

# **Student Communication and Representation at Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington: A Student Representative Perspective**

## **Introduction**

At the last meeting of the Student Assembly on Monday 13th July, we discussed the issue of student communication and representation at Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) with our members. This document is authored by Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association (VUWSA) on behalf of the Student Assembly. The contents therein are compiled from that discussion, as well as the members' reports from the same meeting.

This paper attempts to outline VUW's student communication and consultation processes from a student perspective. Currently, students do not feel like they are adequately listened to nor communicated with, and feel like the systems in place to ensure consultation and communication are lacking in a variety of ways. This paper will outline some of the key concerns surrounding student communication and consultation. We will be looking to compile a list of recommendations regarding these points, which VUWSA will present at University Council at a later stage.

This paper is important at a governance level as the University's strategic plan includes "Students as Partners" in the Iho of the University. The Iho also includes "Processes that Empower our People". It is the Student Assembly's view that the current processes do not amount to partnership, nor do they empower students. Moreover, the Strategic Plan also includes 95% overall satisfaction rate. This is unlikely to be achieved without students feeling listened to in the University's decision-making process.

**"Our students are partners in their learning. They are closely involved on leadership at all levels of the institution – from decisions by the University Council affecting the whole institution to decisions by programmes affecting individual courses."**

Students feeling engaged, communicated with and listened to in the University's decision-making processes is crucial to student experience. Low quality communication leads to a disengaged and ultimately unsatisfied student body. An unsatisfied student body in a New Zealand context will lead to generational falls in domestic EFTs, as students choose to go to competitor Universities which can avoid negative press about student engagement.

While the Student Assembly believes that Te Herenga Waka performs better than many other Universities in New Zealand, we identify many small changes that could be made to improve

the state of student engagement. We believe we can be even better, and lead student experience this way, making us a clear first choice for domestic students leaving high school, and for international students choosing to study abroad.

We also acknowledge the timing of this report. This comes following several high-profile instances of the University failing to engage and consult with the student body adequately. This includes the Name Change, the Grade Bump, and the increase in Halls of Residence fees. It is because of these situations that there is currently a large appetite for improvements to the engagement processes.

The Assembly discussed the following questions:

- Where are you included in decision making? At what stage are you included?
- What is working?
- What needs to be improved?
- What issues are important for your group?
- What are your expectations of student representatives to communicate with your respective communities? How should that be supported by the University?

The paper is split into two components: consultation and communication.

The groups represented in the Student Assembly include the following:

- Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association
- Tumuaki o Ngāi Tauria
- Pasifika Students' Council
- Victoria University of Wellington Law Students' Society
- Victoria University of Wellington Commerce Students' Society
- Victoria University Feminist Organisation
- Disabled Students Association
- Tutors Collective
- UniQ Victoria
- Residential Advisors from Halls of Residence
- Victoria International Students' Association
- Postgraduate Students' Association
- Victoria University Arts Society
- University Council Student Representatives
- Victoria Engineering Club
- STUDiO
- Victoria University of Wellington Science Society

## **Acknowledgement of Principles**

Student representatives recognise and appreciate the inclusion of “students as partners” as a high-level principle in the Strategic Plan. Further, this also includes “Processes that Empower Our People”. This is important in ensuring collaboration, co-design and consultation throughout the University decision making process. The Student Assembly believes that the current process can be further improved in regard to partnership or empowerment of students. It is paramount that we make changes to address this, to uphold the Strategic Plan.

## **Student Representation and Consultation**

Students representatives at Te Herenga Waka— Victoria University of Wellington value our ability to engage with the University in multiple forums. However, whilst students formally engage with the University in multiple platforms, we would like to focus on our experience engaging in these platforms.

Currently, VUWSA has representation on every faculty’s Academic Board, to varying degrees. Collectively, these Faculty Delegates (along with members of other student representative bodies such as VicCom and VUWLSS) form the Student Academic Committee. This group for example was instrumental in VUWSA’s early collaboration with the university on its COVID-19 response, providing a rough-and-ready gauge of student opinion on many core issues within a tight timeframe.

VUWSA also maintains the university’s class representative structure, and many issues that find their way to the Student Academic Committee are first brought to VUWSA’s attention by class reps. For changes affecting specific courses, there is no substitute for a class rep gauging the opinion of their classmates.

