



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA



Centre for
**Deliberative
Democracy**

Social Cohesion Action Plan: Project Report



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Photo by David Beach

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the various lands, waterways and skies where we work, learn and live - the Ngunnawal peoples, on whose Country the Bruce campus stands. We also acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who study and work with us, and thank them for sharing their cultures, knowledges and contributions to our collective work. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and thank them for their continuing care for Country. In developing the Social Cohesion Action Plan and the deliberative process documented in this report, we were mindful that this work does not stand alone - it must be understood in connection with the University of Canberra's Indigenous Leadership Strategy. Together, these initiatives are instrumental to creating the conditions for a truly inclusive and cohesive UC community.

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Introduction

To inform the University of Canberra's Social Cohesion Action Plan, a deliberative engagement process was designed and undertaken with staff, students and community partners. Bringing diverse voices into inclusive, informed and reflective dialogue, the process built collective ownership of the Plan's direction. This report documents that process and the learnings that emerged.



Central to the deliberation was the question: *How can the University of Canberra become a place where everyone feels they belong, can express who they are, and connect safely across difference?* The question is timely. Students are learning in different ways, in different places and with different life experiences, while social and economic pressures increasingly shape people's ability to participate, connect and feel a sense of belonging. At the same time, questions about how to uphold freedom of expression and how to define safety within a diverse community - one comprising people with different identities, beliefs, backgrounds and values - are complex and central to how a university community functions, learns and grows.

Sponsored by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor's office and led by the Centre for Deliberative Democracy, with MosaicLab as external facilitation partner, the process ran from October 2025 to April 2026. It gave the UC community space to explore these issues with care and depth - sharing experiences, weighing trade-offs and considering what conditions support cohesion across university life. The actions developed through the University Voice Panel will shape an Action Plan that reflects the needs, priorities and aspirations of those who live, study and work at UC.

This report covers the Reference Group that guided the process; the consultation and background research conducted; the University Voice Panel's composition, session design and expert speakers; the outcomes of the deliberative process; and concluding learnings and reflections.

Reference Group

The Reference Group brought together eight members from across the University, including representatives from Student Life, Counselling Services and UCX, alongside student members. Its purpose was to oversee the design and implementation of the deliberative engagement process that would inform the Social Cohesion Action Plan.

Reference Group members included:

Mikaela Dockrill	Manager, Student Wellbeing and Support
Matthew Sinclair	Manager Inclusion
Vicki De Prazer	Psychologist and Associate Director Medical & Counselling
Andrew Giumelli	Deputy Director Operations - UCX
Dr. Robin Ladwig	Lecturer Human Resources Management
Harshith Ghanta	President, International Students Association
Simone Chitsinde	President, Student Representative Council
Nic Whyte	Student – Brisbane Campus

The Group's responsibilities spanned the full arc of the process:

- Process design - shaping the key questions and themes for the deliberative process to explore, and advising on the selection of expert speakers.
- Participation - guiding participant composition and recruitment strategy, and identifying key student and staff cohorts for inclusion.
- Broader engagement - supporting the promotion of consultation activities, including discussion papers and surveys.
- Impact - contributing to this report, evaluating the process, and initiating further research on social cohesion beyond the project

This work was carried out across three workshops facilitated by Emanuela Savini with support from Olive Mendoza. Members also contributed between workshops via email and individual meetings, and several went on to participate as expert speakers at the University Voice Panel.

Among the Group's earliest and most consequential decisions was developing the central question and three themes that would anchor the deliberative process. The question asked: *How can the University of Canberra become a place where everyone feels they belong, can express who they are, and connect safely across difference?* From this, three themes emerged through the Group's discussions:

sense of belonging and connection, freedom of expression and safety, and spaces for connection. These themes shaped each stage of the engagement that followed.

Reflections on the Reference Group model

The Reference Group proved to be a genuinely valuable element of the process. Drawing together perspectives from across student services, wellbeing, student experience and the student body itself meant that decisions about the deliberative process were tested against a wide range of considerations from the outset. Each member brought expertise that shaped the design in ways a narrower group could not have achieved.

