Using the Student Voice
to Improve Quality

Contents

Foreword

Ako Aotearoa's mission is to ensure the best possible educational outcomes for learners. There are many avenues for achieving this, but one of the most important is ensuring that learners themselves are involved in organisational approaches to quality assurance and enhancement. As we noted in our 2011 Annual Report:

> Fundamental to Ako Aotearoa's drive for the best possible outcomes for all learners is our support of work that encourages learners to have their say about their tertiary education experience. Of equal importance is our aim to ensure that tertiary education organisations listen to and act on what they say.

We are therefore pleased to have been able to partner with the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations on this work, exploring how organisations can make effective use of 'The Student Voice' to ensure and enhance the quality of learning experiences.

One of the key findings of this research has been the need to build 'cultures' of student engagement at tertiary organisations, and it is important to recognise that this requires action on the part of multiple parties. It requires genuine engagement with students by management and teaching staff, but it also requires an active and engaged body of learners.

This publication is not the 'final word' in how to make use of the student voice; rather it is a critical first step that provides a basis for practical action in the context of each individual organisation. I look forward to seeing the different ways in which organisations make use of the findings, features and questions this work has produced and the future initiatives and projects to which it will lead.

In closing, I would like to extend Ako Aotearoa's sincere thanks to the members of the project's steering group, and in particular to all those organisations who provided case studies for this work. Once again, it is impressive to see the commitment that exists across the sector to not only purse quality provision, but to openly share organisations' approaches, systems and experiences.

Dr Peter Coolbear
Director
Ako Aotearoa

NZUSA has greatly valued the opportunity to partner with Ako Aotearoa in this project. The field of student support, in particular the role of students in quality enhancement, is vitally important to tertiary education's on-going development. Unfortunately, for some time it has remained relatively under-researched, both in New Zealand and internationally.

We embarked upon this journey to begin a much needed process of legitimising the way in which Tertiary Education Organisations and Students' Associations hear and heed the voice of students.

This research highlights the ways that two private training establishments, four polytechnics, one wānanga and two universities have each been grappling with what are often complex aspects of student representation. It points to and celebrates the variety of ways that management, teaching staff and students have approached this, albeit not always in a cohesive manner. Making the process of 'hearing and heeding the student voice' systematic is the next step in seizing the opportunities presented here for quality enhancement.

It has been heartening to see the many examples of staff and students working together to achieve changes that enhance the quality of the education and the highly transformative experience delivered to students during their time of study. It is likewise encouraging to note the way in which this research reinforces the notion that representing the diversity of students is about acknowledging students as a collective body – not as disassociated individuals.

This is the beginning of a much larger process of finding new and better ways to embed the student voice in tertiary education and one that we are excited to be part of. I have a huge amount of faith in the ability of our members to play their part in putting this research into practice. We face the challenges of adapting to a constantly changing world and in order to do so, we will have to remain focussed on mobilising constructive and aspirational student engagement.

I would like to personally acknowledge and thank all those who played their part in bringing this research to fruition. Your efforts have not gone unnoticed and will make a significant and positive contribution to the experience of thousands of current and future students in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Pete Hodkinson
President
New Zealand Union of Students' Associations

Introduction

In 2012, the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA) and Ako Aotearoa: The National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence commissioned research into student representative systems in New Zealand to consider how these systems contribute to the quality enhancement procedures of academic programmes in tertiary education organisations (TEOs).[1] The full report from this project – *Student Voice in Tertiary Education Settings: Quality systems in practice* – is available from the Ako Aotearoa website. This report summarises the key findings and themes from that work.

Representative systems can offer students the opportunity to engage with and have input into governance, decision making and quality enhancement at all levels within tertiary education organisations. However, little has been written about what makes for good practice in relation to this and student representation is often presented "as intrinsically valuable and fundamentally benign, with significant advantage to those students who are involved" (Kuh and Lund, cited in Carey 2012, p4).

What is clear from the literature, though, is that student participation and engagement at the decision-making or governance level is valuable for both learners themselves and the organisations where they study. Trowler (2010) cites the work of researchers (Kezar, 2005; Little

> [Organised representation] is about providing an independent student voice … to ensure the student learning experience is central to decision–making, development and enhancement activities. It differs from simply gathering student opinion because a representative voice can take an informed position on issues, work to achieve compromise or settlement agreements, and own a jointly negotiated solution…
>
> Whilst it is embodied by student membership of committees and involvement in processes, it is about more than a student simply being present when decisions are made. It is about an approach to student engagement which ensures student involvement in change, in partnership with staff at their institutions.
>
> –sparqs, 'Formal mechanisms for quality and governance'

et al., 2009; Lizzio and Wilson, 2009; Mafolda, 2005) who report such benefits as:

- improving the effectiveness of the organisation
- increasing the transparency of organisational decision making and
- providing the opportunity for students to democratically participate in institutional life, which sets them up for active involvement as citizens in a democratic state.

This thinking is further supported by papers presented at a recent forum on quality assurance in higher education in Europe (Bollaert *et al.*, 2007). These cited various examples of the benefits that accrue from listening to students and working in partnership to enhance the quality of what tertiary organisations offer.

The research was designed to provide an overview of how student voice is collected and brought together in such a way as to provide input into quality improvements in tertiary organisations. Given the diverse contexts for tertiary education providers and nature of systems for representing students in tertiary organisations, the research was not a comprehensive review or categorisation of the variety contained within those systems. Instead it specifically looked at systems in practice

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[1] The commissioned project focused on student voice in 'traditional' provider-based tertiary education settings. However, incorporating learner views and representation can enhance quality in any education environment. For example, although community-based provision or the workplace education and training offered through industry training organisations involve very different education contexts from a university or ITP, learners in these settings are just as affected by issues around programme design, educational support, and organisational policies and processes as those studying on a traditional campus – and can provide just as valuable 'on-the-ground' perspectives on those issues. We encourage all organisations to reflect on how the material in this report might be used to develop structures that effectively support and enhance outcomes for their learners.

within nine organisations, with a view to identify common principles that underlie good practice.

Some of these systems (generally in smaller organisations) provided a single mechanism to represent the interests of all students. Others were more focussed on a single student group (e.g. postgraduate students), or were designed to feed into a more specific area (e.g. course content, faculty boards). Descriptions of these practice examples can be found in the full report noted above or downloaded separately from the Ako Aotearoa website.

