monash postgraduate association
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Inspiring and supporting postgraduates

Postgraduate representation on university committees at Monash University

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Contents **Page**

Introduction 4

SECTION ONE: STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

1.1 What is student engagement? 5

1.2 What is student representation? 5

Diagram showing MPA support system for postgraduate representatives 7

SECTION TWO: POSTGRADUATE REPRESENTATION AT MONASH UNIVERSITY

2.1 Postgraduate representation on Monash University committees 8

2.2 The process of placing postgraduate representatives on university committees 8

2.3 The pros and cons of the election and nomination processes 9

Table of pros and cons of appointment methods 10

SECTION THREE: BEST PRACTICE IN STUDENT REPRESENTATION

3. Example of a best practice student representative process 11

SECTION FOUR: RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Recommendations 13

Attachment 1: University committees with postgraduate representation 14

Attachment 2: MPA nomination & support processes for postgraduate representatives 16

Introduction

There has recently been a great deal of enthusiastic discussion about 'the student voice' being heard and included in university governance. Universities around the world are beginning to embrace and value student participation in decision-making. This is good news for university-based student associations, who have long understood the valuable contribution an effective student representative can make to the operation of a university.

However, when discussing the role of 'the student voice' in university governance, there is commonly a conflation of student *engagement* and student *representation*, when in fact there are very important distinctions between these two processes.

This discussion paper looks at the differences between student engagement and student representation and specifically, at the ways in which postgraduate student representatives operate at Monash University. It examines how postgraduate representatives are best supported to ensure an effective outcome, as well as making some practical recommendations to enhance representative processes to the advantage of both the University and the postgraduate cohort.

The Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) is a separate, incorporated association that is recognised by Monash University Council as the representative body for all postgraduates on all Victorian campuses, and as such, is involved in the appointment of postgraduates to representative positions on university committees.

SECTION ONE: STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

1.1 What is student engagement?

Student participation in university affairs is encouraged and supported by universities in numerous ways, for example: running student focus groups; surveying students; encouraging students to become involved in university-run social events; including students on project teams; and inviting students to meet with university management.

Examples of groups engaging with Monash University in this manner would be faculty-based postgraduate groups, student sports groups, residential college groups and university-registered volunteer and leadership groups. Students participating in these processes provide input based on their personal experiences and that of their friends.

Engagement with the wider student population is a very valuable exercise for the university, but it should not be confused with student representation.

1.2 What is student representation?

The appointment of student representatives where formal representation is required (such as university committees, boards and working groups), falls under the auspices of the student representative bodies.

At Monash University student representative bodies are independent, incorporated student associations, recognised by University Council as the official spokespeople for their relevant cohorts. Each student association's board is democratically elected by the relevant student cohort,[1] they employ their own staff and the organisations are run as independently as possible from university influence.[2]

When student representatives are appointed by independent student associations, those representatives are bound by the student associations' constitutional obligations to their relevant student communities. One of these obligations is to be responsive to the needs of the wider student cohort.

Postgraduate representatives appointed by the MPA must act in the interests of the postgraduate community over and above self-interest or the University's interests, particularly when those interests diverge. Their views are informed by the MPA's collective and historical knowledge, rather than simply by their own experiences. That collective and

[1] At Monash University, all postgraduates are officially represented by the MPA. The undergraduates are officially represented by their campus-based organisations: MSA (Clayton undergraduates), MONSU (Caulfield undergraduates), MONSU (Peninsula undergraduates) and MPSU (Parkville undergraduates).

[2] Each year the university collects a compulsory Student Services Amenities Fee (SSAF) paid by students in addition to their course fees. Forty percent of the postgraduate SSAF is paid to the MPA. SSAF is the sole source of funding for the MPA, therefore the university can exert influence over the MPA via the conditions set out in the funding agreement between the university and the MPA. Once that agreement has been negotiated, the university's influence over MPA operations is minimal.

historical knowledge is primarily provided by the student association staff,[3] who offer the only form of continuity in an association whose governing board changes annually.

