Rethinking Student Representation:

Western Sydney University &
The newDemocracy Foundation

About us

newDemocracy is a not-for-profit research group, with a particular focus on best-practice citizen engagement and innovations in democratic structures. Our Research Committee is chaired by former Western Australia Premier Geoff Gallop and former Federal Senator Robert Hill.

newDemocracy is not a think tank and holds no policy views. newDemocracy also commissions independent third-party research which occurs in parallel to the process in order to ensure robustness and to capture the potential for improvements to existing democratic processes.

newDemocracy's research and advocacy is focussed on identifying less adversarial, more deliberative and more inclusive public decision-making processes.

1. *What is the problem?*

All universities in Australia struggle with student engagement. Western Sydney University (WSU) is no exception. Students are in a busy and sometimes transitional period of their lives that reasonably places extra-curricular university responsibilities below work, study, and social past-times. Efforts to account for this and rethink student representation are a recurring challenge with solutions traditionally drawing inspiration from existing political institutions. These challenges are an opportunity that WSU can leverage to play a leading role in developing innovative representative models.

Across the globe, public authorities are increasingly using citizens' assemblies and democratic lotteries to involve citizens directly in solving some of the most pressing policy challenges. These processes give ideal amounts of time and information to a group of randomly selected everyday people and facilitate their deliberation on an issue that leads to finding common ground on a set of recommendations.

At present, participation in student unions and academic governance isn't shared equally across the student population. Many students are unable or unwilling to participate in these non-academic activities. This ensures that participation in student politics is restricted to the cohort of politically active and ambitious students, creating an institutional culture that reinforces the disconnect between everyday student life and student politics.

Student representation should reflect the lifestyles and needs of all students. There is no singular way to design this institutional model, only one that a representative mix of students from all campuses, degrees, university experiences can find agreement on when given the right time and incentives to address the challenge together.

We know that elections are not good at predicting which students will be good in leadership and advisory roles, nor are they sufficient at engaging a diversity of students impacted by their decisions. Student representation needs to be more than a training ground for future Members of Parliament, and if not, then it must be a better training ground.

The lack of diversity in Australia's parliaments is often attributed to this pipeline that produces politicians from students. It results in half the federal parliament made up of people from legal, political consulting, party, or union backgrounds.

WSU can lead the way in addressing the culture of student politics and the exclusiveness of its electoral systems by rethinking student representation through a trial of democratic innovation to design a new model for student governance. This would place WSU as a global leader alongside endorsements from the OECD and United Nations Democracy Fund.

Countries like Belgium and Ireland have played pioneering roles in the development of these processes. The Francophone Parliament in Brussels, Belgium has recently legislated an [institutional role for mixed, MP and citizen, parliamentary committees](#) whose consideration of issues reports back to the parliament. This approach is now being considered by the national parliament.

WSU can choose 32 students through a democratic lottery and give them the right time (4 days over the course of a semester), information and incentives to work together and find common ground around recommendations for how students at WSU should be democratically represented in the future.

This will give students a chance to experience innovations in democracy at a time in their lives when they are becoming civic actors. The process will equip a randomly selected group with a new range of skills for youth leadership, helping position WSU at the forefront of other universities nationally on the topic of democratic leadership and student empowerment.

2. Project overview

Western Sydney University will partner with The newDemocracy Foundation to run a world-first students' assembly that openly shares the problem of student representation with students themselves. This project will announce WSU as leaders in democratic innovation and student politics, setting the standard for Australian universities and drawing the focus of inspiration for an international audience.

The assembly will feature 32 students chosen through democratic lottery and tasked with providing recommendations they find agreement on to answer the question:

How should students have a voice at Western Sydney University?

Students will meet four times over a semester to learn, deliberate and find common ground around innovative approaches to student representation at the University.

The project draws from the growing international and domestic momentum behind citizens' assemblies and their ability to facilitate a representative mix of everyday people finding common ground solutions to difficult problems.

Project Outcomes

The lasting outcomes this project will deliver are:

- A diverse group of students, who traditionally are unable or unwilling to participate, will have **taken the time to learn about student representation**, its challenges, and the range of perspectives on the issue.

- This same group will have worked together to **find common ground around recommendations** that justify and explain trade-offs.

- They will **learn from University staff**, asking their own questions and receiving feedback on draft recommendations throughout the process.

- Students from all over WSU **will share the problem with University staff, supporting and explaining key trade-offs** to present a new democratic process <u>chosen</u> by and for students.

