

**Book Review: ‘The Bloomsbury Handbook of Student Voice in Higher Education’
Edited by *Jerusha Conner, Rille Raaper, Carolina Guzmán-Valenzuela and Launa Gauthier***

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Introduction

Students’ voices are as important in educational enhancement and development as those of teachers, policymakers, administrators and potential employers. However, they can be difficult to capture and to act on (Young & Jerome, 2022): students are not a single homogeneous group; surveys can only take snapshots of one subset of students’ views at a single moment (Hamshire et al 2017) and may encourage simplistic analysis by the use of multiple-choice questions; course evaluations are known to be prone to bias (MacNell et al, 2015); and there is a clear power dynamic between students and teachers which may affect the honesty and effectiveness of student feedback. This collection of 31 chapters attempts to address these issues by providing both theoretical constructs of the value and purpose of student voice work, and also by providing techniques for hearing students’ voices through evaluation, community participation, formal representation and partnerships.

Part I: Theorising Student Voice (Chapters 1-6)

This initial section includes a range of vibrant and compelling voices, offering a cerebral exploration of concepts and perspectives as an introduction to some of the more practical elements in later parts of the handbook. Whilst that might not be what readers are expecting, or familiar with, every encouragement should be given to start here, as a framing for the following content. There are also helpful practical elements within the chapters of how the abstract might manifest itself in the reality of our professional settings, and how new and deeper understandings of theories can translate to enhanced practice. Some chapters also nurture a tendency towards nostalgia, with helpful summaries of the historical development of student voice over the decades (that many of us ourselves were involved in); current state of the art instantiations; and a reimagining of the future.

Less successful elements reflect the difficulties of balancing variety of content with coherence and some of the theming in the introduction to Part 1 is rather constraining. Inevitably some of the detail does not translate very well either across cultural contexts, particularly the historical descriptions and some phrasing. Nevertheless, most readers will be familiar with the rudimentary of the global experiences and there are core messages within all chapters. There is also the challenge with all edited books where some scene setting would be useful at the beginning of each chapter, but repetition needs to be avoided with limited word counts - however, establishing the professional context and positionality of the authors within each chapter should be a minimum to help readers recognise boundaries and limitations.

Overall, the ideas and reflections of authors provide readers with critical reminders of what we should keep focussed on, as we struggle with the increasingly pervasive neo-liberal and marketized institutional and sector agendas that draw us away from our main objective of informing teaching pedagogy and enhancing responsive learning (chapter 2, Guzman-Valenzuela). Some of the key take-away messages that should be useful as we battle against a reduction in complexity and diversity of the student voice (chapter 3, Darwin), and seek to embrace ‘ambiguity and unpredictability’, (chapter 6, Wallin, et al) are:

- Acknowledging the neo-liberal basis and cultural norm where failure is framed as the result of a lack of persistence and hard work (chapter 5, Medhat Esmat);
- Noting the critical distinction and balance required between student voice for ‘self’ and on behalf of others; and whether that voice is invited or asserted (chapter 1, Conner);
- Recognising the ‘singular perspective offered by metrics as a mediating tool’ and the ‘fallacy of a singular consensual voice’ which lends itself to academic distrust and student passivity (chapter 3, Darwin);
- Understanding that progress will always be predicated on an institutional or sector disposition for change (chapter 2, Guzman-Valenzuela);
- Embracing student voice as a repertoire of possibilities (chapter 4, Barnett).

These important shared messages – particularly useful for those more recently interested in student voice - remind us not only of where we have come from on this journey, but what our future objectives might be, and how we can effectively assert a call for action. The other Parts and chapters of this handbook will aid us in reaching that destination.

Part II: Hearing the Voices of Diverse Student Populations (Chapters 7-12)

One of the key strengths of this handbook is its inclusive approach to the concept of student voice. The editors outline how they have been careful to allow chapter authors to define “student voice” in a range of ways, which has resulted in the inclusion of “*voices of students who have not been as well represented in the existing literature*” (p1).

This philosophy is well exemplified in Part II, where the first three chapters focus on amplifying the voices of particular groups: students with disabilities (chapter 7, Bialka); student survivors of gender-based violence (chapter 8, Bull); and student athletes (chapter 9, Harry).

With this foundation established, the latter chapters in this part offer examples of particular interventions where student voice has been utilised in effecting institutional changes for other underrepresented groups. Drawing on case studies from the UK (chapter 10 and 12) and Chile (chapter 11), initiatives are outlined which aim to transform the university experience for racially minoritised (BAME) students and first generation indigenous scholars (FGIS). These initiatives have resulted in tangible outputs including a staff toolkit and local culture map (chapter 10, Sterling-Morris), an inclusion framework ensuring expertise from the target group is centred (chapter 11, Flanagan-Bórquez et al) and BAME ambassador roles empowering students with influence and authority to affect change (chapter 12, Hamshire et al).

The editors note the absence of LGBTQ and religious minority student voice from Part II, and further to this is the notable absence of mature and part-time students whose experiences and voices are unique and important to consider.

This section would be of particular interest to anyone undertaking an institutional reform project who would like to consider some concrete ways in which they can draw on inputs from as wide a range of students as possible.

Part III: Amplifying Student Voice through Activism, Community Service and Digital Civic Engagement (Chapters 13-17)

Part III examines the expression of student voice through activism, community service and digital civic engagement. The five chapters in this section explore strategies students use to influence institutional change and challenge structural inequalities. This part of the handbook would be of particular interest to student leaders, those working in student unions and academics exploring student activism. The editors emphasise in their introduction to the section that student activism is an extension of student voice by which students understand they have the right to have a voice and presence to bring about change that is needed.