However, despite the representation of students on boards in many faculties and areas of the University, issues regarding consultation and communication continue to arise. This was shown particularly during the COVID-19 period in regard to Halls of Residence, and the scaling of grades. These issues were also prevalent prior to COVID-19 - including the name change, and previous issues in student accommodation.

This demonstrates that the issue is not specific to the quantity of representation, but rather the value and attention placed on those representative channels by the University.

## **What does partnership mean for students?**

Partnership to students goes beyond consultation, but to the true spirit, collaboration. Student representatives do not want our voices to be considered a “tick-box” or feel tokenistic at the end of a decision-making process. For instance, when there is a disproportionate ratio of staff

to students in decision making forums, consensus will never fall in students' favour in cases where we are outnumbered.

Instead, students would like to be involved in the ongoing collaboration and engagement, at all levels of decision-making, including prior to major decisions. Thus, a bottom-up approach where students are engaged with earlier in the decision-making process enables better partnership than a top-down approach. This would prevent decisions feeling pre-determined, rendering the consultation ingenuine. Therefore, partnership can only be truly achieved if the University fulfils its own obligations to proactively engage with student representatives.

Further, the Student Assembly also raised concerns around the inherent power imbalance within the University and students as partners. This is evident in the inherent imbalance of resources, financial means and time. The University as the convener of many of the forums with student representation, has led to concerns about how easy it may be to exclude student representatives. This is particularly concerning to the independence of student groups when taking opposing stances on issues. This is also important as student representatives then feel their ability to engage with the University relies too heavily on personal relationships between individuals, which also has the potential to be volatile with the turnover student representatives. Thus, students as partners to student representatives also means correcting this power imbalance.

In particular, the University's responsibility to endorse the visions and values outlined in its own strategic plan highlights the importance of renewing and upholding this partnership.

### **Student Communication**

The quality of student engagement, both with elected student representatives, and with the wider student body which they represent, is dependent on communication from the University. Lack of communication creates the perception that the University does not want to engage with their students. For students to “feel a sense of belonging to a vibrant and inclusive university and civic community”, according to the Strategic Plan, communication must be a two-way street, where both parties are both able to listen, and to be listened to.

Currently, student communication is scattered over many platforms. This includes through emails, through Blackboard, the website, MyVUW and on the Facebook page. A consequence of this is that students often come across discrepancies in information communicated between these platforms, only contributing to misinformation and confusion. There are also discrepancies present on Blackboard across different faculties of teaching. Information is therefore easily missed, with no method that guarantees the same information reaches all students.

University information is also not consistently communicated in a way easily accessible to students. Crucial information is lost within dense paragraphs and links sent out sometimes

open the staff intranet site, making them further inaccessible to students. Additionally, accessible measures, such as infographics, short videos, and larger font size, have been neglected from student communications in the past. Despite significant improvements throughout lockdown, there is still much room for the inclusion of more of these accessible measures within University communications to students.

We find that due to these issues, many of the University's initiatives go unnoticed. It is difficult for students to discern what the University wants them to know, and their lack of knowing gives rise to the perception that they are not valued as members of the University community.

The Student Assembly does not believe that it is the responsibility of student representatives to disseminate the University's information. The information we do share, we do so for the benefit of our students, with the desire for further student engagement with the University's programmes and initiatives. Because of this, student representatives are often hesitant to communicate University information which has not been formally decided, or is likely to be retracted or changed. We want the information we share to help clarify situations for the benefit of students, not further add to potential confusion where there may already be different messages.

We would like to note that over the COVID-19 period the way the University communicated information, and their consultation on this with students, did gradually show a marked improvement. In particular, we would like to thank the work of Pam Thorburn, alongside Stuart Brock, in helping to facilitate some of these changes to student communications. We would also like to thank Kevin Rowlett and his staff for the clear communication and engagement from Student Health over the last four months. It has provided much certainty and peace of mind for the student community.

As shown in this report, we believe there is room for further improvement in both student representation and consultation, and with communication. We would like to work further with the University towards these improvements. The Student Assembly will be producing a number of recommendations on the issues highlighted above, upon further consultation and discussion. These recommendations will be circulated shortly.