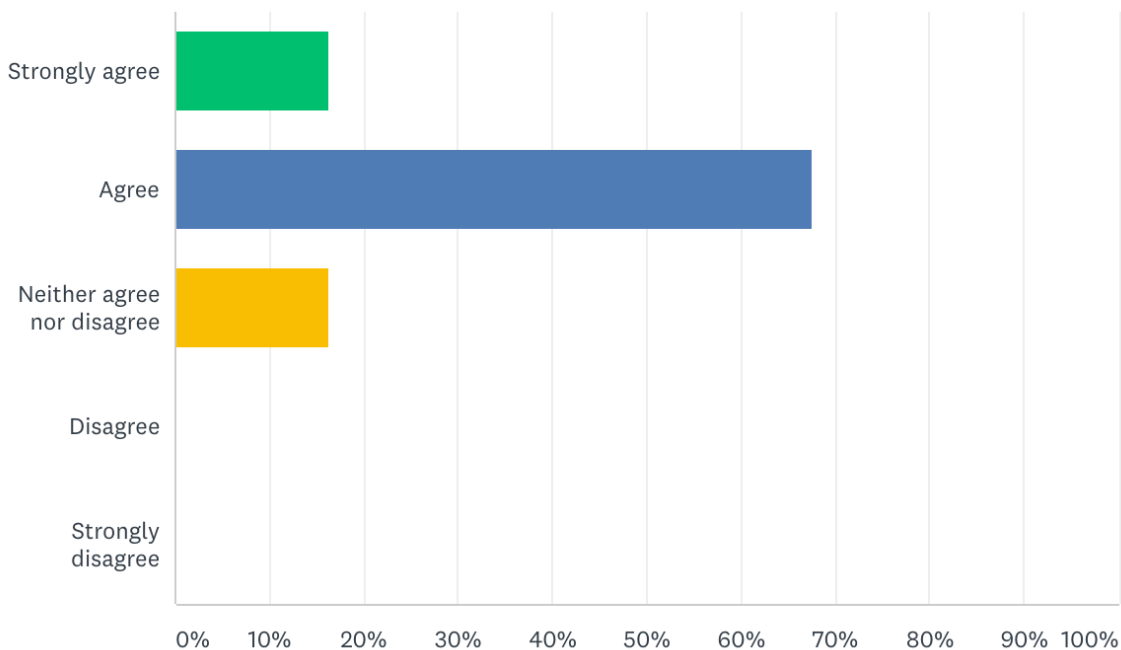


Figure 4: Did the analysis workshop identify gaps and opportunities to increase student voice and develop student partnership approaches within the institution?

The workshop helped staff identify that although students may be involved in what the university deemed 'consultation', they rarely had a voice if staff were present and dominant in the discussion. Key staff at my institution were influenced by this notion, and have since put actions in place to improve the student voice in projects and decision making.

Staff, participant survey

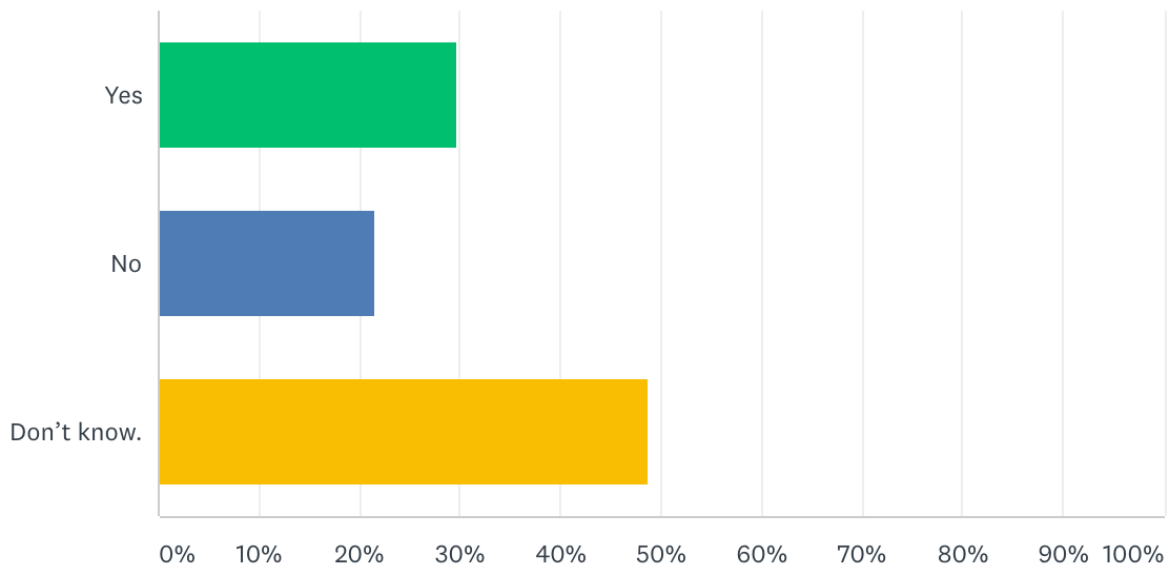


Figure 5: Did your institution put in place any follow-ups on the priorities for action identified in the analysis workshop?

Practitioner network

This part of the survey was directed at staff who had taken part in the practitioner network. While there was only a small number of respondents, the results were indicative of a successfully run SVA activity.

Practitioners reported the importance of the network to discuss what worked and did not work within their own institutions. With a focus on governance and decision making in this collegial space, the ability to “reflect on our own practices with different contexts in mind” and to support a diverse range of student cohorts was a recurring theme. Moreover, the network was considered invaluable and central to any cultural shift to energise and enhance authentic student engagement and partnerships.

Being able to hear from those people on the ground and in similar roles was invaluable. It was reassuring that we're doing some things well, and informative about how to do better where we have gaps.

Staff, participant survey

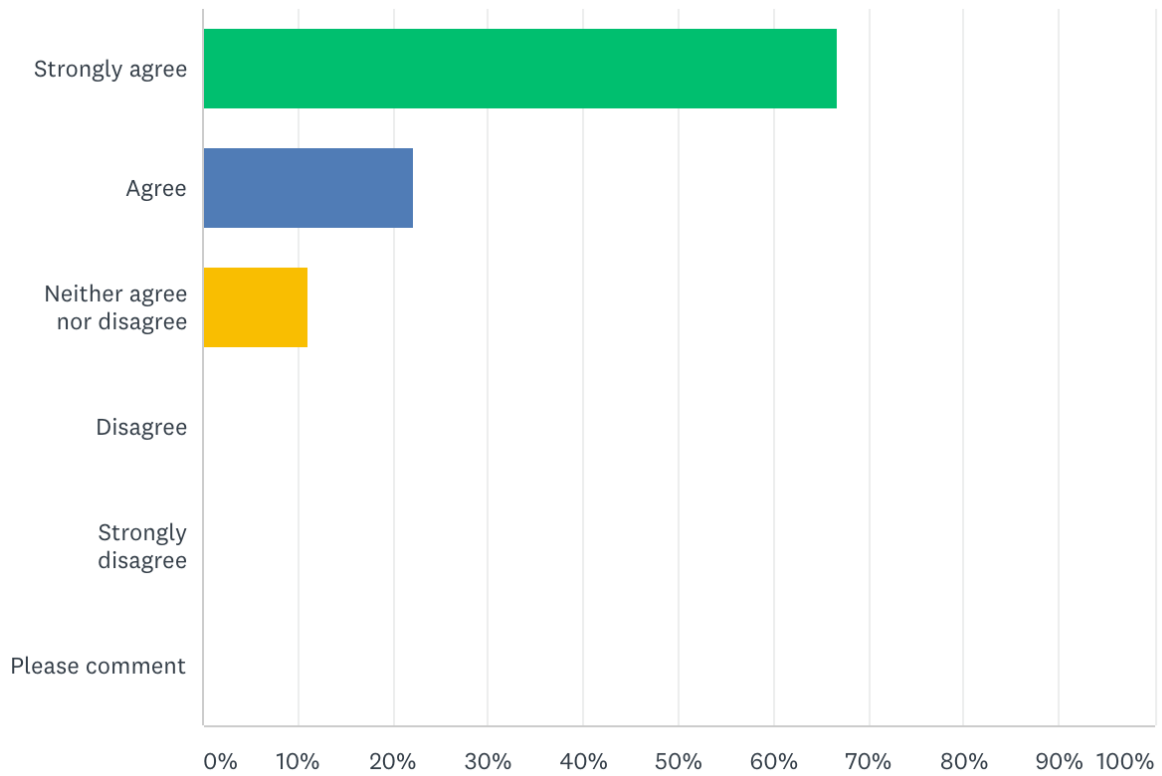


Figure 6: Did you find the practitioner network beneficial?

