Strengthening Connections: Academic and Professional Collaboration in Practice

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Introduction

Tertiary institutions have traditionally distinguished between academic staff and professional staff according to their primary responsibilities, workload allocation, and organisational location. Academic roles have generally centred on teaching, curriculum, scholarship, and research, while professional roles have encompassed specialist, administrative, technical, advisory, and student support responsibilities[1]. The distinction between academic and professional roles can be useful when it supports specialist expertise, accountability, and clarity of responsibility. However, it is important to recognise that these categories are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive as they do not always reflect the complexity of contemporary tertiary educational practice. Academic staff may bring substantial professional and student support expertise, while professional staff may have academic backgrounds and contribute directly to teaching, learning, curriculum, and scholarship. The increasing overlap between these responsibilities has contributed to the conceptualisation of the *Third Space*: a domain in which roles, identities, and activities extend across traditional academic and professional boundaries (Whitchurch, 2008). This does not necessarily remove the distinction between academic and professional roles. Rather, it recognises that many staff work between or across these domains, combining different forms of expertise to respond to complex educational and institutional needs. In this context, the boundaries between academic and professional work are increasingly fluid, intersecting, and shaped by the work at hand.

This understanding is essential as students do not experience tertiary education through organisational structures. They experience the institution as a whole. A student who is struggling to

[1] Terminology describing professional staff and functions can include professional staff, student services, student affairs, and practitioners, with these terms sometimes used interchangeably. For consistency, this paper uses professional staff as the overarching term for staff whose primary responsibilities may include specialist, administrative, technical, advisory or student support functions. Specific terms are retained where institutional structures or terminology are cited in the literature.

attend class may simultaneously be navigating financial pressures, disability, mental health concerns, family responsibilities, cultural adjustment, housing insecurity, or uncertainty about their future. Therefore, student engagement requires attention to the whole person, including the circumstances within and beyond the institution that shape participation and success, supported by whole-of-institution coherence and intent (Kift, 2024). This positions student success within the broader educational environment, where belonging, wellbeing, engagement, and institutional relationships shape students' experiences and outcomes (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; van Kessel et al., 2025).

However, institutional responses to students' intersecting support needs are often organised through separate domains, including teaching and curriculum functions and professional specialist areas such as wellbeing, accessibility, administration, careers, and student engagement. When the boundaries between these areas are poorly defined or managed, students may be required to navigate organisational divisions that have little meaning from their perspective. Their experience can become fragmented, especially when responsibility is passed between staff, services, and organisational units without coordination. Conversely, when expertise is effectively connected across these boundaries, students are more likely to experience support as coherent, timely, and responsive. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to ensure that appropriate support exists or to dissolve the distinction between academic and professional roles. Rather, it is to connect complementary forms of expertise around the student. This raises an important question for contemporary tertiary education: How can we strengthen collaboration between academic and professional teams to deliver seamless, student-centred support?

Connecting student success across institutional boundaries

Student success is increasingly understood as more than academic achievement alone. Kahu and Nelson (2018) conceptualise an "educational interface" in which institutional and student factors interact, with belonging, wellbeing, emotions, and self-efficacy influencing engagement and student experience. Lizzio's (2006) Five Senses of Success similarly positions connection, capability, purpose, resourcefulness, and academic culture as important dimensions of students' transition and success. This understanding does not remove student agency. Rather, it recognises a reciprocal relationship in which institutions create conditions that enable engagement, while students actively participate in their learning and development. The relationships between students' sense of connection, engagement, wellbeing, persistence, and academic outcomes reinforce the importance of belonging (Allen et al., 2024; Gilani & Thomas, 2025; van Kessel et al., 2025). This perspective shifts attention from perceived individual student deficits towards the relationships, structures, and practices through which students experience the institution (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

