

Criteria for Effective Student Councils

What makes a good Student Council or SRC? If we are to recognise Student Councils that are doing well, or others that need improvement, we need to have some idea of how we judge this.

In a previous article in **Connect** (initially in # 75, June 1992, and again in #116 in April 1998) it was suggested that a Student Council needs a vision of what it can and should do, and that it should monitor what actually happens and match the work of the Student Council against that vision. This was mainly concerned with the sort of things that the Student Council worked on, but it didn't talk about how the Student Council was structured, how it related to other students, or how it connected to the school's decision-making.

It's now suggested that there are 10 possible **criteria** (or definitions) for a successful Student Council. Your Student Council can use these to think about how well you are doing – but you need to be brutally honest with yourself. You also need to

collect views about the Student Council on these ten criteria from different people; a junior member of the Student Council may see some things differently from a senior member, or from a student who is not on the Student Council, or from a support teacher, or from the Principal. So ask a range of people.

Put your results onto the graph at the end of the criteria, so you can show and compare your results.

The importance of the answers you get is more to do with how they help you to improve your Student Council. These views give a glimpse at one time, but this might (and probably should) change with time, especially if you use what you learn to help you improve.

(In several areas, these criteria also recognise that there are different ways for the Student Council to be structured and operate, reflecting the different sizes and structures of the school. A Student Council in a school of 15 or 150 students should be very different from a Student Council in a school of 1500 students.)

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Criterion 1: The Student Council meets regularly

- It has a clear timetable for meeting
- It notifies all members (and other students) when the next meeting is to be held
- There is good attendance of members
- It meets in various forms and groups (eg as a whole Council, in sub-groups etc)

0	Not at all
1	Poor
2	Some
3	OK
4	Good
5	Brilliant

Criterion 2: The Student Council has clear structures and processes

- There is a clear and known process for students to become a member of the Student Council through election or appointment
- There is a known and written constitution describing how the Student Council works
- This constitution and how the Council is working, is reviewed regularly
- The Council has internal structures and processes that are appropriate to the work of the Council (including chairing, recording decisions etc)
- Meetings are well run, effective (productive) and enjoyable

0	Not at all
1	Poor
2	Some
3	OK
4	Good
5	Brilliant

Criterion 3: The Student Council is broadly representative of students

- Students are elected or appointed through democratic and representative processes (that could be by election, or from volunteers or by other agreed processes)
- There is a range of students on the Student Council – in age, ability, school engagement, race, gender etc – that broadly represents students in the school
- No significant group of students is, or feels, unrepresented on or by the Student Council
- Being on the Council is a desirable outcome for a broad range of students

0	<i>Not at all</i>
1	<i>Poor</i>
2	<i>Some</i>
3	<i>OK</i>
4	<i>Good</i>
5	<i>Brilliant</i>

Criterion 4: The Student Council reports to students and gets advice from students

- Student Council representatives get advice and support from other students in different ways
- Time is available for the Student Council members to report back to other students and to get advice
- The views of other students are considered and taken seriously by the Student Council

0	<i>Not at all</i>
1	<i>Poor</i>
2	<i>Some</i>
3	<i>OK</i>
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5	<i>Brilliant</i>

Criterion 5: The Student Council deals with a range of issues

- The Council is aware of the different things that a Student Council can do
- The Council actually does a range of things, including advocacy for students, putting forward student views (on curriculum, rules, uniforms, facilities etc), organising events, supporting agreed causes – ie it is not just restricted to fundraising or social activities
- The Council controls the time that it allocates to different issue and topics – it makes sure that one or two things don't dominate
- The Council sets up appropriate internal structures to deal with different issues eg sub-groups or working parties
- The Council is effective in implementing and working on this range of issues
- The Council completes its plans and achieves what it sets out to do

0	<i>Not at all</i>
1	<i>Poor</i>
2	<i>Some</i>
3	<i>OK</i>
4	<i>Good</i>
5	<i>Brilliant</i>

Criterion 6: The Student Council is trained and networked to be effective

- Appropriate training events are organised within the school and made available to all members of the Student Council
- Members of the Student Council get follow-up support and informal training in the skills needed to do their work
- The Student Council has access to inter-school and statewide networking opportunities
- The Student Council is a member of the appropriate statewide organisation (eg VicSRC) where it exists

0	<i>Not at all</i>
1	<i>Poor</i>
2	<i>Some</i>
3	<i>OK</i>
4	<i>Good</i>
5	<i>Brilliant</i>

Criterion 7: The Student Council has time to do its work and credit for its work

- The Student Council meets at a time convenient to all members
- Time is provided, as part of the school curriculum, for Student Council members to do their work
- Credit is provided for Student Council members to recognise their contribution to the school and to their own learning
- The Student Council is publicly acknowledged for its work

0	<i>Not at all</i>
1	<i>Poor</i>
2	<i>Some</i>
3	<i>OK</i>
4	<i>Good</i>
5	<i>Brilliant</i>