The MPA differs to some of the undergraduate student associations in that the postgraduate representatives work closely with their association staff. Postgraduate representatives are predominantly more mature than their undergraduate counterparts and their focus tends to be centred on improving the postgraduate experience. They recognise the value that staff expertise can bring to achieving that aim. The system works because it is clearly defined that the staff role is advisory and the decision-making power sits with the student representative.

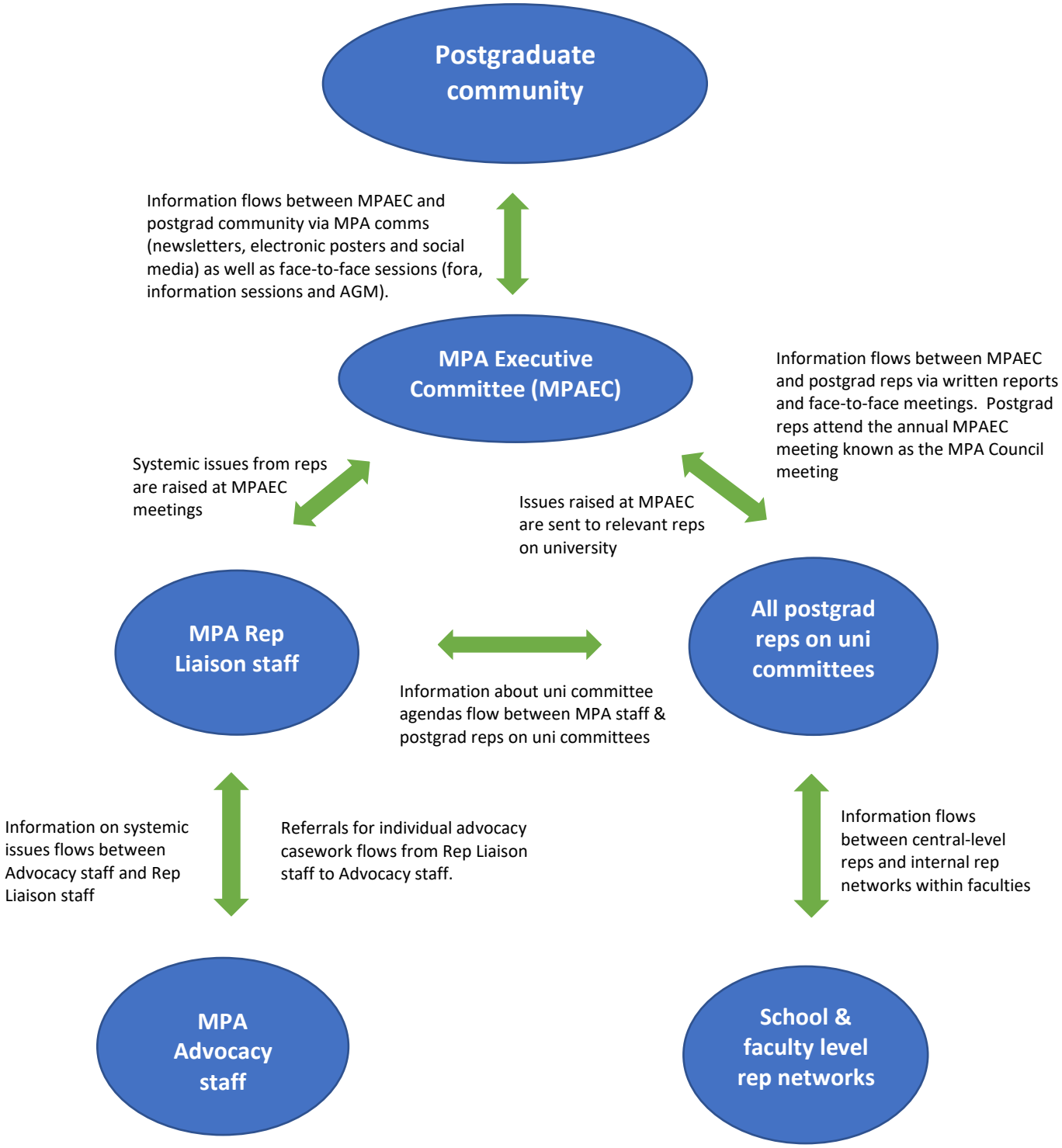
The other key difference is that where the undergraduate association representatives can often be driven by federal party politics, resulting in situations where block voting is commonplace, the postgraduate representatives uniformly come to these positions as independent students, free from party politics. It is therefore imperative that they are supported by the MPA in order to become informed about the wider postgraduate community and their concerns.

