Office of the Pro Vice Chancellor (Education)

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the Students as Partners Initiative at UNSW Sydney

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1. Introduction

Many Universities are embracing a partnership approach to form stronger relationships between the student body and university decision makers. However, the University of New South Wales (UNSW) has developed a unique conceptualisation of the partnership between students and the University. The Students as Partners Initiative, within the UNSW PVC(E), is a way of thinking that positions students as change agents, who share responsibility for learning and teaching with professional and academic staff. The initiative enables students to partner with staff in the creation of knowledge and the development of teaching innovations, shifting their position from one of learning from to one of learning with academics.

The SaP Initiative is closely aligned with Theme A2 of the UNSW 2025 Strategic Plan: Educational Excellence – the UNSW Scientia Education Experience, through the creation of a collegiate learning community of peers, academics, employers and alumni. The initiative will also aid the establishment of UNSW as a global leader in technology-enhanced learning, a key objective of Theme A2, by engaging student partners in the creation, design, development and testing of innovative digital educational technologies. The uniqueness and scale of the project necessitate a thorough evaluation of its effectiveness, to identify areas for improvement and to inform future partnership models, both within the PVC(E) and throughout the broader University community.

a. Background

The concept of ‘Students as Partners’ is becoming increasingly popular throughout the higher education sector worldwide (Matthews, 2017). Initiatives classified as ‘Students as Partners’ are based on a shared ethos of moving students from a position of learning from to learning with academics. However, a wide variety of implementation strategies and pedagogical rationales have been reported. Many initiatives engage students in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) or subject-based research and enquiry, but the SaP Initiative at UNSW Sydney has focused on educational design and the development of teaching innovations. Over two hundred students have participated in the SaP Initiative at UNSW over the last two years across multiple projects. Students have been employed in educational design, data analytics, data visualisation, software development and in mixed, virtual and augmented reality projects.

A key component of the UNSW Scientia Educational Experience is the RASE (Resources-Activity-Support-Evaluation) learning design model, which provides a framework for course redesign with a focus on student-centred, authentic activities (Churchill, King and Fox, 2013). The SaP Initiative extends the use of the theories and concepts upon which this framework was built beyond engagement in coursework, by involving students in the design and production of educational resources and activities. Students learn by solving meaningful problems (Jonassen, 2000), whilst also gaining paid work experience, making the initiative a unique conceptualisation of partnering with students. SaP projects involve experiential learning, leading to deeper levels of conceptual understanding than those normally achievable through traditional teaching methods. Whilst working on SaP projects, students construct their own knowledge in an authentic context, and develop skills in social negotiation and collaboration in ‘real-life’ problem-based learning activities (Savery and Duffy, 1995), whilst producing artefacts to benefit future students.
A recent literature review found that programs similar to the UNSW SaP Initiative exist in only four countries: Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), although another example has been reported in Ireland (Bovill, 2014). Partnerships commonly involve between one and five students; only 7% of all initiatives reported engaging more than 100 student partners. Reported outcomes were overwhelmingly positive. Consequently, the articles lacked insight into the challenges involved. Outcomes were often reported in a student-centric manner, and data on the benefits for staff is sparse (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Previous studies into the effectiveness of SaP initiatives have used critical inquiry and case study methodologies. Case studies provided rich data on specific projects involving very small numbers of students, but the results are not generalisable.

Domestically, student partnerships amongst higher education institutions gained momentum through a National Senior Teaching Fellowship, awarded to UTS Professor, Sally Varnham. After various symposiums involving stakeholders from across the Higher Education sector, a set of seven principles were developed, along with a formal national body, Student Voice Australia (SVA). In 2018, SVA engaged 10 institutions, including UNSW, on the first Pilot program to train, support, and foster meaningful student – staff partnership.

2. Scope and approach

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of the Students as Partners (SaP) Initiative at UNSW Sydney. This will be achieved by evaluating (1) the experience of student partners engaged in the project, (2) the experience of university staff working with student partners, and (3) the ability of the initiative to create meaningful partnerships. The analysis of the experience of student partners will inform the approach of the initiative going forward and tackle any challenges presented throughout the study. This report is designed to enhance the students as partners culture across UNSW and is targeted toward all members of the University community, including students, academic staff, professional and executive staff, PVC(E) staff, IT, and Estate management.

b. Aims

The evaluation was conducted using contextual inquiry, which involves asking questions of student participants in traditional focus group and interview settings, followed by observation and interaction in their working context. Two semi-structured student focus groups were conducted, each consisting of approximately equal numbers of student partners. One focus group consisted of students from STEM disciplines and one consisted of non-STEM students. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure that participants represented a range of Students as Partners projects, Faculties and study classification, and that both domestic and international students were represented. One to two students from each focus group were invited to attend a follow-up one-on-one semi-structured interview. Themes and findings from the focus groups were confirmed and explored in greater detail during the interviews. Purposive sampling was used to select approximately equal numbers of students who were new to the initiative and students that had been engaged on multiple SaP projects. Some students interviewed were observed whilst working as student partners and asked questions about projects and tasks performed. Approximately four staff members involved in Students as Partners projects were selected to attend semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that staff participants represented a range of Students as Partners programs.
The evaluation analysed the experience of student partners that came from a range of faculties and projects to minimise bias. Student partners were randomly selected across the four key educational development projects, including:

- Digital Uplift and Educational Design
- Data Analytics and Experimental Visualisation
- Virtual, Mixed, and Augmented Reality Projects (LITEroom)
- Tool Development Projects, Educational Technology Services

The approach of the evaluation has been designed to capture a broad range of experiences within the Students as Partners initiative by involving students from a range of disciplines, and study modes in the evaluation.

