

## 2018 ANZSSA CONFERENCE

*As written by your fabulous NUPSA SRSO (Georgia)*

### **Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec**

After leaving the Newcastle badlands on Sunday and descending into the glorious sprawl that is Melbourne, I woke feeling refreshed and ready to conference. My phone decided it hates me and that a proper city was beyond its capabilities of comprehension. It sent me for a 2km walk in the wrong direction, but I got a fabulous coffee so it wasn't all bad. As I am an anxious little creature who had left the hotel super early I still found my way to the venue on time. There was all of the nice welcoming and opening procedures and then we got started with our first keynote speaker, James Dodkins.

James was a rock musician who turned his hand to become a customer experience expert and started his presentation by (literally) playing some Metallica. I was impressed yet saddened that I was not invited to accompany him, on the triangle. The fact that I did not actually have a triangle handy did not, in any way, dampen my idea that this could be my time to shine and share my musical gifts with the world. I was not invited to share the stage. Boooo.

James comes from a very customer focussed perspective (look we will deal with the whole 'Are students customers?' question later and for right now let's just go with it) and started by explaining the importance of creating lasting & effective first impressions. First impressions should have 1. Impact, 2. Purpose and 3. Direction. I think this is really important as we are a student association, we want to be noticed and make a good impression!

Next we need to create 'superfans' who will not only love us but will tell other people that they should love us too! These 'superfans' will promote our brand so we need to be delivery such great services that we are creating fans at every opportunity. Merchandise and branding can be really essential to promoting us and I feel NUPSA is doing some good work in this space and can't wait to see what we do next. I am a NUPSA superfan!

James outlined the importance of getting it right (in our case this would be our delivery of services and events). There was discussion around identifying problems or gaps, monitoring our delivery, communicating to ensure issues are understood and compensating when we get it wrong. As nearly everything NUPSA does is free for students this last step could be a bit tricky in practice but I appreciate not all compensation is monetary.

The next important message was to 'make it clear'. His point was made by demonstrating a number of misheard song lyrics. Essentially we need to ensure our messages and communication is simple, understandable and crystal clear. If you are ever bored come see me and we can sing Pterodactyl Beaver to a Beyoncé song together.

His final point was to discuss that management must allow teams to rock. Listen to the team and empower them to take action. Trust I your team and allow them the resources required to achieve goals. All in all this was a really great presentation with some good take home messages that I think can be utilised within NUPSA. We then broke for morning tea so I was able to delicately guzzle pastries (imagine a pelican eating a seagull) whilst inhaling coffee. I am sure it was nothing short of a vision of loveliness.

After morning tea we had concurrent sessions where we got to choose sessions that were relevant or of interest to us.

**Session 1. Belonging in Partnership: staff and students working together to create belonging in informal learning environments- Heather Aguilar, Massey University**

Heather discussed how they wanted create a sense of belong for BA students by creating a common room. This was a challenging process with one of the most significant hurdles being finding a suitable space and being granted approval to use it. Once they were given a space they found that students really utilised and enjoyed the space. Two students spoke about how important this space was to them and that they could see that having this space actually changed the perspectives on education for some students. Heather was all cute and teary and it was lovely. Heather spoke about that they have tried this on other campuses where they have been given shared space and it has been nowhere near as effective. This session really resonated with me as NUPSA is currently advocating for a postgrad student space.

**Session 2. Let's Talk- Why Student partnership matters- Dr Rina Daluz & Daniela Sbrizzi, UNSW**

This session focussed on the development of the Student Minds program at UNSW. This program is a student led mental health support program which utilises student skills and peer support. Group meetings are held and facilitated by students with an inclusive atmosphere and mental health is actively discussed. Students that require more intensive or individual support are linked to the counselling service. I loved how this program focusses on relevance, student partnership, early intervention and seeks feedback from students so it can further develop/improve.

