

Student Involvement in Academic Forum: Discussion Paper

Background

The Academic Forum has governance rules that regulate its function, membership and procedures. Election of the Forum's member is clearly prescribed and electoral procedures are meant, presumably, to deliver a representative group that can attend to the Academic Forum's prescribed functions. The functions of the Academic Forum are to:

- (a) act as an electoral college for the Academic Board;
- (b) provide a forum representative of the University's academic community to debate academic policy;
- (c) advise Academic Board on matters of academic policy...;
- (d) serve...as a body where concerns and grievances...can be aired and brought to the attention of the Vice-Chancellor.

The second function (b) specifically states that the function of the Academic Forum is to *provide a forum representative of the University's academic community*. Membership of the Academic Forum (according to the list dated 16 February 2001) indicates a very unrepresentative sample of the academic community. Perhaps that's the subject of *another* discussion paper.

This paper addresses the issue of *student* involvement and how it might be improved. It assumes that the method of selecting academic and student representatives for the Forum will remain unchanged. Random selection could certainly be considered as an alternative selection process but that is not the purpose of this paper.

The Problem

Student membership on standing committees is inevitably problematic. Students are preoccupied with their studies and organisational issues would seem to interest very few of them. Why have student representatives at all? The Academic Forum is not a decision-making body so interest in its operations is further diminished. The Forum is not meant to mirror the Board's operations, rather to stimulate debate and provide a more accessible venue for lively discussions. This is reason enough to involve more students—to incorporate the voices of those directly affected. In the past, issues have been aired in the Forum but, in the absence of decisions, its participants see little 'closure' of these issues. They are left wondering if it was all a waste of time. There are probably additional difficulties with the Forum that relate to the physical space: it's an awkward lay-out where less-powerful voices would find it hard to be heard. The formality of the space is intimidating and is not conducive to open or consensual discussions.

The problems experienced by the Forum are not dissimilar to those experienced in representative government. Those in the forum (or parliament) are unrepresentative of the wider population and formal proceedings are not conducive to useful discussion. Without genuine opportunities to participate (beyond the ballot box), the electorate grows cynical, sceptical and weary. How then to encourage meaningful participation that can occur in tandem with the prescribed governance rules? How to ensure representativeness? How to create an environment that is conducive to deliberation? How to establish opportunities to influence outcomes? The following possibilities could lead to greater student *and* academic involvement in the Forum.

Some Possibilities

Representativeness

Random selection is the most obvious way of improving representativeness. Intuitively we consider that those who are interested in participating *will* participate by putting themselves

Student Involvement in Academic Forum

© Copyright 2001 Dr L. Carson, Merewether Building (H04), University of Sydney NSW 2006 AUSTRALIA
Phone: 02 9351 3089 (Int +61) Fax: 02 9351 3624 (Int +61) Email: l.carson@econ.usyd.edu.au Web: www.hydra.org.au/activedemocracy

http://www.hydra.org.au/activedemocracy/articles/06_student.htm

forward. Instead self-selection (under the guise of election) leads to a situation in which the same group of people offer to serve. The remainder is not necessarily apathetic. When randomly selected, citizens show a surprising willingness to participate in the political process. This has been demonstrated recently when innovative methods of consultation have occurred. These methods include citizens' juries, deliberative polls, people's panels, consensus conferences and more familiar focus groups.

As is the case in the wider political context, these consultation methods could be used by those charged with a decision-making role to inform their decisions. The Academic Forum could promote its activities and encourage further involvement by convening a jury, panel or interactive poll on an issue of interest. Participants could be randomly selected from the student (and academic) body and invited to participate. The event can be open to observers and this will encourage further involvement from the wider University community.

Deliberative capacity

These processes are highly interactive. A skilled, independent facilitator is appointed. Expert witnesses are called. The participants question the panel of experts and engage in discussion among themselves. The organisers make it clear how the recommendations will be used so that there are no false expectations. Participants inevitably are changed by the process: they learn a lot, they develop confidence in their personal views and they move beyond their own individual interests towards a consensus that is more mindful of the common good. Participants also develop greater respect for the organising body because of its willingness to consult and to be influenced by the outcomes. The reverse is also true: participants are angered by time ill-spent.

Influence

The Chair of Academic Forum has indicated that he would like to see more follow up from Forum proceedings. When matters are discussed there is currently insufficient closure on the issues. Action plans would help to establish this need for closure, as would some ongoing reporting about the outcomes of any deliberations. Nothing makes a group more weary than the sense of futility that arises from talking, talking, talking—with no reported outcomes. Discussions are most energetic when linked to decisions.

In this vein, if innovative consultation methods were to be employed, it would be essential that they lead to specific outcomes. This should be an explicit, contractual arrangement between participants and organisers: a statement of intent about the way in which any recommendations will be used. The reputation of such methods is dependent upon the willingness of Academic Board to act on recommendations that emerge from a robust process that is genuinely reflective of the views of the wider University community.

Recommendation

That Academic Forum considers the next issue of interest that comes before it as an opportunity to convene a jury, panel or interactive poll of the kind outlined here. Consideration should be given to ensuring representativeness, deliberative capacity and transparency of outcomes. Within the University context, with the rich diversity of talent available it is likely that skills and time would be available and may willingly be offered at no cost. Appropriate space and other facilities would need to be provided.

Further Information

References

Carson, L. and B. Martin (1999). Random Selection in Politics. Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers.

Student Involvement in Academic Forum

© Copyright 2001 Dr L. Carson, Merewether Building (H04), University of Sydney NSW 2006 AUSTRALIA
Phone: 02 9351 3089 (Int +61) Fax: 02 9351 3624 (Int +61) Email: l.carson@econ.usyd.edu.au Web: www.hydra.org.au/activedemocracy

http://www.hydra.org.au/activedemocracy/articles/06_student.htm

Fishkin, J. S. (1995). The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy. New Haven, Yale University Press.

Renn, O., T. Webler, et al., Eds. (1995). Fairness and Competence in Citizen Participation. Evaluating Models for Environmental Discourse. Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Renouf, C. (1999). "Rebirthing Democracy: The Experience of the First Australian Consensus Conference." Consuming Interests (79, August): 16-19.

Websites

Australia's first consensus conference: <http://www.consensusconference.chirp.com.au/>

Australia's first deliberative poll: <http://i-d-a.com.au/>

Citizens' juries in US: <http://www.jefferson-center.org/>

People's panel in UK: <http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/index/pphome.htm>

Teledemocracy Action News + Network: <http://www.auburn.edu/tann/>

Student Involvement in Academic Forum

© Copyright 2001 Dr L. Carson, Merewether Building (H04), University of Sydney NSW 2006 AUSTRALIA
Phone: 02 9351 3089 (Int +61) Fax: 02 9351 3624 (Int +61) Email: l.carson@econ.usyd.edu.au Web: www.hydra.org.au/activedemocracy

http://www.hydra.org.au/activedemocracy/articles/06_student.htm