

Have Your Say Summit 2020

REPORT BACK



About the Have Your Say Summit

In August 2020, a collection of current and emerging student leaders came together to talk about student life at RMIT. The discussions were led by students and focused on key student needs at RMIT. Students brainstormed ideas for improvements and changes that they would like to see at RMIT for 2020 and beyond. This is the second annual summit cohosted by the RMIT University Student Union (RUSU) and RMIT.

This year, with COVID-19 restrictions in place, the summit was held online. This report captures the ideas that were generated in student-led breakout sessions as part of the online summit.

Key Themes

This year, students at the Have Your Say Summit talked about four key themes:

Student-Centred Education PAGE 3

Effective student partnerships and feedback structures for program managers via Student-Staff Consultative Committees (SSCC).

Iso Life PAGE 5

Creating community and fun while we are off-campus during COVID-19.

Future Focus PAGE 6

What should the next 5 years at RMIT look like?

Support Beyond the Classroom PAGE 7

Necessary student services like legal advice, career guidance, counseling or disability support.

Student-Centred Education

The summit tackled key questions about how student voices can improve course design. Discussion focused on the Student Staff Consultative Committees (SSCCs) which have been set up to help students give feedback to their program managers.

What is SSCC?

Some of the participants were quite familiar with the SSCC program. They described it as a way to give feedback about course delivery and content, and ensure courses remain relevant and up-to-date. Each program will have its own SSCC comprising students and staff. The role of student representatives on SSCCs is to:

- negotiate and advocate on behalf of students
- seek to understand student and staff perspectives; and
- work with staff to resolve issues.

Students see SSCCs as an important bridge between students and program managers who can feed information back to the Academic Board. SSCCs have also helped students give feedback to their teachers about remote learning during COVID-19. Some people also commented that being an SSCC representative has enriched their experience as a student.

How did you hear about SSCC?

Generally, students reported that they first heard about the SSCC Program through their student email, lecture announcements or the SSCC nomination process. However, a lot of students have never heard of SSCC.

Barriers to involvement

If students do hear about their SSCC, they might still be unsure how to participate, or may lack confidence to nominate as a representative. This is particularly so when SSCC nominations occur very early in semester before students have had a chance to get comfortable with their program and cohort. Some students want reassurance that being an SSCC representative will not negatively impact their studies.

Different schools and programs approach SSCC in different ways and this means it is difficult to generalise about the program. Overarching guidance has previously been provided by RMIT Student Life, with individual SSCC groups then operating largely autonomously within each program. Larger programs need a different meeting and consultation structure compared with smaller courses, where interaction can be more informal and voluntary. Some students reported that, in their program, anyone who wishes to join the online SSCC meeting can do so. Other students reported that, in their school, meeting participation has been restricted to official representatives.

In RUSU's experience, the fact that SSCCs are not centrally administered has made it more challenging to reach out to SSCC representatives. RUSU does not currently have access to a list of SSCC representatives across all colleges. Rather, RUSU makes contact with SSCC representatives via our partners in RMIT Student Life who then reach out to staff in colleges. This means updates and information about the SSCC program are currently led by staff and not students.

Ideas

Ideas for how to improve SSCCs were wide ranging, but can be broken down into four themes: visibility, accountability, connection and empowerment.

Visibility

Ideas to increase visibility of the SSCC program included:

- Having a **centralised administrative person** to help promote SSCCs throughout RMIT
- **Integrate SSCC announcements into Canvas.** This could take the form of a link or summary information. Course coordinators could make a separate Canvas discussion board for SSCC representatives, where students can put their feedback. Canvas is now the main point of engagement for students. A link in Canvas will be easier to find than people's inboxes which can quickly become overwhelmed with emails.
- **More promotion of SSCCs at RUSU and RMIT events** – event organisers can give a brief announcement about SSCC: "it's a great way to meet people, develop and improve skills and get your voice heard"

- **More disseminated promotion** – via RUSU, RMIT Student Life, clubs, Colleges

Accountability

The SSCC program seeks to provide a source of accurate, up-to-date feedback on course design, delivery and content. It is also designed to help students speak up and provide a meaningful connection with program managers. Students had a number of ideas to help keep SSCCs accountable and ensure they achieve these aims:

- Representatives should **take into account the wide range of experiences and opinions** in their courses, not just their own perspective
- SSCC representatives could use **regular informal surveys** to collect student feedback (not just the Course Experience Survey), depending on resourcing, possibly with support from RUSU
- More **meetings between RUSU and SSCC representatives**. At these meetings, students could engage in open discussion, share ideas and hear from Student Rights Officers. Program managers could be invited to join the discussion.