Cultural change

Outside of the Practitioner Network, the response to networking opportunities and sharing good practice was a little more varied. Figure 7 asked all participants about the opportunities provided by

SVA to share knowledge and good practice, while there was a 67% agreement that opportunities were made possible because of SVA (with an 8% disagree result), the noncommittal result was much higher.

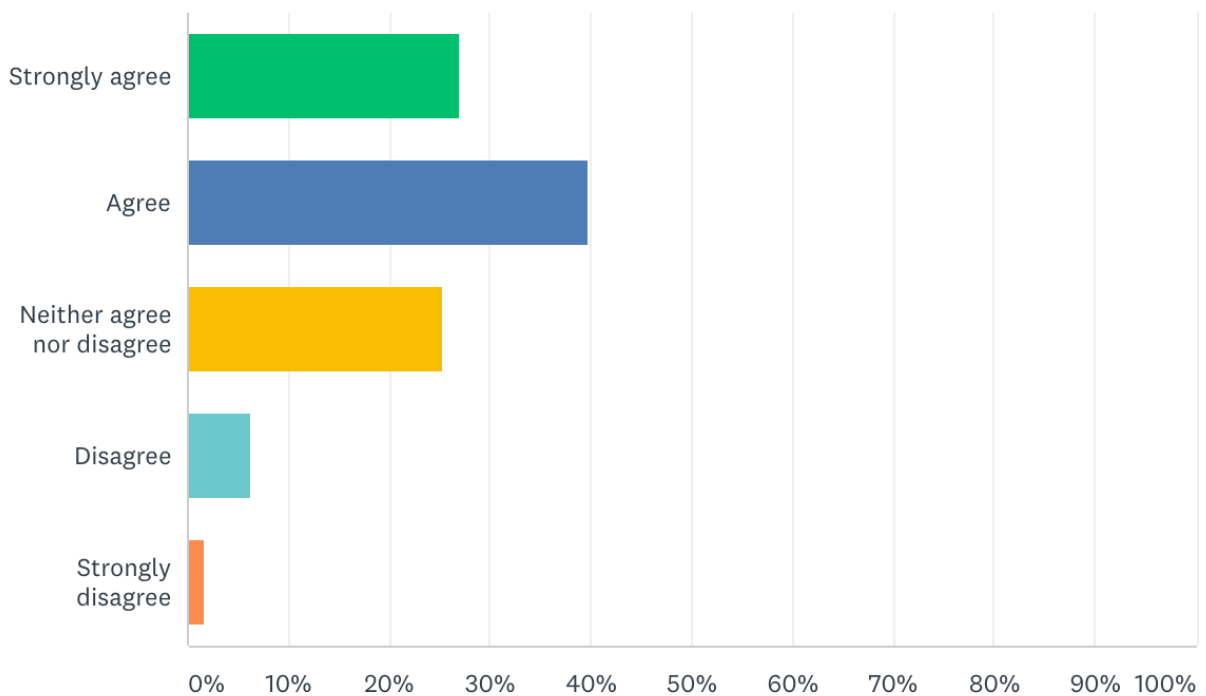


Figure 7: Has SVA provided an opportunity for you to network, share knowledge and good practice in authentic student engagement and student partnership practice?

A rich theme that emerged among respondent comments was the importance of being able to connect and share, with the need to overcome isolation and to collaborate regularly mentioned. The importance of working together and aiming for common goals was noted, but the issue of institutional size and the varied experience between urban and regional settings were also raised. As one respondent expressed, student partnership should not be approached “through a ‘one-size-fits-all’ lens” and that “sustainable changes” requires an engagement with the student voice in each unique setting.

This noted need to connect and share was very much linked to establishing, building upon or changing the culture of student partnership. Figure 8 identifies participant views of this within their own institutions (65% positive, 18% neutral, 17% negative) revealing that there remains room for improvement (and that student partnership is not a static process). Some student participants noted that there is a “a long road ahead” for authentic partnership and that there continued to be a division between students and staff. Co-developing shared outcomes and goals was noted as an important approach to “equalising” staff-student relations. Indeed, this reflected students and staff comments around the need for whole of institution approaches to partnership, where partnering occurs ‘all the way down’.

When asked how SVA could strengthen and sustain a culture of student engagement through partnership within institutions and across the sector, participants focused on communication, the sharing of data and experiences between institutions, administration support, and enhanced networking opportunities for staff and students (inclusive of SVA events). Comments included:

Send out more communications about the events and the SVA as a whole to broaden the awareness and increase participation with more universities Australia-wide.

...gaining momentum through a regular annual symposiums will sustain a culture of student engagement and awareness across institutions and with other providers.

Sustained authentic dialogue with students to get their voice on how they think they should be engaged.

The other recurring theme was how to effectively deal with the high turnover of student representatives. This is a perennial issue and one that requires serious consideration.

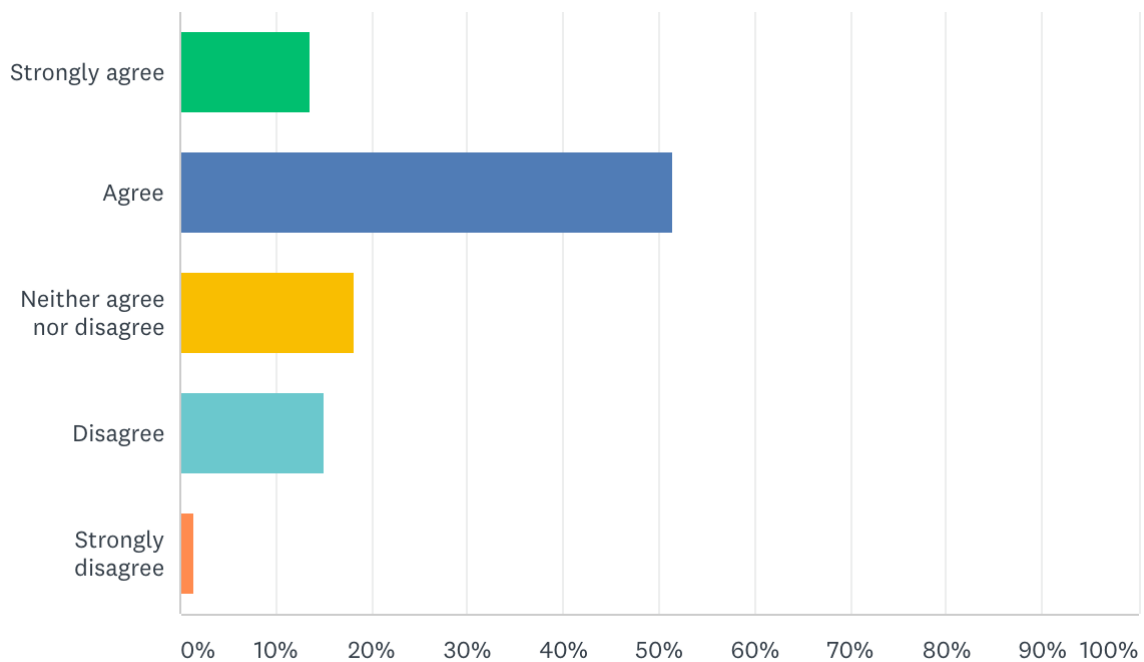


Figure 8: Do you believe that your home institution values student voices and actively encourages a culture of student partnership?

I think it's important to note that effective partnership (especially in decision-making and governance), can have different forms. I think the way metropolitan universities approach their student representation is very different from the way regional universities do so. As such, it was really useful to connect with other regional universities at the forums to share ideas and issues.

Student representative, participant survey

Obstacles and concerns

Given the broad remit, the diversity of stakeholders and resourcing levels, it is unsurprising that some obstacles and concerns were raised by participants. A small number of themes and isolated comments emerged that are worthy of mention:

- Staff frustration that institutional leadership were not necessarily genuine in their engagement practices. Attached to this were issues around workload and transparency;
- Frustration with communication within the cross institutional working groups;
- The need to strengthen alignment with existing internal institutional partnerships initiatives. With one participant feeling that to not do so potentially undermines the “value proposition” of being a Pilot participant.
- Concerns that SVA and partner institutions did not engage sufficiently with the wider student body. References were made to need to reach out to the ‘average’ student and for there to be a more diverse cohort of students involved.
- That partnership approaches could displace traditional (and independent) student representative systems (i.e. student unions and associations).