Constructs covered;
1. *To what extent are student partners driving teaching and learning innovations?*
2. *How is the SaP initiative enhancing employability amongst UNSW graduates?*
3. *To what extent are student partners provided training and support?*
4. *What impact has the SaP initiative had on the overall UNSW community?*
5. *Are student partners treated differently to other staff members?*
6. *What can be done to enhance the experience of student partners and improve the overall SaP initiative?*

### a. Limitations

Out of scope from the evaluation was capacity to measure *employability rates, the recruitment process, and impact on the broader UNSW community:*

i. The qualitative nature of the study limited the capacity to measure *employability rates* amongst students within the SaP initiative, where employability was evidenced by anecdotal perceptions of the interviewee’s, including individual understanding of professional skills and development outcomes.

ii. Understanding the effectiveness of the *recruitment process* was also limited to evidence given by successful applicants (those accepted into the Students as Partners initiative). There is scope for future investigation into the recruitment process to include students who were unsuccessful.

iii. An important element of the SaP initiative is developing the culture of partnership across the University. However, this particular evaluation was specific to students as partners within the PVC(E) and could not fully investigate the *impact on the broader UNSW community.*
### 3. Glossary of terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students as Partners</td>
<td>SaP</td>
<td>This refers to any activities relating to the PVC(E) SaP initiative, where students have been engaged in casual employment to enhance educational delivery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Client</td>
<td></td>
<td>This refers to the person/s who initiated the project to be developed by student partners; often the clients are academic staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student leaders</td>
<td></td>
<td>This broadly refers to any student holding an elected position, including Arc, SRC, PGC, and faculty or society representatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Voice Australia</td>
<td>SVA</td>
<td>This refers to the non-for-profit organisation, established from the National Senior Teaching Fellow awarded to Prof. Sally Varnham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Partnership in Quality Scotland</td>
<td>SPARQS</td>
<td>This refers to the Scottish organisation dedicated to fostering, supporting, and maintaining student partnership in Scottish Higher Education Institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supervising staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>This refers to the PVC(E) staff members who oversee activities across the SaP projects, and allocate work to the student partners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Board of Studies</td>
<td>BoS</td>
<td>This refers to the UNSW Board under the DVC(A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Study</td>
<td></td>
<td>This refers to the highest level of study being undertaken by the student, i.e. Undergraduate, Post-Graduate, Masters, HDR, etc.</td>
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4. Key findings

a) Students driving teaching and learning innovations

“I understand what kind of lifestyle students have and how to design an application or product in a way that makes it easy for students and staff to learn it in the first place, and then start using it on a regular basis.”

The teaching and learning tools developed through the Students as Partners projects are designed to enhance educational experience for both students and staff at UNSW. While the student partners are generally perceived as an intern-level employee, both the client and supervising staff consider their work to be of high quality. Overall, student partners have autonomy over the development of the tools, however are required to adhere to pre-determined specifications from the clients. The students often receive feedback on the product once it is reviewed by the client, and/or supervising staff.

Student as Partners projects have spanned across almost all UNSW faculties, including both STEM and non-STEM. The teaching innovations reflect Theme A2 of the UNSW 2025 Strategy, delivering Educational Excellence through the Scientia Educational Experience, as they incorporate digital technologies into learning and teaching innovation. The student partners often work with advanced software and technologies, including the use of Extended Reality tools into educational innovation.

Overall, the evaluation found that student partners provide significant user-insight to enhance learning and teaching innovations at UNSW. This includes the development of education platforms, such as Moodle, and other internal University websites, booking systems to improve access to facilities, and the digital uplift of courses.

