

Editorial: Who Speaks, Who Listens, Who Belongs: Strengthening the Diversity of Voices in Higher Education

Caroline Rueckert
Griffith University

Across tertiary institutions in Australia and New Zealand, there is a renewed focus on voice, on who speaks, who listens, and how we engage when views differ. Conversations about freedom of expression, respectful debate, inclusion, equity, and diversity have become central to campus life. Institutions are being called to create environments where dissent and respect can coexist, where freedom of speech is upheld alongside care, safety, and belonging. For those of us working in tertiary education, these principles are not abstract. They come to life every day in classrooms and in the informal spaces across our campuses where people meet, listen, and learn from one another.

It is within this wider conversation that this issue of JANZSSA finds its home. I am delighted to introduce an edition that places the question of voice at its centre, exploring whose voices are heard, how they are engaged, and what it means for institutions to create spaces where every voice can matter.

In this context, the question is not only how we protect speech but how we create the conditions for a diversity of voices to be heard and, ultimately, to matter. Diversity of voice calls for more than tolerance or acceptance. It asks for care, attentiveness, curiosity, and the systems that make genuine access and participation possible. It is easy to uphold the principle of voice in theory. The harder work is building environments where many voices can coexist with dignity and where disagreement becomes a source of strength rather than division.

This is where the wider reform agenda now unfolding across Australian and New Zealand higher education becomes particularly relevant. The Australian Universities Accord has renewed the sector's focus on participation, equity, and belonging, while national frameworks on gender-based violence prevention, safer communities, and student partnerships have placed lived experience at the centre of how quality and accountability are defined. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the conversation has moved into legislation. In December 2024, Cabinet approved amendments to the *Education and Training Act 2020* (NZ). The reforms require universities to adopt formal freedom-of-speech statements, impose a new duty on university councils to protect and promote academic freedom, and introduce annual reporting on freedom-of-speech issues and related complaints. The legislation also sets expectations of institutional neutrality, open debate, and protection for diverse speakers, while limiting restrictions on expression to those that are unlawful or disruptive to core university activities. Supporters see these changes as strengthening academic freedom and encouraging robust discussion. Critics caution that prescriptive expectations and institutional neutrality may narrow universities' ability to engage with issues of social justice, Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, and Māori and Pasifika equity. Together, these developments reveal a shared challenge across both nations, as universities seek to balance freedom and care in ways that sustain diverse voices within their communities.

For those of us working across the student experience, these debates are familiar. We have long known that there is no single student experience. Every student's story is shaped by identity, culture, situated knowledges, place, and personal circumstance. Yet some voices still struggle to be heard, some stories are told through others, and some experiences remain unseen. Expanding voice is not about adding new perspectives to an unchanged system. It is about rethinking the system itself, its structures, its assumptions, and its ways of knowing. It asks us to consider who counts as a knower and what forms of knowledge are valued within our institutions.

This kind of change requires a whole-of-institution approach. Equity, diversity, access, and inclusion must be built into the foundations of university life, not treated as peripheral projects. It means reimagining curriculum, support, and policy through a relational lens and recognising that meaningful progress depends on collaboration. Students-as-partners approaches exemplify this shift. When students co-create learning and institutional change, they bring insights that deepen relevance and belonging. Partnership, however, is slow work. It rests on trust, humility, and a willingness to keep learning from one another.

Cook-Sather's essay "Expanding Whose Voices Are Included in Academic Publishing About Student Services" opens this issue with a challenge to reimagine not only who contributes to our field but also how those contributions are expressed. She argues that achieving epistemic justice requires broadening the genres and conventions of academic publishing so that a fuller range of knowers and ways of knowing can be recognised. Drawing on her experience creating reflective and co-authored publication spaces, she shows how expanding form and authorship can democratise knowledge and redefine what counts as legitimate scholarship.

This framing provides the foundation for JANZSSA's new "Voices From the Field" initiative, which debuts in this issue with "Transforming Student Services: Inclusive, Scalable, and Personalised Solutions", edited by Oostergo, Rueckert, Burge, Choudhury, and Navin. The editors selected this theme because it captures one of the sector's most enduring challenges, how to design systems of support that are both inclusive and scalable, personal and sustainable. Bringing together reflections from more than 30 practitioners, the collection explores five interconnected themes: person-centred approaches, holistic support, universal design, collaboration and partnership, and agency and strength. Across these contributions runs a shared conviction that transformation happens when systems keep people at their centre, balancing efficiency with empathy, care, and situated knowledge.

Corner and Holder continue this exploration through the University of Victoria's Timely Declaration initiative. Their case study demonstrates how purposeful collaboration between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs can turn coordination into partnership. By developing shared language, acknowledging cultural differences, and investing in relationships, they show that durable change grows from mutual respect.

Mann and Priest examine how a regional university advances inclusion through an LGBTIQ+ Ally program grounded in Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory. Their evaluation shows how theoretical framing can deepen practice, strengthening advocacy and cultural change even in smaller or less diverse regional contexts.

Sereni presents a study of the University of Adelaide's redesigned International Student Welcome program, where traditional information sessions gave way to interactive, community-building experiences informed by flipped learning and outdoor education. The result was stronger belonging and engagement while maintaining compliance, showing that creativity and regulation can coexist when programs are designed around connection.

Thyer reflects on the evolving role of tertiary chaplaincy in an increasingly pluralistic environment. She argues that chaplaincy must move beyond its Christian origins to become an inclusive, professional, wellbeing-focused service that responds to the spiritual and existential needs of today's diverse student communities.

Toutai, Palavi, and Nosa explore the cultural and environmental factors influencing alcohol consumption among young Tongan male students in Auckland. Using the Kakala model, they

reveal how family roles, social norms, and cultural identity shape behaviour. In doing so, they remind us that effective wellbeing strategies must be community-based and culturally grounded.

Together these contributions paint a picture of a sector that is learning, listening, and evolving. There are no simple solutions. The real work lies in continually finding balance between freedom and responsibility, belonging and curiosity, and care and accountability. Progress takes shape through consistent practice, through relationships grounded in trust, and through a commitment to dialogue that continues even in challenging moments.

As a professional community, JANZSSA has always brought together reflection, research, and practice in service of student success. With this issue, and with the launch of “Voices From the Field”, we continue that commitment. If we can keep creating space for genuine dialogue where diverse voices are heard, engaged, and respected, we not only protect freedom of speech but also fulfil its purpose. At its best, freedom of speech is not an endpoint but a practice, one that helps us build understanding, empathy, and a more inclusive future for all who learn and work in our institutions.

Professor Caroline Rueckert

Editor-in-Chief, Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association

References

Education and Training Act 2020 (NZ).

Please cite this paper as:

Rueckert, C. (2025). Editorial: Who speaks, who listens, who belongs: Strengthening the diversity of voices in higher education. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 33(2), 123–126.
<https://doi.org/10.30688/janzssa.2025-2-04>

Editorial team for Volume 33, Issue 2, 2025

Professor Caroline Rueckert — Editor-in-Chief

Amy Heise — Associate Editor

Dr Tere McGonagle-Daly — Associate Editor

Dr Peter Hartin — Associate Editor

Dr Cameron Lydster — Associate Editor

Contact the JANZSSA editorial team: janzssa@anzssa.com



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.