The Research

The research was conducted through a brief literature scan, and interviews and focus groups with staff and students in nine TEOs, including two universities, four institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), one wānanga and two private training establishments (PTEs). In total 113 people were interviewed across the organisations. Fifty of these were staff members, including staff of students' associations, and 63 were students. Details of the nine organisations in which data were collected are set out in the appendix.

Data from the interviews and focus groups were subjected to a thematic analysis across the different organisations to identify and examine key features of practice, the extent to which they were present, the extent to which they impacted on quality enhancement, and the commonalities and differences between the organisations. These were then discussed with the project's Steering Group, who provided further input before the final report was written.

Further detail on the research approach can be found in the full report available from the Ako Aotearoa website.

The Findings

This research explored features of good practice in nine tertiary organisations across New Zealand. It did this through an examination of specific processes designed to ensure that student voice is an input into organisational decision making. The participating organisations have in place a wide variety of representative systems, and these are used with the intent of improving systems for teaching and learning, and also for improving other services available to students. However, while efforts are made to provide resources that enable students to participate meaningfully, some student groups face a number of challenges in being able to do so. Similarly, while there are indications in some areas that student interest in participating in representative systems is increasing, there are others that suggest that a majority of students have little interest in being themselves actively involved.

Similarly, one of the biggest challenges for TEOs is to get students engaged in representative systems and quality-enhancement procedures. Numerous reasons were offered for the lack of engagement, including the age and life stage of students, their lack of time, anomie, apathy, contentedness with what is being offered, and just wanting to 'get in and get out' with a qualification. In relation to this, TEOs can draw lessons from the findings from the industrial democracy research on engagement in workplaces (*e.g.* Purcell and Hall, 2012), which has found that where workers clearly have a voice and are listened to, they are more likely to engage in systems for representation. An analogy can be drawn here to students within a TEO – a position that evidence from the current project supports.

Staff at TEOs showed the value they placed on the contribution that students make to quality enhancement through the ways in which they collected information and the ways in which they viewed their students. Across and within the organisations, students were viewed along a customer/partner continuum and this impacted on the type of feedback that is sought and the ways in which organisations engage with their students to get this feedback. Staff at most organisations viewed students primarily as fee-

paying customers but also saw the 'students as partners' model as an ideal, preferred or future state. Most thought their approaches were moving towards getting students to take a more active role in the development of quality teaching programmes, apart from one where staff and students were both of the view that there was already a full partnership approach in place.

Seeing students as customers has the potential to constrain student voice, placing it in reactive rather than proactive mode. Organisations may then only react to complaints, rather than seeking the input of students into larger issues related to actively improving teaching and learning. Where there were examples of true partnership in action, students made a significant contribution to quality enhancement at the class, faculty and committee level. This worked when students were perceived and treated as equal partners, the students themselves were well prepared, and worked in a consultative way with other students to ensure that the views they were putting forward were representative, and when organisations acted on student input and communicated this back to students.

Features of good practice

While the research aimed to find out about what was happening in relation to the impact of representative student voice in quality enhancement, it also aimed to identify pre-conditions for the effective operation of these systems. To do this, a draft set of good practice features was developed based on a Scottish Student Engagement Framework (sparqs, n.d.). The findings of the research were then used to refine these features.

Five practice features, along with indicators of what may be observed as demonstrating the presence of these features (outlined in the appendix), were identified:

- organisations have a range of representative systems that enable all students to have a voice

- students are resourced so that they are able to undertake representative work in a supported, meaningful and knowledgeable way

- students actively engage in student representative systems

- quality enhancements incorporate the student voice

- the organisation exhibits a culture of representation that values the student voice.

FEATURES	INDICATORS OF FEATURES IN ACTION
Organisations have a range of representative systems that enable all students to have a voice.	• The extent to which there are representative systems at: ° central/organisational level ° local/departmental/programme level • There is diversity of groups/associations and representatives reflect the diversity of the student body • There are linkages between these levels/types of representation
Students are resourced so that they are able to undertake representative work in a supported, meaningful and knowledgeable way.	• Resourcing of representative groups includes elements such as: ° Training ° Job descriptions and general guidance on how to manage the role ° Terms of Reference for committees ° Resources to support data collection, analysis and communication ° Networking opportunities ° Advocacy support
Students actively engage in student representative systems	• Students have a mandate from the people they are representing • Students engage / respond to representative systems (reactive) • Students contribute proactively • Students collect and analyse their own data and communicate back to other students • Students influence other students
Quality enhancements/actions incorporate the student voice.	• Students use and value the representative systems • Quality enhancements are made as a result of student input • Quality enhancements made as a result of student input are communicated back to students
The organisation exhibits a culture of representation that values the student voice.	• Organisations meaningfully involve students in shaping the curriculum • Student voice is legitimised • Deliberate efforts are made to empower and involve students • Students are viewed as co-producers or partners in teaching and learning • Student contribution is recognised and rewarded • There is codification of representation (*e.g.* in terms of reference and constitutions of committees, boards *etc.*

Range of representative systems

New Zealand has a diverse tertiary education sector that caters for students ranging from those undertaking doctoral studies through to those studying at foundation levels. Reflecting this diversity, the TEOs in this study adopted a range of representative systems at an organisational level that provide opportunities for their students to have input into quality enhancement procedures. These included:

- class and programme representatives
- faculty representatives
- committee representatives
- board representatives
- council representatives.

These systems are designed to operate at different levels, with each level being best suited to affect a different aspect of the learning experience. Ideally, however, they also link with each other so that feedback or effects at one level influence what happens at another. Figure 1 below illustrates these interactions.