Students displayed pride in the quality of work they produce. There was a strong belief that student insights are valuable to the overall success of the projects. There is scope for student partners to have greater involvement in developing solutions, rather than being allocated a pre-determined role. This would not only ensure students are engaged as meaningful partners but would also enhance the projects by incorporating expert student insight from the outset.
The key areas of success, include:

- Student partners have worked on a range of tools to enhance learning and teaching innovations at UNSW, such as:
  - Redesign of course assets to deliver hundreds of digitally enhanced blended and online courses
  - Digital enhancements to online learning platforms, including Moodle and Smart Sparrow
  - Solving educational challenges and providing the latest approach in educational tools through data analytics and experimental visualisations
  - Providing student insight into solutions to enhance the end-product
  - Building digital platforms to increase access and connectivity to services across UNSW
  - Using advanced Extended Reality technology to deliver unique and innovative learning and teaching solutions
- Students provide expert user-knowledge and incorporate the student voice to enhance learning and teaching innovations
- Students are developing solutions for courses they had previously completed, which has allowed them to easily identify issues and opportunities for enhancement

The key challenges, include:

- Providing opportunities for student partners to showcase SaP projects across schools and faculties, which would increase awareness of the initiative
- Allowing student partners to analyse the problem and develop solutions with the client, rather than involving the students after determining a solution
- Promotion of the SaP initiative and the quality of work student partners can produce to enhance learning and teaching
- Involving students in determining the role they play in order to best utilise their skills and insights (some students reported having minor roles on projects, however were given greater responsibility once the client became aware of the extent of their skill set)
- Facilitating peer-to-peer skill sharing amongst student partners, particularly between students from differing disciplines or skill sets
- Providing multi-disciplinary partnership opportunities
b) Professional Development

“Their employability, I can tell you, has probably doubled in chances”

A key outcome for students engaged in the SaP initiative is the development of skills by providing professional experience in their field of study. While there are no current mechanisms for measuring professional development outcomes, the students perceive that their employability has considerably benefited from working as a student partner. Some described the opportunity as ‘an unprecedented platform for promotion’.

As Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is becoming essential to graduate employability, the SaP initiative similarly provides students with the skills and professional development, along with a portfolio of professional work, that will ensure they are competitive in the future job market. In this way, the program efficiently provides students with professional work experience while simultaneously driving learning and teaching innovations across the University. Many of the educational and development outcomes were common amongst the student partners, however there is no clear matrix for how professional development is monitored or measured.

One student completed a professional internship after working as a student partner and reported feeling significantly more prepared for the internship, having already worked as a student partner in the PVC(E) office. The student said it was much easier to acclimatise to the professional environment having been familiarised with the processes and protocols at an enterprise level.

Student partners reported that while their courses provide a strong theoretical framework, the SaP initiative allowed them to apply academic concepts to practical real-world problem-solving. Students said that although the faculties did a good job at bridging the gap between theory and practical applications, the SaP initiative provided exposure to a corporate setting that would have otherwise been inaccessible. In this way, the students are not only enhancing their knowledge in the classroom, but also developing as highly employable professionals within the University community. As the SaP initiative continues to develop, there is scope to connect student partners with industry professionals through workshops or forums that would enable the students to gain industry networks and professional advice.
The key areas of success, include:

- Access to state of the art technology, which provides technical development, and enhances students’ digital proficiency
- Students find working and training in their field valuable, particularly in relation to more routine, casual employment that students often occupy throughout university
- Some students who had previous professional experience said they favored working in the PVC(E) as it provides support and flexibility to work and maintain their studies
- Student partners reported the overwhelming benefit to their learning, particularly through applying theoretical concepts to real life practical applications
- Students develop a unique portfolio of professional work, which will enhance employability
- Students are developing technical and soft skills, such as:
  - Communication, adaptability, teamwork and public speaking
  - Managerial and organization skills, including working within strict timeframes
  - Professional development and experience in a professional environment
  - Proficiency in various digital applications
- Students feel confident approaching their supervisor about opportunities to develop skills in particular areas outside their own expertise
- Student partners generally felt the recruitment process provided practice for future work applications
- Having independence over the projects enabled the students to learn by trial and error, and encouraged them to test a range of solutions to deliver the most effective outcome

The key challenges, include:

- Occasional communication barriers exist between the students and client; providing student partners with skills in communicating expectations and negotiating timelines would be beneficial
- Students are developing a range of professional skills, however there are no existing processes to monitor or measure skill development or progress throughout the initiative
- Many of the student partners became aware of the SaP initiative through word-of-mouth; investigating effective communication channels will enhance awareness across a diverse range of UNSW students
- There is scope to provide student partners with networking and/or training opportunities with industry professionals, particularly as the SaP initiative continues to develop
c) Accreditation and recognition

It is important that the necessary tools are in place to enable students to succeed in both study and work. Remuneration is one key aspect of this. There is a strong commitment within the PVC(E) to ensure students are adequately remunerated for the work that they do, and as such, student partners are paid at an hourly casual rate. However, there is scope to investigate the creation of a Board of Studies recognised course to provide students with course credit, in the case that a significant contribution is made to the UNSW community (this could extend to other leadership or partnership activities outside of the PVC(E)).

Student partners valued the opportunity to showcase their work in a forum held in 2017 and indicated their support for similar opportunities in the future. However, there is still scope to improve how student partner projects are recognised and celebrated. This would not only ensure the students feel valuable but would double as a marketing tool to communicate the benefits to the broader University community. It is therefore necessary to demonstrate the high calibre of work students can produce when given the opportunity and adequate support.