3. Why is deliberation different?

It is difficult for large groups of people to find agreement on complex decisions. However, there are some prerequisites that make such group decision-making easier. These prerequisites or *principles* improve the deliberative quality of group work by creating the environment for the consideration of the broadest range of sources while giving participants time, an equal share of voice and authority.

These seven principles underpin the plan in this document:

1. **Clear Remit:** A clear, plain-language challenge or question is placed before a group. "***How should students be represented at Western Sydney University?***" is a neutrally phrased question that goes to the core of the issue and provides a strong platform for discussion about priorities and trade-offs.

2. **Information:** In-depth information will be provided to the participants to help them understand the dilemmas from a range of perspectives. There will be an emphasis on the **diversity** of sources brought into the discussion. These include the initial information kit, the views of the wider university staff and administration, and any key stakeholders or expert witnesses the group calls for. Students will also spend extensive time asking questions and identifying sources **they** trust for the information they need.

3. **Representative:** A stratified random sample of the student body will be recruited through a democratic lottery. Simple demographic filters (faculty, degree stage, gender, cultural background, and campus) are used to help stratify this sample to reflect the student population. Most engagement does not enable a representative cross-section of the community to be heard, instead incentives to participate are often geared to those with the most acute interest. This is challenging, but possible, to rebalance by giving students a meaningful opportunity to influence a decision and offering appropriate incentives.

4. **Extended Time:** This process will create the ideal environment for students to move beyond their initial off-the-cuff view and form a considered collective judgment. To do this, students must be given ample time to question stakeholders, learn from one another and find agreement on trusted sources of information. Time is a crucial factor for the deliberation and so students will be given 30+ hours together to find common ground.

5. **Influential:** The assembly's final report must have weight. It needs to be considered at the highest level of decision-making power and responded to directly. Some students will be asked to present their report and recommendations directly to the Vice-Chancellor to demonstrate the *gravitas* of the report and the students' role.

6. **Dialogue, not debate:** The task for the group is to find common ground. We do not use simple majorities and it is not a debate of one position seeking to defeat another. The deliberative process asks people what trade-offs or changes they can accept to reach agreement.

7. **Free Response:** The student panel will be given a 'blank page' and in turn will produce a set of recommendations, each with rationale and evidence justifying their decisions.

4. What will we ask students?

The remit needs to provide an open and non-leading question that clearly stipulates the topic but does not curtail the group's exploration of the issue from the outset.

We start with four framing questions that inform any remit:
1. What question do students **want** to answer?
2. How can we help focus them on the **hardest** part of the problem?
3. How can they be of **most value**?
4. What is **accessible** and **understandable**?

Question:

How should students have a voice at Western Sydney University?

Authority

It is important that the incentive to participate in the process is pre-agreed and clearly conveyed – this **must** involve a direct link to the decision. Student will need to feel that this process is distinct from standard university communication.

The complete unedited report will be presented to the Vice-Chancellor in person.

It will be made public immediately and available to students, media, and the public.

The University will provide a public response to the recommendations report in writing within 60 days.

Senior representatives of the University will also respond in-person within 90 days.

In short, this needs to pass the test of being the most meaningful offer students will ever have to participate in a shared decision – not just another forum or survey.

6. Recruitment

We will recruit 32 students through a democratic lottery.

Democratic lotteries use a type of stratified random sampling that ensures the recruited students will meet a pre-determined make-up (outlined below). This ensures that we recruit a diverse and representative mix of students, however it means we must make design decisions regarding what criteria we stratify by.

The strength of this selection method lies in students clearly seeing "people like me" in decision making positions – descriptive representation in this way fosters trust in the representation of the panel and ultimately trust in its decision making. This means that our stratification decisions must always aim to build trust and legitimacy in the capacity and make-up of those selected by ensuring the room looks like the wider population. That might be because they study on the same campus, are in the same school, at similar stages in their degree or have similar life and campus experiences because of their cultural background.