Connection

We need to create a sense of community so that students are motivated to create a better learning and teaching environment, not just for themselves but for future students. Some ideas to help support this included:

- encouraging people to **host more than two SSCC meetings** per semester
- ensuring SSCC provides a broader student experience, going beyond the academic side of things, for example, **social events**. This could be achieved by SSCC members organising social gatherings themselves, or in partnership with RUSU and RMIT Student Life

Empowerment

Students need to feel empowered to give feedback about their courses. This can be achieved by:

- Giving students **reassurance** that being an SSCC representative will not have a negative impact on their studies and **emphasising the benefits** of participating in the program
- Potentially **delaying the SSCC nominations until semester 2**, or until **several weeks after the start of semester**, when students are more comfortable and confident
- More involvement from **course coordinators**. Course coordinators could help SSCC representatives get feedback from other students. However, some students thought it was not always possible to expect

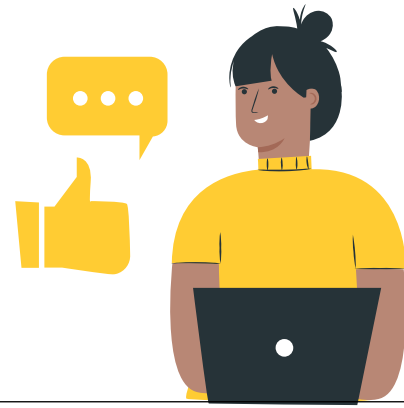
this level of support from teaching staff, depending on workloads.

- Hosting an **event explaining the program** and its benefits. Some students suggested this event could be hosted by course coordinators, while others were concerned about the existing workload for course coordinators. Coordinators or other host staff would need to be given time release and recognition for hosting these events.
- Offering **more professional development** for SSCC representatives. For example, **ongoing student-leader run training, or micro-credentials** covering topics like negotiation skills and public speaking.

Recommendations

There are a number of changes that would help reinforce the SSCC program. Some of these can be easily adopted and some require more funding. We recommend that:

- RMIT establish a **new role** to help **centrally coordinate** SSCC operations across colleges.
- RMIT **integrate SSCC into Canvas**, either via a link or discussion board/s.
- RUSU and RMIT schools and colleges work together to facilitate **more meetings and social events between SSCC and RUSU representatives**.
- RMIT Student Life update SSCC guidance materials to **encourage more than two meetings** per semester and to provide reassurance that being an SSCC representative will not have a negative impact on students' studies.
- RMIT Student Life provide further guidance to schools about the **timing of SSCC nominations**, in consultation with students and RUSU.
- RMIT and RUSU work together to explore options for hosting an introductory event explaining the SSCC program, **for potential representatives**.
- RMIT explore development of a **micro-credential** for SSCC representatives, covering topics like negotiation and public speaking.



Iso Life

This session discussed social activities and events that can support students to engage with campus life even while they are studying remotely. People have had positive experiences with RMIT Mates saying it's one of the best places to make new friends. However, COVID-19 has left many students feeling isolated. People are missing that sense of community you get from on campus interaction. Students are saying that at times they don't feel comfortable engaging with in-class discussion online. This means it's even more important that RMIT and RUSU student life teams create a sense of belonging and community through online social events.

People get tired engaging through screens all the time especially with online classes as well. Remote activities need to include creative ways to connect without having to spend several consecutive hours looking at screens.

Some people are feeling confused about where to find events that are being hosted online. Emails can be overwhelming and probably aren't the best way to communicate about events. Sometimes email feels like too much 'noise', although email newsletters (incorporating a range of information on a topic of interest) can be a good way to communicate with people.

There are also technical issues such as Wi-Fi connections, audio issues and lag that can impact events.

Ideas

Students came up with a range of ideas to help make online events run smoothly:

- ongoing **funding for clubs** so they can continue to function and reach students.
- remember to include RMIT **students outside Melbourne**. For example, when arranging food deliveries, consider how non-local participants can join in.
- schedule **event timings** to avoid excessive screen time. For example, make sure the event isn't too long and people have a break between online classes and social events
- students generally felt that **Zoom** has been the best platform for social events

- **help people find events** - we need an organized system to reach a larger audience. This could include:
 - a platform for club executives to showcase their events.
 - events linking to people's calendar apps
 - newsletters

There was also discussion about the type of events that work well online. Students would like more:

- **regular networking** events such as **industry nights or speed friending**. These events can help students meet people in different courses or make connections that will help their future. **RMIT Activator** has run professional networking events that could provide a model.
- **trivia, games and quiz nights, book clubs and dinner nights** (for example where everyone gets together to cook a meal and talk)
- events that **incorporate exercise**. This helps get away from screens and supports people physically and mentally, as well as allowing them to connect
- events that allow people to **talk without looking at the screen**