The key areas of success, include:

- Students are paid to work on projects related to their field of study
- Students enjoyed showcasing their work in the SaP forum in 2017 and saw it as an effective means of informing academics about the kind of work students can produce to enhance learning and teaching
- Successful applicants are employed on an ongoing basis as student partners (or until they are no longer a UNSW student), so long as they continue to produce quality work and take pride in the SaP initiative

The key challenges, include:

- Providing semi-regular opportunities to showcase student partner work, including at forums (including those that are not necessarily hosted by the PVC(E))
- Retaining documentation of all projects completed as part of the SaP initiative
- Ensuring student partners are recognised on the platform/piece of work they’ve developed i.e. ‘This was completed by Jane Smith as a student partner’
- Providing guidelines for appropriate recognition (including remuneration, course credit, and, AHEGS), which can be accessed by all members of the University to support student partnerships beyond the PVC(E)
- Investigating the creation of a BoS recognised course to provide credit for student partners (and other student leaders) who make significant contributions (time or other) to the UNSW community
d) Training and support

“One of the good things about it was that I had another student there with me so just knowing that if I don’t know something I can ask them first before asking like a supervisor”

Training for student partners is generally provided in the form of mentoring and informal support rather than a fixed training program. Throughout their work, the students develop professional skills, receive training on a range of software and technical applications, and engage in peer-to-peer mentoring while working with other student partners. The students come from different faculties and level of study, which has encouraged peer-mentoring and provided an interdisciplinary perspective on learning and teaching innovations.

The students value the opportunity to develop skills in areas other than their predominant field and feel confident approaching supervising staff about partnering with student partners who are skilled in other fields. The students often find collaborating with other student partners beneficial to both their own development, and the success of the end-product.

The training generally prepares the student partners to adequately complete their work. However, it would be beneficial for the student’s development to have networking opportunities with professionals in their field, either internally, or through industry partnerships. As the SaP initiative continues to develop, it will be important to consider the extent to which student partners gain industry connections and networking opportunities. This could be an important way to inform student partners of potential career paths or provide general professional knowledge.

The key areas of success, include:

- Students felt encouraged by having other student partners commencing with them, making the transition into work much less daunting and provided additional support
- Students are confident approaching supervising staff about gaining opportunities to develop additional skills
- Students mostly work independently, however are comfortable going to other students and their supervisors for support
- Students and staff both indicated the importance of teamwork and supporting each other in their work, and felt that there was a strong sense of teamwork within the SaP initiative
- Stagnated start times and level of study have contributed to an effective mentoring environment
- Students are given freedom to work around their own schedules and aren't penalized for having to step back from a project if they become overwhelmed with the work load
- Most training is informal, such as project management training, communication, teamwork, and training in some professional digital platforms
- It is not compulsory for student partners to work in the PVC(E), which frees up travel time, enabling the students to instead complete additional study, work, or assignments
The key challenges, include:

- Student partners reported feeling an ‘imposter syndrome’ when initially commencing work, which was often a result of the SaP initiative being their first experience working in a professional environment.
- Students generally felt supported, however were initially unaware of general PVC(E) protocols and operations; an induction period would be beneficial to outline general protocols, operations, and expectations of the student partners.
- Student partners value working with other students with different skillsets and level of study, or experience, and indicated the desire to have more collaborative work opportunities.
- Providing professional development through forums or workshops run by professionals (across different fields) to provide students with knowledge of general professional skills, and career pathways.

**e) A Culture of Partnership**

“**I had edited a course, which was introduction to Korean and I was just walking up the corridor opposite the library and I saw this girl with her headphones watching that course, probably prepping. That was really nice, and that felt good.**”

The work of student partners has had considerable impact across the UNSW community; having developed learning platforms across almost all faculties, each with the aim to enhance the overall educational experience of both students and staff members. Although there is a perception amongst staff that awareness of the Students as Partners initiative is spreading, most of the students interviews felt that not many people knew about SaP, particularly other students.

Student partners generally saw the potential for student partnerships to be expanded throughout the university community, with one student commenting: "**students can work in collaboration amongst the faculties and the schools to develop products or course content or help out with the research... it will not only be good for the students because they get the exposure and the experience, but it will be helpful for the school as well as they’ll be able to develop a more collaborative community**”

While the SaP initiative within the PVC(E) is building meaningful student – staff partnerships, there is scope for more to be done to ensure there is a campus-wide culture of partnership. There must be a commitment to inform, educate, and train the broader community to enable this culture. The SaP initiative could be used as a good-practice framework for faculties, and other departments to use to form their own partnership initiatives or activities.
Although it is important that student partnership is a culture, and not limited to a program within the University; there is potential to centralise or co-ordinate efforts to ensure all areas of the University have the necessary tools to develop meaningful student – staff partnerships.