Interestingly, the points raised can be viewed as a microcosm of the relationships *between* SVA stakeholders. While important to stress that these comments are a minority position, they reflect tensions that are sometimes evident between the expectations of senior staff, staff, students and student representatives. Of course, this is circle that is not easily squared, however, very notion of partnership is how to best navigate, mitigate and collaborate around such tensions. As a pilot study, these are important factors for consideration moving forward.

Ensure that student associations and unions are actively involved in all partnerships, and provide resources on how to effectively do this. There is a real risk of institutions side-stepping established student representation structures, and it would be far preferable to build resources, training and models that build on what already exists within associations and unions.

Student representative, participant survey

Work with more than just student council and club reps. “Average” students are the ones that need to be engaged.

Student representative, participant survey

Focus groups

Two separate focus groups gave additional qualitative depth. They also provided an important link between the two surveys, with the focus group participants derived exclusively from the Advisory Group. The first focus group was composed of 7 staff members and the second was a group of 9 student members. This division allowed for the unique experience of the two cohorts to emerge.

A number of themes (in bold below) emerged, but the clear point of difference between the two groups was that staff were far more concerned with *outputs* and *deliverables* (with particular attention on the GPGs to directly inform best practice). Students, however, were far more interested on the *process*. This is an important point. Process is about developing relationships to drive cultural change, while outputs are about what has been done and do not necessarily require an investment in the building of relationships that authentically aim to develop inclusive partnership arrangements.

In respect to the **nature and role of partnership** it was broadly understood as a change in process and culture and that it needs to be reflected through the governance lifecycle. Within the staff group there was a more procedural (but not entirely) and results based approach to getting students on to committee and boards:

We're trying to embed a culture of partnership as much as possible... equality between the members on our governance committees and the students who are representing our student body on our governance committees, and including them in decision making from the ground up.

For students, process emerged as the central consideration. Partnership was seen as more than engagement and was about respecting the student voice:

For me, I think student partnership is going beyond that cursory consultation and working in a direct and meaningful collaboration. And so when you're looking at governance structures, it's making sure that the students aren't just a tick box, but their voices heard and also listened to. Students should be involved as actual partners from the inception of an idea or a change as opposed to just being brought in to approve it at the end.

As to **how well it is done** there was some convergence between the two groups where some

students felt that partnership is often tokenistic and applied in non-controversial situations where "the cogs are already in motion". Likewise, within the staff group, the concern of wondering "how much co creation is actually happening" was raised. There was also concern by students that delay tactics could be part of an anti-consulting strategy because their "tenure is so short."

There was some divergence around student union/ association representatives, whom some in the staff focus group expressed concerns that they were not legitimately representative of the broader student population. While in the student group there was a sense that some staff or institutions have a fear of dissent or student backlash, which can be in the view of one student: "incredibly stifling to a strong and legitimate partnership".

This speaks to the **motivation** of why institutions are involved in the project. Within the student group there was a query as to whether the commitment to SVA reflected a desire to manage or enable the student voice. While acknowledging the complexity of the situation, the staff group were more circumspect and viewed institutional involvement more positively, but with some reservations:

I do think that the motivating factor for the senior executive is that it will result in genuinely better outcomes for students that it's not a cynical brand exercise or a tick box exercise, I do think that they are committed to a better student experience as the result of student inclusion. But I wonder, you know, what would it look like if students were actually genuinely in an equal power sharing relationship with other decision makers at this organisation.

In respect to **SVA success factors**, the focus on champions was significant, but also double edged. Executive level champions were viewed as vital, but with the requirement to also be available. Communication and training of staff and students were thought to be the building blocks of cultural change to broaden the number of and support further than champions. But as one staff member pointed out it has to extend beyond champions into a whole of institutional understanding that works through all levels and meaningfully engages with cultures of resistance:

Remember also, we're talking about big, complex institutions as well ... and I think, how you get that structural ... change, and, and the cultural change ... it's complex stuff. So having one champion in your organization, it's great, and it's a start, but how you move to

the next level of having this across your institution, and embedded it's ... a challenge, because you've got to get right down to the grassroots level. And there's some people that are just not on board, they're resistant.

Additionally, for the staff group, having an office with 'student voice' or 'student participation' in its title is a vital institutional bridge between championship and action. This signifies a resources and funding opportunity and one that can be aligned with any future SVA model (see recommendation 8). An important caveat stemming from the student group is that these structures and processes must not reproduce a 'students as customers' worldview, which the group saw as the antithesis of genuine partnership.

With the **Pilot experience** a few points can be noted from the two groups

Staff focus group:

- Staff noted that the Pilot has been enabling, but it has been an "edge of desk project" that is not factored into workload distribution.
- SVA has "been one mechanism for drawing academics into a conversation around governance and decision making rather than curriculum."
- The strategic analysis workshops did start conversations about student engagement and did empower students in that conversation.
- The workshops also provided a permissioning space to discuss the issue and enforced some collaboration.

Student focus group:

- SVA membership was seen as a sign of commitment to students. However, some institutions stepped away from the process.
- SVA membership provided "a bit of ammunition" when conversations about student voice were not being listened to.
- Analysis workshops were valued as catalytic conversations that contributed to a capacity building process.
- Workshops in some institutions suffered from not having decision makers in the room. Additionally, follow-ups were sometimes lacking.

The final theme was around **possible futures** and is integrated into the Looking Forward section below

It will take some time to change the whole thing ... so we can't expect to change things from one day to another, but rather to take small steps and let it flourish.

Student
focus group
participant

Workshops planted a seed and started a conversation about the fact that We're not as good as we think we are ... in terms of student voice.

Student
focus group
participant

ACCOUNTABILITY

REAL CONSULTATION! INDEPENDENCE

POWER? DATA SOURCES

RESPECT OUR SAY?

HEALTHY CONFLICT IS NECESSARY!

OUT OF OTHER STUDENTS

ACADEMICS

LIFE BLOOD! STUDENTS

REDUCE JARGON IT'S ISOLATING!

NETWORK

50% STUDENTS

RESOURCES RESTRICTIONS...

A INCREASE ACADEMIC STAFF

IMPARTIAL?

WELL EQUIPPED!

CALLY PEOPLE

YOU CAN'T ASK THAT!

STAFF TO RESPECT STUDENTS

WE CARE

WE CAN REPRESENT ALL!

WE ARE ALL ORDINARY!

DIVERSITY

SHOW UP! OFFICIAL REPS BE PAID?

ADD VALUE

ACCOUNTABILITY WON'T ATTRACT WRONG STUDENTS.

ADD QUALITY - SUSTAINABLE

FOR EFFECTIVE FOCUS

IT'S A LONG GAME... LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

REACH OUT

Student Voice

Australia

DEMOCRACY... TOGETHER!

WORK

W+W+W+W

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Institutional survey

Senior leadership (DVC level) were sent a link asking them to co-ordinate the completion of the survey on behalf of their institution. This survey sought *institutional level* views about the SVA Pilot project to ascertain views of the institutional experience and what a future SVA model might look like. Only one response was requested per institution. The survey targeted institutions that have directly participated in the Pilot and institutions that have not. The survey was also sent to relevant national agencies.

Figure 9 differs from the participant survey respondent breakdown with a significant majority of respondents being senior staff with portfolio interest in student engagement and experience. Eight of the Pilot institutions, ten non-Pilot institutions and four national agencies completed the survey. The survey design included a section for Pilot institutions only and general section for all institutional and agency responders.