FIGURE 1: FEED-BACK AND FEED-FORWARD LINKAGES

FIGURE 1: FEED-BACK AND FEED-FORWARD LINKAGES

Feedback Level		Effect Level
Organisation	⟷	Policy
Faculty/Department	⟷	Programme
Course	⟷	Delivery
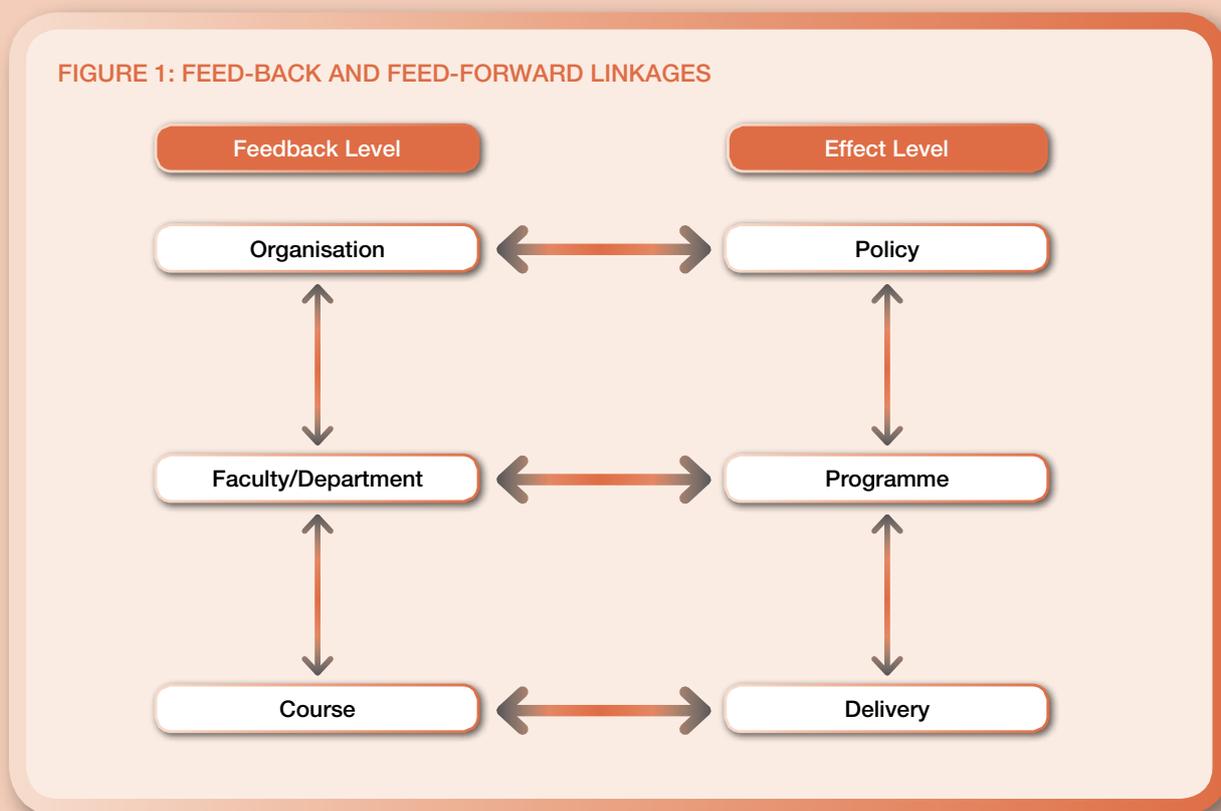
Lizzio and Wilson (2009) identify class representation (*i.e.* the course level in figure 1) as a particularly important representation level because of the direct input that students can have in resolving issues for all students, and the opportunity it provides for building a sense of community between staff and students. Class representative systems are integral to supporting and enabling the collective voice for students, as representatives have the opportunity to have contact on a daily basis with individual students within their classes and potentially throughout the organisation.

> *Representative systems that work have highly visible class representatives … Students can interact with the class rep daily and it is important that what they think about an issue is heard and is visible.* (Students' Association, university)

The class representative system is also frequently an entry point for students who may want to move up the hierarchy of representation to faculty or committee level. This was evident from the case studies in this research, where those at higher levels of the student representation hierarchy had commonly started off as a class representative.

Across the nine organisations, there was evidence of varying structures and levels of support and engagement with class representative systems. Class representatives who were resourced and supported to undertake their role and who saw changes happening as a result of their input were more likely to actively continue to seek the views of other students.

Diversity

It is a key challenge for most organisations to ensure greater diversity amongst student representatives so that they reflect the diversity of the general student body. Through formal representative mechanisms organisations are able to ensure diversity in representation at a structural level by having designated positions/portfolios on some committees and at the students' association executive level for students, for example, with disabilities, and Māori, Pasifika and international students. Some organisations also have specific representative associations that support these students across their campuses.

Class representative structures are generally not constructed specifically to promote diversity of representation, as they simply consist of positions to which students can either be nominated or elected. With the numbers of class representatives growing over time this may lead to an increase in the diversity of students taking up these positions.

Of particular concern is the need to engage more Māori, Pasifika and other groups of students in the systems. Staff at one organisation commented that there was considerable interest from Māori students to be the representative on the students' association, but that the same could not be said for Pasifika students.

In this regard, it is worth highlighting the approach to representation taken by the wānanga in this research. Here, staff commented that it is the representative *community* voice that plays a significant role in terms of precedence and in determining the nature and types of programmes that are delivered. Individuals have a voice as part of communities and these were represented through historical relationships and experiences that come with the individual students: "when you take the student on, you take on their whānau, their relationships, their whakapapa connection" (Staff). Further information about this approach can be found in the Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi practice example.

A variety of views existed within the participating organisations, and amongst students' associations, about the extent to which the class representatives are as effective as they might be. The evidence suggests, however, that while students are generally comfortable in their roles as class representatives, representation at higher levels is more difficult, particularly for those in ITPs. The step up to faculty or committee level can be daunting as students see themselves as a single voice in a room full of academics. A range of factors contribute to

this, including lack of familiarity with the subject matter being discussed by the committee or knowledge of what debates have been held in the past, lack of familiarity with formal meeting procedures and processes, being a sole student voice in amongst a wider group of professionals, and the inherent status divide between students and academics.

Student representatives are frequently learning as they go at this level, and it often takes them time to get up to speed with the state of play in committee discussions. The extent to which

students were able to play an effective role in faculty or organisation-wide committees was dependent on the student themselves (including their confidence and personal qualities), the expectations that were placed on them by the committees themselves, and the extent of support they received both within the committee or from other sources such as students' associations.

> With students there is a power dynamic which is fierce – they are green. It is tough work. Either students say nothing or [say] something random and silly.
> (Students' Association, ITP)

As with the class representative system, the research team found examples of good practice relating to student representation on committees. Effective student representation was facilitated where there were clear guidelines for students, where students were fully briefed and treated as equal partners, and were fully engaged in the topics dealt with by the committees. In addition, student input can be supported through such mechanisms as transparent meeting procedures and chairs of committees running meetings in ways that allow student members to have an equal chance to participate.