The key areas of success, include:

- Awareness of the benefits of partnership activities continues to spread as more staff and students are involved in the SaP initiative
- The overall impact of the SaP initiative on enhancing learning and teaching for both students and staff members across the University
- Awareness of SaP is perceived to be spreading amongst staff members throughout UNSW and is encouraging the development of more projects involving staff – student partnerships
- Overall, the SaP initiative is effective in developing meaningful student partnership and could be used as a framework to guide and support the development of student – staff partnerships across the broader University community

The key challenges, include:

- Increasing awareness across the broader UNSW community and developing a targeted communication strategy to encourage a culture of partnership
- Increasing exposure of student partner projects across the UNSW community, including showcasing work developed by students as part of a partnership
- As the SaP initiative is relatively new, there was a sense of ‘incompleteness’, perceived to be due to inconsistent commencement and completion procedures; this could be addressed by developing an induction period, and establishing an alumni network to connect students and inform past student partners of additional opportunities
- Providing the broader UNSW community with the support, training, and tools necessary to form partnerships outside the PVC(E)
f) Meaningful partnerships between staff and students

The student partners felt valued and supported by the professional staff, and generally had positive experiences with the academic staff, or the ‘clients’. The collaboration between the staff and student partners was reported to be highly effective in bringing together the points of view of both academics and students in the final product. The PVC(E) supervising staff maintain that study is a priority and keep up-to-date on assessment and exam periods to ensure students aren’t overloaded. Occasional communication barriers arose between the students and academic staff (or clients), where expectations and timelines were unclear and caused minor complications. To ensure meaningful partnership, students should be included from the beginning of all processes and be involved in determining their own role in any projects, or activities.

The key areas of success, include:

- Overall, academic staff are impressed by the quality of work the students produce and have often asked students to take more responsibility in the development of applications once they are aware of the students capacity
- Staff members ensure that students study is a priority and keep up to date with exam and assessment periods to ensure students aren’t overloaded with work
- Students reported that staff will often suggest a method to use, however will ensure student partners have a degree of freedom over the project
- Working in collaboration with academic staff gave the students an appreciation for the point of view of academics and the work that goes on behind the scenes to provide a high quality educational experience
- The student voice enhancing learning and teaching innovations by understanding student needs and expectations
- Trust between the academic staff and the student partners is mostly positive, with the students anticipating that as more partnership activities develop academics, the respect and trust will continually improving

The key challenges, include:

- Increased demand for projects has caused some staff to attempt to bypass proper PVC(E) processes; informing staff and faculties of guidelines may be required to facilitate effective student partnership outside of the PVC(E) (internal processes should also be well communicated)
- Occasional communication barriers, which could be addressed by providing students with training in negotiating timelines and communicating expectations
- Ensuring students are involved from the beginning of any process (to identify their role and work in partnership on solutions) to develop meaningful student – staff partnership
- Students should be involved and well represented in all aspects of the University, including representation on any working groups or governance boards
5. Summary

The Students as Partners (SaP) initiative at UNSW delivers work-integrated learning opportunities, while simultaneously driving learning and teaching innovation. The PVC(E) provides paid work by employing students, rather than outsourcing. Students are engaged in project-based partnerships that provide professional skills and development.

The SaP initiative prepares student partners for future employment. Students develop technical skills by working on state of the art technology, which is usually difficult to access as a student due to financial constraints. The students are also developing soft skills, such as, teamwork, adaptability, project management, public speaking, communication, and problem-solving skills. While the students’ development outcomes are consistent, there is scope to measure and assess progress of the student partners throughout. Along with professional skills, the employability benefits for student partners is strengthened by their ability to demonstrate valuable professional skills and provide a professional portfolio of unique projects, which is likely to separate them from other applicants.

Students predominantly receive informal training and support throughout their involvement. While this is successful in developing professional skills, the students would benefit from an induction period, which may include an overview of the PVC(E) processes and procedures and outline the expectations of the students. The students would also benefit from connections to industry or industry professionals. There is scope for the PVC(E) to investigate networking or workshop training days, where students gain general skills and professional networks.

It is important to recognise that students are not a homogenous group. From the sample of students involved in the evaluation, students came from a range of backgrounds, disciplines, level of study, and included both domestic and international students. However, a large portion of the student partners become involved in the SaP initiative through word-of-mouth, which suggests that awareness across the broader UNSW community may be limited. To ensure a culture of meaningful student and staff partnerships, it will be important for the Office of the PVC(E) to investigate the most effective communications strategy to that reach a broad and diverse cohort of students. The PVC(E) will need to identify key student groups to build partnerships with, while also investigating strategies to reach the ‘silent’ community (students who are not involved in student leadership roles, or clubs and societies).
The partnerships between staff and students are mostly successful. There are occasional communication barriers, which could be overcome by providing students with the skills to negotiate and communicate expectations prior to commencing work. Students would benefit from skills in negotiating timelines and communicating expectations. While meaningful partnerships are being developed, the SaP initiative is overwhelmingly limited to the Office of the PVC(E). Although some staff – student partnerships are developed outside the PVC(E), there is scope for the initiative to expand throughout the university, to link with, and support, schools, faculties, and other departments. The SaP initiative in its current form, with some minor enhancements, could be used as an effective model for other communities throughout the University.

