



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA

Strengthening Social Cohesion

Community deliberations on belonging and
connectedness at UC

Discussion paper | February 2026

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Prepared by the UC Social Cohesion Reference Group. This Discussion Paper is designed to provide context and prompts for UC community members participating in the Social Cohesion consultation. It does not reflect an institutional view of the University.

1. Introduction

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 University of Canberra (the University) is developing a Social Cohesion Action Plan because the campus community is changing. Students are learning in different ways, in different places, and with different life experiences. Staff and students are navigating a mix of physical, digital, global, social and workplace spaces. Broader social and economic pressures also shape people's ability to participate, connect and feel a sense of belonging. These shifts make it important to understand what helps people feel recognised, respected and able to contribute across the whole university community.

At the same time, the University is committed to fostering environments where people feel safe, empowered and able to express their views. Students and staff work within a diverse community, with different identities, religious beliefs, social-economic backgrounds, values and expectations. Questions about how to uphold freedom of expression, how to define safety, how to trust information with the rapid growth of AI-mediated communication, and how to respond to wider socio-political changes are becoming more prominent. These are complex issues and central to how a university community functions, learns and grows.

This deliberative process gives the University community space to explore these issues with care and depth. It brings people together to share experiences, weigh up trade-offs and consider the conditions that support cohesion across all parts of university life. The actions developed through the University Voice Panel (the panel) will help inform a Social Cohesion Action Plan that reflects the needs, priorities and aspirations of the people who live, study and work at the University.

Why this discussion paper?

The purpose of this discussion paper is to encourage members of the UC community to think about what matters to them when it comes to social cohesion. It is a conversation starter, to help you think about what you may choose to tell us during the consultation process.

This paper is not meant to tell readers what to think. You may find some of its considerations inadequate in addressing concerns that matter to you. If so, please tell us. While your input may go beyond the issues raised in this paper, we encourage you to at least refer to some of the key points raised in these pages.

We are seeking views on

- Your needs, priorities and aspirations as a member of UC community
- Shared and divergent experiences of physical and psychological safety within the community
- Institutional drivers and barriers to creating a sense of belonging for all
- Expectations of respectful engagement and freedom of expression
- Impact of campus spaces (online and offline) on connecting with others

2. Why Social Cohesion Matters Now

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2005) defines social cohesion as “[t]he connections and relations between societal units such as individuals, groups (and) associations’ [...]; it is the ‘glue’ that holds communities together. Cohesiveness is created from connections based on a shared sense of belonging and attachment, similar values, trust and a sense of ‘social solidarity.’” It is important to note some of the key dimensions of interest here: connections, a shared sense of belonging and attachment, similar values, and trust.

Social cohesion is an important aspect of the university experience, and all members of the university community are stakeholders in some way. Yet it is not clear how UC members view social cohesion and what to do about it.

The University of Canberra’s Social Cohesion Action Plan will help fill this gap, by undertaking community-wide deliberations on perspectives and lived experiences of belonging and safety across a community where experiences of identity and connection often differ and sometimes collide. The findings from the deliberations in March and April 2026 will serve as foundational resource in understanding University-wide commitment to social cohesion as a collective responsibility.

This deliberation process takes place at a time when community perspectives on social cohesion has never been more essential. In recent years, Australia has witnessed growing concerns regarding the rise of antisemitism, islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination affecting diverse communities across the nation. These concerns have intensified following the horrific attack at Bondi Beach in December 2025, which prompted renewed calls for urgent and comprehensive action to address the underlying drivers of social division and intercommunity tension. In response to these escalating challenges, the Australian Government has established a Royal Commission to examine antisemitism and social cohesion, recognising the need for sustained, systemic approaches to fostering inclusion, mutual understanding, and shared belonging across our increasingly diverse society. This inquiry reflects a critical moment for reimagining how institutions, communities, and

individuals can work together to build resilience against discrimination and strengthen the social fabric that connects us all.

As distinctive locales for learning and identity formation (Faine et. al. 2016), universities are uniquely positioned to understand and ensure safety and belonging among its diverse members. This diversity has expanded significantly in recent decades: with international education now representing a major sector of the Australian economy (McCowage et. al. 2025), the growth of international student enrolments has brought a welcome plurality of individual and cultural experiences to campuses nationwide. However, this increasingly diverse environment has also brought heightened awareness of the challenges many community members face.