Coordinating attendance across members' competing responsibilities was at times complex, and some of the Group's work needed to be carried forward between meetings via email and individual conversations. This worked well in practice, though more frequent meetings would have allowed for richer collective discussion. Asking more of members' time was not realistic given their existing commitments - a constraint worth anticipating in similar processes, where Reference Group members are likely to be drawn from people whose substantive expertise is matched by demanding workloads.

That said, the depth and quality of the deliberation owes much to the Group's guidance. Their early decisions about the central question and themes, their input on participation, and their continued engagement throughout shaped a process that was both rigorous and genuinely connected to the University community it sought to engage.

Background Research & Consultation

To inform the deliberative process and ensure that the University Voice Panel had relevant evidence and community perspectives to draw on, the project team undertook two streams of work in the lead-up to the panel sessions: a review of relevant literature and practice, culminating in a discussion paper, followed by a program of university-wide consultation. Together, these activities shaped the Panel Background Report, which was provided to panel members as foundational material for their deliberations.

Background research and discussion paper

In January 2026, the project team undertook a review of relevant literature and institutional practice to establish a shared evidence base ahead of the consultation. This included an examination of research on social cohesion in higher education settings - drawing on work addressing belonging, inclusion and the experiences of diverse student and staff communities - as well as a review of how universities, both in Australia and internationally, have approached social cohesion, inclusion, and community-building. Drawing on this review, the team developed a discussion paper synthesising the key findings. The discussion paper was made available on the [project webpage](#) and one written submission was received in response.

While the limited uptake reflects the constraints of this phase of the process, the discussion paper nonetheless served a valuable function in grounding the consultation in the available evidence and informing the deliberative work that followed.

University-wide consultation

In February 2026, the project team undertook university-wide consultation using three methods: an online survey, written submissions invited via the discussion paper, and a focus group with staff.

Online survey

The online survey received 225 responses from across the UC community. Respondents included students (both domestic and international), professional and academic staff, and alumni or community members. The largest groups were domestic students (n=79) and international students (n=73), followed by professional staff (n=48) and academic staff (n=24). In terms of length of time at UC, the majority of respondents had been at the university for three years or fewer, with 76 having been at UC for less than one year and 90 for between one and three

years. Of the 225 respondents, 57% (n=129) indicated that English is their first language, while 43% (n=96) indicated that it is not.

Staff focus group

The project team offered to attend meetings across the institution to discuss the project's content and invite responses. One such request was received, and a focus group was conducted with eight members of staff. Although small in scale, the session generated substantive discussion and covered many of the themes explored in the online survey, including belonging, inclusion, and experiences of the working and learning environment. The focus group findings were considered alongside the survey data in the analysis presented in the Panel Background Report.

The findings from this phase of the work documented in the Panel Background Report, available on the [project webpage](#).

Reflections on the consultation phase

The survey response rate was encouraging given the timeframe, and the data it generated proved genuinely useful for informing the deliberative process. That said, the consultation phase was constrained to approximately four weeks, which limited what the team was able to achieve. With additional time, it would have been possible to trial a wider range of engagement methods and to conduct further focus group sessions to complement the survey data. These limitations were in part a function of resourcing: a more extensive consultation program would require additional staff capacity and a longer lead time.



The University Voice Panel

Recruitment approach and participant selection

Recruitment for the University Voice Panel ran concurrently with the university-wide consultation in February 2026. The Reference Group had given considerable thought to the composition of the panel, they developed a stratification framework that guided recruitment and selection.

Rather than assigning fixed quotas to every dimension of diversity (which is not feasible at panel scale) the framework established a small number of primary stratification criteria and adopted intersectionality as an active selection principle. This meant that during application review, preference was given to participants whose lived experiences spanned multiple dimensions of identity and circumstance, ensuring the panel achieved broader representation.

The overall panel was structured across four groups: students (approximately 40%), academic and professional staff (approximately 40%), partner providers (approximately 10%), and UCX representatives (approximately 10%). Within the student cohort, the framework prioritised diversity of study level and mode, cultural and linguistic background, First Nations representation, and the inclusion of online students based in the ACT. Within the staff cohort, it sought an even balance between academic and professional staff, diversity of functional role (including frontline service roles not always centred in institutional conversations) and cultural and linguistic diversity.

