

Student Assembly Recommendations to Improve Student Communication and Representation at Te Herenga Waka— Victoria University of Wellington

Introduction

A paper was submitted at the last meeting of the University Council from the Student Assembly which outlined the current structure of student communication and the representation model here at Te Herenga Waka— Victoria University of Wellington. This paper highlighted the places where the structure and processes work well, as well as places where they have fallen short. The latter has resulted in students feeling undervalued and disempowered as partners of the University.

The Student Assembly has compiled a list of recommendations we believe will strengthen communication and engagement between the University and its students. We believe these changes will transform Te Herenga Waka into a University which leads in prioritising the student experience, making Wellington a clear first choice for both domestic students and international students choosing to study abroad.

Our recommendations

1. Delivery of communication

Centralised Platform

The Assembly believes that these issues could be partially solved by the creation of a centralised platform, where all communications are disseminated from. This would not only be a singular place where all students will be guaranteed to receive and see the same information, but also holds potential as a place for the University to conduct consultation, such as CAD surveys. The Assembly understands this as something in production as a part of the Student Success Programme (SSP), and we believe it is required as soon as possible.

Additionally, the Assembly believes that this platform should provide flexible and consistent information to students in real time. Proactive dissemination of information, will counter some of the issues that have arisen throughout the year wherein lecturers or course coordinators have provided information to their students prior to the central University. Real time updates through a centralised platform is one such way to ensure consistent communication.

Partnership with Students

Additionally, there should be further partnership with students around marketing and communication, so that the delivery of messages is student-friendly and accessible. The Student Assembly sees potential in communication workshops run by the University. These workshops would bring together student representatives and allow feedback and updates to the University on the best methods for communication with students, and how these communications can be better managed. Alternatively, the University could employ students as part of their communications team, even if only part-time or on a casual basis.

One-page type documents, infographics, and universally accessible content are all examples of improved methods for student communication. The Student Assembly envisions such meetings to occur over semi-regular periods deemed appropriate, be it annually or bi-yearly. This is important to ensure that students with different preferences of processing information, or who may find it difficult to read large blocks of text, are not excluded in receiving this information. This is particularly pertinent during times such as COVID-19.

2. Content of communication

Clarity of Decision-Making Processes

When communicating a decision on a given proposal, academic or structural change, it is imperative that the University include a section explaining what student input was considered in the decision-making process. This should include what methods of consultation and collaboration were employed, at what stages, and through which forums. Concurrent to this, information about the main issue's raised by students and the decisions made by the University on these issues will also be necessary to ensure true clarity of process.

Additionally, justifications as to how the decision accounts for this student perspective, and how this was placed against other considerations, should also be included. This could be actioned through a summary at the end of a paper outlining student involvement, an acknowledgement of their views and how these were able to be included or not during the process.

This year, many students' expressed frustration towards the University's decisions and the process behind them. Particularly where a decision was made that was adversarial to the desire of students, this frustration was further exacerbated by the University's lack of reasoning as to why it made the decision. Furthermore, prior to discussions with students, it could be useful for the University to provide a list of 'non-negotiables', with reasons why they are 'non-negotiable', to help frame the discussion.

The Assembly believes this knowledge gap can be addressed by the University supplying adequate reasoning to students as to why a particular decision was reached. Clear

communication for this reasoning helps to satisfy some of the questions that are bound to arise when a major decision is made.

Consistency of Communication and Engagement

Supplementary to this, the Student Assembly is of the opinion that continued and consistent communication, representation and consultation is also necessary to ensure that students are kept up to date with University changes and decisions. This requires more than just email updates from the University, but more streamlined communication channels between students and the University including two-way, open avenues of consultation and discussion. Current examples of this include the 'Student Representative Meeting' which ran throughout the Covid-19 lockdown and continues today.

Hosted by the Director of Student Academic Services, Pam Thorburn, this meeting is attended by representatives from a wide range of groups within VUW. The structure of the meeting allows for general updates from the University, as well as the communication of issues that student groups have faced. These issues can then be quickly and efficiently dealt with. Additionally, members of senior leadership will attend when necessary to talk to specific issues and changes at Te Herenga Waka, allowing for a genuine dialogue between student representatives and members of University Staff.

Implementation of two-way avenues of communication and consultation will add legitimacy to claims that the student voice is heard and taken into account. Additionally, increased representation of students on major decision-making bodies and committees of the University will help to address the concerns students feel around not being involved in the decision-making process.

3. Early engagement

If the University is to claim to have the students' perspective in mind when making decisions which will directly impact student success and well-being, it is imperative that they actively make space for students at the table. This must happen early in the process.

Current consultation avenues often ask for student input far too late in the process. Late engagement damages the spirit of partnership between the University and students- as by the time students are consulted, many preliminary decisions have already been made. This can leave engagement appearing tokenistic and as if consultation is merely a 'check-box' in the eyes of students.

Additionally, recognising that the student body is not homogenous, and involving a wide variety of student representative groups early, will ensure that all possible perspectives are considered. Active, early engagement with the various major stakeholder groups of Te Herenga Waka will ensure that the breadth of student experience is taken into account, and issues which relate to equity are addressed before any major decision is made.

Furthermore, the Assembly acknowledge that other than this forum, student representatives are often not compensated for their time and energy. Therefore, it is important that we find ways to ensure they receive adequate support for their engagement.

4. Partnership Framework

While we understand that the building of individual relationships is incredibly important from year to year, we believe that it is also important that those relationships are performed within a framework which empowers our student representatives. This framework should include the levels of student consultation required for different situations, and to what degree, dependent on the different importance levels and urgency of decisions being made. Further, this framework could also explore mutual accountability measures to ensure ongoing and reciprocal partnership. We hope these accountability mechanisms and commitment to partnership, will ensure these breaches are appropriately and constructively remedied.

This framework could also be an opportunity for the University and students to co-design a living document that embodies these practices and principles. Collectively, we would need to establish a process to ensure this is a living document, annually reviewed and practically implemented into University operations.

5. Ongoing Improvement

All of the recommendations discussed in the above report will not be the final. This should be a living document which is reviewed frequently with VUWSA, Student Assembly and students generally. Partnerships are always changing and so need to keep up to date and recognise that this is a bare minimum. There may also be things that we have missed or things that become more or less relevant as time goes on. We look forward to continuing to work with the University in the spirit of partnership.