Student partners saw the potential for SaP-type projects to be developed in other departments across the University, as well as within the PVC(E). To ensure Students as Partners is a UNSW-wide culture, and not solely a PVC(E) program, it is important to put in place enabling strategies to inform and support the broader University community in fostering and maintaining meaningful staff – student partnerships. The Recommendations made in this report are informed by the PVC(E) SaP evaluation, however are designed to be informative and adaptable for any UNSW departments that may wish to build student partnerships.
6. Student Voice Australia

Student Voice Australia (SVA) is a national not-for-profit organisation established in 2018, to promote, support, and foster meaningful student partnerships across Australian Higher Education institutions. SVA was established after a National Senior Teaching Fellowship, awarded to UTS Professor Sally Varnham, gained momentum throughout the sector. The Fellowship was entitled Creating a National Framework for Student Partnership and University Decision-Making and Governance, which undertook a sector-wide collaboration to understand the ‘what, why, and how’ of student partnership in Australian institutions.¹

Throughout 2017, Prof. Varnham co-ordinated several sector-wide seminars that attracted student leaders, academics, professional staff, and industry bodies. These discussions informed the core themes of the seven SVA Principles, which were established to facilitate and support meaningful student partnerships both throughout individual institutions, and nationally.

Some universities have since adopted their own unique initiatives that embody aspects of the SVA principles for student – staff partnership. This includes; Partnership agreements between university management and student unions; adopting course representative models within faculties; and increasing student representation on university boards and working groups.

Ten institutions, including the University of New South Wales, have joined the steering committee for the first pilot program. SVA will work with the ten institutions to audit, support, and train students and staff in strategies to develop and maintain a campus culture of meaningful partnership.

The Pilot institutions include:
1. The University of New South Wales
2. The University of Technology Sydney
3. Charles Sturt University
4. The University of the Sunshine Coast
5. The University of Adelaide
6. Holmesglen Institute
7. La Trobe University
8. Curtin University
9. Flinders University
10. The University of New England

¹ Varnham, S. 2017. Student Voice Australia. Retrieved from; studentvoiceaustralia.com
## a. SVA Principles

The Seven Student Voice Australia principles are:

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<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| 1. Building authentic partnerships | Working in partnership with students at all levels of decision making to enhance educational experience. This includes:  
  - Create a culture of student partnership  
  - Make opportunities for engagement clear for students  
  - Involve students in deciding where and how student voice is articulated  
  - Students involved from the beginning, to identify issues and the solutions |
| 2. Communication                 | An open and trustful relationship is necessary to encourage all members of the institution to work together. This includes:  
  - Determine effective communication strategies with diverse cohorts of students  
  - Ensure students have adequate information to be involved in the process  
  - Feedback on the outcomes of student input  
  - Success stories in which students worked in partnership with the institution |
| 3. Strong student leadership      | Student leaders play key roles in providing professional representation of student interests. Institutions should:  
  - recognise and acknowledge the student voice as mature and professional  
  - Students should participate in knowledge transfer  
  - Ensure students do not change over at the one time |
| 4. Training and support          | Training and support is vital to enabling students to participate professionally and effectively in decision making. This includes:  
  - Training and support as a partnership  
  - Mentoring by executives and senior student partners/leaders  
  - Ensure knowledge transfer amongst students  
  - Work in partnership to identify appropriate resourcing |
| 5. Every student's voice         | A national presence supported by the sector is needed to sustain and strengthen the culture of partnership to support and build capacity in tertiary institutions, staff and students. |
| 6. Valuing student voice         | All forms of engagement and representation should be valued. This includes:  
  - Recognising student work by supporting and celebrating outcomes produced  
  - The difference students make, and the student experience outcomes are made clear  
  - The considerable time invested in student activities should be formally and tangibly recognised |
| 7. A National Presence           | Institutions should consider processes for incorporating the voice of underrepresented student groups in the diverse Australian sector. This includes:  
  - Support opportunity for all students to be heard and have their views represented  
  - Ensure systems of engagement are accessible by all relevant students  
  - Understand that student cohorts are heterogeneous and groups within the student body may hold different views for many issues |