The importance of relationships, connectedness, early engagement, continuity of support, and whole-of-institution responsibility is also visible in vocational education and training (VET) research (Andrahannadi & Griffin, 2025; Niittylahti et al., 2023). These themes resonate with established higher education research on belonging, engagement, and student success (Allen et al., 2024; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Lizzio, 2006), suggesting important areas of continuity across tertiary contexts. Niittylahti et al. (2023) found that student engagement in vocational education is influenced by relationships with teachers and peers, students' sense of inclusion, and their connection with their educational program and future occupation. Andrahannadi and Griffin's (2025) National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) study identified six interconnected characteristics of effective student support: a whole-of-institution approach, early engagement with students and relevant stakeholders, high-quality training delivered by caring and skilled staff, continuity of support, holistic and individualised support, and strong relationship-building. These characteristics resonate strongly with established higher education frameworks,

including Lizzio's (2006) Five Senses of Success, particularly the emphasis on connection, capability, purpose, and resourcefulness. Rather than suggesting a distinct model of student success, the VET evidence reinforces a broader tertiary sector understanding that effective support is relational, coordinated, and sustained across the learner journey. Viewed together, this research suggests that relational approaches to student success are not unique to VET or higher education; rather, relationships and belonging represent broader features of how students experience tertiary education.

Connecting expertise around the student

Relational approaches to student success have important implications for how academic and professional staff work together to support students. Teachers and trainers may be among the first people to notice changes in attendance, participation, behaviour, or engagement, while professional staff may possess the specialist expertise required to respond to underlying wellbeing, disability, safety, financial, or social issues (Andrahannadi & Griffin, 2025; Niittylahti et al., 2023). Within this context, institutional structures can create divisions between academic and professional responsibilities, even where staff expertise crosses these boundaries. Academic staff may contribute disciplinary, pedagogical, and curriculum knowledge, while professional staff may contribute expertise across learning design, libraries, educational technology, student administration, careers, wellbeing, accessibility, equity, engagement, and inclusion. However, these boundaries are more fluid in practice. Professional staff may contribute directly to teaching, learning, and curriculum design, while academic staff may bring substantial professional and student support expertise. The challenge therefore lies less in separating individual skill sets than in connecting expertise that may be distributed across organisational roles and structures (Thorpe & Partridge, 2026; Whitchurch, 2008).

The solution is not to make any one group responsible for matters beyond their role, expertise, or authority. Rather, it is to connect complementary expertise through coordinated responses and shared responsibility with clear professional boundaries that move beyond isolated services or referral pathways (Power et al., 2020). While referral remains an important part of effective support, when enacted in isolation, it does not necessarily constitute collaboration (Edwards, 2011). Edwards's (2011) work on relational expertise suggests that complex student needs are best addressed when staff recognise and connect the expertise distributed across different practices. Integrated approaches have demonstrated the value of connecting academic and student affairs expertise to provide coordinated responses to students' academic, personal, and financial needs (Collier-Tenison & Polk-Hampton, 2024). Academic–professional partnership research, likewise, emphasises the importance of working across professional boundaries rather than relying on separate or sequential forms of provision (Parkes et al., 2014). Multiple forms of expertise are essential, and effective partnership between academic staff and professional services can strengthen how institutions respond to students' needs (Bovill et al., 2011; Vere et al., 2024). Together, this literature suggests that effective collaboration involves more than directing students between services; it requires staff to connect their expertise, develop shared understandings, and coordinate their responses around the student.

Connecting expertise across the Third Space

These relational and integrated support models provide a way of understanding the boundary-spanning work described in Third Space literature. Whitchurch (2008) conceptualises the Third Space as an emerging territory between academic and professional domains where roles that cross traditional academic and professional boundaries, including blended forms of expertise and activity, can emerge. Subsequent scholarship has developed the concept to examine how academic and professional staff negotiate boundaries, identities, and responsibilities in increasingly complex

tertiary environments. The Third Space operates across academic and professional boundaries through the formation of social connection, relational agency, and co-design (Kiddell & Quirk, 2026; Thorpe & Partridge, 2026). Power et al. (2020), examining an integrated student support model at an Australian regional university, found that understanding, skills, and a student-centred philosophy operated alongside communication and collaboration as important factors influencing effective support. Their findings suggest that integration is not achieved simply by co-locating services or establishing referral pathways; it depends on the interpersonal relationships and capabilities that enable staff to work together around students (Power et al., 2020). As a result, effective cross-boundary work depends not only on formal structures but also on relationships, recognition, and the ability to value diverse forms of institutional knowledge (Vere et al., 2024).

Matthews et al. (2019) and Whitchurch (2008) argue that social capital and relationships are significant in enabling Third Space practice. The significance of Third Space practice lies not only in where professional roles sit organisationally, but in what happens when different forms of expertise are connected around complex institutional and student needs. Increased collaboration can support recognition of diverse forms of knowledge across the institution, strengthen relationships across professional groups, and contribute to institutional change (Vere et al., 2024). However, the forms of institutional knowledge that are generated can remain relatively invisible within conventional organisational structures and measures of contribution (Veles, 2024). Thorpe and Partridge's (2026) scoping review identified 54 studies of Third Space work and highlighted both the growing importance of this area and the need for more empirical research capable of informing institutional policy and practice. Contemporary research is therefore continuing to explore relational agency, co-design, and the ways academic and professional staff create collaborative spaces across institutional boundaries.