**Session 3. Safer communities 2015-2018: Three years of initiatives to prevent and respond to sexual assault and harassment at the University of Sydney- Amber Colhoun, University of Sydney**

Amber discussed that the University of Sydney has implemented a Safer Communities Strategic project as a way of reducing sexual assault and harassment on campus. This strategy was developed after analysing survey data obtained in 2015. The survey in and of itself was a crucial step in understanding the scope of these issues. Students were really engaged and passionate about this strategy and often reported finding value and meaning in the work. Interestingly Amber also found that negative reactions or constructive criticism is also extremely helpful at providing insight and information which can help improve what is offered. There is now a compulsory module being trialled and they are seeing the positive feedback increase each year as it is further tailored and improved. Amber advised there is still work to be done and moving forward they are looking at running targeted focus groups to gather even more information and feedback.

**Session 4. The peak of partnerships: UA and CAPA working together to improve campus safety- Dr Renee Hamilton, Universities Australia & Natasha Abrahams, CAPA**

Ok to be fair I was asked to take photos for this session and it was almost lunch so I wasn't as on the ball as I would have liked to be. I did still pay attention as Renee works with the Respect. Now. Always. Campaign which I think is quite important. It was great to hear of how this partnership has flourished and acknowledged that this has not always been easy and that these are two very different organisations and personalities. Yet they have worked together really well and each benefitted from the others knowledge and perspectives. It was nice to hear that it isn't always seamless (as an only child I know I can struggle with collaboration) and that by working through

issues and discussing them, they could be addressed/resolved and then the partnership moves on. I think this is significant for me personally as I think I can be a bit too quick to assume that because something isn't working, it never will.

Lunch was had. Surprisingly pleasant sandwiches.

### **Plenary Session**

#### **What's in a name: Partners, Customers or Students?**

Sorry but unless you would like this report to go on forever and ever I am not listing all the details of who was on this panel. There were people, all with valid reasons for being selected for the panel and they all did the talking. If you need specifics, come see me and I can give you my conf program which lists them.

I was really interested in this panel as I think the topic raises some interesting questions and conflicts. I'm not sure that a clear answer emerged and that is because I suspect there is not one simple answer. I would also suggest that we could have added Consumers however that might muddy some already murky waters. This is a complex topic/theme which I think was touched on multiple times throughout the conference. What I felt was lacking was an analysis of what are the common elements of student, partner & customer and what are the differences? Does this affect how we engage or work with people? I felt like the panel spent a bit more time discussing partnerships than the actual topic so that was disappointing. I felt the facilitators could have pulled people back to the topic rather than asking questions which sometimes seemed to steer things even further off course.

#### **Session 5. How do you know you are getting it right?: Implementing an authentic student partnership program, getting the people right and managing uncomfortable emotions. – *Dr Ben Chandler & Emily Hack***

This session was cool, fun and interactive. I will praise anyone that veers away from Powerpoints in a conference setting. We were split into groups of about 15 and people were given tasks inside envelopes. There was Lego on the table and we needed to complete the task we had been given but we weren't allowed to talk to other participants. It became clear early on that all of the tests were not the same and some people's task were directly counterproductive to others. It was fun to see the frustration of some people, some people rage quit and some people just got on with it. It was great and they explained this was not designed to be easy or comfortable. They also explained that this can sometimes be similar to working in a University and I appreciated the living metaphor they created. 10/10 would recommend.

#### **One on One with James Dodkins (keynote speaker)**

I wanted to pick his brain about how we can increase student engagement and feedback. I also wanted to discuss how/where we advertise and if different strategies are needed for different topics. To be honest I did not feel James brought a lot to this and I left feeling bemused but with not a lot of new info or ideas. So that happened.

**Session 6. The Students Association: An authentic partner enabling student success at and beyond university- *Ulisses De Souza Pereira Dias & Craig Black, by this stage in the day I no longer cared about where people were from and stopped writing it down. I know they were from New Zealand if that helps?***

So this session was great at highlighting how important student associations are and what they can offer both students and the universities. I felt a little like they were preaching to the converted in my case but it was still great to hear as I think student associations are incredibly important and the work they do is valuable and meaningful. It was great to see the respect and comradery that had developed between the student and staff member presenting. It was all a bit warm and fuzzy and late in the afternoon, I need that.