The Australian Human Rights Commission launched the Racism@Uni project last year – a project that aims to understand how students and staff, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, experience racism on campus or online at university. Concerns about campus climate have also intensified in response to recent events: the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) has been monitoring how Australian universities are assuring wellbeing and safety, freedom of speech and academic freedom following the increase in protest activity related to the Middle East conflict. Adding to this picture of campus safety challenges, the 2021 National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) reveals the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, further complicated by the high rate of underreporting, for a significant portion of the student body in many Australian universities (Social Research Centre 2021).

As the University of Canberra pursues its 10-year *Connected* Strategy, it is vital to recognise that safety, belonging and connection are not simply buzzwords. They form the fabric of institutional integrity. To be “Connected for Life” means every member trusts that they are seen, listened to, valued, and most importantly, safe.

Questions to consider

- What does belonging and connectedness at UC mean to you?
- What are some actions we can take for a whole-of-community approach to social cohesion?
- What are our community vulnerabilities, and what are our strengths?

3. Foundations for Belonging and Shared Understandings

As noted in the previous section, social cohesion can be considered as the “glue” that binds members of a society together, acting as an essential force for creating communities that are healthier and more resilient. This section will focus on two key dimensions of this so-called glue: sense of belonging and shared understandings.

In one of the early studies of social cohesion in Australian universities, Smart et al. (2000) writes that belonging is **not just about proximity**, or being in the same classrooms and offices or eating in the same canteen. To reduce prejudice and foster meaningful interactions, it is important for universities to cultivate conditions of equal status, common goals, and institutional support. Without these conditions, members of the university community tend to retreat to “comfort zones” where they only interact with people from similar cultures and languages. This results in individuals living “parallel lives” where they have less chances to form deep interconnections with others (Smart et al. 2000).

For example, international students who fear linguistic and social rejection tend to befriend students with the same experience. Meanwhile domestic students dissociate or disengage altogether, thinking that they lack common ground with students from other cultural, religious or socio-economic backgrounds (Smart et al. 2000, 20-23). In this sense, fostering belonging and shared understandings does not mean pursuing homogeneity. Rather, belonging and shared understandings thrive when members of a community embrace similarities, such as shared values of equality and truth-telling, while actively valuing unique contributions and difference.

Another threat to cultivating belonging is the **“marketisation” of higher education** (Healy et. al. 2016). When students feel that they are simply “customers” of an export industry rather than genuine members of a community, their relationship to the university becomes largely transactional. For Healy et. al. (2016), true belonging develops when universities become spaces where people connect with others and from their identities through engaging with different perspectives and experiences – what they term “meaningful friction.” Building a sense of belonging therefore is not simply about the “internationalisation” of campus statistics, but a matter of thinking about the genuine “interdependence” of a community. This means moving beyond the assumption that students will automatically gain international perspectives merely by studying in Australia or by having international students enrolled in their classes. Such perspectives only develop through genuine connection and interaction between students – through the active engagement across difference that creates meaningful relationships and shared experiences.

Universities employ various approaches to nurture a sense of belonging and interdependence among its members, especially students. These include:

- **Curriculum-based mixing** (Smart et. al. 2000) whereby universities use major coursework projects as opportunities to assign culturally diverse teams. In these projects, students are encouraged to collaborate with peers from different backgrounds rather than self-selecting into homogeneous groups. For example, Monash University, has implemented Graduate Attribute policies which require teaching philosophies to embed cross-cultural competence and ethical values,

consistent with the university's aim of preparing its graduates to be responsible and effective global citizens. Other opportunities for this cross-cultural might include peer mentoring schemes or peer assisted learning.

- **Engaged creative placemaking** (Mutero 2019) in which university members are actively encouraged to co-create physical spaces such as murals and gardens that reflect their diverse backgrounds. In Durban University of Technology, South Africa, the campus environment becomes a site of experimentation where community members reimagine and redesign “our space” together. As a result, cafeterias have been transformed into sites for both social justice and cultural expression.
- **Participatory curriculum co-design** approaches that position students as active contributors to shaping their learning environments. This involves creating mechanisms for students to voice their cultural perspectives and needs in curriculum development. For instance, Curtin University's School of Design used “culture boards” and anecdotal feedback to gather input into students' creative expressions on what an intercultural curriculum might look like for them
- **Purposeful design for connection** that considers how spaces are organised and inhabited to create opportunities for cross-cultural contact and relationship building. For example, Murdoch University has an obligatory residential policy in the “Student Village” where students are mixed in shared flats by race, gender and nationality. As a result, students formed long-term friendships and biases and stereotypes are transcended.

