

Student Engagement in Service Delivery: Taking it to a Whole New Level

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Abstract

Student Services professionals have been sharing knowledges and good practice for many years with sector colleagues in higher education. This sharing assists professionals to inform planning and service delivery at their respective institutions. What if this sharing of knowledge was extended to students in higher education; the very people our services hope to support? A recent Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA) conference engaged the thoughts and experiences of students in higher education. Student voices have always been an interesting and valuable component of Student Services staff members' professional development. Below is an account of a student voice who shared his own experience and those of his fellow colleagues at the 2015 ANZSSA conference but what he shares with us in this paper is not his student experience. This student voice articulates the take home messages of what he learned from Student Services staff at the conference – Student Services successes, Student Services challenges, and the Student Services context. His story is useful for reflection when considering student engagement. Do we merely take student knowledges and context then adapt our services accordingly? Alternatively, for greater impact and successful outcomes, do we meaningfully engage with students in mutually beneficial relationships where Student Services stories are shared with students?

Introduction

The concept of working with students to deliver programs out of Student Services in higher education institutions is not novel. Student Services have been running peer led initiatives and engaging student volunteers in the delivery of services for some time, for recent examples see Seeto, Sharp, Wills, and Styles (2013); Loane (2015); Baterna-Daluz (2014); and, Commons (2012). What appears to be missing from the literature about Australian Student Services is the practice of engaging students in the planning and decision making of Student Services in higher education. Recent reflections from a university student draw one's attention to such an idea as well as the thought that if Student Services were more forthcoming about sharing their challenges and context with university students, students are in a unique position to contribute to the future planning and decision making in delivering services and programs. Their perspective would be invaluable owing to the mere fact that they are the end users of such services and programs.

This paper will outline the roles that Student Services play in higher education. It will also outline the context for the origins of this paper. Importantly, this paper will share reflections from a student about Student Services in higher education. These reflections will lead to a discussion on the role of students in the development and review of planning and service delivery for Student Services.

Student Services in Australian higher education are those non-academic departments in higher education that are primarily responsible for welfare and advisory services. Student Services are established as retention units that support the student's transition and adjustment to university life and to aid the enhancement of the students' personal resources. Services often include counselling, disability support, health, careers and employment programs, financial aid, scholarships, and accommodation advice. "The primary goals for student services are: 1) to assist students [to] make successful adjustment and transition to the university environment; and 2) to reduce enrolment attrition and enhance student retention" (Andrews, 2009, p. 182). The International Association for Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) (2016) recognises that Student Services exist in most higher education systems around the world and add "value to their educational and lifetime learning experience".

The mainstream activity of university life – the legitimisation and dissemination of certain forms of knowledge – is taken as a given, as normative. It is students who must adjust to it in order to be successful. Support services provide the mechanisms for students to achieve this, if they do not come to university with the capacities and resources to achieve this on their own. (Gale, 2012, p. 249)

The Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA) is established to provide "development opportunities and sector representation for professional staff working in post-secondary student engagement, student participation, student wellbeing and student development" (Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association, 2015). It provides annual conferences which enable the sharing and dissemination of leading practice in the areas of student support while also providing a platform for the discussion of existing challenges that affect students in higher education as well as the challenges for student support departments. In 2015, the ANZSSA conference was held in Hobart, Tasmania in Australia and had a strong delegation of active students from the higher education sector. The theme for the 2015 conference was *visible, viable, valuable – traversing new landscapes in student engagement and development*. One example of the visibility of the student voice was the introduction of student panels discussing best practice and real life experiences taken from their own learnings. Interestingly, the student voices focussed on non-academic programs and peer support systems that students viewed as more important during orientation and the first few weeks of semester; rather than the traditional time management, how to write an academic paper and how to avoid plagiarism workshops that many institutions deliver to first year students. Connectedness, peer support, having a buddy, and focussing on how to have healthy relationships were all key themes resonating from the students' voice.