Chapters 13 to 15 examine student activism internationally. Davis and Stokes (Chapter 13) discuss direct action by students and local residents to resist university expansion displacing Black residents in Philadelphia in 1969. Hlatshwayo (Chapter 14) explores how Black students challenged colonial legacies and called for decolonising the curriculum and broader higher education reforms through the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements. Ríos-Jara (Chapter 15) compares student activism in England and Chile in the 2010s to challenge tuition fees and government higher education policies. These three chapters illustrate - as explained by the editors - that students resort to activism once regular student engagement processes in universities fail.

Chapters 16 and 17 move into digital and community-based civic engagement. Huning (Chapter 16) explores the potential for students to use digital media to communicate with peers and lecturers. Freudhofmayer and Resch (Chapter 17) examine digital civic engagement initiatives ranging from teaching children in schools to helping migrants settle in a new country. While digital media had benefits, in-person communication was important for fostering civic engagement. Both these chapters show how student activism can be formalised and integrated into student learning, both taught and co-curricular.

The chapters in this section demonstrate the empowering potential of student activism and digital engagement, which can overcome the limitations of formal student voice mechanisms. The authors show students as agents of change using disruptive and collaborative methods to reshape higher education with work towards greater social justice and democratic participation. While this section considers case studies in depth, the chapters would have been enhanced by including more approaches to supporting student activism in higher education that readers could use in their own contexts.

Part IV: Institutionalizing Student Voice through Governance Structures (Chapters 18-24)

The editor raises an important consideration at the start of this section, noting that the increasing institutionalisation of the student voice serves not always to amplify or protect its use but instead to manage and contain the student contribution. The editorial commentaries provided for each part of this handbook are one of its key strengths: helping the reader to identify themes and controversies which exist in the different aspects and to appreciate the various perspectives under consideration.

This part opens with a chapter (chapter 18, Klemenčič) which provides a comprehensive introduction to the topic of student representation, setting the scene for the more specific cases outlined in the remaining chapters. Examples from a wide range of countries are included: the USA (chapter 19, Ris et al); Finland (chapter 20, Trifuljesko and Björnö); Italy (chapter 21, Romito and Colombo); Kenya (chapter 22, Ochieng et al); the UK (chapter 23, Turner and Winter); and a comparative analysis of Italy and Chile (chapter 24, Pastore and Ascorra).

A variety of structures is discussed and critiqued, including student membership of institutional committees, participation in Student Unions, staff/student commissions and quality assurance processes.

The critical lens through which these examples are viewed will be of interest to anyone involved in university governance mechanisms. In particular, discussions of the extent to which student representatives can really be said to represent the diversity of the student body are timely and relevant.

Part V: Elevating Student Voice through Pedagogical Partnerships (Chapters 25-31)

The fifth and final part of the collection focuses on pedagogical partnerships. The seven chapters are unified by the definition of pedagogical partnership articulated by Cook-Sather et al (2014) and there is a clear focus in all of them of core of this definition, the recognition that partners make equally valid contributions to the task in hand. The examples in this part should provide ideas for those considering establishing or reviewing pedagogical partnerships in higher educational settings.

The wide range of contexts considered in these chapters shows that partnership needs to be culturally sensitive: achieving recognition of contributions needs different approaches in Pakistan, China, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, and the US. There is a particularly interesting consideration of respect and trust in collectivist and sometimes hierarchical cultures in Asia (chapter 26, Gauthier and Iftikhar and chapter 28, Kaur and Tang) and about the need to overcome a perceived lack of value for Māori students and their views in New Zealand (chapter 31, Sutherland et al). The chapter about student partnership in shaping identity-centred curricula in the USA (chapter 27, Hall et al) has a particular resonance in 2025, as we see push-back against diversity, equity and inclusion strategies in US higher education.

Across the chapters, there is a strong sense of what students gain from engagement in partnership activities, which is the particular focus of chapter 25, by Cook-Sather et al, but it

also shines through the many opportunities to hear students' voices in these pages, making the book particularly valuable.

This part also covers partnerships implemented at different scales: the micro-scale, with individual partnerships between teachers and students, meso-, work with broader intra-departmental or cross-institutional teams (such as in chapter 29, Griffioen et al, in the Netherlands). No macro-scale partnerships (which may span institutions and countries) are described, although we note that Part IV covers this in some of the governance examples. There would certainly be challenges in setting up true partnerships at this scale.

The case studies in this part provide a good selection of different ways to implement successful partnerships, and in themselves highlight the value of including students' voices in any evaluation of student engagement initiatives. Whilst they cover specific situations, the principles of cultural contextualisation, relationship-building, respect, and trust are applicable more generally, and so I think these chapters will be useful to educators, policy makers and students considering partnership development, especially with the reminders always to set partnership plans in a cultural context.

Conclusion

This collection of perspectives and experiences certainly achieves the objective of providing both theoretical constructs and practical techniques in support of the commitment to amplify and elevate student voice. It also delivers in terms of celebrating the rich potential that purposeful listening and authentic partnerships can bring to professional practice. And furthermore, it is a call to action on deeper moral, social, and philosophical levels as to why we should resist the more constraining manifestations sometimes seen in 'institutional mimicry' (Kandiko Howson and Kingsbury, 2023) and reductive practices relating to student engagement and student experience. On that basis, the book should be of interest to colleagues and partners who are both novices and more familiar with the myriad perspectives in our community.

References

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