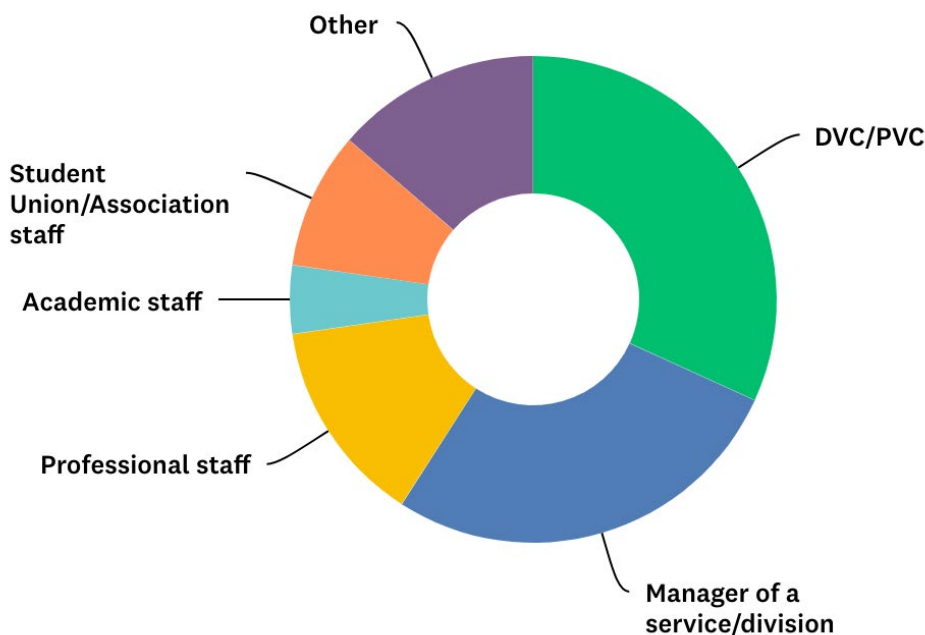


Figure 9: Designated institutional responder

| Pilot institutions (responders) | Non-Pilot institutions |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Charles Sturt University Curtin University Flinders University La Trobe University University of Adelaide University of New England University of New South Wales University of the Sunshine Coast | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central Queensland University Charles Darwin University Deakin University Federation University Australia Murdoch University Southern Cross University University of Canberra University of Newcastle University of Wollongong Western Sydney University |
| Pilot institutions (non-responders) | National agencies |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holmesglen Institute University of Technology Sydney | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduates Association National Union of Students TEQSA |

Figure 10: Partner and non-partner institutional responses

Pilot institutions

As noted, eight of the ten Pilot institutions participated in the survey. Five of the institutions agreed that their involvement contributed to changed practice, with the remaining three recording a neutral result. Six of these respondents noted that their institution had taken part in an analysis workshop. Cross-checking against SVA records, seven institutions in total took part in a workshop, with two others running modified versions, and one institution opting out of the workshop opportunity. All responders noted that their institution put in place some form of follow-up on the priorities for action identified in the analysis workshop.

Figure 11 and Figure 12 illustrate how much and where SVA materials and key learnings have been disseminated. While it is positive that the sharing of SVA resources and practices has taken place, there is clear room for improvement. Internal resourcing is an identified issue across all datasets – and this would appear to be a key area for improvements to assist with amount of and depth of dissemination. Figure 12 indicates that reaching college, faculty and departmental levels with respect to student

governance and decision making should be a point of focus going forward – in essence, there is a need to better develop whole of university approaches to better elevate, incorporate and embolden student voices.

The qualitative data (across all three research instruments) indicates that the alignment and augmenting of SVA materials to suit each unique setting are further opportunities for the future, but will likely require the deployment of additional internal resources. Similarly, the ‘what is done’ with materials or priorities for action is an area to improve both data collection and points of alignment and support, both internally and as a potential future model path for SVA.

The overall responses for the Pilot institutions indicate a genuine engagement with the Pilot. There was no disagreement that funding in and of itself reflected a commitment to strengthening student partnership in governance and decision making across the sector and not just within their own institution (see Figure 13). There was a similar response to how the Pilot has facilitated improved cross institutional cooperation (see Figure 14).

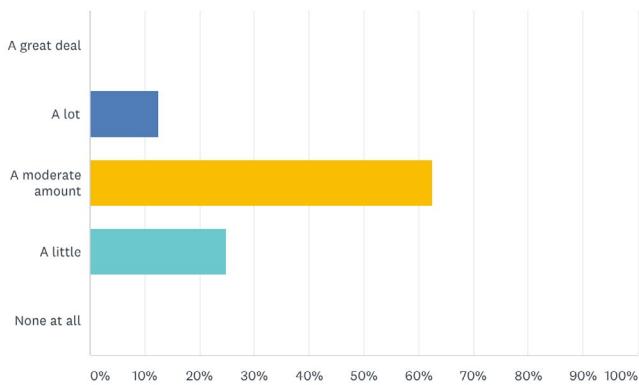


Figure 11: Have SVA materials and/or key learnings been disseminated through/across your institution?

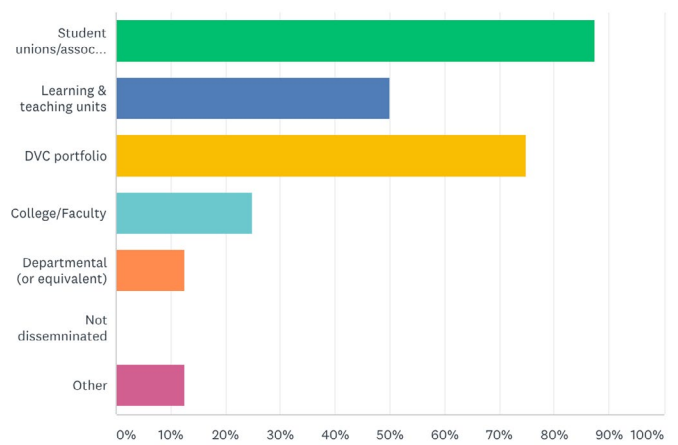


Figure 12: Where have SVA materials and learnings been disseminated through/across your institution?

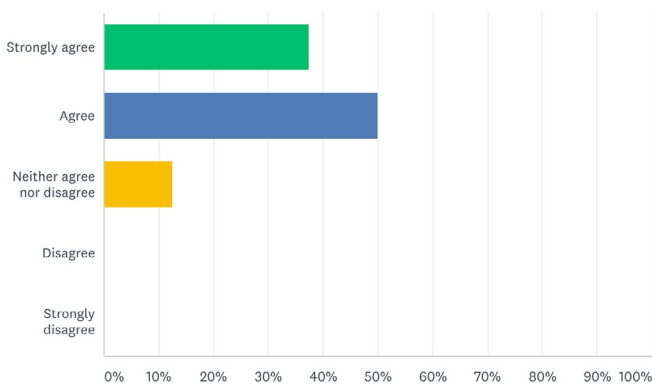


Figure 13: Does your institution's investment in SVA Pilot project reflect a commitment to strengthening student partnership in governance and decision making across the sector?

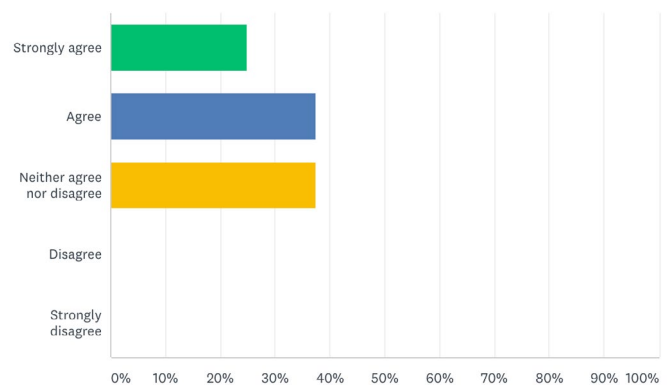


Figure 14: Has the Pilot facilitated improved cross institutional cooperation?

All institutions

Moving to all institutional survey responses, 19 of 22 had participated in an SVA event, with three don't knows. For all institutions at least of one of their students had attended an SVA event or activity. Institutions were asked to reflect on whether student informed decision making and governance was encouraged within each institutions overall student experience. Figure 15 reveals that there was no disagreement to this proposition (indeed, factoring out national agencies the agree rate was 89%).

It is unsurprising that there were no negative results. The likelihood of a designated institutional responder providing a negative response is minimal. However, the high neutral result, coupled with the 'agrees' outstripping the 'disagrees', is indicative of institutional awareness of the need to

further progress student informed decision making and governance.