The Third Space provides a useful foundation for the concept of *connected expertise*, drawing on Edwards's (2011) notion of relational expertise and the development of common knowledge across professional boundaries. Connected expertise does not require professional roles to become indistinguishable. Rather, it involves connecting different forms of specialist knowledge around a shared understanding of the student, the educational context, and the task at hand. It requires staff to recognise when and how to draw on the expertise of others, develop shared understandings, and coordinate their responses while maintaining professional boundaries, confidentiality, and accountability (Edwards, 2011; Parkes et al., 2014; Vere et al., 2024; Whitchurch, 2008). In this sense, collaboration is not about doing one another's work; it is about making different forms of expertise more useful to one another. Connected expertise therefore brings together several ideas that recur throughout this collection: collaboration, relationship-building, complementary expertise, and integrated support. It recognises that effective student-centred practice depends on both connection and appropriate professional boundaries.

Connecting expertise in practice

Across the contributions that follow, collaboration takes multiple forms, including relationship-building, coordination, translation between professional domains, capability-building, and the creation of shared spaces for dialogue. The "Voices From the Field" format brings practitioner accounts into conversation with the research literature, making visible forms of relational and boundary-spanning work that can otherwise remain overlooked. Drawn from different professional and institutional contexts, the contributions explore how academic and professional expertise can be connected through relationships, systems, leadership, communication, and shared practice. Four interconnected themes emerge: student success as a shared, whole-of-institution responsibility; relational partnerships and deliberate spaces for connection; recognising and valuing complementary expertise; and integrated and holistic support for wellbeing.

Student success as a shared, whole-of-institution responsibility: This theme reflects established research that conceptualises student success as emerging through the interaction between students and their educational environments, rather than as an outcome produced by individual students or discrete support services (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kift, 2024). The contributions demonstrate how this principle can be enacted through curriculum-embedded partnerships, coordinated institutional processes, and shared staff capability, extending the concept from an institutional aspiration to everyday practice.

Relational partnerships and deliberate spaces for connection: The second theme focuses on the relational conditions that enable academic–professional collaboration. The contributions illustrate how these relationships are cultivated through deliberate spaces for dialogue, shared activity, proximity, and repeated interaction. They emphasise the importance of relationships, networks, trust, and boundary-spanning activity in connecting different areas of institutional expertise (Thorpe & Partridge, 2026; Whitchurch, 2008).

Recognising and valuing complementary expertise: This theme illustrates the importance of recognising the specialist knowledge distributed across professional practices and the creation of new forms of knowledge through boundary-spanning collaboration (Edwards, 2011; Veles, 2024; Vere et al., 2024). The contributions demonstrate what becomes possible when these different forms of expertise are recognised as complementary rather than hierarchical.

Integrated and holistic support for wellbeing: The fourth theme positions wellbeing within the broader educational experience rather than as a discrete service operating alongside teaching and learning. Research on student belonging demonstrates relationships between students' sense of connection, wellbeing, engagement, and academic outcomes (Allen et al., 2024; van Kessel et al., 2025). Moreover, integrated student support research highlights the importance of coordinated approaches that connect academic and professional expertise around students' broader needs (Collier-Tenison & Polk-Hampton, 2024; Power et al., 2020). The contributions demonstrate how these principles can be enacted through curriculum, relationships, staff capability, and coordinated support.

Student success as a shared, whole-of-institution responsibility

Strengthening collaboration between academic and professional staff requires moving beyond isolated partnerships toward whole-of-institution approaches. A key enabler of this is ensuring that student services teams proactively engage academic staff in a coordinated and consistent manner.

At the University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC), we achieve this through the Curriculum of Success Collaborative, a cross-team group of advisers who drive curriculum embedding underpinned by Picton and Jacquet's (2024) Curriculum of Success framework. Using relational pedagogy, advisers partner with academics to understand their context and equip them with strategies to embed and teach cross-disciplinary student success skills.