In addition to representative systems (voice *for* mechanisms), the participating TEOs also collected the individual views of students through a range of mechanisms, including special project groups, class and programme evaluations, and organisation-wide surveys (voice *of* mechanisms). In relation to the latter, however, students in the universities and ITPs that took part in this research felt over-surveyed and were unsure about the extent to which changes were made as a result of the information gathered. Where students were told what had been done as a direct result of their feedback, they felt better about the surveys, suggesting that a closing of the feedback loop is important to students. When changes were evident, they felt listened to and encouraged to have continued input.
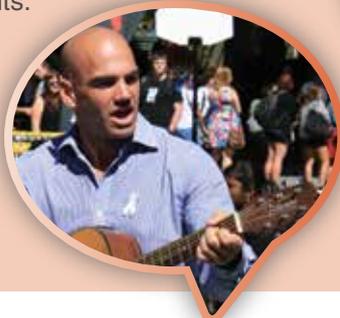
Resourcing of students

Systems for student representation are insufficient on their own. In order to perform a representative role in a meaningful way, student representatives need to be trained, resourced and supported so they understand what the role entails and are enabled to carry this out fully. The indicators of good practice in this regard that were identified through the literature and this research include:

- training
- job descriptions and general guidance on how to manage the role
- terms of reference for committees
- resources to support data collection, analysis and communication
- networking opportunities
- advocacy support.

For the most part, the staff, students' associations and student representatives interviewed in this research thought that support and training for class representatives – run by students' associations in ITPs and universities and staff in PTEs – was working well.

However, there was less evidence of resourcing to support meaningful involvement of student representatives at higher levels within organisations. While most committees on which student representatives sit have terms of reference and students were briefed about the issues facing committees, this appears to be insufficient for some students.

Lizzio and Wilson (2009) talk about the importance of student representatives at this level needing to understand more about the role they are to undertake and the need for staff to build supportive relationships with students so that they are empowered to undertake their roles in a fully engaged way. To some extent staff and others spoken to at the universities were of the view that student representatives were sufficiently resourced to take this on, but this may reflect these representatives' greater confidence in their own skills. At the ITPs in this research, students were less confident about their ability to contribute meaningfully, often because of their lack of experience with formal meeting processes and having less time available – due to the nature of their programmes – to come to grips with the issues and seek the views of other students.

Another issue was the difficulty experienced by student representatives in collecting information from students because of lack of time and sometimes lack of interest or willingness on the part of students to provide input through representative structures. As a student representative commented:

> If they [students] have an issue they would say it, would email the lecturer directly. We have forums and online discussions about assignments, but these are not used … Most [students] are happy with whatever goes. People don't recognise the input they could have. The group … just want to get through, rather than have extra responsibility. (Student representative, ITP)

Most representatives in this research obtained information primarily through word of mouth or discussions with friends, as limited amount of class time is made available to support this function. This impacts on the extent to which the class representatives can truly be said to speak for all class members. The minimal support or resources for student representatives to collect data limits the authority that they bring to their collective voice as they participate in discussions on issues within their organisations.

Carey (2012) points out that communication is key to students being able to fully represent the views of students, convey information to staff, and then relay this back from staff to students. In the light of this view and the information from student representatives in this study, organisations need to appreciate the importance of resources to support effective communication between students and their representatives and do more to facilitate the effective operation of those processes.

Similarly, there are limits on the extent to which student representatives are given opportunities to provide feedback to their constituents on actions taken by staff as a result of their efforts. Despite this, the majority of representatives were confident that speaking up on behalf of students had made a difference. As two student representatives commented:

> We know we are listened to when it gets written down, when we get explanations and what is being done to change, when they [staff] give us feedback about how they are changing it. It makes you aware that things are getting better. (Student representative, ITP)

> We know we are listened to as we see things happen … sometimes we have to keep pushing ... It's way better than school … We feel listened to and appreciated. (Student leader, PTE)

In summary, all of the organisations had resourcing mechanisms in place that trained and supported student representatives to undertake their roles and organisations are aware they need to continue to work on these areas particularly in relation to ongoing support programmes. However, they were less aware of how they needed to or could support students to gather and analyse data and how information could be communicated to staff and back to students.

Students actively engage in student representative systems

This feature was explored to find out about how students engage with the representative systems that are available to them. The indicators of this engagement from the practice features included:

- students have a mandate from the people they are representing

- students engage with/respond to representative systems (reactive)

- students contribute proactively

- students collect and analyse their own data and communicate back to other students

- students influence other students.

Most of the students interviewed for this research were already actively involved in the representative process. To this extent, the student interviewees were better placed to comment on the motivations for students to become involved in representative systems and the researchers were not able to explore the views of those who remain unengaged.

In keeping with Little and Williams' (2010) findings in higher education institutions in the UK, however, the overall perceptions of student representatives in the case-study organisations was that the majority of students are not interested in engaging with representative systems. This is likely to reflect a wide range of factors, including the time commitment needed to fully participate as a representative, priority being given to other commitments such as work and family, and the relative ease with which direct input from students can be gathered by organisations.

Despite this, competing trends could be seen in the case studies. While some ITPs were struggling to get students fully engaged,[2] universities reported seeing positive trends in relation to student engagement with

representative systems, with numbers of representatives increasing and greater interest being demonstrated in participation in training.

On the whole, the perception of those interviewed was that most students at the individual level tend to be reactive, rather than proactive. They provide feedback through the systems that are in operation rather than proactively debating or promoting change. It may be that the approach of organisations in requesting feedback via a plethora of class evaluations and surveys has encouraged this. This model is akin to the consumer/customer approach whereby feedback is sought. Its cumulative effect may be to discourage deeper debate around the bigger issues and stop students from fully engaging as partners in a learning community.

This lends weight to our findings that having systems in place for student representation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ensuring the operation of effective systems for student voice. In addition to systems being in place and resources available to support their operation, students must be voluntarily and actively engaged in mechanisms that are in place for students to have a say in the organisations in which they are enrolled.