Responders were also afforded the opportunity to provide examples of how students are engaged in governance and decision making. There was an impressive response rate to this question with nearly all responders indicating a range of formal decision-making structures and processes that incorporated some level of student representation (see word cloud below). This included student involvement in:

- Board of Trustees/Directors, Academic Senates and University Councils
- Faculty and department level committees
- Teaching and learning committees
- Forums and townhall meetings
- Student Advisory Councils
- Student unions/associations

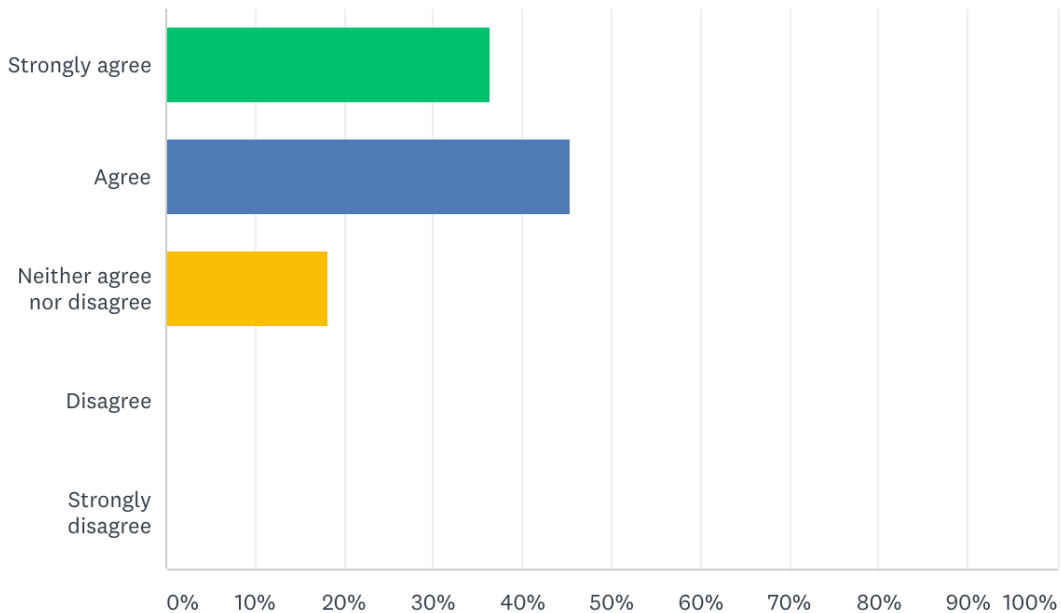


Figure 15: Is student informed decision making and governance encouraged within your institution?



There were a smaller number of institutions that sought the student voice through focus groups, working groups, project teams, subject or course governance and ongoing student consultative processes. That students are engaged in governance, quality assurance activities, and decision making processes is without question. The effectiveness, inclusivity and authenticity of an engagement that lends itself to genuine partnership is at the heart of the SVA Pilot and what drives any necessity to develop a future model.

At the conclusion of the survey respondents were asked if students played a role in formulating the responses. Given that understanding power relations and dynamics is central to the SVA workshops and incorporating feedback from the student focus group (where cultures of power differentials were raised), the results indicate there is still some way to go to achieve a culture of substantive and iterative partnership with students. This was a sentiment that was repeated in the student focus group where a discussion focused on how institutions think that they are further along the engagement spectrum than they are: usually the commitment is to student input, not true power sharing.

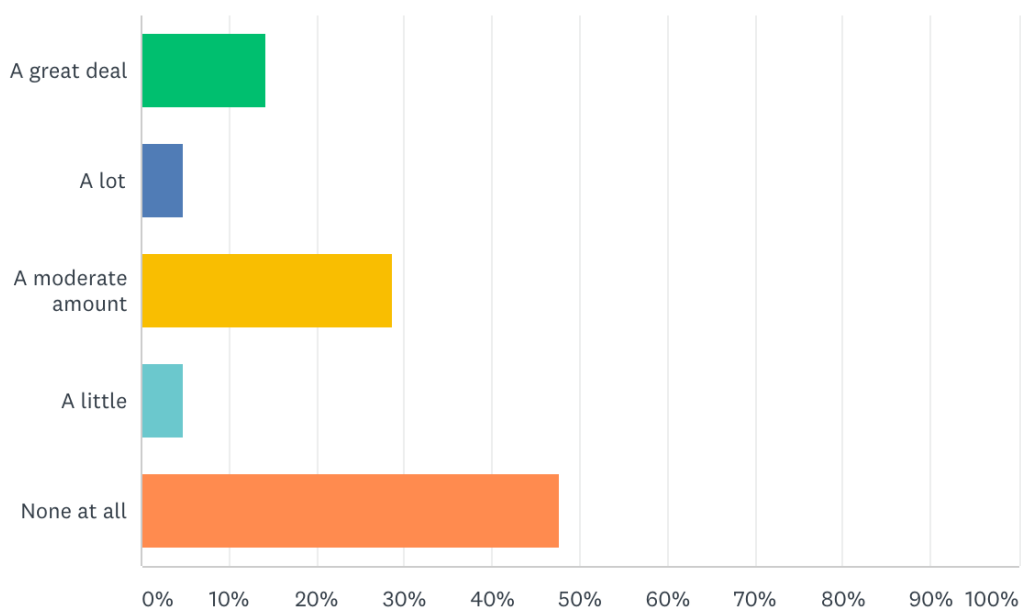


Figure 16: Have students played a role in forming responses to this survey?

Looking forward

Future deliverables

Central to this evaluation was to examine the effectiveness of the Pilot to engage with the Pilot institutions and to explore the appetite for an expanded SVA presence. This is inclusive of enabling discussions around future models and deliverables. Collating the findings from the focus groups and the two surveys provides a rich insight into the overall enthusiasm and possible future directions for SVA.

The participant survey asked respondents to rank the three categories of **training, resources** and **events for students**. While acknowledging that all three are vital components, the forced ranking exercise assists with directing priorities. The results were clear: training was the key priority, closely

followed by resources, with events trailing as the least important. That said, comments across that emerged from across all of the research indicated the popularity and necessity of SVA events.

Respondents were then asked to rank a series of options for each of the categories. For training they were asked to rank the following:

- Understanding and engaging in governance and decision-making processes.
- Developing skills to work in partnership.
- Being an effective student representative.
- Train the trainer model- training students to deliver training within their own institution.

On the average ranked score the first and third options were the most popular. Looking exclusively at first preferences (where a score of one was recorded) options three and four scored equal

highest. The result here shows that 'Developing skills to work in partnership' as a specific subset did not attract significant traction. This is not to diminish its importance, but it suggests that a different strategy of explicitly subsuming it into the other categories would be a good option moving forward.

In respect to resourcing, it was a near dead heat between the two options (which also adds weight to the above point that skills around partnership remains central to the core work of SVA):

- Developing resources to increase knowledge and understanding of student partnership approaches.
- Developing resources to support effective student representation.

For events there was a clear preference for opportunities for students to network and share their experiences (e.g. Student Summit) over the creation of a National Student Voice Awards (a result of nearly 87% over the latter).

The staff focus group also noted a need to develop student capacity building regarding governance: that a commitment to partnership requires a commitment to scaffolding and resourcing. Survey responders also stressed the need for "continuous support and events for staff in partnership and leadership roles" and for the "provision of resources and links to relevant information for institutions that may have student interest in partnership, but not the institution backing from staff."

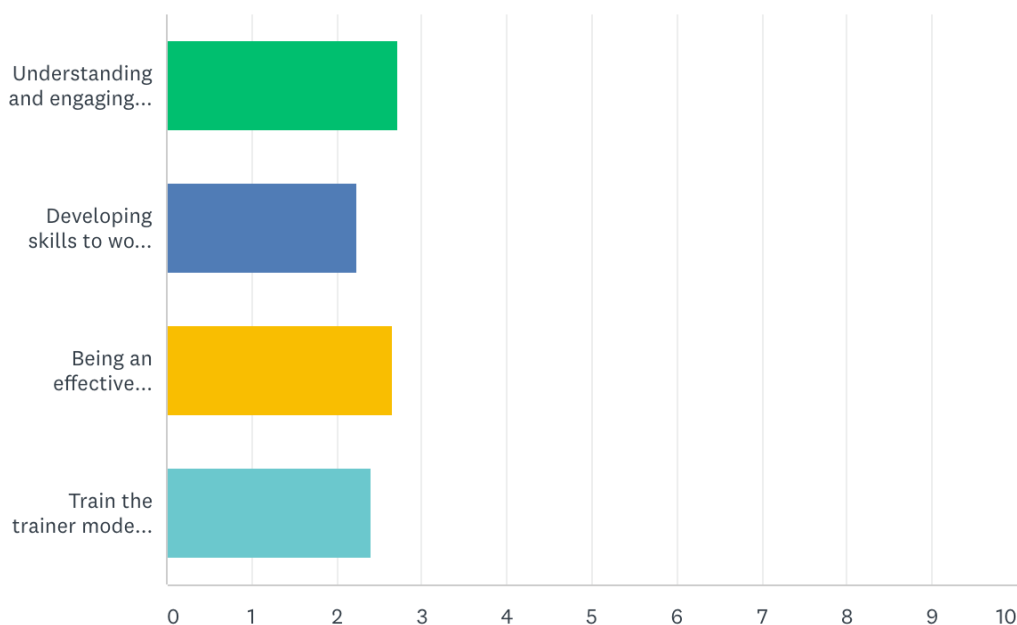


Figure 17: where do you think SVA should prioritise its focus (training)

Information sessions about how to negotiate partnership agreements with a university

Student, participant survey

Showcasing successful examples of student partnerships, representation and models of practice.