Turning to UC's specific policy context, the Reconnected Framework places advancing equity in student enrolment at its centre (University of Canberra, Reconnected 2025):

“[UC is] committed to promoting equity for under-represented groups, including students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students with disabilities, and those from rural and regional communities. We will redefine our institutional approach to equity by embedding inclusive practices, strengthening the inclusion of student voices and establishing robust support systems that empower all students to succeed.”

UC's student demographic profile reflects this commitment to equity and access. At UC, 38% of the undergraduate population are first in their family to attend university. The aspiration to be the most accessible university in the country is central in creating a digitally connected, inclusive and collaborative university environment.

Importantly, UC finds its place-based identity on **Ngunnawal land**. The University is committed to “embedding Indigenous knowledges, cultures, and leadership at the heart of education, research, and operations.” Indigenous perspectives are weaved into the university's values, where belonging means finding common ground as

members walk together on Ngunnawal land. But this does not mean that members are just passing through, like customers out to buy goods. Rather, UC encourages its members to be “Connected to Canberra” and the region. We are all contributing citizens of a much larger community.

Questions to consider

- What are the tensions between creating safe spaces for specific groups and maintaining openness across difference?
- How can social cohesion strengthen, rather than diminish, the expression of unique identities?
- Where is the line between fostering belonging and expecting assimilation to dominant norms?

4. Safety and Freedom of Expression

The 2021 National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) and Universities Australia Charter on Sexual Harm give us an idea of what physical, psychological and intellectual safety might mean in university contexts.

Physical safety means freedom from bodily harm, sexual assault, and harassment. The NSSS 2021 report underscores that this is a fundamental condition for Australian campuses meet, both for onsite and online spaces. Without physical safety, any other form of learning and engagement would not be possible for members of a community.

Psychological and cultural safety refers to an environment where members of a community trusts that they are welcome, respected, and free from the fear of making mistakes (Smart et. al. 2000). For example, classroom and office practices that give assurance to members from different cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds that their linguistic and cultural norms are not disregarded or devalued.

Meanwhile, **intellectual safety** refers to a community member’s confidence in their right to hold diverse views, ask questions freely, express controversial beliefs, or challenge dominant perspectives, without fear of censorship or retribution.

The relationship between safety and freedom of expression is arguably one of the more contentious issues that universities try to navigate. While popular opinion often puts the two in tension, the UN Social Cohesion framework and the NSSS 2021 report suggest they are complementary conditions. Social cohesion thrives when members trust that the institution has robust safety nets and support, such as fair processes for handling harassment cases. Members are more likely to engage freely and critically when they acknowledge the legitimacy and trustworthiness of

institutional policies and procedures. Conversely, a culture of silence, unsafety and distrust leads victim-survivors of abuse and harassment to self-censor and withdraw from community life.

To create safe and principled university spaces, the Universities Australia Charter on Sexual Harm and NSSS 2021 recommend **“active bystander” training** as early and regular as possible. Such orientations promote a culture of shared responsibility in ensuring safety for all. For example, the University of Queensland has a dedicated portal that houses a comprehensive set of information on safety, from reporting options, support units, existing campaigns, to bookings for the university’s online training and modules. Providing accessible and readily available information contributes significantly to cultivating an institutional culture of dignity and care.

The Universities Australia Charter on Sexual Harm also emphasises that the best institutional practice is having **trauma-informed and culturally appropriate services**. For example, the University of Melbourne’s Safer Community Program offers 24/7 specialist help and advice to members of the university community about inappropriate, concerning or threatening behaviour.