How the Students as Partners Initiative at UNSW aligns with the Student Voice Australia Principles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Principle Outcomes</th>
<th>SaP initiative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Building Authentic Partnerships | • Engagement of students in all areas both formally and informally from the beginning of their tertiary education careers.  
• Staff and student organisations work together to make opportunities for engagement clear  
• The involvement of students in defining where and how student voice is articulated  
• Institutions work with students from the beginning of a decision-making process, to identify issues and to reach decisions on solutions, strategy and direction. | Successes:  
• Students and staff build trust and meaningful partnerships by collaborating throughout the process  
• Student partners are given autonomy when developing pieces of work within the PVC  
Challenges:  
• Allow students to be involved from the beginning; when identifying the problem and developing solutions  
• Work with the students to determine their involvement in the process, rather than allocating a pre-determined role  
• Develop strategies with students to determine appropriate channels for engagement clear to UNSW students  
• Ensure expectations of both the staff and students are discussed and clearly identified from the beginning of any process  
• Support the development of a students as partners culture at all levels of UNSW, to engage students both formally and informally from the beginning of their university careers  
• Opportunities for student input are promoted to, and understood by, all students |
| 2. Communication-Honesty and transparency | • Institutions should work with students to determine the most effective means of communicating with different cohorts of students in changing technological and physical environments.  
• Students are provided with access to all information and data required to enable them to effectively participate in decision-making  
• Students can see that their voice counts. Transparency around how decisions are made is a key element of effective partnership. This requires also communication with students regarding the outcomes of their input and their engagement  
• Success stories of situations in which the institution and students have worked together on resolution of issues should be shared. | Successes:  
• Communication between staff and students to determine appropriate communication channels to reach more students  
• Students receive semi-regular feedback on the effectiveness of the product being developed  
• Students feel valued and proud of the work they produce  
Challenges:  
• Develop channels to showcase work produced by student partners  
• Continue to develop communication strategy with student partners to broaden the reach of the initiative  
• Ensure students and staff are aware of each other’s expectations and discuss timelines for effective communication  
• Provide an induction period that ensures students are informed about general protocols, procedures, and expectations |
| 3. Strong Student Leadership | • Institutions are encouraged to recognise and acknowledge the student voice as mature and professional which, with appropriate training and support, is equal to the task of contributing respectfully and responsibly to decision-making  
• Student leaders and representatives need to commit to supporting knowledge management and participate in knowledge transfer to incoming representatives.  
• Processes which ensure that student leaders do not all change at the one time provides an opportunity to secure knowledge | Successes:  
• Staff value the work of students and provide mentorship and informal training that allows them to succeed in their work  
• Staff and students value multiple levels of student experience, and processes ensure that hiring is staggered, and student partners come from a range of disciplines and study levels  
Challenges:  
• Provide opportunities to connect student partners from different projects; this could be through semi-regular student partner meetings, or by partnering students on certain projects |
### 4. Training and support - as a partnership

- A course/year or subject representative system (or equivalent) is an important means of laying the foundation for partnership by helping to build expertise and confidence across a wide base of students.
  - Mentoring by senior executives and existing student representatives is recommended.
  - Staff and student bodies working together on training and support is a partnership function as well as helping to build a partnership ethos.
  - Student leaders and representatives within an institution comprise a group which requires cohesion and oversight in terms of training and support.
  - Because student bodies typically have transient officers, it is desirable for their offices to have professional support to assist transition and knowledge transfer from year to year.

**Successes:**
- Students receive effective mentorship by both professional staff and other student partners
- Professional staff ensure that knowledge transfer can happen amongst the students by having a staggered recruitment process

**Challenges:**
- Work with current student partners on developing an induction process which informs students of internal protocols, PVCE office layout, expectations
- Staff and students work together on a training process for the broader UNSW community on effective practices for partnership, and guidelines for recognition or remuneration
- Empower faculties and schools to develop a course, year, or subject representative system to lay the foundations of partnership with students
- Through establishing a SaP Alumni network, connect past and current student partners for mentoring opportunities

### 5. Every student's voice - diversity/inclusion

- Institutions need to recognise the difference between representing and being representative.
  - It is important to support opportunity for all students to be heard and their views to be promoted
  - Student representatives should not be perceived as representing certain groups.
  - Student cohorts are heterogeneous and different groups within the student body may well hold different views for many issues.

**Successes:**
- Both staff and students found the students as partners initiative to be inclusive students from diverse backgrounds
- The recruitment process appears to be accessible by students from diverse backgrounds

**Challenges:**
- Investigate ways to improve the communication of opportunities for student engagement (i.e. connecting with faculty societies, promoting through autonomous departments such as Nura Gili)

### 6. Valuing student voice - recognition

- The considerable time that students invest in representative activities should be formally and tangibly recognised.
  - Students value having their efforts recognised and the best way is the reporting and celebration of the outcomes produced through student partnerships.

**Successes:**
- Student partners are remunerated for the work they do
- Students see value in working in their field of study and find the work significantly more rewarding than previous non-professional casual work
- Students are developing a professional portfolio

**Challenges:**
- Develop ways to celebrate and communicate the success of outcomes produced through student partnerships
- Develop of metrics system that can manage, measure, and communicate the projects developed by student partners, the impact on the wider community, and the growth of the initiative

### 7. A National Presence - facilitation/support

- A National body for facilitations, support, and training in matters relating to student partnerships and effective engagement in decision making
- National education sector awards for celebrating student partnership achievements would assist in demonstrating sector wide commitment to student partnership.