Listening to student voices is an important component of successful service delivery. The 2015 ANZSSA conference and the particular insights shared by one of the students extend on this student voice. Simon Playford is nearing the end of his Bachelor of Business and Law at the University of Southern Queensland. He is an active student representative and is the President of the USQ Student Guild. He was selected by the ANZSSA executive to be sponsored to attend the 2015 ANZSSA conference. His take home messages are provided below and are unexpected. They provide key points of reflection for Student Services departments.

The student experience: Simon Playford

It is a testament to the ANZSSA organisational committee that each year they sponsor students to attend this conference. I believe that a fundamental takeout from the 2015 ANZSSA conference is that student engagement itself plays a vital role in the growth of any Student Service department within a higher education institution. However, this conference has shown that engaging with students incorporates a wider scope than ever previously thought.

Throughout the conference, representatives from the Student Services sector and their respective universities introduced individual papers and presented a solid insight into their issues, successes and their interpretation of the future of Student Services. Additionally, there were struggles seen within this sector from both the metropolitan and regional higher education institutions, which reconciled that student engagement is becoming a complex issue across the nation and globe.

Furthermore, the particular learnings from the 2015 ANZSSA conference are as follows:

- The uncertainty surrounding the funding from Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (“HEPPP”) and Student Services and Amenities Fee (“SAF”) creates vulnerability within the Student Services sector. Unfortunately, a repercussion of this uncertainty is that students are not properly engaged due to project/program funding boards. The boards may have concerns about risky investment of funding into contemporary Student Services programs due to low viability or return. This does not provide the stability employees need to perform and engage properly and in addition this creates disadvantage to student-led programs.
- Students need more support than ever before. A central theme of papers presented at the conference was in regards to the increase in varied avenues of support offered to students. Student Services has grown into an integral function of any higher education institution with services extending to emotional/wellbeing, academic, financial and career support. New formats of support and new ways of engaging students have unearthed and it does become challenging for Student Services to find and explore new avenues to support students.
 - Students are spending less time on campus at their respective institutions – this creates a problem for engagement to occur by the institution. However, papers reflected on the progress of contemporary ways to appeal to students and increase the time spent on campus. Such programs like leadership/future leaders programs, student representation programs, interactive campus life through health and recreation, and increased relationships with student unions/guilds have successfully been explored as seen within the presentations.
 - Student mental health awareness programs are increasing – an institutions’ Student Services department becomes vital in the support of healthy bodies and healthy minds. The use of ‘friends’ and ‘lecturers’ to initiate support programs regarding mental illness have seen to be effective in combatting against this new issue.
 - With graduate roles becoming more competitive, career guidance within Student Services need to complement the students overall learning journey – Student Services have become a service that needs to be targeting students pre university right through until post graduate support. Especially, within this realm of career guidance and support. A paper suggested that frontline staff including lecturers need education around supporting and directing students to the appropriate department when they are confronted with a concern or issue. Additionally, targeting students first in family or disability support to guide them into university, particularly with online orientation and pre university support is becoming crucial for retention.

- Students Services utilisation of students to run programs/initiatives – this is a perfect way to reach to a wider audience especially with engagement becoming more of a challenge. Primarily, SAF is incorporated highly within this topic as most programs can be/are funded through this Commonwealth initiative. However, one paper commented on the fact that the institution's student association has created a bipartisan approach with professional staff and students working jointly on programs to deliver the intended key performance indicators and level of desired engagement. Additionally, beneficial outcomes could provide learnings for the students regarding career professionalism and staff understanding student perspective.
- Sexual assault on campus is soon to be more of a public issue – sexual assault and violence on campus is soon to become a controversial and public issue via the documentary "The Hunting Ground". This isn't a new issue for some institutions, however, this documentary will bring to light the incredibly disturbing acts that can occur at higher education institutions and help create awareness of institutional complaint handling processes and procedures. This is a welcomed documentary and movement against sexual violence/assault. Students need to be incorporated into the institutions response to this anticipated movement to deliver the correct message to the students, staff and general the community.
- The ability ANZSSA gave to students and Student Services' representatives for open communication was undeniably valuable to both parties. This value was clearly evident through the exchanging of questions, particularly during the student panel sessions. Additionally, the opportunity to communicate was evident through networking between sessions, question time at the end of sessions and always the end of day activities; all offer insight into the student's mind. In delivering a unique opportunity for this communication, all the student speakers were from diverse backgrounds, including a regional university student, a New Zealand student and some local Tasmanian students. This particular element, that being, diversity of opinion, just reinforced how Student Services needs to be actively engaging students throughout any stage of an idea/plan/activity/service to truly gauge its service delivery. On a personal note, I felt I was valued during the ANZSSA conference, that the student panel sessions gave value to the student voice. The ability to answer questions from the Student Services' representatives not only gave value to the student opinion however, enabled the representatives to understand, gain insight and digest the unpredictable response they were given. In reflection, the student panel sessions reminded Student Services that students are stakeholders, students are a source of untapped knowledge, students are a source of revenue and students are the end-user or consumer of the product or service. To not engage students would be detrimental to any Student Services division in any educational institution.