**Session 7. Financial Inclusion Action Planning- From development to Implementation- *Sarah Shores, UNSW***

Ok this presentation was the session of the day in my opinion. I even wrote down where Sarah was from because I genuinely wanted to know and I think this woman is incredibly smart and amazing. Seriously. I wasn't expecting this as I mainly stayed because I was in the room and it did not involve me walking up any stairs. Not really. I stayed because I thought it may be relevant to my role but was also a bit nervous because I thought a) this could be immensely boring, b) they will talk about complex financey things that I have little/no ability to grasp and c) they might want to do group accounting based-activities (by this stage in the afternoon I would rather have attempted DIY dentistry than do that). I WAS A FOOL!!! Sarah identified some scary data relating to the financial circumstances of many students and the struggles they are experiencing, not only this but how systems and structures that are meant to be supportive often fail students. My inner social worker was immediately paying very close attention. Financial inclusion action planning is SIMPLE to understand and Sarah identified ways that it could be implemented and the systems structures we create can be modified or improved. I went away with a key desire to research this topic and see what UoN is doing in this sphere. 21/10. Seriously, everyone should attend this.

DAY ONE DONE. I sojourned to Lygon St for a spectacular pasta tasting plate, a well-earned Aperol spritz and as an added bonus I cuddled a blind sausage dog named Ruby. She licked my eye and I have never felt so loved. Was a magical end to the day and I went home to bed really early because I had taken in a lot of info and my brain had gone all mushy and useless.

**Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> Dec**

My tired old body made it through another night. Brain seemed to perk back up once given coffee. I made ze journey back to the conference clutching it possessively whilst being dazzled at the fun Melbourne fashion being sported by practically everyone. Seriously Newcastle, you need to lift your fashion game.

**Keynote Day 2**

**Whai Whakaaro: An Indigenous perspective on authentic partnerships.- *Dr Megan Hall, Victoria University of Wellington***

Again with the things I really enjoyed! This was a great keynote where I felt really engaged. I got learn some interesting things about Maori culture and traditions. More importantly I got to (re)learn about some of the amazing contributions that community and students make when authentic partnerships are created. There was also discussion about the consequences in not engaging in partnerships and how that even with really good intentions, significant mistakes can and will be made where we assume knowledge. At the end of this speech all of the New Zealand delegates came down and sang a traditional song as a way to honour Megan. Was glorious, moving and made me slightly teary.

### **Panel Discussion**

#### **Engaging students in addressing sexual assault in universities- just tokenistic diplomacy?**

Once again I am not listing the panel members. Am starting to realise that I may not be that into panel discussions as a learning tool for me. I find them a bit... cluttered. Does that make sense? I also think they make the people on the panel nervous so we probably don't see their best. However that being said I was invested in this topic as I wrote my thesis on victim-blaming in cases of sexual assault and I feel it is a very hot topic in the media. It was interesting to hear that because students find this a really important issue there were some fantastic student led, staff supported initiatives occurring. It was really interesting to hear how active and passionate students were and because of this, they would not be satisfied with tokenistic diplomacy. So real action was taken and this was really inspiring.

### **Concurrent sessions 8 & 9**

I attended two sessions back to back which I really didn't get much from and I am not listing their names or titles (come see me if you would like to know) as I don't wish to offend. Let's just say it was an hour of my life I am never getting back.

#### **Concurrent session 10. When the desire for Perfection gets in the way of progress: Helping students let go of Perfectionism- *Dr Emma Kerr, UoN***

I clearly went into this session with bias but it was great! Perfectionism was defined and explored and some possible pros/cons were discussed. Emma had a great powerpoint and I felt she was a really strong presenter. I loved hearing fellow audience members identify traits/habits that they have and link that to Perfectionism. It was a fantastic presentation and I was impressed. It was easy to link to my practice and NUPSA members could benefit from us running this workshop again in 2019 (we already knew how relevant this was for postgrads and ran it in 2018).

