TERTIARY EDUCATION UNION
TE HAUTŪ KAHURANGI

# Submission on Kōrero Mātauranga Tertiary Student Voice October 2019

## 1. Introduction

1.1 The Tertiary Education Union Te Hautū Kahurangi o Aotearoa (TEU) welcomes this opportunity to submit on Tertiary Student Voice as part of Kōrero Mātauranga, the national Education Conversation.

1.2 TEU is the largest union and professional association representing academic and general staff in the tertiary education sector (in universities, institutes of technology/polytechnics, wānanga, private training establishments, and other tertiary education providers). Our members are passionate about their work and about the direction of the tertiary education sector. Key to ensuring the direction taken remains a positive one, is ensuring student voice remains a key component of a high quality and transformative tertiary education system.

1.3 In 2011, the voices of students across Aotearoa came under attack. The Education Amendment (Freedom of Association) Act made membership of students' associations voluntary (VSM), weakening the collective voices of students from every tertiary education organisation (university, institute of technology & polytechnic, wānanga, private training establishment).

1.4 Research commissioned by TEU in recent years has highlighted the impact of decreased democracy within the tertiary education sector[1], with TEU members describing empty consultation processes which have either reduced or prevented meaningful engagement in decision-making by both staff and students, and the impact this has had on teaching, learning, and the strength of public tertiary education.

1.5 Decisions are best made when students, staff, institutional leaders, iwi, and the local community can debate and discuss together.

1.6 Without meaningful engagement with staff and students and their communities, institutional leaders have failed to properly understand the needs and experiences of the very people who constitute our campus communities, and the wider communities the sector serves as a whole.

1.7 The New Zealand Union of Students' Association (NZUSA) has called on students' associations across Aotearoa to share their input and experiences through the Tertiary

[1] THE STATE OF THE PUBLIC TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR SURVEY, 2018
VOICES FROM TERTIARY EDUCATION: Response to Kōrero Mātauranga
Under Pressure: The 2016 New Zealand Tertiary Education State of the Sector Survey

Student Voice Engagement Survey, and the TEU supports NZUSA's submission to this Conversation.

1.8 The TEU and our members – both general and academic staff – also feel it is important to make this submission in support of the NZUSA, in support of dedicated, enduring and meaningful student voice and representation, and in support of increased democracy in the tertiary education sector.

1.9 This consultation process has the potential to usher in the most significant positive change to student voice in Aotearoa since the attack on students' associations and democracy in 2011. TEU therefore also supports the objectives of Kōrero Mātauranga, of Tertiary Student Voice, and it's the Conversation in its acknowledgement of and respect for the next generation of leaders, innovators, and change-makers.

## 2. Our thoughts on Student Voice

2.1 Student voice is currently hugely unequal across our tertiary education institutions (TEI). Many do not have any form of student voice, while others have very minimal representation. Some have a functioning students' association and student voice structure but are greatly limited by resource constraints and the ever-present risk of funding cuts.

2.2 TEU supports NZUSA in their view that overall, student voice is not taken seriously. TEIs often use student engagement and consultation as a 'tick-box' exercise, rather than a meaningful and valued means of shaping student learning experiences, educational outcomes, and positively impacting student wellbeing.

2.3 Where students are given a platform to be heard, minority demographics are often underrepresented, their views are not taken seriously, or when they are heard that there is a failure to appreciate or understand their perspective.

2.4 TEU supports NZUSA's call for the establishment of a National Centre for Student Voice to serve as the primary training and support organisation for students' associations and representatives. The creation of a National Centre for Student Voice would play a crucial role in ensuring the voices of Māori, Pasifika, disabled, LGBTQIA+, international and other minority student groups are represented, engaged with and heard in decision-making processes.

## 3. Enhancing the Status Quo via Increased Accountability

3.1 Current accountability mechanisms such as tertiary education councils and academic boards currently lack diversity and proportionality of student voice. Restoring the legal right of staff and students to have representatives on TEI councils will strengthen decision-making, ensuring it better reflects the demands of teaching and learning, however the legislation still needs to be strengthened if genuine democratic accountability is to be restored to all university, polytechnic and wānanga councils.

