

Engaging with the Student Voice: Refreshing Practice and Theory – a ‘Reboot’ for 2025 and Beyond

Megan Bruce, Durham University, megan.bruce@durham.ac.uk
Jackie Cawkwell, Independent Educational Developer (previously University of Nottingham), jacalyncawkwell@btinternet.com
John Parkin, Anglia Ruskin University, john.parkin@aru.ac.uk
Conor Naughton, Peridot Partners, conor_naughton@yahoo.co.uk
Josh Alcaraz, BSc (Hons) Nursing Science Registered Nurse (Adult), Northumbria University, josh.alcaraz@northumbria.ac.uk

The idea for this special issue on Student Voice was first proposed by Megan Bruce during an editorial board meeting for the Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal (SEHEJ). At the time, Megan was leading a two-year institutional project at Durham University aimed at enhancing the university's engagement with student voice. Her interest in expanding this dialogue across the sector was the driving force behind the decision to dedicate a special issue to the topic. The idea coincided with an ambition of Jackie to better understand the evolution of student voice and describe current thinking within the sector, to support development work with new lecturing colleagues and for novice educational scholars. With the enthusiastic support and involvement of additional special issue editors John Parkin, Conor Naughton, and Josh Alcaraz from the wider RAISE community, the project gained momentum. John, Conor and Josh identified a desire to learn more about the experience of contributing at an editorial level for an academic journal and to extend their professional networks; it also became clear very early on that the collective endeavour was significantly enhanced through their specific scholarly endeavours and practical experiences as, variously, undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students. The diversity and enthusiastic support of all colleagues on the special issue editorial board has certainly made the journey enjoyable and, we believe, enhanced the quality of the output. We are also indebted to the new SEHEJ Editorial Assistant, Ella Dyer for their unwavering commitment. We were further delighted when the RAISE community decided also to make Student Voice the theme of the 2025 summer conference (Who we Engage with and How we Engage Them), allowing an even greater focus on this issue.

While the concept of "student voice" has been in use since the 1990s, primarily within the school context, it has taken on a central role in higher education in recent years. Initially driven by the National Student Survey (NSS) in the early 2000s and later reinforced by the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) from 2017 onwards, student voice has evolved into a key element of institutional and educational development strategies.

Beyond these sector-wide metrics, wider societal issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have further reshaped how staff and students engage at every level, from institutional and departmental to modular. These shifts have prompted a re-evaluation of traditional practices, creating new opportunities and challenges for engaging with students in meaningful ways.

Since the formation of the RAISE community in 2010, the field of student engagement has undergone significant transformation. This special issue focuses on the impact of this

evolution and asks: how can we reframe our understanding of student voice today in ways that foster dynamic and effective staff-student relationships? In doing so, we are offering a refreshed conceptualization of student voice, while also sharing innovative practices that reflect contemporary developments in student engagement. By bringing together a diverse range of ideas and contributions, this issue provides valuable insights for an international audience, with practical implications for policy, practice, and research.

Our experiences of the evolution of the term “student voice” over the past decade have highlighted that it remains a concept in flux, evolving from something that was originally quite tokenistic to something more inclusive, active, and impactful. A decade ago, student voice primarily focused on formal feedback mechanisms: gathering responses to improve experiences without fundamentally reshaping them. Today, however, the focus has shifted towards co-creation, where students are empowered not just to critique, but to actively shape their learning experiences. Furthermore, recent emphasis on diversity means we now seek to amplify a broader spectrum of student voices, particularly those from marginalized and underrepresented groups; for example: first generation students, racially minoritised students, students with disabilities, mature students, and part-time students.

To ensure that our approach to this special issue aligned with best practices in student voice work, we adopted a co-creation model from the outset. We included students on our editorial board, incorporated student reviewers in the peer review process, and welcomed many submissions co-authored by both staff and students, sometimes with students as lead authors. This collaborative approach has been crucial in ensuring that our work reflects the true spirit of student voice and the practices of the SEHEJ community in offering developmental support to novice authors.

We were thrilled when our call for papers generated an overwhelming response, far surpassing our expectations with over 80 submissions. We are especially grateful to Rachel Forsyth, the outgoing SEHEJ Editor in Chief, who joined the special issue editorial panel to help manage the large volume of submissions.

The 23 submissions we selected were overwhelmingly practical in nature, with 15 of these presented as case studies or toolkits. This contrasts with the usual focus of SEHEJ issues, which typically feature a higher proportion of research articles. We believe that this more practice-oriented approach is perfectly suited to the topic at hand, offering concrete examples and insights that readers can implement in their own contexts.

Although we had to be selective in our choices, we have curated our selection of papers around four key themes:

- Marginalised Voices (Coldrick & Ly; Leslie & Wright; Findon et al.; Booth-Carey & Rundle). Both articles and case studies are included under this theme, including a range of innovative approaches to capturing student voices through the employment of various tools, and an evocation to re-imagine inclusivity.
- Voices in the Wider University (Le Normand & Waters; Cook-Sather et al.; McConnell et al.; Freeman; Johnson & McGuigan; Wang & Wang; Briggs et al.; Gibb et al.;

Docherty et al.; Elliot & Gillis; Banks; Mitchell-Smith et al.). Submissions within this theme were by far the most numerous, incorporating concepts such as co-production, trust, empowerment, politics of care and agency; whilst more practical manifestations emerged with a focus on aspects such as teaching awards, end of unit surveys, and feedback loops.

- Voices in the Curriculum (Booth et al.; Milian et al.). Although submissions were small in number, we are reminded of the emerging and powerful discussion and call to action in dismantling the systems and cultures associated with colonialism.
- Voices in Student Leadership (Cuthbert; Morrell-Scott; Peplow et al.; Carey et al.; Veuger et al.). Predominantly practical pieces, submissions offer guidance and ideas for tools in response to such challenges as positive mental health and well-being, and the experiences of student councils, governance and communities of practice, complimented by a call to reconsider how representative some of our current practices actually are.

In addition to these original contributions, we are pleased to also include a review by our special issue editorial team of *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Student Voice in Higher Education* (Connor et al., 2023). The themes explored in this comprehensive work closely mirror the themes featured in our own issue (diverse student voices, student activism, institutional governance, and pedagogical partnerships).

As we look ahead, we hope that this issue sparks further exploration into the evolving concept of student voice and its application. Regular readers will know that each SEHEJ issue always includes at least one paper related to student voice, even when it is not the main focus. We see this special issue as the beginning of an ongoing conversation that will continue to develop in future issues, as the field of student engagement continues to grow and diversify.