

What people thought about the three focus areas

Focus area 1(a): Enhancing the student voice status quo via increasing accountability

Accountability mechanisms are key to empowering students' voices. Without them, it is hard for students to be heard and seriously considered by their providers.

We heard that most people think the existing accountability mechanisms (e.g. audits and governance structures) could be more effective and transparent.

More specifically, we heard that where there is a lack of accountability to student voice, this is because governance structures lack student representation and/or do not factor in student voice. We also heard there is a power imbalance between students and staff, student voice is treated as a "tick-box" exercise, and feedback loops are not closed.

Key suggestions regarding how to increase accountability to student voice included:

- More and better channels to capture and include student voice, like surveys, forums, regular updates, and complaints and dispute resolution processes.
- More student engagement at all levels of providers, including in decision-making processes.
- Adopting partnership approaches between students and staff, both within organisations and across the sector as a whole.
- Better promotion of, and easier access to, information on provider processes and systems.

Focus area 1(b): Enhancing the student voice status quo via greater support

Supporting students to build the capability, capacity, and confidence to be involved in their providers' processes and systems is key to empowering them to hold their providers accountable.

We heard that support for student voice could be more effective. For instance, not all providers offer training to their student leaders and some students are unable to access training outside of their provider (e.g. cannot attend national student voice summits).

Key ideas regarding support that could be provided, and ways to improve existing support for student voice included:

- More training for students and staff.
- Better availability and access to specific supports and services (e.g. support tailored for Māori, Pacific, disabled, international, or LGBTQIA+ students).
- A wider range of options for students to share, gather, and feed their voices into decisions (e.g. via hui, fora, and surveys).
- Better promotion of, and easier access to, information on support available to students.

- Establish an organisation to provide student voice support and resources for all students across all subsectors.

Focus area 1(c): Enhancing the student voice status quo via sustainable resourcing

We have previously heard that resourcing for student voice is a big challenge, both at the provider and national level, and that under-resourcing results in a weakened student voice overall.

Key points we heard around resourcing for student voice included:

- Government should explore options to make it easier for students to pay membership fees for provider and national-level students' associations.
- A lack of genuine student engagement and transparency around how decisions are made can lead to dissatisfaction with the compulsory student services fee (CSSF).
- Satisfaction with the CSSF tends to result when students and providers have jointly established a method of gathering student input into consultation and decision-making. In these instances, a partnership approach is a key factor.

Suggestions regarding how to sustainably resource student voice included:

- Drawing upon existing funding streams (e.g. CSSF and Education Export Levy) and ring-fencing a portion for student voice.
- Direct funding from Government and/or education providers.
- Funding student voice at providers via a national organisation. This could involve arbitrating the amount each provider receives based on the student body size and effectiveness of the student voice mechanisms in place.
- Supporting students' associations to operate independently. For instance, by making investments and holding events to accrue income.

Focus area 2: Making structural changes to enhance student voice

Strong and sustainable student voice is supported by structures that enable students to be actively involved in their provider's governance and quality assurance and enhancement processes.

Key points we heard about student voice structures included:

- Where student voice is present in governance, there is often a power imbalance, which results in student voice not being genuinely considered.
- There is a need for culture change around student voice. This includes ensuring student voice is embedded and supported at all levels of a provider.
- Rather than enforcing a new structure, it may be more effective to have high-level principles for student voice that providers must demonstrate and achieve.

We consulted on two possible approaches regarding the formation of student voice structures in providers. These were provider-designed and -led processes and subcommittees to the council, with the former being more enabling and less prescriptive than the latter. Of the two approaches, the provider-designed and -led process was the most preferred.

Key themes raised regarding the two approaches we proposed included:

- Provider-designed and -led process would be better able to factor in and accommodate provider and student body diversity. It would also enable providers with existing structures to continue with and further refine them.
- Legislated subcommittees would ensure consistency across the sector.
- A middle-ground option may be best as both approaches have value. This could be an approach that allows flexibility, but still has some requirements and/or legislation underpinning it to ensure student voice is taken seriously.

Focus area 3: Establishing a national centre for student voice

Unlike the United Kingdom and Australia, we do not have a national organisation for supporting students and providers, and for facilitating best practice, around student voice.

Through consultation, there was wide support for a national centre for student voice (national centre), and many thought it would be effective at enhancing student voice.

Some key themes raised around the idea of a national centre included:

- Queries around how it would be funded, including the suggestion it be government funded.
- It should have a key role in co-ordinating training for student leaders and supporting best practice within providers and across the sector.
- Queries around how a single national centre would consider and support differences between subsectors and individual providers.

Some suggestions on the roles and functions of a national centre included:

- Capability and capacity building, including providing support, guidance, and training for staff, student leaders, and students' associations.
- Ensure providers are accountable to student voice.
- Link into government decision-making to enable student voice to inform key decisions concerning policy and strategies.
- Resource support and development, including providing and managing an information resource for student voice (i.e. a "one-stop-shop").
- Monitoring and development, including ensuring a basic level of consistency across the sector (i.e. via audits and reviews of student voice with providers).
- Providing a third party service between students and providers during complaints, dispute resolution, and mediation processes.
- Supporting connections, including coordinating communication and action around student voice, and helping link up student voice initiatives (e.g. via national surveys).
- Supporting student activism and advocacy.

Some reasons put forward not to establish a national centre included that it would lead to a one-size-fits-all approach to student voice, it would be too bureaucratic and become a "tick-box" exercise, and that there is no need for a national centre as the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations could perform that role.