Staff, participant survey

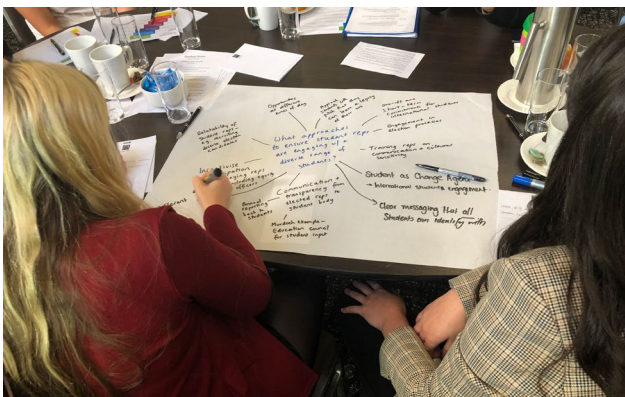
Prioritise strategies that foster student linkages and relationship building across all categories of students. This is key to all activities aimed at student partnership initiatives.

Student, participant survey

Lobbying institutions so that they come to understand the importance and scope of true partnership

Staff, participant survey

below: ideas discussion at the 2019 SVA Summit



Future models

The future model question will require institutional input, both in respect to design and funding. Yet the overall design must be a collaborative enterprise that is not dominated by funder imperatives. As noted in the student focus group, SVA offers a potential non-institutional peak or backbone function that is essential for keeping the conversation above institutional politics and agendas. For SVA, identifying strategies to prosecute a sector-wide argument that future funding should be premised on improving student partnership *outcomes* broadly defined. An outcome-based approach will also accommodate institutional scale and differentiation. Again, the different needs and diversity between institutions was a point that was made repeatedly.

Shifting from aims (broad aspirations) and outputs (counting what has been done) to whether institutions have achieved outcomes (the impact, what has been realised), would be an advisable trajectory for SVA. The important point here is to focus on *process*. Demonstrating outputs or deliverables on their own is reductive and can

be counter-productive. Moreover, establishing genuine partnerships is about relationship building which is in itself a process – a point that was clearly articulated in the student focus group.

Take, for example, the SVA aim to “strengthen institutional commitment to authentic student involvement in decision making and governance and develop a shared understanding of student partnership principles and good practice across a diversity of tertiary education settings.” This aim could be worked into the following three measurable outcomes:

1. Institutions can **demonstrate** increased student involvement in decision making and governance processes;
2. Evidence of **meaningful** and **authentic** student involvement; and
3. Student partnership principles are **understood** in an **applied setting** across a diversity of tertiary settings.

These example outcomes require innovative measurements. To measure concepts like ‘meaningful’ or ‘understood’ requires an

appreciation of the processes and relationships that sustain partnership within each institutional setting. Moreover, it is a commitment to longer-term measurement to ascertain the correlation between student partnership models, behavioural and cultural change, and improvement in areas like student satisfaction and retention.

Through a partnership approach each institution could develop a basket of indicators to show the extent to which outcomes like those suggested above are being met. The points of measurement – what has been achieved, to whom and how – can be captured through qualitative (and often proxy) measures. Incorporating the work undertaken in the Institutional Strategic Analysis Workshops, SVA could provide support and resources for this process.

An emerging and popular framework for collaborating to deal with complex social dynamics is collective impact. It is a framework that can be easily be adapted for use within the tertiary sector. Briefly, it is a framework that supports the coming together of a diverse group of stakeholders to find shared solutions. There are five core principles that have been adapted over time (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Cabaj & Weaver, 2016):

1. The development of a common agenda/ shared aspiration;
2. Collect data, measure results consistently and commit to strategic learning;
3. The coordination of mutually reinforcing and high leverage activities;
4. A commitment of continuous communication and authentic engagement with all participants; and
5. The establishment of a backbone organisation or stewardship to coordinate.

On the last point, SVA is well placed to be a backbone organisation for the whole sector. This approach can incorporate the development of shared aspirations for the sector and simultaneously accommodate institutional difference through the identification of institutional specific measures. While more work would be required to co-develop outcomes and how they would be measured, the above indicates a potential avenue for SVA to consider going forward. It is also fundamental that the SVA model clearly articulates how it engages and communicates with different student groups. Drawing from the focus groups and surveys the recurring themes were:

- Developing practices and strategies that reach a broader and a more diverse cohort of students;
- The need to continue working alongside student unions and associations;
- Improving the reach to vocational students; and
- Paying students for their time and input.

On the first two points the student focus group revealed a wariness that some institutions infer that student representatives do not reflect the broader student populations they are elected to represent. Some care needs to be taken to navigate this space to ensure that representative bodies are appropriately included while still developing a broad communication strategy to reach as many students as possible via multiple channels. On the third point around vocational students, specific resourcing to enable an expanded and more inclusive SVA model that works with this unique cohort would be recommended. In respect to payment, a distributed model that asks institutions to take responsibility for how student time and input is rewarded would be ideal. This should be done in a manner that relates to their specific situation and partnership arrangements. Again, a properly resourced SVA could assist with facilitating this process.

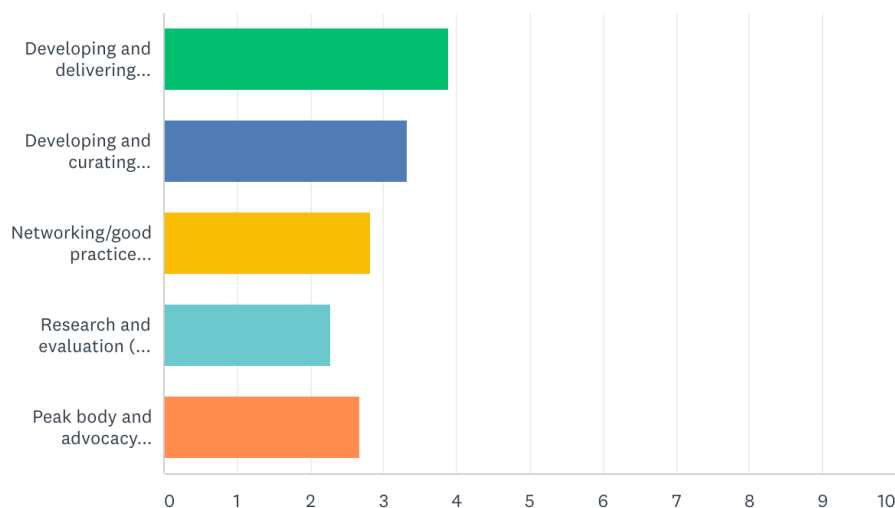


Figure 18: Participant Survey: What should a future SVA model focus on?

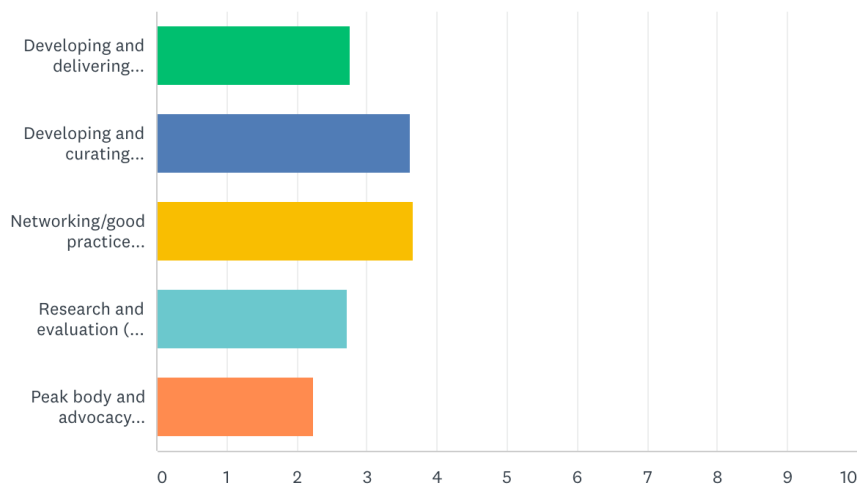


Figure 19: Institutional Survey: What should a future SVA model focus on?