The collaborative approach strengthens connections across student services teams, establishes an extensive pool of resources and experience, and provides a united approach to build connections with academics. The focus on capability-building rather than dependency has ensured continuity despite staff turnover. Moreover, this approach creates shared responsibility for student success across the institution, resulting in more seamless, student-centred support.

— Rebekah Couper and Danay Baker-Andresen, Student Engagement, Success and Wellbeing, University of the Sunshine Coast

Students are and should be at the heart of everything that we do and it's important to note that when students are interacting with staff, whether academic or professional, they don't see the divide

between the two; they see the institution and its workers as one, and their experience with either shapes their experience of the whole. To strengthen collaboration, we must look at the current pain points: 1) Recognising that there is a vital pastoral role to teaching that should be formally recognised and supported by student voice and experience; 2) Time and capacity as universal constraints to doing good work; 3) Passion and satisfaction — we can't create a positive/meaningful impact on students if we ourselves aren't doing well; 4) Communicating earnestly, openly, and making space for perspectives and opinions of others. There are a whole host of other pain points that must be addressed; however, these are paramount.

— Josephine Ocampo, Student Experience Coordinator, Faculty of Health, Medicine and Behavioural Sciences, The University of Queensland, Australia

Imagine preparing a course profile and knowing exactly what needs to go where, before questions roll in. Enter a simple "quick check" survey tool, co-developed by our professional and academic staff to guide academics through building clear, complete course information with a mission of zero student confusion. Sitting alongside The University of Queensland (UQ) course profile system, the tool helps surface and fill gaps that staff and students often only discover later: assessment details, workload expectations, support information, and policy alignment. The tool also provides examples of good practice and key wording, helping course coordinators understand the requirements and rationale behind them, particularly when inheriting an existing course profile. Part quality assurance, part quality enhancement, this simple approach promotes shared ownership and good teaching practice. We've seen cleaner, more thoughtful course profiles and a more streamlined process: less back-and-forth and, ultimately, a smoother experience for students from the outset.

— A/Prof Allison Mandrusiak (SFHEA, Director of Teaching and Learning), and our amazing Student and Academic Support Unit: Tzyy Shang Low (Student and Academic Administration Officer), Jessica Sinclair (Manager, Student and Academic Administration) & Kate Stanton (Administration Coordinator), School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, The University of Queensland

Bridging the Gap: Widening Participation for Non-School Leavers at the University of Newcastle, Australia

In higher education, widening participation initiatives are often directed towards school-aged students, where engagement is more easily facilitated by established cohort settings. For non-school leavers, more targeted outreach efforts are required to create meaningful opportunities for engagement. This involves building relationships with community organisations and agencies that support diverse populations, including employment services, parenting programs, and similar networks. Prospective students within these groups frequently perceive multiple barriers to university study, such as balancing work, family, and education. The first challenge is, therefore, not academic preparedness but developing a sense that university is achievable and relevant to their lives. Uni Next, at the University of Newcastle, addresses this gap by connecting individuals who are considering a pathway program with relevant academic program information and the professional staff who can support them to achieve their educational goals.

— Dr Jo Hanley, Kate Bennett and Georgia Young, Uni Next team, Pathways and Academic Learning Support Centre, University of Newcastle

Relational partnerships and deliberate spaces for connection

As a teacher, I believe creating an *ibasho*—"a place where one feels at home" in Japanese—between academics and professional staff strengthens student wellbeing through a shared sense of belonging and a common commitment to student success. Through regular coffee/tea gatherings, staff can exchange ideas and foster a merging of professional identities. Academics can utilise wellbeing-based teaching approaches, such as the Universal Wellbeing Model (Stevenson et al.,

2024), to create supportive learning environments across its six dimensions: physical, social, ethnic and cultural, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Meanwhile, professional staff contribute vital insights into daily student needs and service access, enabling a truly holistic approach. Inspired by students who find their own ibasho in cafés, this collaborative model reminds me that a shared sense of place is essential. Ultimately, fostering this environment enhances the wellbeing of students, academics, and professional staff alike, building a stronger, more supportive, and deeply connected higher education community.

— Dr. Yoko Mori is an English lecturer at the Institute of Science Tokyo and a Fellow of HERDSA engaged in academic development research

Strengthening collaboration between academic and professional teams requires more than coordination; it involves creating intentional spaces for dialogue, reflection, and shared learning.