3.2 There must be increased representation by students across student voice systems, but there must also be improved support for student representatives. Currently, student representatives receive little meaningful training and students' associations are poorly and inconsistently resourced. Increasing student participation in the democratic process, begins with well trained and resourced representation and results in more engaged learners and citizens.

3.3 Many students are currently unaware of how their voice influences decision-making within tertiary education. Decisions by management are often made behind closed doors, with no student representation present, and therefore no consultation with the wider student body. The student body as a whole must be provided with more transparent and timely information from their education providers so that they may be aware of decisions being made that directly impact them.

3.4 Traditional systems of accountability such as student evaluation and teaching surveys are an important means of monitoring teaching quality, but only when they are part of a multifaceted programme of assessment, where evaluation is designed to gauge progress toward clearly articulated and understood goals, and when the goals can indeed be measured by student surveys. However, this is not the case in our tertiary education sector, and student surveys are too often used as a proxy for genuine student voice and engagement.

3.5 We need to remove blunt metrics that do little to improve teaching and education, serving only to provide the illusion of meaningful and direct engagement, and instead strengthen real democratic participation.

3.6 TEU supports NZUSA in their view that TEIs must do more to ensure students are made aware of student involvement and representation on forums and committees and must provide more information about how student voice affects decision-making. It is important that students are aware of the impact of their engagement, and that of their student representatives.

3.7 The best way students can have a strong, independent voice is through a strong, well resourced, valued and respected students' associations.

## 4. Enhancing the Status Quo via Greater Support

4.1 Currently, support for student representatives is inconsistent across the sector. While some students' associations have resources to fund training, this is not true for the majority of tertiary education providers. In recent years, NZUSA has stepped in to provide support, but they do not currently have the capacity to train every student representative and provide constant support for local-association issues that arise throughout the year.

4.2 Student representatives and associations need greater support and increased funding if the tertiary education sector values democratic participation by our student communities. The establishment of an independent student governance board (National Centre for Student

Voice) would greatly increase the capacity of the student body to provide support for student representatives.

4.3 TEU supports NZUSA in their call for all student representatives to receive effective and consistent training and support through initiatives provided by well-resourced local students' associations.

4.4 TEU supports NZUSA in their call for the establishment of an independent student governance board (National Centre for Student Voice) which would serve as the primary training and support organisation for students' associations and representatives. This Centre would provide training to all students' associations on campus at the beginning of each academic year and provide continuous support throughout the year. This Centre would ensure training is independent from the TEIs and would leave national-level associations such as NZUSA to focus on political support and training.

4.5 Students' associations do not currently have the resources to support and train all student representatives. The creation of a National Centre for Student Voice proposed by NZUSA would establish strong relationships between the National Centre and local-level students' associations to ensure training and support is accessible to all student representatives and that training and support is consistent across the country.

## 5. Enhancing the Status Quo via Sustainable Resourcing

5.1 TEU supports NZUSA in their proposed outline of CSSF decision-making processes:

*Before:* Students need to be aware of how the CSSF is actually being spent in order to make informed opinions about how it should be allocated in the following year. There also should be a robust consultation process whereby the student body have a variety of ways to have their say about the CSSF.

*During:* Decisions relating to the CSSF should be made by the TEIs and student representatives jointly, considering all of the feedback from the wider student populations. After all, it is student money, so students should have a strong say in how it is spent.

*After:* Once decisions are made, the loop should be closed. TEIs need to provide information to students that show how student voices were actually considered in decision-making, and how student voice and engagement affected the final decision.

5.2 In order for students to have effective, independent representation, they need a strong students' association dedicated to ensuring the interests, needs and concerns of students are heard by their provider. Making it easier for students to pay membership fees for both organisation and national-level students' associations is an important means of strengthening both students' associations and student voice and engagement.

5.3 The establishment of the National Centre for Student Voice proposed by NZUSA would be an important tool in addressing the current imbalance of power in deciding students' associations' funding levels. A National Centre for Student Voice would arbitrate the appropriate level of funding the local students' associations should receive from their

respective institutions. This could be based on a number of factors including student numbers, services provided by the students' association, and membership of national level associations.