One of the substantive issues to come out of the focus groups was around appropriate resourcing of SVA. It was repeatedly noted that staffing levels (one FTE) was inadequate given the scope and reach of the project. Moving out of the pilot phase, scaling up the staffing levels will need to be addressed. This could include an in-kind component where future funding institutions ensure a fractional appointment to support student partnerships activities within their institutions with assistance from SVA.

Both surveys asked: 'What should a future SVA model focus on?'. Respondents were required to force rank from the most to least preferred, with the following options offered:

- Developing and delivering training/professional development for students and staff.
- Developing and curating resources to support students, staff and institutions.
- Networking/good practice sharing events across institutions (e.g. Annual Symposium).
- Research and evaluation (to deepen and develop good practice)
- Peak body and advocacy (providing/harnessing expertise and insight)

For the participant respondents option **one** was the clear preference. For the institutional survey options **three** and **two** were the most preferred (by a clear margin). However, on first preference option one was the second ranked among institutions.

What these results indicate is that SVA's core business is clear. Supporting staff and students, developing and curating resources, and providing networking and event opportunities must not be placed second when developing a future strategic outlook. Within this, however, the space for creative endeavour must remain. The 'core business' is about creating spaces to iteratively co-develop

practices that enhance, inspire and innovative. The work should not be reduced to training package deliverables that are divorced from the very ethos of genuine student partnership.

Further, this point of focus should not preclude the pursuit of research, nor a peak body agenda (which are higher level concerns than the delivery of services, resources and opportunities), it just requires consideration that doing so does not diminish the capacity of SVA to deliver on what it does best.

Future funding

When participants were asked if the SVA Pilot project had succeeded in enhancing authentic engagement of students in institutional decision making and governance (Figure 18), there was a near 70% approval response (with less than 5% disapproval). This is an outstanding result for SVA, but with clear identifiable opportunities for improvement.

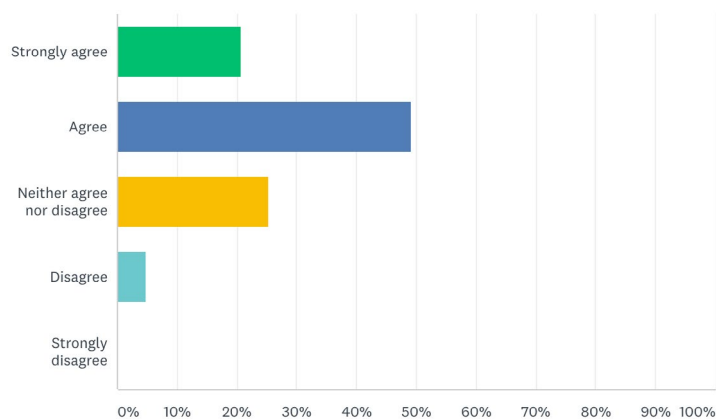


Figure 20: Overall, has the SVA Pilot succeeded in enhancing authentic engagement of students in institutional decision making and governance?

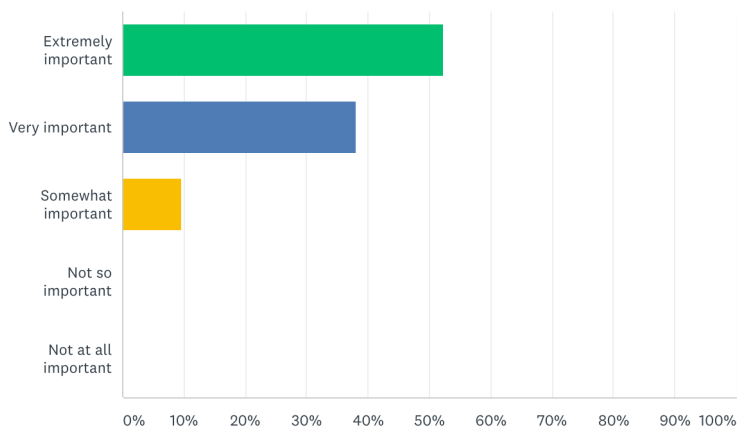


Figure 21: How important is institutional investment in strengthening student partnership in governance and decision making?

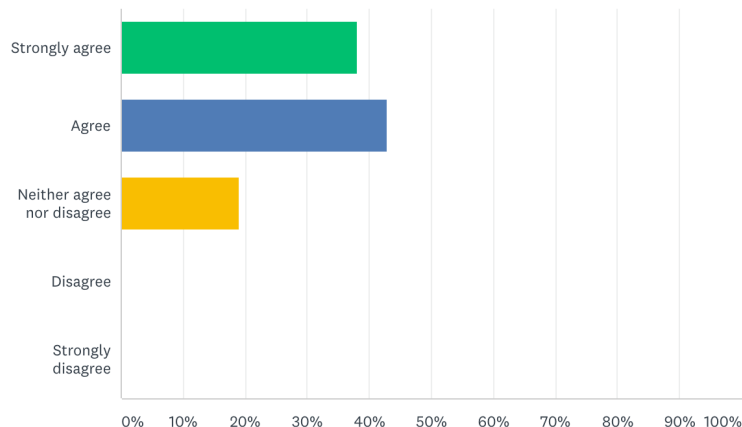


Figure 22: Should SVA be supported to further develop its national presence across the tertiary sector?

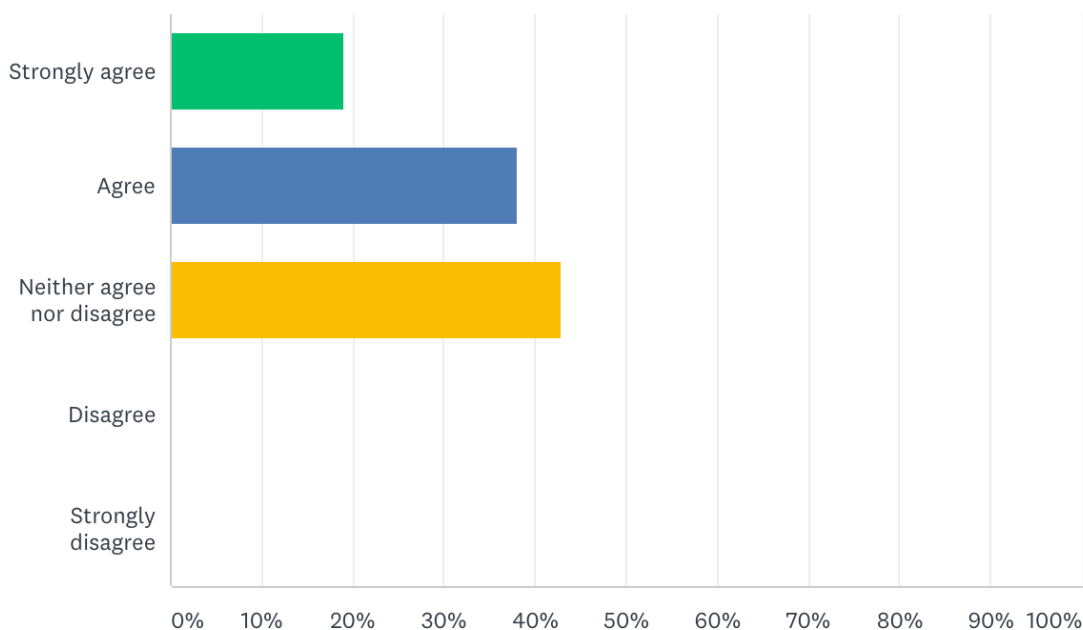


Figure 23: Should tertiary institutions continue and/or commit to funding SVA beyond the Pilot project?

The student focus group revealed that the current funding model was one that was appreciated, but that there needs to be an increase in the number of institutions that are involved. It was felt that this would multiply cash and in-kind contribution and would result in a greater diversity of institutions with more vocational representation.