Expressions of interest were assessed against a selection matrix to ensure the panel collectively reflected the breadth of the UC community.

Student panel members received an honorarium of \$200 to recognise their commitment and remove practical barriers to participation.

Snapshot of the panel

The University Voice Panel comprised 25 members drawn from across the UC community. Professional staff made up the largest group (43%), with domestic students, international students, and academic staff each representing approximately 17% of the panel. Seven in ten panel members identified as women (70%), with men comprising 23% and non-binary participants 7%. The panel spanned a broad age range, with half of members aged between 35 and 54, and 40% aged between 18 and 34. Among student panel members, the majority were undergraduates in their second year or beyond, with five HDR students and two

postgraduate coursework students also participating. 31% of the panel identified as living with a disability.

The panel reflected considerable cultural diversity. Of the members who specified their cultural background, 10 identified as Anglo-Australian, with the remaining representing a wide range of backgrounds including Eastern and Southern European, South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, and Bengali), East Asian, Southeast Asian, African, Latin American, Pacific Islander, and First Nations Australian. Notably, almost all panel members reported engaging across cultural difference regularly a group well-placed to deliberate on questions of social cohesion.

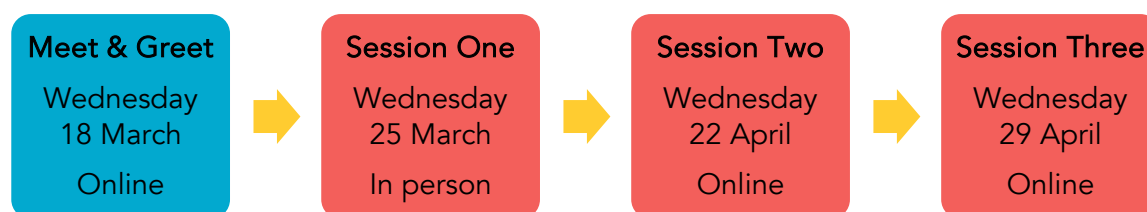
Reflections on panel recruitment

Recruiting a representative panel within a university context presented some practical challenges. Student recruitment proved particularly difficult: a second recruitment drive was required following Session 1 to reach sufficient numbers, reflecting the competing demands on student time that make sustained participation across multiple sessions hard to secure. In retrospect, it may also have been worth recruiting a larger initial cohort than the target panel size, anticipating some attrition across sessions.

Session timing is another consideration. Weekday scheduling created barriers for some participants, and weekend sessions might have improved accessibility - though this would come with its own trade-offs for students in casual employment and for staff participation. Similarly, the student honorarium of \$200, while meaningful, may not have fully reflected the time commitment involved, and a higher amount could support both broader recruitment and stronger retention in future processes.

Session design and deliberative process overview

The University Voice Panel met across four sessions between March and April 2026, facilitated by MosaicLab.



The process opened with an online Meet and Greet session on 18 March, which allowed panel members to connect with one another, hear from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, and prepare for the deliberative work ahead. Session 1, held in-person on 25 March, was the substantive foundation of the process: panel members

engaged with the Panel Background Report and the findings from the university-wide consultation, heard from expert speakers, and reflected on critical thinking, lived experience, and bias. Sessions 2 and 3 were held online on 22 and 29 April respectively, moving the group from information and discussion into the development, refinement, and finalisation of their recommendations.

Expert speakers: selection and participation

The selection of expert speakers was a matter the Reference Group approached with care. They developed a selection rationale focused on three criteria: relevance to each of the three deliberative themes (*Sense of Belonging and Connection*; *Freedom of Expression and Safety*; and *Spaces for Connection*), representational value in terms of the communities and perspectives speakers could bring into the room, and positionality and strategic credibility - that is, whether a speaker's professional standing and personal experience would lend weight and authenticity to their contribution. From this process a shortlist of ten speakers was developed, though not all were ultimately able to attend.

The speakers who participated brought a genuinely diverse range of expertise and lived experience to the panel's deliberations.