To this extent, it is useful to borrow from research findings on engagement in workplaces (Purcell & Hall, 2012), which have found that where workers have a voice and are listened to, they are more likely to engage in systems

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[2] This included one example where an ITPs had not been able to fill all the positions on its students' association, and another where due to a shortage of applicants the organisation did not need to actually run a full election process to fill positions in its newly formed representative system.

for representation. It may be, then, that a key to increasing effective engagement with representative systems is for organisations to more effectively demonstrate how they are responding to the concerns being raised by student representatives and to do more to inform students about the quality enhancements that are being made as a result of what they say.

Quality enhancement actions incorporate the student voice

This feature was explored to find out about how initiatives designed to enhance quality incorporate student voice. The indicators of use of student voice for this feature evident in existing literature include:

- Students use and value the representative systems.

- Quality enhancements are made as a result of student input.

- Quality enhancements made as a result of student input are communicated back to students.

It was clear from the case studies that these tertiary organisations have made considerable efforts to engage students in putting forward their ideas for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning processes, and in some instances, in relation to wider processes for management of the organisation.

There is evidence from this and other New Zealand research (see Gorden *et al.*, 2011) of the importance of including representative student voice in the quality-enhancement process. However, one of the key issues for the student representatives and the other students spoken to was getting feedback about how their information was being used and their strong desire for the feedback loop to be closed.

Being listened to was important to all the student representatives, but just as important were *visible* signs that their views are valued by their organisation. Students know they have been heard when any changes that have been made as a result of their input are relayed back to them, or when they or see changes for themselves:

> *The main way we know [we have been listened to] is if changes are made. For example the [X] … they were not changed completely in the way we were advocating, but they wouldn't have changed if we hadn't spoken up and then others did. We felt there were a lot of people there who weren't happy with them, but until we started talking about it no one had any idea how to change them or make them better. A lot of team work.* (Student representative, university)

Closing the feedback loop is also seen by staff and students as part of encouraging ongoing student engagement in representative structures as it counters a common view that 'speaking up' doesn't actually change anything.

This concept of closing the feedback loop with students, especially with information from surveys, needs more attention. While staff in the research commented that the information gleaned was valued, students seemed to be unaware of how it was used, unless they saw direct changes in the classroom or to their environment. Overall, students were more aware of how information from course evaluations was used, as tutors had direct engagement with them about this,[3] compared to information from surveys or other wider organisational data collection. In particular, there did not seem to be evidence that good feedback processes were being used in relation to surveys, where, in some cases, the only feedback involved summaries posted on websites.

A culture of representation that values student voice

The existence of representative systems is not on its own a measure of the extent to which the organisations value student input. Rather, value is shown by the extent to which

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3 Most of the organisations had policies whereby tutors/lecturers are required to give feedback to students about what is happening as a result of the feedback that has been provided through evaluations. To make the feedback more meaningful, one of the organisations has introduced course evaluations three weeks before courses finish so that students potentially get more immediate feedback. This organisation is also moving to online evaluations so that data are quicker to collate and analyse and then lecturers can respond more quickly.

organisations meaningfully involve students in shaping what questions are asked and how information is gathered, heed their contributions (where appropriate), and incorporate student views when undertaking quality enhancement. A culture of representation that values student voice will show evidence of the following:

- organisations meaningfully involve students in shaping the curriculum

- student voice is legitimised as a valid and necessary input into decision making

- deliberate efforts are made to empower and involve students

- students are viewed as providers of information, consumers, customers or partners

- student contribution is recognised and rewarded

- there is codification of representation (*e.g.* in terms of reference and constitutions of committees, boards *etc.*).

Eight of the nine organisations evidenced a culture of representation that showed they value student voice through the structures and processes they had in place and the examples they gave of these in action. There was a continuum of practice in relation to this feature both within and between organisations. This related to the representative roles available to students, the extent to which their representative views are sought, what these views are sought on, and whether or not their views are subsequently validated by being incorporated into changes made by organisations.

Student representation at the highest level in universities and ITPs is limited by the composition of the boards and councils. Student representation is required on all university, but not ITP, councils. Only one of the four ITPs in this study included a student representative on council (as a community representative) with another setting up a council sub-committee as a means of providing a student voice at the council table. Individual student representatives operating at academic board or council level felt it was both harder to fully participate and their voice was less likely to be listened to.

> *We're equal partners on [X] committee, where as higher up we are not even clients, but antagonistic annoyances, especially if you have the [students' association] hat on rather than the student rep hat.* (Student representative, university)

> *The Council is such a high level meeting … [they] are all suited old men. But how much do they know about students … it seems a huge distance to students.* (Student representative, ITP)

Overall, organisations need to be open to listening to the collective voice of their students. They might like to consider being more strategic about the amount of data they collect through surveys and demonstrate that they are listening to their students by providing feedback about how the information provided by them is being used to inform quality enhancements.

Discussion: Effecting voice through a partnership model

Evidence around the features of good practice for student voice suggests that the variety of representative systems used by organisations in this research are genuinely used with the intent of improving systems for teaching and learning, and improving services available to students. However, while efforts are made to provide resources to enable students to participate meaningfully, some student groups face a number of challenges in being able to do so. Similarly, while there are indications in some areas that student interest in participating in representative systems is increasing, there are others that suggest many students have little interest in active engagement.

These strengths and limitations are, however, heavily influenced by the culture of representation that can be seen in different organisations. Underpinning this is the way in which the organisations (or different parts of an organisation) view their students on a continuum – from primarily a service consumer through to a partner in a learning community. Where students are seen only as 'service consumers', organisations tend to regard them through a lens which approaches teaching and learning, and the provision of services for students, as

a market commodity. The idea of student as customer was particularly strong in relation to student experiences with enrolment and services such as library, IT, health and counselling. In the market model, the student 'customer' is always right, but meeting service requirements may also involve trade-offs against the price that they are willing to pay for that service.

The partnership model, on the other hand, takes a longer term view, grounded in the need for sustainability and considering the interests of future students. The idea of student as partner in the learning process was present in all of the organisations. While it was referred to as evolving in some TEOs, partnership was an ethos that all of the organisations were looking to develop and foster particularly in relation to teaching and learning:

> *It's a mix of both. It's a partnership in that there is a strong student voice, something that we really want to develop. [It's] part of a sense of building a community and that we are all part of the community and to be able to allow this to flourish … we need to be working in the same place to the same visions. On the other hand, we have to provide a good level of service [and we are] building a customer ethos throughout the university of providing a service. So it's the two things – if we want a safe and dynamic environment, it needs to be done in partnership with students.* (Staff, university)

It is the view of an organisation's staff and management that determines the way in which student voice is listened to, valued and used. Robinson (2012) warns that if organisations take solely the consumer/customer approach, this has implications for the types of demands that students will make on their organisations. She argues that this could lead to "pandering to students, and to the study provider being devoted to the immediate satisfaction of its students rather than offering the challenges of intellectual independence" (p104). Little and Williams (2010) hold a similar view and concluded that that if organisations take the

customer approach, they run the risk of being seen as reacting only to the negative comments, and students themselves could become the passive recipients of programmes that are delivered *to* them rather than *for* them.