Engaging students in Student Services

Simon's words draw our attention to the fact there is much context about Student Services programs, funding, and governance that we do not tend to engage students with. His story highlights that an informed student body can be positioned to advocate for and on behalf of Student Services. This thinking extends student engagement in Student Services beyond the active delivery of certain peer led initiatives. Simon's reflections can inspire Student Services to take student involvement to a new level – to be involved in the planning and decision making of services and programs more broadly.

Student engagement in higher education is not a new concept and is widely researched (Kift, 2009; Lizzio, 2006; Nelson, Clarke, Stoodley, & Creagh, 2014; Tinto, 2012). Much literature speaks to the argument of having a whole of institution approach to student engagement and recent research shows that students agree with that sentiment (White, 2014). Lizzio (2006) discussed the five senses model for creating a successful orientation and transition to university which is based on the themes of connectedness, purpose, capability, resourcefulness, and culture. McInnis (2004) discussed pressures of tertiary institutions to provide student satisfaction and a quality student experience to the extent where universities have to become more creative in how student support and services are generated. The process of traversing the application of universal design in learning and teaching is optimised by involving LSES students in all stages of development and implementation. Engaging students in the process and the adoption of guidelines and standards with sufficient and appropriate training of staff members and ongoing support are just some of the items detailed on pre-existing checklists for applying universal design in Student Services (Burgstahler, 2015). Students' engagement with their studies, with the university culture, and with one other is critical to student success (Broughan & Hunt, 2012). "Student engagement is critical to student learning success, progression and retention..." (Nelson et al., 2014, p. 4). The idea that engagement is a "two-way street" (Kuh, 2009, p. 697), where there are responsibilities placed upon the university and the student to ensure that there are opportunities availed and that conditions are suitable, can be extended to informing the development of Student Services.

One particular example of higher education mapping the student voice into the planning and development of services and programs is that of SAF. Student input into the decisions around how SAF is used at each institution is mandated by the Australian Government. The *Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines (Representation Guidelines)* state that a formal process of consultation with democratically elected student representatives is undertaken to determine the use of proceeds from the generation of SAF at each institution (Australian Government, 2013). This is a useful benchmark for Student Services departments to consider when exploring the methods for engaging students into the planning and decision making of their services. At the very least, it is a strong signal that the Australian Government supports student engagement in the management of its activities. Student engagement is not only to benefit the student experience, student success and student outcomes. Universities are under pressure to have sophisticated pictures of student lives and their experiences to inform future policy and strategic planning initiatives. Therefore, innovative ways of connecting and engaging students to inform future planning is something that needs to emerge for tertiary institutions.

Concluding comments

ANZSSA provides a strong platform for students to engage with Student Services' professionals. One opinion in relation to this history is that Student Services have used this opportunity to understand further the student experience and hear student views in relation to services. Student engagement needs to go beyond attempts to enhance the student experience. Student engagement can provide mutually beneficial outcomes for both the student and Student Services departments in higher education. Student Services can do better at sharing their context with students and subsequently engage them in the planning and decision making of the department's intended programs and services. This valued student voice creates a unique opportunity for Student Services to take the evolution of its Service to a whole new level.

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