Criterion 8: The Student Council is connected to the school's decision-making

- Students are represented on the school's decision-making body, either from the Student Council, or directly from the student body; there is more than one student appointed
- Students are represented on a range of other committees within the school eg uniform committee, canteen committee, curriculum committee, facilities etc
- Student views are heard and considered seriously in all these forums
- The Student Council is asked for its views on all important matters

0	<i>Not at all</i>
1	<i>Poor</i>
2	<i>Some</i>
3	<i>OK</i>
4	<i>Good</i>
5	<i>Brilliant</i>

Criterion 9: The Student Council has teacher and principal support

- There is a Student Council support teacher who has time release to support the Student Council
- This teacher supports and advises the Council without taking over
- There are regular meetings of the Student Council with the Principal and other appropriate members of the school administration
- The views and suggestions of the Student Council are seriously considered and discussed

0	<i>Not at all</i>
1	<i>Poor</i>
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Criterion 10: The Student Council has the resources it needs

- The Student Council has a budget that it controls and allocates
- It has access to practical resources such as photocopying, mailing etc
- It has a Student Council noticeboard that it controls
- It has a space of its own – eg an office, a filing cabinet etc

0	<i>Not at all</i>
1	<i>Poor</i>
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This is a first draft of a criteria-based tool to help you to reflect on the effectiveness of your Student Council. It was tried and amended by students at a recent Western Metropolitan Regional SRC Conference in Victoria. **We'd like you to try it too and see if it's useful.**

The descriptions are meant to show that there are many possibilities; some are essential (at least the Student Council should be like this), and others are desirable (and not all Councils may be like this).

Are there other criteria that could be used? Are the descriptions appropriate?

Let **Connect** know how you have used this and what you think.

Informed Representation

If you're a representative, when people ask you about an issue, you don't just present your own ideas. If you're a representative of other students, you need to be finding out what they think too, and making sure you present their ideas. And you'll also need to find out about the topic, so you know what you're talking about; usually you shouldn't just give views 'off the top of your head'.

We talk about this as **informed representation**. This article explores some ideas about what that means. It developed from a brainstorm with the Student Executive of the VicSRC.

Why is informed representation important?

First of all, to speak about any issue, you'll need to know more about the issue. Yes, as a student, you know and experience certain things – in fact, your experience gives you an **expertise** that others (particularly teachers and other adults) do not have. But that knowledge and experience will also be limited. So the first part of informed representation is knowing the facts about the issue. Otherwise you'll come up with incorrect views and maybe even look foolish.

Secondly, the issue is likely to be complicated. Any one person knows some of the details, but there are many more to be considered and taken into account. You'll need to weigh up different ideas and some of them might be contradictory.

Thirdly, there are probably many different views on the topic, from different students – who have different experiences and needs. You are not representing just your own views, but seeking to give some idea of the range of views that exist. This is even more important when you remember that you were probably elected or appointed as a representative because you were confident and wanted to 'step forward'. That's well and good, but that then means you may not be a 'typical' student. Indeed, is there such a person?

So, if you are to provide a student perspective, you need to be finding out what other students – and a range of many different students – think about

the topic. Otherwise, you are misleading whoever is asking for your views. And other students have a right to have their voices and views heard – just as you do.

What is informed representation?

From this discussion, we can then think of informed representation as having three dimensions: *depth*, *breadth* and *history*.



Depth means finding out as much as you can about the topic – as much detail as you can. What does the topic mean? Why is it important? What are the possible differences and complications?

Breadth means finding out what a range of other students think about the topic. What is their experience? Are there different experiences? What do other students think should happen? Why? Which students have different views?

History means finding out what has already happened or is happening now. What have people tried before? What have students already suggested? What happened? Who else is working on this topic? Why? And this also includes **future history**: what you think *should* be happening.

How do you become an informed representative?

Thinking about these three dimensions helps us to define how we can go about being better informed as representatives. When you're asked for a student perspective on a topic, you should be trying to get as much information as possible, within the time available.

First, research the topic in all the usual ways: use internet search engines, look in the media (papers, TV, radio), find some articles about the topic, interview people working in the area. Try to use a diversity of sources, and talk with a diversity of people. You may be able to use 'professional connections' (researchers, teachers, community workers) to help point you to what will be useful.

Secondly, make a special effort to find others who are particularly interested and working on the topic. They should be able to help you with some history and background, and let you know who has a special interest in the topic – the 'stakeholders'.

Thirdly, find out the experiences and views of other students. You can do this formally, through surveys and questionnaires, but this might take some time. If you have a limited time (as is usual), at least try to talk with and interview a range of other students. Don't just choose your friends: choose students from different groups, different ages, different backgrounds – even different schools if possible. You will want to know both what they have experienced on the topic (what is and has been happening) and what they think about this – and about what *should* be happening.

Fourthly, involve other students actively in the topic. If other students are actively interested, and have different experiences, set up a working group to advise you, and to act with you on the topic.

In this way, when you get up to speak, you'll know what you are talking about, you'll know what other students think, and you'll be able to be an informed representative in suggesting positive and practical possibilities.

Roger Holdsworth
with VicSRC Executive members