Recommendations

We recommend that:

- RMIT support students and event staff to overcome technical difficulties such as Wi-Fi issues and lag, by offering **training and funding for equipment** where required. Training should cover the use of technology and event design. (For example, how to build in contingencies and alternatives where participants do not have access to high quality internet).
- RMIT continue to support the **Mates program** and **RMIT Activator**
- RMIT and RUSU review the above ideas from students and incorporate them into future event planning

Future Focus



The team at next.rmit invited us to input into RMIT's 5-year strategic plan. So, a group of students got together to talk about the future. Like all workshops at the summit, this discussion was led by students, for students.

Discussion was wide-ranging but there were clear recurring themes of **quality, job-readiness, breadth, flexibility and community**. RMIT is well-known for fashion, technology and design, and many students pay significant fees to study at RMIT. A flow on from this is that students want to see high-quality, interactive, face-to-face and practical learning now and into the future. Students talked a lot about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and what we can learn from this in future.

Ideas

Students highlighted the need for **contingency planning** so RMIT can respond and communicate quickly and effectively in the event of any future disruptions.

There was discussion about **researchers and teaching staff**. Students want RMIT to be known for high-quality research and committed teaching staff. This can only be achieved if researchers and teachers feel secure and supported.

Many students felt strongly that we need a **balance of job-readiness and life education**. This included:

- social interaction and networking
- cultural exchange
- exposure to different learning styles
- working face-to-face with different people
- access to one-on-one time with coordinators
- continuing to encourage guest lectures
- market or industry-based lectures and events
- equipping students to keep up with a rapidly-changing job market
- breadth offerings

"Many students do come to our university (and other universities) for that in person experience. For many people it's a core part of their growth as young adults, an opportunity to socialise, network and meet

friends, and a key cultural experience for international students who choose to study here."

"In education we should be building people who are well rounded, investing and increasing aspects of their lives they're not necessarily proficient in"

With COVID-19 and the transition to online courses, there was much discussion of the benefits and challenges of remote learning. In summary, online learning can have the benefit of flexibility but it needs to be accessible to everyone. As one student put it:

"Who are we inviting in and who are we keeping out with the way we run online classes?"

Accessibility also means having the right technology. Another student commented that:

"technology to complete project calculations isn't available at home. It's a serious educational limitation that only allows those who can afford the required technology to be able to properly participate in their education from home."

Learning materials need to be **current**, and include **live, in-person interactions** to foster a **learning community**. Students were very clear that pre-recorded lectures can never be a substitute for live, interactive classes. Live classes give students confidence that the material is up-to-date. This is particularly important in our current climate where knowledge and context are rapidly evolving.

Finally, some students would like the future to include **diverse assessment options** and **non-linear pathways** for completing degrees. This means thinking beyond timed exams and allowing students to complete other projects that can showcase their learning and experience.

Recommendations

RUSU is grateful to next.rmit for approaching us to jointly reach out to students for input into the RMIT Strategic Plan. We recommend that RMIT take steps to reflect the above ideas in their strategic planning documents and that this consultative approach with RUSU and students continue.

Support Beyond the Classroom



RMIT isn't just about going to class or attending social events. It's also about access to services like legal advice, career guidance, counseling or disability support.

While students know about the services that are available at RMIT, students are less clear about:

- where these services are located
- how to find them on the RMIT website
- whether they can access follow-up appointments or have chats with support services after their initial appointment

Students felt that the current online student portal was not very visible. Some students commented that we need a new online student portal. This suggests that the current portal is not cutting through to students or is not presented in a way that meets students' needs.

Some students find that accessing these services feels intimidating, or that these services lean towards supporting staff rather than students.

Ideas

Students suggested a chat box using both automatic responses and live staff responses. RMIT Connect currently has an online chat function. However, it seems not all students are aware of this function or know how to access it. Alternatively, students may be looking for additional chat options as a way to connect directly with services, alongside the chat currently available through RMIT Connect.

Students also pointed out that some of the services at RMIT have names that make it difficult to search for them online. It may be a good idea to find out what search terms students are using, so those search terms can be reflected in the way the services are described.

Recommendations

We recommend that RMIT consult with students and with RUSU to:

- **understand** how students are currently engaging in online searches and chat boxes when trying to access support, and the barriers they currently face; and
- design an **improved user experience** for students to locate and interact with RMIT support services online

This work should also explore how to make the on-campus locations of services more visible to students, for example, by linking to interactive maps.

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