The postgraduate representatives are connected to the university-wide operations of the MPA which provide a mechanism for information to flow between the representative, the MPA Executive Committee, postgraduate representatives on other university committees and the wider postgraduate body, ensuring they are well-briefed and can participate in the university committee in a meaningful way.

The connection between a postgraduate representative and their representative body is what makes the contributions of a postgraduate representative so valuable to the university and to the postgraduate community.

[3] It is important that student association staff are employed by the association (not the university) and are therefore free of conflict of interest when providing advice.

MPA support system for postgraduate representation



SECTION TWO: POSTGRADUATE REPRESENTATION AT MONASH UNIVERSITY

2.1 Postgraduate representation on university committees

Not all university committees provide for postgraduate representation. In Australia, the decision to include a student representative position on a committee largely sits with the university, although in some instances is imposed on universities by government regulations.

There are over 70 positions on university committees that provide for postgraduate representation at Monash University. This includes senior central committees and those sitting under faculties and administrative units of the university. A full list of these committees can be found in Attachment 1.

2.2 The process of placing postgraduate representatives on university committees

The manner in which students are placed on university committees varies across the different committees. There are currently four different processes that take place at Monash University:

2.2.1 University-conducted election - The University conducts elections and successful candidates are directly appointed. Examples include University Council and Academic Board.[4]

2.2.2 MPA-conducted election - The University academic unit requests that the MPA run an election on their behalf to determine the successful candidate. An example is the Faculty of Arts Graduate Research Committee.

2.2.3 MPA nomination - The University requests that the MPA nominates a postgraduate representative to the committee. The MPA selects a representative by the process set out in Attachment 2. In summary: a call for expressions of interest is placed in the MPA newsletter; applications are short-listed; applicants are interviewed by a subcommittee comprising postgraduate members from the Executive Committee and MPA staff; a nominee is selected. The successful candidate is chosen on their perceived ability to effectively and responsibly represent broader postgraduate interests. This candidate is then nominated to the Chair and the nomination must be formally accepted by the committee.[5]

[4] For postgraduate-specific vacancies arising part-way through a term of office, the MPA has traditionally been invited to provide a nominee, who is then placed on the committee via cooption.

[5] While the committee has the power to reject the MPA nominee, there have been no known instances of a committee doing so.

MPA staff maintain regular contact with postgraduate representatives, who provide and seek information on issues raised at their committees. An induction and training program is provided by the MPA.

Examples include: Graduate Research Committee; Learning and Teaching Committee; and most grievance, discipline and termination panels.

2.2.4 University nomination - The University calls for expressions of interest from students and the successful candidate is chosen by University staff, sometimes via interview. Sometimes positions are not advertised at all; they are filled via a direct request (aka a tap on the shoulder) from a University staff member to a specific student. This process raises ethical concerns and can be exploited by candidates being chosen on their willingness to remain quiet and compliant. The MPA would contend that these students are engaging with the University but are not acting in the capacity of representatives.

2.3 The pros and cons of the election and nomination processes

The chart on the following page summarises the pros and cons of each appointment method. From the perspective of the postgraduate student body as well as the University, enabling the MPA to make a nomination to a postgraduate representative vacancy far outweighs all other methods of appointment.