While these initiatives demonstrate promising approaches to building safer, more inclusive campus environments, significant challenges remain sector-wide. The new Universities Accord (National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence) Bill 2025 suggests that voluntary codes are no longer sufficient to build the trust necessary for genuine social cohesion. The 2021 NSSS report notes that one in two students know “very little or nothing” about their university’s formal report process for sexual harassment or assault. Furthermore, many students do not report incidents because they feel it would be too hard to prove, that it would not be taken seriously by the university, or that they will lose valuable peers and support in the process. Such barriers not only compromise individual safety but undermine the sense of collective care and mutual responsibility essential to a cohesive campus community.

For UC, walking together on Ngunnawal land means looking out for one another, collectively working to ensure that every member thrives. This is uniquely non-Western framework for safety and wellbeing - one based on “custodianship” and “respect.” When faced with safety and free speech disputes, the wisdom of Ngunnawal culture invites us to reflect and ask, **does this expression honour our obligation to walk together?** If a significant portion of victim-survivors are underreporting, what can we do as a community to ensure that university values, culture and policies adequately respond to lived experiences?

Questions to consider

- What does it mean for safety and freedom of expression to be mutually reinforcing rather than in tension – and what conditions make this possible?
- How can we move beyond awareness of policies to genuine active bystander culture where collective responsibility for safety is lived daily?
- How can UC embody the principle of "walking together" to create a culture where reporting harm is seen as an act of care for community rather than individual burden?

5. Spaces for Connection

The spatial dimension of social cohesion is just as important as its psychological and cultural ones. The physical space of the campus as well as digital spaces can either be opportunities to bridge divides or exacerbate them.

Without **intentional design of university spaces**, members of a community form silos, where they study and work in the same buildings but never truly cross paths (Smart et. al. 2000). Researchers suggest designing for **“sticky places”** or **“collision spaces”** where people stay and interact, rather than “slippery” places that emphasise transitory and passive interactions. For example, communal kitchens and circular seminar rooms encourage eye contact and chatting, whereas large lecture halls tend to lead to less exchanges.

However, the effectiveness of physical spaces depends on members having the time and capacity to use them. **Economic pressures** of the cost-of-living crisis may also affect member’s relationship with university spaces. Many students work part-time or full-time and therefore have less chances to stay and linger for social interactions in the university. Due to the marketisation of the university too, others may also view their time as focused on “getting a degree,” where clubs and organisations outside class become distractions rather than opportunities to form identities and connect with others.

These constraints on physical presence have made digital spaces increasingly critical to fostering connection. Furthermore, **digital inclusion** has become more and more urgent in the post-COVID world. The 2025 Australian Digital Inclusion Index suggests that while “digital inclusion in Australia continues to improve, large gaps remain. Digital exclusion remains a significant challenge, particularly for older Australians and people experiencing social and economic disadvantage” (Thomas et. al. 2025, 7). Nationwide initiatives are being rolled out to address this issue. Foremost of such is the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA), which is a shared initiative of over 500 business, government, academic and community

organisations to promote collective action on affordability, digital accessibility and digital ability in Australia.

In the higher-education sector, Monash University has a dedicated Digital Experience and Inclusion Team. Their primary task is to “implement and uphold web accessibility standards, focusing on making digital content accessible to people using assistive technologies, as well as those with varying physical, sensory, or cognitive abilities.”

UC faces the challenge of balancing both dimensions of spatial inclusion. The Reconnected Framework outlines the University’s commitment to ensuring digital equity, particularly important given that many UC students balance work, family, and study commitments that limit their time on campus. However, as digital spaces expand, how do we ensure physical campus environments remain welcoming and purposefully designed for connection? For a university community with diverse needs and constraints, what does spatial inclusion look like when some members need flexibility and virtual access while others seek face-to-face "collision spaces" to form meaningful connections?

Questions to consider

- How can we design on-campus "collision spaces" that work for time-poor students rather than assuming traditional patterns of campus life?
- How can we create genuine opportunities for connection and community-building in digital spaces?

How to have your say

- Email us a response to this Discussion Paper at Emanuela.Savini@canberra.edu.au
- Complete a survey at the QR code provided here ->
- Discuss these topics at one of your meetings and let us know what people thought – access the Discussion Planner we created at the QR code here ->
- For online students, check your mail for invitations
- Register your interest in joining the University Voice Panel in March and April at QR code provided here ->



Please provide your input by **Wednesday 4 March 2026**.

More information and submission instructions can be found [HERE](#).

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For further reading

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