- Dr Artie McCarthy, Lecturer in Global Studies at UC, offered a critical scholarly lens on institutional inclusion, drawing on research that interrogates how well-intentioned programs can inadvertently reinforce deficit framings of the communities they seek to serve.
- Mijica Rose Lus, Secretary of the Multicultural Hub Canberra and an ACT Young Woman of the Year, brought deep practitioner knowledge at the intersection of equity, community development, and mental health, alongside lived experience of multicultural community life in the ACT.
- Mikaela Dockrill, Manager of Student Wellbeing and Support at UC, contributed over fifteen years of professional experience in trauma-informed, student-centred care and has led a range of equity-focused wellbeing initiatives at the university.
- Harshith Ghanta, a UC student serving as Diversity Officer on the Student Representative Council and President of the International Students Association, brought a direct student voice and lived perspective as an international student on questions of belonging and genuine participation.
- Dr Trisnasari Fraser, representing Welcoming Universities (a national initiative of Welcoming Australia supporting universities to embed genuine cultures of inclusion) offered both research expertise at the intersection of community psychology and the arts and deep personal commitment to what inclusion looks and feels like in institutional practice.
- A representative from the *Racism@Uni* project had also accepted the invitation to speak but was unfortunately unable to attend at the last minute.

Following Session 1, the University Voice Panel reflected on the areas of expertise that had been covered and identified some gaps that would benefit from further input. Additional background research was undertaken, drawing on examples from other universities, and a speaker was subsequently invited to speak to UC's Indigenous Leadership Strategy - a decision made in direct response to a recommendation from a First Nations panel member. This responsiveness to the panel's own evolving needs reflects the adaptive design of the process.

From deliberation to recommendations

Over four sessions the panel moved from orientation and information-gathering through to substantive deliberation and, ultimately, the development of their recommendations. The group worked to develop a shared definition of social cohesion as it applies to the UC context, which grounded the recommendations that followed. The panel developed four recommendations encompassing fifteen suggested actions. These were drafted by the group, sense-checked with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor before being returned to the panel for finalisation at the concluding session, at which point they were formally handed over to the DVC's office. The recommendations now form the foundation of the Social Cohesion Action Plan currently being developed by the university.

Reflections on deliberation

Several areas for improvement emerged from participant feedback. The allocation of time was the most frequently raised concern: while the learning sessions were valued, the time available for developing recommendations felt insufficient, and some participants felt the final outputs did not fully reflect the group's deliberative capacity. A more deliberate balance between facilitated learning and participant-led deliberation would strengthen the quality of recommendations produced.

Clarity about the Panel's scope of influence was a related consideration. Despite the remit being communicated throughout the process, Panel participants continued to raise questions about the extent to which their recommendations could shape University policy. More time spent on this framing, supported by additional information or examples, would help participants develop a clearer understanding of the Panel's influence early in the process.

Accessibility and pacing also emerged as considerations. Participants for whom English is an additional language noted that the pace and conceptual complexity of some sessions made full engagement challenging, and one group activity involving multiple overlapping numbering systems was experienced as confusing. Building in more time for participants to absorb complex material, and reviewing activity design for clarity before delivery, would help mitigate these issues.

Outcomes

The University Voice Panel process generated three interconnected outcomes, each contributing in distinct ways to the development of the Social Cohesion Action Plan.

Survey data on social cohesion at UC

The deliberative process was preceded by a community survey designed to capture a baseline understanding and sentiment around social cohesion across the UC community. Drawing on responses from students and staff, the survey gathered both quantitative and qualitative data across themes of sense of belonging and connection, freedom of expression and safety, and participation in campus life. Respondents were asked to reflect on questions such as the extent to which they feel a strong sense of personal belonging to the UC community, whether they trust the University's leadership to make decisions in the best interests of all members regardless of background, and how confident they are that the University would address exclusion or bias if witnessed. The survey also explored the frequency and quality of cross-cultural interactions in campus and online spaces, and the barriers that prevent members from engaging more fully with one another.