**Successes:**
- UNSW has been one of the first and integral member institutions to indicate support for the SVA Pilot program

**Challenges:**
- UNSW to continue to review its processes for embedding a culture of student partnerships both internally within the PVC(E) and across the University (from a course level through the high-level university decision making). This should be considered in line with the SVA Principles
7. Recommendations

Note: all recommendations should be considered within the framework of student partnerships, where by students and staff should work together on implementing changes and solutions to enhance the SaP initiative.

1. Communication and Awareness

It is recommended that:

i. A communications strategy is developed to increase awareness of Students as Partners within the PVC(E), and across UNSW, and to promote opportunities for students to engage in partnership activities. This may include:
   a. Working with students to determine the most effective communication channels, and implement strategies to reach a diverse and representative range of students
   b. Communicating professional development outcomes to inform students about the benefits of participating in partnership activities (see 2iii)

ii. Success stories involving student partners or partnership activities are showcased throughout the University, through:
   a. Demonstrating how the student voice has contributed to the enhancement of projects/activities, and the overall impact on the UNSW community
   b. Working with students to develop promotional assets, such as video or graphic, to promote the work of student partners across digital platforms
   c. Hosting occasional forums to showcase SaP work and the benefits of partnership to staff and other students
   d. Ensuring any work developed by student partners is afforded recognition by including the students name, or a graphic acknowledging the work as a SaP project

iii. Students are involved in all aspects of decision making to develop meaningful and authentic student partnerships;
   a. Enable students to contribute to solutions by working with student partners to determine their involvement in all processes, rather than allocating a pre-determined role
2. **Professional Development**

It is recommended that:

i. Student partners are provided opportunities to make industry connections, and/or connect with industry professionals. This may include;
   a. Hosting occasional forums that provide student partners with knowledge of potential career pathways or general professional development from industry professionals
   b. Providing opportunities for student partners to work outside of UNSW with industry partners

ii. The recruitment process generally reflects professional recruitment processes and provides students with constructive feedback to improve future applications. This may include;
   a. Ensuring students receive feedback throughout the recruitment process, including students who have been unsuccessful in their application
   b. Involving senior student partners in the recruitment of potential students
   c. Expanding recruitment channels by working with faculties and schools to develop accessible and effective communication to potential student applicants

iii. Development outcomes associated with working as a student partner are made clear and measurable. This may include;
   a. Clearly identifying skills and professional development attributes associated with the students as partners initiative
   b. Working with student partners to evaluate their own progress and development throughout

3. **Training and support**

It is recommended that:

i. Incoming student partners are provided with an induction, which includes;
   a. An introductory session informing student partners of general procedures and protocols, expectations of the students, their rights as a student partner, and the general layout of the Office of the PVC(e), or relevant school/department (if external to the PVC(E))
   b. Providing training in general professional skills, such as negotiating and communicating timelines and expectations with clients
   c. Providing a Students as Partners handbook, or guidelines, outlining information from 3.i.a.

ii. Encourage peer-to-peer support and mentorship between student partners from across a range of project areas by supporting occasional networking meetings, roundtables or luncheons

iii. Work with current student partners to develop a SaP Alumni network, which will allow current and past student partners to connect. This may include;
   a. Using a digital platform to link past and current student partners, which encourages networking and mentorship
   b. Informing past student partners of employment opportunities relevant to their skill set

iv. Provide good-practice training and information guides for staff (see recommendation 4.ii.)
4. A campus culture of partnership

It is recommended that:

i. The UNSW PVC(E) adopt all 7 Student Voice Australia principles (outlined in section 6a of this report)

ii. Equip the UNSW community with the necessary tools to achieve a campus-wide culture of meaningful student – staff partnerships. This may be realized through either appointing a Students as Partners co-ordinator, or a taskforce responsible for overseeing the following:
   a. Training and information sessions with University staff, and students on good-practice approaches to meaningful student – staff partnership
   b. In partnership with students, develop a Students as Partners guideline made accessible across the university, which includes:
      i. Appropriate processes for recruiting, supporting, and working with students in partnership
      ii. Guidelines around acceptable remuneration or recognition for student partners
      iii. Outline appropriate educational and skill development outcomes for students involved in partnership activities

iii. Develop a system to measure, manage, and communicate activities relating to the students as partners initiative, or other partnership activities, across the University. This may include:
   a. A log of all projects or activities completed as part of a student partnership

iv. Develop an accredited Board of Studies recognised course for students in partnership or other leadership roles, in the case that the student is required to make significant time and/or other contributions to the UNSW community
   (NOTE: it may be necessary to adapt an existing course/s to satisfy the intention of this recommendation)
   a. Investigate appropriate requirements to satisfy parameters of the students’ engagement, including:
      i. costs associated with the course
      ii. educational and development outcomes
      iii. appropriate criterion to qualify for enrolment
      iv. subsidiary issues associated with varying degree requirements

5. Review and evaluate progress

It is recommended that:

i. A 2-yearly review of partnership initiatives is conducted, involving activities both within the PVC(E), and across UNSW
   a. Students should be involved in any feedback or evaluation processes
8. References