## 6. Making Structural Changes to Enhance Student Voice

6.1 Student voice and input into governance is grossly inconsistent across the sector. Some TEIs have some student input, while others have very little. Student representatives that sit on TEI councils, boards, and committees are usually sole representatives, meaning students do not feel supported and may be afraid to speak up. These are also instances of student representatives who are not elected, and therefore lack the mandate of the student body.

6.2 Effective, well-resourced and consistent training and support of student representatives is crucial to ensuring meaningful engagement from the student body in matters that directly impact them.

6.3 TEU supports NZUSA's call for legislated subcommittees to respective TEI councils to ensure consistency of student input across the tertiary education sector. Legislated subcommittees to TEI councils would establish a strong baseline of student voice.

6.4 Under this approach, by law, TEIs will need to establish a student committee that has input into the highest decision-making body. This committee should consist of the elected executive or student council of the TEI's relevant students' association.

6.5 While there is benefit in the flexibility of TEI designed processes, TEU supports NZUSA's suggestion that this should be additional to the legislated subcommittees to ensure student voice is guaranteed.

6.6 TEU supports NZUSA in their assertion that the biggest structural change needed to ensure an improvement in student voice and representation will involve a culture shift within our TEIs toward once again valuing student voice and democracy within the sector and upholding student voice and democracy as core principles to a thriving and transformative public tertiary education sector.

6.7 Together we need to foster and support a culture shift in which TEIs seek out meaningful engagement with a diverse range of students, and where student voice does and can be shown to actually impact decision-making. This also requires a respectful relationship between the TEIs and students' associations to occur, where independence is achieved, but where dialogue is not ignored.

## 7. Establishing a National Centre for Student Voice

7.1 Nationwide, students' associations have been asking for an organisation that will independently regulate student voice systems in TEIs and support student representatives. In many tertiary education institutions, student voice is non-existent, in others it is poorly resourced. Across the board it is entirely inconsistent.

7.2 TEU supports NZUSA's call for National Centre for Student Voice to ensure TEIs are complying with their student voice requirements and to hold institutions accountable for failing to listen to students.

7.3 Funding is also a major issue facing students' associations. A National Centre for Student Voice would also be effective for ensuring TEIs are adequately funding students' associations and removing the dominant power TEIs hold over associations during the funding negotiation process.

7.4 A National Centre for Student Voice would provide training and support to student representatives; regulate student voice systems in TEIs; and arbitrate the service level agreements between TEIs and students' associations.

7.5 A National Centre for Student Voice would provide on-campus student voice training; provide a contact for student representatives in need of support; regulate and audit TEIs to ensure they are complying with student voice requirements (i.e. CSSF process); arbitrate service level contracts between TEIs and students' associations; receive and address complaints regarding TEI student voice processes.

## 8. Key recommendations

**Recommendation One:** Current accountability mechanisms such as tertiary education councils and academic boards lack diversity and proportionality of student voice. There must be increased representation by students across student voice systems, but there must also be improved support for student representatives.

**Recommendation Two:** A National Centre for Student Voice must be established to ensure TEIs are complying with their student voice requirements and to hold institutions accountable for failing to listen to students.

**Recommendation Three:** Currently, support for student representatives is inconsistent across the sector. Student representatives and associations need greater support and increased funding if the tertiary education sector values democratic participation by our student communities. The establishment of an independent student governance board (National Centre for Student Voice) would greatly increase the capacity of the students' association to provide support for student representatives.

**Recommendation Four:** Making it easier for students to pay membership fees for both organisation and national-level students' associations is an important means of strengthening both students' associations and student voice and engagement. A National Centre for Student Voice would arbitrate the appropriate level of funding and resourcing the local students' associations should receive from their respective institutions.

**Recommendation Five:** Structural change in the form of legislated subcommittees to TEI councils would establish a strong baseline of student voice and ensure consistency of student input across the tertiary education sector.

**Recommendation Six:** Engaging with students through Kōrero Mātauranga is an important step in ensuring student voice is represented and heard in the tertiary education sector. However, the conversation must not stop here. Rather, the conversation must be an ongoing, collaborative process between all parties. We all win when students are given voice.

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