

# Championing the student voice: A ‘Students as Partners’ approach to student-led research initiatives

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## Abstract

*The student voice holds valuable insight as to how practitioners and institutions respond to issues facing students, from dissociated belonging to a loss of the capacity for engagement (Tice et al., 2021). To address this our team has developed a community of student leaders who are currently leading investigations into various student-based problems. To engage and empower students, we adopt the Students as Partners approach; a collaborative process that fosters reciprocal relationships wherein students and academics work together to address the processes they share (Mercer-Mapstone, 2020). Key takeaways for students centre on an increased sense of belonging, greater engagement, and improved confidence in abilities and ideas.*

## ‘Students as Partners’ approach

In order to develop a community of student leaders at the University of Tasmania, a Students as Partners approach was adopted through the combined efforts of University College (UC), the Division of the Academic Executive Director, and the Tasmanian University Student Associations (TUSA). This Student as Partners approach is defined as a collaborative process, fostering reciprocal relationships, in which students and academics work in collaboration to address shared processes (Mercer-Mapstone, 2020). The program expands upon foundational research and initiatives that highlight the necessity to engage and empower students through a sense of belonging (Wilson et al., 2020; Knox, Hawkins & Wilson 2020), and to address issues resulting from a lack of belonging and engagement in tertiary activities (Tice et al., 2021).

## Student Voice Project

*“I had limited avenues to express my opinion ... the project allows for student voices to be heard and provides a pathway to implement student recommendations”*

The multidisciplinary Student Voice Project enables students to employ a range of skills including project management, communication, data analysis, problem-solving, research, and stakeholder engagement skills. Students work closely with relevant stakeholders such as academic mentors, university staff and student representatives, and project peers to inform, design, deliver, and evaluate a research project, with further scope to implement the recommendations of the project. The student-led project operationalises project management tools, practices and responsibilities around the needs of a student-focused organisation, with the aim of creating and/or building positive impact on the student experience. Throughout the

semester, the project is supported by practical tutorials and workshops, as well as practitioner-based Peer Learning Circles in which students develop their stakeholder management skills and student voice in a series of discussions with mentors and peers. The development of the written report for the project is heavily scaffolded using the online assessment platform, Cadmus. The scaffolding for the assessment has been designed so that students are guided through the process of research, evaluation or implementation, and the learning analytics delivered by Cadmus allow for an understanding of student process and progress, supporting the delivery of experiential and authentic pedagogy.

### **Impact of Student Voice Project**

*“I feel more involved in the university, as I have met and been able to form professional relationships with various members of the students, teaching staff, and TUSA leaders, that I would otherwise have not encountered without the program. ”*

The impact of this project has been felt both at a student and institution level. By providing students with a platform to share their student voice, the project has been able to increase their sense of belonging through partnerships with academics and peers alike. Students have been able to demonstrate greater engagement through applying project learnings to their other units and interactions, and their confidence in abilities and ideas has been fostered through the scaffolded assessment. The growth of the many students who have participated in the program has been evidenced by the number of students who hold student leadership positions at the university, apply for external roles with their industry connections, and pursue internship opportunities in areas they hadn't previously considered. At an institutional level, the university has recognised the impact that this project has had on student experience by expanding the opportunities for participation in the project and mentorship. These findings provide a foundation for future collaborations with student cohorts to develop an informed and ongoing program to actively address the needs of students across Australia, and empower those who participate.

### **References**

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