To achieve a descriptively representative sample, we will use five stratification variables:

- **Campus.** WSU has 10 campuses in NSW and online students. These campus locations will be grouped into: **West** (Campbelltown, Lithgow, Penrith), **Central** (Bankstown, Liverpool City, Nirimba, Parramatta City, Parramatta South, Sydney Olympic Park) and **Outer** (Hawksbury, Online and Sydney City).
- **Cultural background**. Asking students the question: "Do you speak a language other than English at home?" To determine their cultural and linguistic diversity.
- **Degree stage.** Students will be represented by how far into their degree they are: **First year, Second year, Third year+ and Post-graduate.**
- **Faculty**: WSU has 13 schools. These will be grouped into: **Arts, Humanities and Law** (Business, Education, Humanities and Communication, Law, Social Sciences), **Engineering** (Built Environment, Computer, Data and Mathematical Sciences, Engineering), **Medicine** (Medicine, Nursing and Midwifery, Psychology) and **Science** (Health Sciences, Science).
- **Gender**: The assembly will statistically match to the student population by **Male, Female** and **Non-binary.**

Students are drawn in a manner that ensures each of the above criteria matches to its representation in the student body. We also draw an additional set of students to account for retention – life happens and sometimes people cannot complete the whole process.

This table outlines the stratification variables, their percentage makeup in the student population and their corresponding representation in the student assembly.

Stratification Variable	Population %	Participant No.
Male	49	18
Female	49	18
Non-binary	2	1
First year	22	8
Second year	22	8
Third year or more	35	12
Post-graduate	11	5
Arts, Humanities and Law	40	15
Engineering	20	7
Medicine	18	7
Sciences	22	8
West	20	7
Central	70	26
Outer	10	4
English	67	25
Other language	33	12

This method aims to avoid an overemphasis on connecting with those who are traditionally likely to opt-in to student engagement. It is important that the invitation to participate is clearly different to standard university student engagement communications. The media, tone and style of communication needs to break through typical responses from students who have learned to ignore university communications.

To do this, WSU will extend a physical invitation to a random sample of 6,000 WSU students (approximately 20% of the student population).

A physical invitation that is graphically distinct from standard WSU communication will capture attention and draw students to considering the incentives offered to contribute.

<u>It is important that all students are given an equal opportunity to participate.</u> These invitations will be sent to a random sample of students from all schools, campuses, and stages of their degree.

The invitations will come from the Vice-Chancellor, emphasising the remit and commitments made to the authority of the final report. There will be emphasis on the role of newDemocracy and independence of the selection process, demonstrating the students' autonomy and freedom in the project. This link to democratic reform and autonomy is crucial to capturing student interest; it builds upon latent social disaffection with public decision-making by reinforcing the uniqueness of this opportunity. They have a significant and meaningful role in making a decision that impacts their own lives.

Interested students who have received an invitation will register online with newDemocracy to indicate that they are available for the final selection (as a fall back, newDemocracy also provides a phone number for people who prefer to contact us to register). This registration process involves collecting relevant stratification data. Based on the registrations received, the stratified random draw will be conducted by newDemocracy.

newDemocracy will contact the drawn sample to confirm their availability for selection and explain the process in individual briefing calls. This exercise in personal communication establishes a relationship between newDemocracy and the students – emphasising the independence of the process and their role. Additionally, contact with each student builds a strong personal commitment to the process, noting that once underway we cannot backfill for non-attendees. At this point, those who are not randomly selected in the second round will be advised and encouraged to follow the process by contributing to a wider engagement process.

Importantly, newDemocracy will not provide *any* participant information to the University (personal or contact details). Public cynicism around potential vetting is sufficiently high that newDemocracy's goal of public trust is threatened by any perception that lists are reviewed. University staff will meet the participants for the first time on the first day of the panel.

Payment of per diems (**$400** for those who attend all four sessions) is strongly advised to avoid excluding participants who may find participation difficult through hardship. Invitations will clearly note that this payment will be made for time and that meals are provided.

In addition to those incentives, we recommend WSU offer recognition of participation in this process in the form of certificates and other CV mayterial. This incentivises students to contribute meaningfully and directly relates to their main motivation as a student.

7. Sources of Information

Information and judgment are required in equal parts to reach decisions. It is imperative that the provision of information to the deliberative process does not erode that trust. WSU should involve active stakeholders in contributing to the process. There will be three key sources of information to inform the group deliberations:

1. ***An information kit provided by WSU***. Written in plain language, this should candidly describe the problem. This includes issues and challenges as the University sees it, and the 'levers' available for taking action or making change. It should not be a brochure, rather it should err on the side of providing *too much detail* rather than too little. This is fundamental to ensuring the process starts on the front foot and students are given every opportunity to become as informed as possible.

   It should outline the process in its entirety before introducing the questions and challenges in front of the panel. As the information kit is the **primary resource** for the students – it is crucial that the information clearly **shares the problem** at hand without shying away from detail or data.