### **Professional Focus Group- Higher Education Health Providers**

I chose this focus group as I am immensely interested in discussing hot topics around the health and wellbeing of students. This is highly relevant to not only my professional discipline but also to my role as SRSO. It was fascinating to hear how other Universities delivered health and wellbeing services and I often thought that UoN was doing some good things compared to other Universities (such as the Student Amenities building and all that is contained within it). It was also meaningful to hear that many services are really noticing mental health issues are becoming more prevalent as the primary reason for visiting a service. This raised the issue of if mental health issues are actually increasing or if more people are seeking treatment due to there being reduced stigma or increased awareness of the benefits of seeking help.

END OF DAY 2. I had a wretched headache and was feeling a little antisocial, but I decided to go to the conference dinner as I think networking is important. It was great, I made new friends and poor choices about the amount of wine/cocktails to consume. Typical me.

**Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> Dec**

**Does student-staff co-creation have a place in higher education? *In conversation with Mollie Dollinger, La Trobe University***

This started with Mollie exploring some examples of student-staff co-creation and discussing some benefits of this. Mollie also raised some interesting questions regarding when/if/how this might not always be required. Then using some new fandangled technology app that I didn't care enough about to write the name down we could ask Mollie questions and they would pop up on the giant screen. So fancy, much modern. Most people seemed go want to discuss how great student-staff co-creation is and asked for ways to increase this, which is very nice. I was actually more interested in some of the questions Mollie asked regarding if it is always required and when it might not be appropriate. Mollie identified that university staff often have specialised knowledge and skills and these should be utilised. Mollie explored the notion that if students are in fact customers, then being given an equal role in creation is an unusual step. I really enjoyed this session as it made me do all of the thinking and reflecting.

**Concurrent Session 11. Partnership with students for a whole of school approach to wellbeing- *Amanda Fraser, Melbourne Law School.***

Amanda outlined that a difficulty of this sector is that there can often be vast differences within an institution when it comes to student partnership, experiences and approaches. Amanda said that by examining formal partnerships in action they were able to identify areas that were really successful and other areas that needed work. Students were encouraged to provide feedback in a policy and practices revision in an attempt to make these more cohesive. It was also recognised that formal settings were not necessarily the best forum for students to express themselves or be heard. Amanda identified that is often more informal partnerships where you see higher student interest and engagement. Recognising, valuing and promoting informal partnership is another way to maximise the student voice and this information can then be taken to more formal meetings.

**Concurrent Session 12. "Students wouldn't want that". How a new approach to understanding the student experience through a Human Centred Design lens has enabled a greater understanding of need at the University of Melbourne- *Daniel Persaud, University of Melbourne.***

Of course I was drawn to this session, like a moth to a flame. The Human Centred Design lens is easily explained with a nifty Venn diagram (not included) which demonstrates the overlap between Context, Functions and Human needs & behaviours. Daniel highlighted that sometimes staff are told that "Students wouldn't want that" without actually asking students or relying on old, outdated data. It was suggested that by speaking to and engaging with students we can find out what they do want and how they prioritise these things. Then we need to consider and explore these 'wants' considering: desirability, feasibility and viability.

Final thoughts:

I found being able to network with other staff from the sector really interesting, inspiring and informative. I loved being able to hear about what they find works, doesn't work, different approaches, issues and challenges. I am still thinking of ways I can apply what I have learned to my role and I think spending time with so many people who are passionate about high-level service provision just made me want to be even better at my role. I came away from this conference excited to come back to NUPSA but also quietly reassured about the quality and services NUPSA provides. I love questions with no easy answers and I think the whole are people students, customers or consumers debate is something I will be musing on for some time. I think this conference absolutely established the importance of universities working in partnership with students, however I would have like more strategies for how we increase and improve student engagement. NUPSA is student led so we already know the importance of the student voice, what I want to know is how we best engage more voices? I am sure there is not one answer to this and I will continue to work with NUPSA to try and increase our engagement.