As a Senior Lecturer and committee member of the Student Equity Community of Practice at The University of Notre Dame Australia, I have experienced firsthand how valuable these spaces can be. The community of practice brings together academics and professional staff from diverse areas, and our regular meetings encourage us to engage with different perspectives on the student experience. This often prompts me to reflect on my own assumptions, and on how my role as an academic connects with broader institutional support services.

A particularly significant development has been our recent initiative to invite students to submit an expression of interest to join the community of practice. I see this as a shift from designing support for students to designing it with them, and that makes the work feel even more meaningful.

— Dr Cinzia Loddo, SFHEA, Senior Lecturer, The University of Notre Dame Australia

Diversity of academic and professional perspectives will always lead to stronger outcomes, especially when it comes to supporting our students.

As a university with centralised student supports, our “hub and spoke” model is proving particularly effective. We have recently aligned our Student Progression Coordinators and AccessAbility Advisors to our three colleges, and they spend time physically in both the college and professional offices. This allows them to build deep relationships and subject matter expertise within the school and discipline context, while also retaining connection to their professional field, fostering career growth.

Enabling our academic staff to have point people with whom they build trust through ongoing engagement ensures collaboration flows freely. In this psychologically safe environment, academic and professional staff are encouraged to bring their diverse perspectives to achieve the one outcome — ensuring student success.

— Natalie Perfitt, Associate Director Student Success, University of Newcastle (Awabakal Country)

At James Cook University, collaboration between academic and professional teams is achieved through student success meetings, committee representation, analytics, interventions, and curriculum support. These mechanisms enable academic staff, Student Success, and professional services to work together to identify student needs, coordinate support, and evaluate the impact of interventions. Engagement data, feedback, and analytics inform improvement, ensuring support strategies remain responsive to student needs.

Within this collaborative model, student success is a shared responsibility. Academic staff contribute expertise in teaching, learning, and assessment, while Student Success and professional services provide outreach, case management, wellbeing support, skills development, and referrals to academic and support services. These complementary roles intersect throughout the student

journey, creating a coordinated support experience. Students engage with this model through outreach, embedded support within courses, referrals from academic staff, self-referral, and access to specialist services. This ensures students experience support that feels connected and accessible, rather than having to navigate services independently.

— Dr Anita Suleman, Student Success Officer, Student Services and Support Directorate, James Cook University, Cairns, Queensland, Australia

Recognising and valuing complementary expertise

As a Language and Learning Educator working at the intersection of academic literacies and student success, I have learned that meaningful collaboration between academic and professional teams begins with recognising the knowledge and perspectives each brings. Supporting students means moving beyond responding when challenges emerge towards designing learning environments from the beginning where students can build confidence, capability, and a sense of belonging. For Third Space practitioners, much of this work happens between traditional boundaries, creating connections between students, academic teams, and professional expertise. Yet the relational work required to create seamless experiences is not always visible or easily measured.

Strengthening collaboration requires recognising that the work connecting students, systems, and learning experiences is not separate from education. It is part of education itself. Genuine collaboration depends on valuing the diverse expertise that shapes the conditions where students can belong, engage, and succeed.

— Anna Wardle, Language and Learning Educator with a focus on communication, belonging and learner empowerment, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

One of the most effective ways to strengthen collaboration between academic and professional teams is to embed professional services within the curriculum rather than treating them as separate from learning. In my Design Portfolio unit, I work closely with the Career Development and Employability team at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), where we deliver sessions on portfolios, cover letters, résumés, and interview skills as part of the unit, culminating in a formal mock job interview involving the professional staff. This partnership ensures students engage with career development in a meaningful, contextualised way. The impact has been significant. Numerous students have shared that the portfolio, interview skills, résumé, and cover letter strategies developed through the unit directly contributed to securing a design role. Experiences like this demonstrate how collaboration between academic and professional teams creates seamless, student-centred support that extends beyond academic success to graduate outcomes. When we work together with a shared focus on student success, support becomes more visible, relevant, and impactful.

— Melanie Finger (Academic - Senior Lecturer) and Bethan King (Professional - Student Success), QUT, Brisbane

To deliver truly student-centred support, we must recognise that students arrive as whole people; they do not experience their academic progress and personal wellbeing in silos. As someone who works regularly with both pre-tertiary and tertiary students, I see daily how fragmented the student journey becomes when academic and professional supports operate in isolation.

Strengthening collaboration begins with the realisation that while our institutional roles and divisions differ, our core human purpose is identical. Differences in professional titles in tertiary education providers needn’t separate the human beings occupying them.