Such a nominated postgraduate representative has the skills to raise and discuss issues of concern in a professional manner, and the support to ensure that the concerns of the broader postgraduate community are effectively represented. The appointment process is independent, transparent and open. The representatives are connected to the wider representative structure and therefore able to make genuine and thoughtful contributions to committee discussions.

The single negative aspect of this appointment method, that of the advertised vacancy failing to achieve 100% reach, could be mitigated by the relevant university unit enabling the MPA to communicate information about vacant postgraduate representative positions to the corresponding cohort via the university email system.

Pros and cons of election and nomination processes, used for appointing postgrads to rep positions on university committees	Uni conducted election	MPA conducted election	Uni nomination	MPA nomination
PROS				
Democratic process	✓	✓		✓
Independent of university staff opinions, biases and conflicts of interest	✓	✓		✓
Transparent process	✓	✓	✓	✓
Advertised to the student community	✓	✓	✓	✓
Candidates have a formal association with the MPA, and use that association to ensure that information flows between the wider student population and the successful candidate, as well as between relevant student representatives		✓		✓
Candidates are chosen based on their skill sets and ability to effectively represent the interests of the student cohort			✓	✓
CONS				
The successful candidate may not have the skills required to be an effective participant	✓	✓		
Majority of voters are not well-informed about the qualities of the candidates	✓	✓		
Students from smaller cohorts tend to be consistently under-represented in the election outcome	✓	✓		
Low voter participation	✓	✓		
Candidates have no formal association with the MPA, so there is no obligation on the part of the candidate to connect with the MPA. This can result in information failing to flow between the wider student population and the successful candidate, as well as between the candidate and student representatives on other relevant university committees	✓		✓	
The candidate operates in isolation and is informed only by their own experience, leading to the possibility of opinions being put forward that are not representative of the postgraduate cohort	✓		✓	
The advertising of the call for interest in vacant positions may not be comprehensive due to the MPA's inability to access university bulk emails/ or university's methods.		✓	✓	✓
May not be a transparent process			✓	

SECTION THREE: BEST PRACTICE IN POSTGRADUATE REPRESENTATION

If universities genuinely want to hear the 'student voice', they must accept that sometimes that student voice will not be in agreement with university policies and proposals. The vast majority of committees at Monash University welcome alternative student opinions when they are presented thoughtfully and with good intentions; they know that diversity on their committees will ensure a good outcome.

A very small minority of committees work to shut-down any dissenting student voice; far from promoting a healthy open discussion, student members feel unwelcome and eventually disengage. It is important for chairs to remember that allowing students to express an opposing view does not mean that the committee must automatically accept that view; a range of opinions should be encouraged, not feared. An organisation that fails to accept that there is always room for improvement is an organisation that is missing opportunities for growth.

When universities fully understand and appreciate the benefits of genuine consultation with student representatives, the benefits to the individual student representatives, the wider student population and the university are manifest.

3. Example of a best practice postgraduate representative process

An example of best practice in postgraduate representation at Monash University is summarised as follows:

3.1 The university ensures that a representative postgraduate student association (MPA) is supported to run with as much financial and operational independence as possible.

3.2 The university engages with the MPA to provide postgraduate representatives.

3.3 The MPA follows their internal process to advertise, interview and select postgraduate nominees, ensuring the requisite skills for the committee. This process ensures that access to representative positions on university committees is open to every individual postgraduate, not just offered to members of the MPA's own executive committee, as occurs in some undergraduate associations.

3.4 Postgraduate representatives are nominated by the MPA and accepted by the committee.

3.5 The MPA provides an induction and training for their representatives to help them understand their role and the role of the committee they are joining.

3.6 Newly appointed representatives are invited to meet privately with the Chair and/or secretary prior to their first meeting for a brief, informal induction on how this particular committee works.