A partnership approach can be viewed in the light of what Gvaramadze (2011) calls 'co-production'. He cites McCulloch's (2009) view – applicable beyond the university context – that

> *'coproduction' emphasises the role of both student and university in shaping the student learning experience. This type of relationship, according to the author, reduces the distance among students and universities, encourages deep learning and enhances collective and collegial approaches to learning* (Gvaramadze 2011, p25).

The consumer/customer versus partner view is a tension for all the organisations in a fee-paying environment. They want to deliver the best service/product they can to students and have a genuine desire to listen and be responsive to students. On the other hand, they want to work with students in a meaningful and co-constructed way, along the lines of a partnership model that encourages the development of learning communities.

In a recent New Zealand survey, 111 of the 159 respondents from tertiary organisations reported that they viewed their students as partners rather than as customers or consumers (Gordon *et al.*, 2011). It would be fair, then, to expect that the majority of practices related to student representation would reflect this partnership approach. The practice examples from the case study organisations, however, reveal ambivalence about this, with market approaches remaining common and varying practices at different levels within organisations.

While partnership is recognised by organisations as an ideal that is being worked towards, many are also responding to conflicting signals that emphasise the identity of students as customers who pay for a service and as such they demand service against standards defined by the customer. This can cause difficulties for organisations in responding to student feedback – on the one hand, they are expected to be responsive to the demand of individual student 'customers', but on the other hand, those individuals may be unaware of the wider external context impacting on the organisation. Collective voice, as expressed through representative systems, provides a mechanism whereby these competing claims can be discussed and debated.

> *The economics of education are now more important for students – the concept of value for money. It didn't used to be like this. Students are now asking whether their education has given them what they expected as the job market is tighter. Students are interested in value for money and their earning capacity as a result of their education.* (Staff, ITP)

> *Slightly unusual customer relationship. Would expect that things like enrolments would run smoothly – the same way as when a customer checks into a hotel. But there are fundamental academic questions where the customer analogy breaks down. But that doesn't mean to say that you ignore student views. We wouldn't expect students to have*

a particularly informed view about quantum mechanics but we would value their views on how quantum mechanics is presented to them. (Staff, university)

Across the nine organisations in this study, the intent to listen and be responsive is seen in the representative systems that organisations have and in the multiple forms of feedback they request through evaluations and surveys. It is clear that the student voice is listened to and valued at both individual and collective levels, through the systems organisations have in place and the quality enhancements that are made as a result of student input.

The indicators of the features in action were present in all the organisations, but to varying degrees within organisations and across them. What was clear from all of those spoken to is that staff and students are prepared to grapple with representative systems and practices, provide opportunities for students to have input, and validate student views by incorporating them into changes that are made.

Themes for Action

From this research, six key themes emerged for translating 'good practice' into actions. These in turn suggest a set of 'reflective questions' that management, staff, students' associations and the wider student body can use to consider and discuss how their organisation uses the student voice for quality assurance and enhancement. The key themes are:

- establishing the partnership in which the student voice is to be heard

- legitimising the student voice

- establishing clear roles for those delivering the student voice

- providing training for those delivering the student voice

- providing adequate resources for supporting the student voice

- hearing and heeding the student voice.

Establishing the partnership in which the student voice is to be heard

The organisations in this research saw their student voice as being an important contributor to quality enhancement through the multiple opportunities for feedback through representative systems (collective voice), evaluations and surveys (individual voice) and special project focus groups (individual voice). However, in some quarters the view of students as primarily customers of the TEO prevailed and this has the potential to position students as reactive *consumers* rather than proactive *partners* in education. This means that organisations could fall into the trap of reacting only to student complaints rather than seeking their proactive input into larger issues related to teaching and learning.

Central to setting the conditions for meaningful, representative student voice is the establishment of a partnership in which student voice is able to be stated, listened to and acted on: a culture of effective representation. The findings of this report show that this seems to be an evolving culture within tertiary organisations, and in the teaching and learning space it is best enabled when students are seen as 'co-producers' of

their learning – treated as part of a scholarly community or future colleagues.

Examples of true partnership in action, where students had the opportunity to make significant contribution to quality enhancement at the wider organisational level, are demonstrated throughout the case studies. These included:

- shared governance arrangements that send a message that students are important

- students being perceived and treated as equal partners within committee structures, with students themselves being well prepared and working in a consultative way with other students to ensure that the views they put forward are representative of the student body as a whole

- good mechanisms for consultation, meaning that students are invited to speak, are listened to, and are part of decision-making processes

- students being given feedback about what has happened as a result of their input.

Legitimising the student voice

Legitimate student voice requires students to be engaged with processes and systems for capturing that voice. Most of the students spoken to for this research were those who are actively engaged in representative systems, and there was a sense from organisations that there was an increase in those interested in being involved in student representation. But, for the most part, students are not engaged in representative systems and quality-enhancement procedures and this is a challenge for the organisations with a genuine desire to include student voice. Numerous reasons were offered for this lack of engagement, including the age and nature of students, lack of time, apathy *etc.*

Organisations provided multiple opportunities for students to engage through formal representative systems, forums, evaluations, surveys and special projects. However, while on the one hand these mechanisms provide multiple opportunities for engagement, on the other, students can become disengaged from

the feedback process as they are asked for too much, too often.

One method of building this legitimacy is through formalised training and recognition systems for class representatives. Some have incentives for survey responses. However, it appears that the best way to engage students is to actively close the feedback loop so that students know they are being listened to and that the contribution they make is having an impact.

Four of the organisations in this research are trying new systems to engage more students in quality-enhancement procedures and these are seen as complementary to what is already under way. For three of these, there were mixed views on the extent to which these systems were genuinely representative of collective voice, primarily because the students had not been elected into these positions.