The participant survey also revealed that over **95% of respondents** thought SVA be supported to further develop its national presence across the tertiary sector. The institutional response to the same question was an impressive **81%** (see Figure 20). On the importance of institutional investment in strengthening student partnership in governance and decision making, the response from institutions and agencies was an impressive **90%**. The result is even more remarkable given that many of the responders were non-Pilot institutions. On the question of whether tertiary institutions

fund SVA beyond the pilot project, there was still and enthusiastic response with **89% support from participants**. While still recording no 'disagrees' the neutral votes from the institutions did increase (see Figure 21).

The hesitancy from institutions is not unexpected and this is more pronounced when asked directly about future funding. Future funding will require deeper conversations that show the results from this evaluation and the production of final deliverables (e.g. good practice guidelines). Institutions will also be keen to know the overall level of enthusiasm from across the sector, inclusive of staff and students. With the neutral vote coming in highest and a split between likely and unlikely to fund moving forward, this is a result that can be viewed positively so long as an appropriate strategy is developed to act on the recommendation herein, and to advocate and celebrate the good work that has been achieved.

Final remarks and recommendations

This evaluation has engaged with staff, students, student representative bodies, national agencies and institutions from across the tertiary sector. This has been a deep engagement with multiple points of interactions with individuals and institutions who have been involved in the SVA Pilot project.

The results of the evaluation clearly show how well received SVA activities, resources and events have been. Through its developing facilitation and activation role, SVA has provided an important foundation for championing a culture of student partnership within the student voice movement in Australia. In particular, the design element of the Strategic Analysis Workshop deserves commendation with its focus on power relations and how best to acknowledge, navigate and mitigate the impact of those relations.

For a 12-month Pilot project SVA has achieved an impressive amount, this has included:

- Hosting high profile national events with a focus on enabling and elevating student involvement in decision making and governance;
- Setting up a staff practitioner network to share better practice, celebrate success and to link staff across institutions;
- Undertaking institution specific analysis workshops to identify gaps and opportunities to increase student voice and develop student partnership approaches within the institution.
- Advocating for the development of student partnership agreements;

- The identification of sector-wide themes for future development and changed practice opportunities; and
- Fostering and developing international links.

This evaluation has identified a number of key findings:

1. Participants reported an overwhelmingly positive experience of the SVA Pilot;
2. There is a need to reach more diverse and representative student cohorts;
3. Working *with* existing student representative bodies is vital for any SVA model going forward;
4. SVAs core business of events and activities have been important sharing, networking and skill development opportunities for staff and students;
5. SVA workshops have proved invaluable for identifying gaps and creating a levelling environment for staff and students;
6. That process, not outputs are the most important factor for students. This is a recognition that engagement must be genuine and meaningful;
7. Tertiary institutions noted the need for continued funding, but require further evidence of the Pilot impact, the funding mix and the sector appetite; and
8. That there is overwhelming support for the continuation and expansion of SVA.

Methodologically, the study has been a participatory and collaborative evaluation. Working closely with the project team and steering committee, this report identifies findings that have utility and recommendations that are actionable and realisable. Noting the key findings – and with an emphasis on future funding uncertainty – the following recommendations are offered.

Recommendations

- 1. Commit to co-developing a sustainable SVA model in the immediate transitional post-pilot phase.**
- 2. Identify and secure future funding for SVA. In order to future proof and grow SVA this should incorporate the eventual establishment of a diverse funding mix.**
- 3. Review the current funding level and resourcing of SVA. One FTE position for a national program is insufficient.**
- 4. That SVA commit to maintain a focus on its core business of developing and delivering training, resources, support, networking and events. However, this approach must not preclude or relegate higher level aims such as SVA transitioning into a national peak body.**
- 5. Co-develop an outcomes framework to better identify and determine the level of traction and impact that occurs within each institution. The emphasis should be on how process contributes to change and not on simply recording outputs or deliverables.**
- 6. Develop a substantive communication and engagement strategy.**
- 7. Commit to measurement, evaluation, and further developing an evidence base going forward.**

A implementation strategy for the recommendations is detailed in the appendix below.

Appendix

Recommendations implementation strategy

1. Commit to co-developing a sustainable SVA model in the immediate transitional post-pilot phase. A future SVA model should:

- 1.1. Identify and develop a new governance structure for SVA;
 - 1.1.1. Consider the appropriateness of SVA becoming an incorporated body with an independent board;
- 1.2. Augment whole of institution approaches;
- 1.3. Align with pre-existing initiatives within institutions;
- 1.4. Seek to establish and support Student Partnership Agreements;
- 1.5. Identify, recruit, activate and support multiple staff and student champions within institutions; and
- 1.6. Consider distributive (see recommendation 3.3) or rotational models for SVA events in order to ease the resource burden on SVA and to promote sustainability.

2. Identify and secure future funding for SVA. In order to future proof and grow SVA this should incorporate the eventual establishment of a diverse funding mix. Considerations should include:

- 2.1. Seek bridging funding to ensure that the next developmental phase of establishing a sustainable model is supported;
- 2.2. Develop a prospectus and an advocacy strategy to take to institutions;
- 2.3. Following the post-pilot transitional phase, a minimum funding period of three years;
- 2.4. Seek efficiencies through the alignment with established networks and initiatives;
- 2.5. A base contribution from the sector to ensure:
 - 2.5.1. The continuation and growth of the Practitioner Network;
 - 2.5.2. The sustainability of national SVA events like the Student Summit and Symposium;
- 2.6. Seek endorsements from student representative bodies (national and institutional) and relevant national agencies (e.g. [TEQSA](#), [Universities Australia](#)); and
- 2.7. Approach the Federal Government around the possibility of a level of matched funding;
 - 2.7.1. Advocating to Government should acknowledge how enhanced student partnership in decision making and governance improves the overall outcomes for tertiary sector and graduates who will be entering the workforce.

3. Review the current funding level and resourcing of SVA. One FTE position for a national program is insufficient. The review should consider:

- 3.1. The funding of fractional state-based positions to improve proximity, access and to overcome issues of geographic distance;
- 3.2. Funding a fractional SVA appointment of a student or recent graduate to support the Project Manager;
- 3.3. An in-kind fractional appointment within each partnering institution (e.g. .1 or .2 of an existing position) to work with SVA to further student decision making and governance within their home institution;
- 3.4. Funding for a fractional SVA appointment to engage and work alongside the vocational education sector;
- 3.5. In-kind administrative support for SVA staff; and
- 3.6. Paying students on SVA committees for their time and contribution.

4. That SVA commit to maintain a focus on its core business of developing and delivering training, resources, support, networking and events. However, this approach must not preclude or relegate:

- 4.1. Focusing on the overall aim of empowering and advocating for change to better enable authentic student involvement in decision making and governance;
- 4.2. That the training and resource imperative does not subsume or act as a proxy for genuine partnership: cultural change requires structural and process issues to be addressed; and
- 4.3. Higher level aims of SVA, for example, seeking to establish itself as a peak national body.

5. Co-develop an outcomes framework to better identify and determine the level of traction and impact that occurs within each institution. The emphasis should be on how process contributes to change and not on simply recording outputs or deliverables.

- 5.1. The framework must allow for institutional difference; and
- 5.2. Co-develop (with staff and students) a basket of indicators that capture the depth and processes that occur within each institution.

6. Develop a substantive communication and engagement strategy. This strategy should:

- 6.1. Establish a sub-committee to develop, review and maintain the strategy;
- 6.2. Identify multiple communication and engagement channels inclusive of:
 - 6.2.1. Reaching and activating a greater diversity of students;
 - 6.2.2. Developing a media strategy that connects with how broad student cohorts' access and share information (e.g. social media, newsletters, clubs and societies);
 - 6.2.3. Work closely with student representative bodies to communicate more effectively with their constituents;
 - 6.2.4. Encourage and work with institutions to incorporate and align SVA communications with their own student engagement practices;
- 6.3. Ensure that SVA materials and resources are easily accessed and have a high level of transferability for each unique institutional environment;
 - 6.3.1. There should be particular emphasis on the distribution of the Good Practice Guidelines (GPGs);
 - 6.3.2. The GPGs should reflect scale and differentiation of institutions across the sector (particularly in respect to regional and urban universities); and
- 6.4. Produce a working document that outlines the aims, activities and outcomes of the strategy.

7. Commit to measurement, evaluation, and further developing an evidence base going forward.

- 7.1. Build the evaluation component into the sustainability phase from the outset; and
- 7.2. Develop an implementation strategy of the recommendations herein.

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Student Partnership Agreements

[Australian National University \(UNU\) Student Partnership Agreement](#)

[University of Western Australia \(UWA\) Student Partnership Agreement](#)

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