3.7 Newly appointed representatives are acknowledged, introduced and welcomed by the Chair at their first meeting, and importantly, existing members introduce themselves to the new postgraduate member.

3.8 The university committee sends out their agenda at least one week prior to the meeting, providing enough time for consultation and discussion between the representative, the MPA and the wider representative network to take place.

3.9 An MPA staff member contacts the representative prior to each meeting after the agenda is circulated. They discuss specific agenda items and how issues affect postgraduates on the ground, drawing on knowledge from the association's advocacy casework, survey results, fora results, reports from the MPA Executive Committee, reports from other postgraduate representatives, and previous MPA submissions.

3.10 Where the representative is on a central-level committee, the MPA coordinates a meeting with their faculty and school counterparts to ensure they have a university-wide view on matters.

3.11 The agenda includes a standing agenda item for student representatives to report on postgraduate issues and activities.

3.12 The Chair sets a tone to help student representatives to feel comfortable about commenting on issues.

3.13 Committee members and the professional university staff supporting the committee are friendly and respectful of student members.

3.14 Feedback from student representatives that is critical of the university is dealt with respectfully and professionally.

3.15 Professional university staff supporting the committee demonstrate a willingness to acknowledge issues raised by MPA representatives, and work with the student representatives and MPA staff to satisfactorily address those concerns.

3.16 Professional university staff supporting the committee proactively consult with student representatives and MPA staff when drafting policies and procedures of particular relevance to the postgraduate cohort, or those which they believe may be controversial, prior to those policies being presented at the meeting.

3.17 Relevant MPA staff members are invited to join committee working parties, alongside student representatives, in instances where the MPA committee

believes the staff are better placed to understand the breadth and ramifications of an issue/policy/procedure.

3.18 Student representatives provide and seek information to/from the MPA staff and Executive Committee. Information from the university committee can then be passed on, or calls for feedback made, to the broader postgraduate community. That feedback is circulated back to the student representative.

The result is a very productive working relationship, where each party understands and is respectful of the other's role and focus. Both MPA and the university committee staff appreciate that there will not always be agreement on every issue, but both are willing to engage in the difficult conversations with good will and professionalism, which is precisely what is needed to produce smart and effective policy.

SECTION FOUR: RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Recommendations

4.1 That, subject to external legislation, postgraduate representative positions on all Monash University committees be nominated by the MPA.

4.2 That the relevant university unit enables the MPA to communicate information about vacant postgraduate representative positions to the corresponding cohort via the university email system.

4.3 That best practice in student representation is applied to all Monash University committees.

Attachment 1: University committees with postgraduate representation

University Council
Academic Board (2 positions)
Environmental Sustainability Stakeholder Reference Committee
Diversity and Inclusion Committee
Athena SWAN Steering Committee (Subcommittee of DIC)
Diverse Genders and Sexualities Advisory Group (Subcommittee of DIC)
Occupational Health and Safety Committee
Standing Committee on Mental Health
Student Engagement Steering committee
Student Environmental Network
Student Equity committee
Graduate Research Committee (2 positions)
Graduate Research Steering Committee
Selection committee VC's Award for Excellence in p/g Supervision
Education Committee
Coursework Admissions and Programs committee (CAPC)
Caulfield Campus Orientation Committee
Caulfield Campus Student Experience Network (SEN)
Clayton Campus Orientation Committee
Clayton Campus Student Experience Network (SEN)
Parkville Campus Orientation Committee
Parkville Campus Student Experience Network (SEN)
Peninsula Campus Student Experience Network (SEN)
MADA
Faculty Graduate Research Committee
Faculty Education Committee
OHS Committee
ARTS
Arts Faculty Education Committee
Arts Graduate Coursework Committee
Arts Graduate Research Committee (Faculty)
Film, Media and Communication
Historical Studies
Linguistics and Applied Linguistics
Literary and Cultural studies
Philosophy)
Social and Political Sciences
Theatre, Performance and Music
BUSINESS & ECONOMICS
Faculty Research Degrees Committee
Education Committee (2 reps)
Quality assurance teaching and learning working group (Edu C'tee)
Equity & Social Inclusion Committee
EDUCATION
Education Committee