   The kit should cover:
   a. an explanation of the process;
   b. the context of the process including the needs representation should serve, the current state of engagement/representation, the resources available to support future approaches and any previous efforts to rethink student representation;
   c. what advice and recommendations the University would like from the panel;
   d. any current thinking on the topic from the current SRC and other stakeholders or experts (internal or external to the University).

   newDemocracy can provide examples of how these kits have been prepared for projects elsewhere.

2. ***Submissions from stakeholders and students*** will provide a complementary set of information to round out perspectives on the topic. Starting with survey style information, this will extend into more detailed submissions ensuring that everyone can contribute to the process. The submissions will help participants assess the issue before contributing to recommendations. They also give people outside of the process a direct channel in. This helps address concerns that the process is in anyway shut-off or exclusionary to any perspective on the topic.

3. Central to the open, non-leading nature of what we do is to simply ask participants ***"What do you need to know and who do you trust to inform you?"***. This question will be posed to participants as part of their deliberations – after each meeting they will be tasked with a refined version of the question – *"What more do you need to know to make an informed decision?"*. This means participants will have the freedom to ask for the information they need and request the sources they trust.

newDemocracy can lead the task of sourcing the information requests that are external to WSU. Those that request information from WSU will be the responsibility of the University to gather.

8. *Participation for students not selected*

It's important that students who do not receive an invitation and those unsuccessful in the lottery are able to contribute to the process in an impactful way. Insights into what students want from their representatives from a values and outcomes perspective will provide students in the assembly with objectives to aim for.

Scaling the wider student contribution to the process will involve a short survey, completed in class (like an evaluation survey) that asks students:
- What do you want from student representation?
- What is important to you in a representative?
- What are the key issues with current representation?
- What suggestions do you have for how we might innovate?

These questions reveal preferences and requires in a representation model but don't jump to conclusions that restrict deliberations to choosing between a set-menu of options.

9. Budget

Items	Cost
Invitations 6,000x print and postage	$8,000
Facilitation 1-person team for 4 operating days and preparation days	$24,000
Venue, AV, Staging	Internal
Catering	Internal
Participant per diem payments 32 x $100 x 4	$12,800
newDemocracy Services Grant	$5,000
Total	**$49,800**

10. Operating Summary: What happens each day (Example only)

	Project Outline
Pre-Assembly	- Information kit preparation - Stakeholder engagement - Student engagement - Recruitment
Week 1 Day 1	Activities: - Introductions: Agenda, Purpose, Process - Understanding the task: the question and our authority - Skills: Critical thinking, unconscious biases, working as a group - Hearing from University staff: setting the scene - Small group discussions: insights from information kit and gaps in knowledge - What have we learned? - What are the gaps in our knowledge? - Group agreement on speaker nominations: - What more do we need to know and who do we trust to inform us? Outputs: - Request for additional speakers - Information requests for additional sources
Week 3 Day 2	Activities: - Hearing from requested additional speakers: speed dialogue - Small group discussions: insights from speakers - What key learnings are emerging? - Are there any key issues beginning to emerge? - Small group conversations: Our stories and perspectives on the issue - Small group discussions: Beginning to develop values assessment criteria. - Small group discussions: *Is there anything else we want to know that hasn't been addressed?* - Group agreement on speaker nominations: - What more do we need to know and who do we trust to inform us? Outputs: - Request for additional speakers - Information requests for additional sources - Draft values assessment criteria
Week 5 Day 3 *Option B*	Activities: - Hearing from requested additional speakers: speed dialogue - Insights from speakers: Small group discussions - What key learnings are emerging? - Are there any key issues beginning to emerge? - Finalising values assessment criteria using draft from Day 2: Small groups writing on laptops to capture and refine criteria.

	• Small group discussions: *Is there anything else we want to know that hasn't been addressed?* • Initial sketch of ideas: How might we solve the problem? Outputs: • Information requests for additional sources • Finished values assessment criteria • Draft ideas
Week 7 *Day 4* *Option B*	Activities: • Further ideas development • Finding agreement, 'letting go' and consolidating around a set of recommendations • Draft writing of the report: working in small groups to provide rationale for proposals that draws on values assessment criteria • Final report walkthrough: *do we all agree*? • Presentation: Report is presented to the VC Outputs: • Final recommendation report delivered to the VC

11. Possible timeline

Stage	Date
Wide Com and Survey (start)	ASAP
Invites go out	August 2
RSVP Date	August 14
Recruitment done	August 21
Wide Com (end)	September 11
Meeting 1	September 11
Meeting 2	October 2
Meeting 3	October 30
Meeting 4	November 20