Establishing clear roles for those delivering the student voice

In order for students to undertake their representative role in a meaningful way, they need to understand exactly what that role entails. While some students may come to their role with a clear understanding of this, others may find such positions unclear and intimidating – especially when this involves interacting with senior staff and management. While addressing this involves training and resourcing as described below, it also involves communicating the extent and boundaries of the representative role. Clear job descriptions help students to understand the requirements of roles, and what they do and do not involve. Similarly, terms of reference for committees help students understand what the committees do – although along with this, student representatives need to be briefed by committee chairs so that they understand exactly what their role entails.

Also associated with this 'role understanding' is the need for

student representatives to embrace the concept that they are the voice *for* students, and to ensure that they are working for the collective student body, rather than from their own individual perspective.

Providing training for those delivering the student voice

When students undertake representative roles they need to be trained and supported in order to undertake them fully. Class representatives were trained to undertake their roles by the students' associations in universities and ITPs, and by staff in the PTEs. The organisations used a range of approaches that aim to develop the students' skills to undertake the representative role, and at the same time equip them with skills they can use in their wider working and community lives. The types of training used by organisations in this research included:

- short introductory face-to-face sessions about the representative role

- handbooks of information that describe the role and the situations that students are likely to encounter

- scenario-based training on issues that student representatives might be asked to resolve that aim to build the skills of students

- leadership development

- training to support class leaders to run meetings and consult with students

- ongoing support through meetings of class representatives and regular contact though emails or social media.

Representatives on higher-level committees were less well trained, although there were examples of handbooks provided to committee members. Most worked to terms of reference and briefings from staff chairs of committees. This appeared to work at the university level, but students at the ITPs expressed a desire for more support in order to perform their roles fully – for example, working with students to read the

papers that were being presented at meetings and so enabled them to provide meaningful student input. Issues around getting to a level of experience where they felt comfortable in this environment were compounded by the relatively short time that students spend on committees. For most of them this is a year, over which time there might only be four to six meetings.

Providing adequate resources for supporting the student voice

Training students to undertake the representative role is insufficient on its own. They also need to be resourced so they are to be able to undertake the role as the voice *for* students. This means allowing them the time and giving them the tools to collect information from students and then time to provide feedback to students. It was this aspect of their role that student representatives found the most challenging, with many collecting information just from students they knew or with whom they engaged directly. However, there were also examples of tutors and lecturers who gave class time to student representatives – an example of the previously mentioned culture of representation in action.

While there were examples of students collecting information from their immediate classes or groups, there was only one example of students having input into the organisation's data collection. This may be due to organisations moving towards more centralised approaches to data collection and increasingly requiring all staff to collect data in the same way. Added to this is that organisations are increasingly using standardised surveys that can be benchmarked to other organisations.

There were examples of students' associations undertaking their own surveys and these have supported representation of student voice in a range of policy reviews.[4] Such surveys have been undertaken of both individual students and of class representatives, and these have provided students with the opportunity to own, manage and use their information to make a collective student contribution.

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[4] Examples of policies reviewed using such a tool include those around undergraduate studies, IT provision and smoking.

Student representatives were, however, rarely resourced to collect information or the views of their peers and most found it difficult to do so. They tended to use strategies such as informal networks and conversations with friends. In some cases they were able to use time in class to seek and provide feedback to the students they represented. Facebook was increasingly being used as a mechanism to communicate with other students.

Hearing and heeding the student voice

All of the organisations in this study have mechanisms in place for quality enhancement that incorporates student voice. These included representative systems at all levels, programme reviews, self-assessment processes, course and programme evaluations, surveys, and special project focus groups. Students had the opportunity to be part of all of these, both at the collective and individual level.

Class representatives are the most effective way of integrating student voice into quality enhancement at the class/programme level. This is because of the ways in which they were engaged at this level and the mechanisms that are in place for them to address issues directly or report these up to school or faculty level. Class representatives also provide a ready mechanism for students' associations to gather and collate information on student experiences that can be used by student representatives sitting on committees at higher levels within organisations. Ensuring representatives have a place for their voices to be heard builds

ongoing student confidence in the value of that voice. As a staff member from one organisation commented:

> *We have lots of policies that are supposed to prompt good practice, but the best monitors of good practice are the students themselves, so empowering class reps to speak, selecting people that have the courage to speak, and putting them in a community of practice in which it is normal to speak is by far the best system* (Staff, university).

One of the key points made by the students in this study is that they like to know when their voice has been heeded. They recognise that this has happened when they get direct feedback about changes that have been made or when they see changes to systems.

There were examples in all of the participating organisations of improvements being made as a result of student feedback. These changes included improvements in the classroom related to teaching practice, assignments and assessments and to a lesser extent to programmes. At the organisational level, changes were made to policies that impacted on all students such as group work, academic integrity, and disciplinary statutes. Student representatives were also seen as providing important contributions to the framing of debates and reviews of a range of issues affecting organisations.

In addition to changes made to academic programmes, information from students was used to improve the services and environments in which the students study. There were examples of changes made to IT systems, computer usage, library services and smoking policies. The students at PTEs were more concerned than others about their immediate environment. Examples of changes effected through their use of the student voice included equipment that they felt enhanced their physical context for learning, such as heaters.

However, while students appreciated changes when they saw them happening, they also commented that they like to be clearly told about what was happening as a result of their feedback. This closing of the feedback loop was visible, articulated and deliberate in some organisations, but not in all of them.

Where students saw changes they felt listened to and encouraged to have continued input. They were also realistic enough to know what it was sensible and reasonable to ask for. Overall, however, they struggled to see outcomes from their contribution to multiple surveys. Most organisations put summaries of survey results on websites to provide some transparency for students, but there was not enough 'pull' for students to read these. In many cases, organisations did not post or otherwise make available to students information about any decisions they may have made based on the survey results.

www.akoaotearoa.ac.nz/studentvoice

Reflective Questions

The following reflective questions are organised according to the above key themes, and are provided to help management, staff, students' associations, and the wider student body reflect on how their organisation identifies and uses the student voice for quality assurance and enhancement. They are intended to help initiate a conversation about how these approaches can be refined and improved.

The first step in using these questions effectively is to identify who is best placed in an organisation to both ask and respond to them. As well as knowing who already holds relevant information or can collect it easily, an important part of this is recognising that different groups within an organisation – senior managers, teaching staff and students – may each have different and equally valid perspectives on an issue. When the answers provided by different groups can be brought together in a constructive manner, it provides a strong basis for dialogue that will improve outcomes for both learners and staff.