Together, these data provide rich baseline information on how social cohesion is experienced across different roles and backgrounds within the University. They offer a meaningful point of reference for understanding the conditions the Panel was responding to and will help inform the priorities and measurable indicators of the Social Cohesion Action Plan



A statement of social cohesion at UC

Alongside recommendations, the Panel developed a shared statement defining what social cohesion means in the context of the University of Canberra. Arrived at collectively by Panel members, the statement reflects the diversity of perspectives and experiences represented across the group. It reads:

Social cohesion at the University of Canberra is reflected in a community where all members feel they belong, are respected, and can participate in campus life in ways that recognise their identities, backgrounds, and abilities. It is fostered through everyday practices, relationships, and systems that make diversity visible. Meaningful opportunities for connection are created by ensuring all voices are heard and valued. Social cohesion at UC is strengthened when individuals are not only participants in the community, but active contributors to shaping it. Community members are empowered to initiate, adapt, and co-create activities, spaces, and meaningful solutions to problems.

Social cohesion is weakened when people feel disconnected, unheard, stereotyped, or pressured to belong on terms not of their own choosing. At UC, social cohesion is demonstrated in a culture where all community members can express different perspectives, challenge bias, and provide honest feedback without fear of exclusion, labelling, or marginalisation. Policies are informed by members of the community, and are updated regularly to reflect their identities and needs. It is also enabled by strong institutional foundations, including clear and accessible support pathways, staff capability to respond appropriately, genuine opportunities for listening and action, reduced structural barriers, and an ongoing commitment to reducing social barriers.

This statement does not function as a policy definition, but as a living expression of what the UC community has said it values and what it expects of the institution. It can inform the framing and language of the Social Cohesion Action Plan, and may serve as a touchstone for how the University communicates about inclusion and belonging more broadly.

Recommendations and actions

Building on their shared understanding of social cohesion and drawing on the evidence, expert presentations, and lived experience exchanged throughout the deliberative sessions, Panel members developed four recommendations encompassing fifteen suggested actions.

The recommendations are:

1. Elevate and live the UC values
2. Create a university-wide culture that facilitates safety, connection, and reciprocity
3. Build a well-informed university community
4. Strengthen digital connection and engagement

The full recommendations and their associated actions are available on the [project webpage](#). They will form the primary basis for the Social Cohesion Action Plan, which will set out how UC will give effect to each recommendation through concrete commitments, responsibilities, and timelines.

Participant outcomes

Pre- and post-deliberation surveys completed by Panel members provide evidence of meaningful participant outcomes across several dimensions.

In terms of learning and understanding, 90% of respondents reported a high level of knowledge about social cohesion by the end of the process (rating themselves 4 or 5 out of 5), and 65% reported that their views had shifted to some degree over the course of the deliberations. The information provided during the sessions was rated as clear and useful by the majority of participants, and 73% felt it had presented a wide range of ideas and perspectives.

The process also generated a strong sense of engagement. Prior to the Panel, 36% of survey respondents said they were 'involved' or 'very involved' in University decisions that affect them. At the end of the process, 60% of respondents indicated they would be more involved in University decisions that affect them following the experience, and 55% anticipated being more involved in the University community more broadly. Encouragingly, 63% said they would participate in a similar panel process again. Connected to this, prior to the Panel, 24% felt that the University's engagement activities had been collaborative, genuine and worthwhile in the past. At the end of the process, 74% of post-deliberation survey respondents felt that this process was collaborative, genuine and worthwhile.

Participants assessed the integrity and quality of the process positively. The facilitators were rated as fair by 79% of respondents (rating 4 or 5 out of 5), and 83% expressed confidence that the Panel's recommendations had been protected from inappropriate facilitator influence. Seventy-three per cent were similarly confident that the University had not unduly influenced the recommendations. Around three quarters of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the process had been collaborative, genuine, and worthwhile – 74%.

Anecdotally, participants at the final session reflected that they had rarely, if ever, had the opportunity to engage with such a broad cross-section of the University community (especially students and staff together) and that the deliberative process itself had been an experience of social cohesion in action.

Not all outcomes were uniformly positive. Before the process began, 38% of respondents were confident or very confident that the Panel's recommendations would be implemented. This proportion declined to 26% after the process. The qualitative feedback suggests that some participants left the process with heightened awareness of the complexity of institutional change, and uncertainty about how recommendations would be acted upon.

Reflections on outcomes

Taken together, the three outcomes of the University Voice Panel process represent a solid contribution to the University's Social Cohesion Action Plan. The community survey establishes a baseline from which progress can be measured; the statement of social cohesion gives the Action Plan an inclusive foundation; and the recommendations set a direction for its development.