We can bridge this divide by moving away from transactional referrals and toward collaborative, relational partnership. When academics and professional staff view each other as equal partners in

care rather than separate departments, we dismantle structural silos. The result is a seamless, deeply human ecosystem where both staff and students genuinely thrive.

— Dr Stephen Fischer, AFHEA (Indigenous Knowledges), Course Convenor and Academic Pathways Teacher, UQ College, Brisbane.

Integrated and holistic support for wellbeing

Narrative case studies are a fantastic tool professional teams can use to bring life to the way referrals can transform the student experience. For the 2026 Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) symposium, we set out to raise awareness of how referrals support and scaffold individual development, especially for navigating university. Our presentation centred on Noor, a fictional student, who had been referred to Student Success by a trusted tutor. The Student Success advisor clarified Noor's goals before guiding her through degree planning. Their support plan included a referral to a learning advisor for time management, supporting Noor's executive function by removing the barrier of initiating contact. A similar non-judgmental, scaffolded approach was used by the Learning Advisor to help Noor decide on strategies that she felt were realistic and relevant to her lived experience of university. The result of this collaborative referral process — a satisfied graduate.

— Amelia Yarwood, Learning Success Advisor and Dr. Lucy Petchell, Student Success Advisor, from the University of Sydney on Gadigal Lands

Strengthening collaboration between academic and professional teams requires clearly defined, complementary roles and shared responsibility for student success. Flinders University's Student Success & Wellbeing Advisor model demonstrates how embedding specialist wellbeing advisors alongside, but not within, teaching teams enables timely, holistic, and coordinated support.

This collaboration can be enhanced through streamlined referral pathways, regular communication, and joint monitoring of student progress, ensuring no student "falls through the cracks." Building trust between teams, where academic staff feel supported to refer complex cases and advisors contribute expertise beyond the curriculum, creates a more integrated ecosystem.

Ultimately, a student-centred approach emerges when academic insight and professional wellbeing expertise are intentionally connected, delivering consistent, personalised, and wraparound support.

— Dr Helen Harrison (she/her), Senior Lecturer, College of Medicine & Public Health, Flinders University; Dr Tori Llewelyn (she/her), Senior Lecturer, College of Health & Enablement, Flinders University; Melissa Suckley (she/her), Student Success & Wellbeing Advisor, Student Engagement & Success, Flinders University

In my work in student mental health promotion, some of the best collaborations with academic colleagues have happened when we find concepts that matter both to student wellbeing and to the discipline students are studying. Behaviour change is one example. For students preparing for health professions, behaviour change theory and practice can inform future clinical practice, while also providing a framework for their own self-development. Another example is creative writing, where mental health literacy training can support students personally while also giving them useful material for character, motivation, conflict, and story development. In both cases, students are not asked to step away from their discipline to learn about wellbeing; they are learning something that belongs in both places. My suggestion to wellbeing and student success colleagues is to spend time understanding the curriculum of the cohorts you support, then look for topics where one learning activity can do two jobs.

— Dr Gareth Furber, psychologist and mental health promotion practitioner, Flinders University of South Australia

When students are struggling, they're most likely to reach out to the people they already know and trust. More often than not, that's their lecturers, tutors, and other academic staff. While many genuinely want to help, they can find themselves navigating difficult conversations without the knowledge or confidence to respond in the most supportive way.

If we're serious about building trauma-informed, student-centred learning environments, we need to make practical, relevant training accessible to academic staff.

To support this, our Student Safety and Wellbeing team has developed a series of training sessions covering trauma-informed practice, bystander intervention, responding to disclosures of gender-based violence, and mandatory reporting. Drawing on the expertise of our professional staff, these sessions build confidence and capability while strengthening connections between academic teams and support services. The result is better support for students, along with clearer referral pathways and collaborative relationships that last beyond the session.

— Jessica McCallum, Prevention Lead at the University of Tasmania

Conclusion

Across the contributions in this collection, a consistent message emerges: student-centred support is strengthened when academic and professional expertise is connected rather than operating in isolation. The examples demonstrate that collaboration can take many forms, including curriculum-embedded partnerships, shared approaches to supporting student success, deliberate spaces for relationship-building, coordinated interventions, and collaborative professional learning. What connects these approaches is a collective commitment to understanding the student experience as a whole and recognising that student success is shaped by the interaction between students, staff, and their educational environment (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kift, 2024).