OHSE Committee (2 reps)
Graduate Research Committee
Student Experience Committee (2 reps)
ENGINEERING
Graduate Research Committee
OHSE Committee Fac of Eng and IT
IT
Faculty Education Committee
Graduate Programs Committee
Graduate Research Committee (GRC) (2 reps)
LAW
Faculty Research Committee
Faculty Education Committee
Faculty Occupation Health, Safety & Environment Committee
MNHS
Graduate Research Committee (2 positions)
Education Committee (formerly Learning & Teaching)
Diversity and Inclusion Committee
PHARMACY
Faculty Graduate Research Committee
Pharmacy Practice Advisory Group
VCPPA
SCIENCE
Faculty Research Degrees Committee
Postgraduate Committee (10 reps or more, 2 from each school, + Malaysia reps)
*(School of Biological Sciences)
*(School of Chemistry)
*(School of Earth, Atmosphere and Environment)
*(School of Mathematical Sciences)
*(School of Physics and Astronomy)
Discipline panel University
Discipline panel Faculty
Discipline panel
Academic progress committee Faculty c/w

Attachment 2: MPA nomination and support processes for postgraduate representatives

MPA nomination process for postgraduate representatives

1. A University committee secretary advises the MPA of a vacancy on their committee and invites the MPA to nominate a postgraduate representative.

2. In a fortnightly newsletter, the MPA places a *call for expressions of interest* in the university committee representative position. Previous minutes and agenda (where available), terms of reference, and dates and location of scheduled meetings are provided to applicants. Applications are made on a form that requires basic information as well as a personal statement.

3. A subcommittee comprising at least 1 MPA staff member and at least 1 MPA Executive Committee student member review applications and interview short-listed applicants.

4. The MPA staff nominate the successful applicant to the university committee secretary, and the committee formally accepts the nomination.

MPA support systems for postgraduate representatives

1. The MPA staff run a personal induction for each new postgraduate representative. An induction pack is provided containing: a comprehensive handbook explaining how committees at Monash work; the expectations of postgraduates holding a representative role; and some MPA merchandise. The representative is issued with an open invitation to contact the MPA staff or student committee members with any questions about their role.

2. The MPA postgraduate representative is contacted by an MPA staff member before each university committee meeting. The staff member asks the representative if they have any questions about the agenda. They discuss with the representative any agenda items of interest to the MPA, provide the representative with the necessary background information including decisions by the MPAEC, previous lobbying efforts by the MPA, and current issues coming through the MPA office from the advocacy service (systemic issues only) and the wider postgraduate community.

3. The MPA postgraduate representative is contacted by an MPA staff member after each university committee meeting. The representative reports back to the staff member on any points of interest to the postgraduate community, and this is fed back to the MPAEC for further discussion where relevant, or to the MPA communications team for dissemination to the wider postgraduate community.

4. The MPA staff facilitate regular meetings between representatives on central-level committees and their counterparts at faculty and school-level, where available. For example, the MPA representative on the Education Committee is connected with the

GPG postgraduate representatives in equivalent roles at faculty and school level and the GRC reps are connected with the HDR postgraduate representatives in equivalent roles at faculty and school level.

5. The MPA staff provide a program of training and information sessions for all postgraduate representatives across all university committees, boards and working groups. Topics vary but can include: how committees work; how to successfully effect change; how to deal with the politics of committees; understanding the university committee structure; and public speaking.

6. Postgraduate representatives have a standing invitation to attend any MPAEC meeting, but must attend the MPAEC meeting held once per year known as the MPA Council meeting. This ensures direct contact between the MPA Executive Committee and their wider network of postgraduate representatives on university committees.