The participant outcome data are particularly encouraging. High levels of learning, a marked shift in perceptions of UC's engagement practices, and strong process integrity ratings all point to a deliberative process that was experienced as meaningful and fair. The anecdotal reflections from the final session (that the Panel itself had been an experience of social cohesion) suggest the process achieved something beyond its instrumental purpose.

The decline in participants confidence around implementation requires some consideration. It is not unusual for deliberative participants to leave a process with a more complex understanding of institutional change than they arrived with, and some uncertainty about follow-through is a reasonable and honest response to that complexity. Communicating clearly and consistently about how recommendations are being progressed, both to Panel members and the broader community, would help mitigate this perception. Reconvening the Panel to review the development of the Action Plan, and again once implementation is underway, would be one meaningful way to address this directly.

Learnings and Reflections

The following section draws on the learnings and reflections from the University Voice Panel process - from Reference Group, consultation, panel recruitment, session design, and participant outcomes, a number of learnings emerged that can inform future work of this kind.

Strengths of the process

The Reference Group model proved its value. Drawing together expertise from across student services, wellbeing, student experience and the student body itself meant that decisions about the deliberative process were grounded in a wide range of institutional and lived perspectives. Particularly the Group's early work - developing the central question and the three deliberative themes - gave the entire process a clear and coherent direction.

The Background Report and university-wide consultation gave the deliberative process a substantive foundation. It effectively provided the Panel with access to relevant evidence, community perspectives and institutional context, which informed deliberations. The consultation data also ensured that the Panel's discussions were anchored in the experiences of the broader UC community, not only those of the Panel members themselves.

The social cohesion statement stands as a distinctive outcome of the process. Arrived at collectively by Panel members, it represents the UC community's own articulation of what social cohesion means in this context - not a definition imposed by the institution but one developed from within.

The recommendations developed by the Panel provide the Social Cohesion Action Plan with a grounded direction. Developed through genuine deliberation and drawing on evidence, expert input and lived experience, they carry a legitimacy that complements and strengthens the University's own policy work.

Deliberative processes of this kind benefit from visible commitment at the most senior level. Building senior sponsorship into both the opening and closing of the Panel (welcoming participants at the outset and receiving the recommendations formally at the conclusion) signalled institutional seriousness and helped participants understand that their work would reach decision-makers.

The participant outcome data show high levels of learning, a marked shift in participants' perceptions of the University's engagement practices, strong process integrity ratings, and the observation that the Panel had itself been an experience of

social cohesion in action - together these suggest the process had value well beyond its primary purpose.

Areas for improvement

Several areas for improvement emerged across the process.

The balance between facilitated learning and participant-led deliberation warrants reconsideration. While the expert input was valued, the time available for developing recommendations felt insufficient to some participants, and the final outputs may not have fully reflected the group's deliberative capacity. Future panel designs should allocate more time to the recommendation-development phase and be explicit with participants from the outset about the Panel's scope of influence.

Student recruitment proved challenging and a second recruitment drive was required after Session 1. In future it would be worth recruiting a larger initial cohort than the target panel size, anticipating some attrition across sessions. Weekday scheduling created barriers for some participants, and weekend sessions - while carrying their own trade-offs - are worth exploring. The student honorarium of \$200, while meaningful, may not have fully reflected the time commitment involved; a higher amount could support both broader recruitment and stronger retention.

The consultation phase was constrained to approximately four weeks, which limited what the team was able to achieve. A more extensive program - with a wider range of engagement methods and additional focus groups - would require additional staff capacity and a longer lead time. This is worth factoring into the scoping of future projects.

The deliberative model in a university context

The University Voice Panel demonstrated that a deliberative model can work well in a university context, but it also revealed some of the particular pressures that shape participation in this environment. Students face competing demands on their time; staff are drawn from across a complex institution with varied roles and schedules; and the diversity of the UC community - spanning modes of study, cultural backgrounds, and physical locations - makes inclusive recruitment genuinely challenging. They point not to the limits of deliberative engagement in this context, but to what thoughtful design and realistic resourcing can address. This Panel leaves UC well placed to develop its deliberative practice further.