Several contributions also challenge more traditional assumptions about the role of students within support systems. Rather than positioning students solely as recipients of support, contributors describe approaches that invite students into conversations about how support is designed and delivered. These include communities of practice and the use of students' lived experiences to inform institutional responses. This reflects broader scholarship on student–staff partnership, which positions students as active participants in shaping educational practices rather than simply recipients of institutional provision (Bovill, 2020; Healey et al., 2014). Such an approach suggests that student-centred practice can be strengthened when students are recognised not only as beneficiaries of support, but as partners in its development.

The contributions add to the existing literature by making visible how academic–professional collaboration is enacted in everyday practice. Rather than presenting collaboration simply as an organisational structure or formal partnership, the contributions illustrate the relational, practical, and often boundary-spanning work required to connect expertise around students. This includes building trust, creating opportunities for dialogue, translating knowledge across professional domains, coordinating responses, and developing shared capability. In doing so, the collection provides practitioner-informed insight into how the principles identified in the academic literature can be negotiated and enacted within institutional contexts (Edwards, 2011; Parkes et al., 2014; Thorpe & Partridge, 2026; Vere et al., 2024).

The contributions also demonstrate that the benefits of collaboration extend beyond effective support for students. Contributors describe opportunities for professional learning, enhanced capability, relationship-building, wellbeing, and a deeper understanding of the broader student experience. Collaboration can therefore contribute not only to more connected student support, but also to more informed, capable, and professionally fulfilling workplaces. These benefits are particularly significant where staff from different professional domains can learn from one another

and develop a stronger understanding of the knowledge and expertise distributed across the institution (Edwards, 2011; Vere et al., 2024).

At the same time, collaboration should not be understood as effortless or cost-free. Academic and professional work increasingly intersects, yet staff continue to operate within different role expectations, workload pressures, resource constraints, and institutional measures of value. Academic staff may face increasing pressure to publish and demonstrate disciplinary or research outputs, while professional staff may be managing competing operational priorities and limited resources. These pressures can create tensions around what is understood as core business, whose work is prioritised, and how time for collaborative activity is justified. This is acknowledged in Third Space research, which similarly identifies tensions around professional identity, recognition, and the institutional positioning of boundary-spanning work (Thorpe & Partridge, 2026; Vere et al., 2024; Whitchurch, 2008).

These tensions also raise questions about how professional expertise and collaborative work are valued. The contributions suggest that professional work may be more visible and influential when it is developed in partnership with academic colleagues, particularly when its purpose, evidence, and impact can be connected to institutional and educational priorities. This should not imply that professional expertise derives its legitimacy from academic endorsement; rather, it highlights the importance of institutional cultures that recognise different forms of knowledge and expertise as contributing to shared educational purposes (Veles, 2024; Vere et al., 2024). More effective approaches to demonstrating and measuring the impact of relational, coordinating, and boundary-spanning work are therefore needed, particularly where its contribution is not readily captured through conventional measures of productivity or educational impact (Veles, 2024).

Importantly, collaboration does not mean that academic and professional roles become indistinguishable. Effective student-centred practice depends on complementary expertise, clear professional boundaries, and appropriate accountability. The concept of connected expertise provides a useful way of understanding this relationship: bringing different forms of knowledge together around shared educational purposes while retaining the specialist capabilities, responsibilities, and boundaries of each profession (Edwards, 2011). The aim is not for staff to do one another's work, but to make different forms of expertise more useful to one another.

One particularly encouraging aspect of the collection is the number of contributions co-authored by academic and professional colleagues. These contributions not only discuss collaboration but also embody it in practice, demonstrating the value of bringing different forms of expertise together to reflect on student success. In doing so, the collection itself provides a tangible example of the partnership and boundary-spanning activity described in the literature (Edwards, 2011; Parkes et al., 2014; Vere et al., 2024).

Ultimately, seamless support is not achieved when every service operates effectively within its own organisational boundary. It is achieved when those boundaries do not become barriers for students. The challenge for tertiary institutions is therefore not simply to encourage collaboration, but to create the cultures, structures, relationships, resources, and recognition that make genuine collaboration possible and sustainable. Connected expertise offers one way forward: bringing academic, professional, and student perspectives together around a shared purpose so that students can participate, belong, learn, and succeed.

Declaration of generative AI or AI-assisted technologies

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