Making effective use of the student voice requires a partnership between providers and their students, and these questions should likewise be used in a collaborative way – as part of a conversation between two partners who both seek better-quality learning experiences and outcomes.

Establishing the partnership in which the student voice is to be heard

- How do governance arrangements show that the student voice is important to and valued by your organisation?

- How are student representatives involved as partners within committees and other mid-level organisational structures?

- What consultation mechanisms exist, so that students are invited to contribute to organisational decision making and their perspectives treated with respect?

- What mechanisms exist for students to influence the quality of individual courses for their own and future cohorts?

- How are student representatives given feedback about what has happened as a result of their input?

- How can the above systems and processes be improved, to ensure the student voice visibly enhances quality at the organisation?

Legitimising the student voice

- How is an active and independent student voice encouraged at your organisation?

- Are the mechanisms used by student representatives for gathering the student voice fit for purpose?

- How does your organisation demonstrate that it is listening to the student voice?

- To what extent are there demonstrable lines of accountability from those who speak for students back to the student body?

Establishing clear roles for those delivering the student voice

- Are student representatives well prepared, and how do they work with other students to ensure that the views they put forward are genuinely representative?

- Who is responsible for orienting student representatives to their role(s), and how is this orientation provided?

- Are student representatives on committees given job descriptions, terms of reference etc.?

- Within committees, how are the different pressures on students' time compared to that of other committee members acknowledged and managed?

- How can these systems and processes be improved to ensure that student representatives at all levels speak effectively for students?

Providing training for those delivering the student voice

- Is there training available for student representatives, who provides it, and what percentage of representatives are being trained?

- How is such training monitored and reviewed to ensure it is fit for purpose?

- How does training account for the specific needs of different representative positions?

Providing adequate resources for supporting the student voice

- What resources can student representatives access to speak effectively for students (rather than only on the basis of their personal experience)?

- What organisational information exists that would assist student representatives, and how is this shared by the organisation?

- If applicable, what data does any student association collect, and how is this shared with representatives, the student body and the organisation?

- How do processes for collecting student data encourage participation and avoid 'survey fatigue'?

Hearing and heeding the student voice

- To what extent is the student voice embedded in the organisation's processes and structures?

- What evidence shows that the student voice has made a difference to organisations' decisions and the quality of provision?

- How is evidence of the student voice's effectiveness publicised to students?

Conclusion

The organisations that participated in this research all involve students in representative arrangements that allow them to feed into or be directly involved in governance arrangements. This begins with the class representatives whose role it is to engage at the 'grass-roots' level and act as the representative voice for their peers and then feed information into governance at the programme or faculty level. The role of students' associations in running these systems is often integral to also facilitating information from class representatives into wider governance structures such as academic committees and councils.

On the whole, these systems can be seen to be working for both TEOs and the student representatives themselves. That said, a challenge remains for many in ensuring both that a majority of students engage in the representative systems and that the diversity of learners at a given organisation is well represented.

Student representation at faculty, board or Council level worked well when there was support from students' associations, chairs of committees and staff, when the students understood their role on these committees, and were fully briefed and prepared. However, student representatives often found this role difficult as they were the sole voice on committees, needed time to read the papers and gather student views, and found staff who were less willing to engage with them.

While the existence of structures and systems enables an organisation to listen to the learner voice, their effective operation rests on the availability of students with sufficient time to participate, and who are prepared to engage through nominations or democratic elections. The most-evidenced barrier to student representative voice in this research was where students were not sufficiently resourced to undertake their role in a meaningful way.

These challenges highlight the point that while a TEO can build systems for using the student voice, *well-functioning* systems require an organisation to have a culture that values students' voice, so that learners – regardless of the number of representatives and their level of

experience – feel able and comfortable to have input into the governance arrangements of the organisation. Ultimately, an effective student voice depends on an organisation's views and its ongoing support and promotion of the value of student representation. It takes time and commitment on the part of all parties – governance, management, staff and students themselves – to enable systems to develop and bed in.

This culture of valuing student voice is the feature of good practice that underpins all other features – it is critical for ensuring that student voice is validated and effective. Where a positive attitude exists towards student voice, organisations build systems, practices and processes that ultimately ensure that learners are listened to and used to enhance quality, and students know that this is the case. This constitutes a positive feedback relationship, as building and operating these systems contribute to further developing a positive student voice culture that enhances the quality of learning experiences and outcomes.

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Appendix: Participating Tertiary Education Organisations

Organisation	Location	Student population[5]
Approach Community Learning (part of Methodist Mission Southern)	One campus in Dunedin	42
BEST Pacific Institute of Education	Five campuses in the Auckland region in Waitakere and Manukau	4,418 (1,944 EFTS)
Eastern Institute of Technology	Two major campuses in Napier and Gisborne and seven regional Learning Centres	7,075 (3,752 EFTS)
Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology	Two major campuses in Nelson and Blenheim	4,772 (2,474 EFTS)
Otago Polytechnic	Three campuses in Dunedin, Central Otago and Auckland	5,027 (3,359 EFTS)
Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi	The main campus is in Whakatane, with additional campuses in Te Tai Tokerau (Whangarei) and Tamaki Makaurau (Auckland). Delivery also occurs at other sites, including marae, throughout Northland, Auckland, Bay of Plenty, East Coast and Hawke's Bay	4,974 (2,786 EFTS)
University of Auckland	The main campus is in central Auckland city with four additional campuses in Grafton, Tamaki, Tai Tokerau and Epsom	36,254 (28,865 EFTS)
Unitec	Three campuses in Auckland, in Mt Albert, Albany and Waitakere	13,679 (8,484 EFTS)
Victoria University of Wellington	Four main Wellington campuses in Te Aro, Karori, Pipitea and Kelburn	20,404 (15,578 EFTS)

[5] Which the exception of ACL, these figures are taken from http://www.tec.govt.nz/Learners-Organisations/Learners/performance-in-tertiary-education/Educational-performance-at-individual-tertiary-providers/ and relate to 2011 rather than 2012. They cover Student Achievement Component and Youth Guarantee funding only – some institutions also have learners funded through other government support, but these have not been included here. These figures do not include international students.