This Special Edition of Sensoria: A Journal of Mind, Brain, and Culture presents a collection of papers in which a relatively recent pedagogical direction for universities is explored – a focus on learners rather than on the ‘sage on the stage’ (King, 1993). Until the 1990s, learning and teaching in universities worldwide tended to follow the sage on the stage model in which an ‘expert’ would inform students what they ‘should’ know about a topic. This technique would be used regardless of who the student cohort might be or what discipline area was being examined. However, over the last twenty-five years there has been a profound shift endeavouring to make university pedagogy student-centric and concentrate on the learner, rather than the imparter, of knowledge. The current compilation of articles explores an essential element of this shift – the need to focus on what students desire to assist them with their learning. It then goes further by exploring and presenting techniques and strategies that may be used to tap this student ‘voice’. Reasons why this shift has occurred are considered below, followed by an introduction to the assorted articles.

**Why Listen to the Student Voice**

Australia’s Prime Minister, Mr. Malcolm Turnbull, has urged Australians to embrace disruption (McDuling, 2015). Mr. Turnbull recently said “The Australia of the future has to be a nation that is agile, that is innovative, that is creative. We can’t be defensive, we can’t future-proof ourselves…We have to recognise that the disruption that we see driven by technology, the volatility in change is our friend if we are agile and smart enough to take advantage of it” (Thompson, 2015, p.1).

The type disruption seen as critical for change is digital. The term ‘digital disruption’ was coined more than 20 years ago by Harvard Business School professor, Clayton Christensen (Christensen & Bower, 1995). Christensen’s (2008) consideration of the effects of ‘disruptive innovation’, which leads to digital disruption, describes the way in which, in the context of a stabilised market place that caters largely to the higher end of the market, new, cheaper or less complicated ideas and technologies could be deliberately and opportunistically employed to upset the status quo of a market, redefine industry best practice and change the ‘rules of the game’. In 2016, the meaning of ‘digital disruption’ has evolved significantly and the phrase is now typically used to describe the disruptive impact new digital technologies are having across all industries and sectors.

Together with the finance industry (e.g., online banking), the taxi industry (e.g., UBER), media (e.g., Netflix) and many other domains, one industry that has faced significant digital disruption is the Higher Education sector. Indeed, the Higher Education milieu is rapidly changing both in Australia and at universities across the globe (Buzwell et al., 2015). In particular, Learning and Teaching in universities has been rapidly evolving in response to the ‘digital revolution’ and universities are endeavouring to react appropriately to meet changing student needs in this space while still supporting academic staff and being able to plan university directions (Buzwell, 2013). For universities to suitably respond in this situation it would be beneficial for a consideration of the variety of futures that could be pursued.

It is not only digital disruption that is influencing how university education is delivered in 2016 and beyond. A further impact on the way Learning and Teaching is provided by universities is the recognition of the necessity to understand the changing student voice if students are to be optimally engaged. The student voice is broadly defined as “any expression of any learner regarding anything related to education” (Fletcher, 2014, p. 2). This time of change for Higher Education appears to be an ideal moment to listen to this voice to determine the optimal directions for university Learning and Teaching.
There are additional reasons for paying attention to the student voice at this time, particularly in Australia. The digital educational revolution (Robb, 2012) is occurring concurrently with changes in the Australian student cohort. The large scale inquiry into the future of Australian Higher Education, initiated by then Minister for Education, Julia Gillard (Bradley et al., 2008), has resulted in a more varied student cohort with potentially different learning expectations than the traditional university student. Some of the groups targeted in the Bradley Report as needing additional encouragement to commence university studies are from ‘non-traditional’ demographic backgrounds in which there may not have been a culture of attending a higher education institution, or the opportunities to do so, and who may have different learning needs which require exploration. Further, both in Australia and beyond, there has been an increase in students conducting their studies wholly online (Buzwell et al., 2015; Romenska et al., 2011), requiring a rethink of the pedagogy that may be best suited to learning in this context. In addition, all these developments are occurring simultaneously with changes in International student cohorts at universities worldwide, due to the increasing financial resources in many countries, resulting in a greater desire and capacity for university education. Thus, the student cohort at universities across the globe is changing at a time when it is unclear what the optimal pedagogy may be during this period of transformation.

As Higher Education evolves, little is known about how to best prepare for changes in learners’ expectations, including what in the huge range of technological and face-to-face experiences may be relevant (Buzwell, 2013). Compounding this predicament, there are few ‘authentic’ voices from learners evident in plans proposed for this future (Andrews & Tynan, 2012; Manefield et al., 20007; Romenska et al., 2011; Buzwell et al., 2015). Indeed, to determine optimal learning approaches, it seems advisable to consult a primary stakeholder—the students. Involving learners in a dialogue about the future of learning and teaching is essential for ensuring that future higher education strategies allow for these changes in students’ expectations and cultures (Buzwell et al., 2013). Further, the opportunity for student representation in the construction of strategies for the future of Learning and Teaching will enable greater cooperation between students and staff and will enhance student engagement (Fielding & Bragg, 2003; Johnson & O’Brien, 2002; Kushman, 1997) and retention (Creanor et al., 2006).

In recognition of the above, The (Australian) Office of Learning and Teaching [OLT] funded a two year project, which commenced at the end of 2013, entitled: Valuing student voices when exploring, creating and planning for the future of Australian higher education (Buzwell et al., 2015). From the project twelve principles characterising the future of learning and teaching as desired by students were developed. These principles include; the need for personalisation; scaffolding; being socially connected and tactile learning; as well as learning that allowed for student choice, flexibility and control over their learning in order to achieve desired employment outcomes. This OLT project was the inspiration behind the current special edition. Over the course of the project, presentations have been made to a wide assortment of university stakeholders - students, academics, university management - and all have concurred regarding the importance of listening to the student voice. Thus, a call was made for this special edition to explore examples and methodologies where the student voice was being examined.

This special edition assembles a variety of papers illustrating differing theoretical and structural responses to the global call for a reinvigoration of university learning. These responses share an embrace of emerging pedagogical practices, together with intentional exploration of the learning opportunities brought about by advancements in technology. The first paper is written by two members of the Australian student voice project, Dr Alexandra Crosby and Associate Professor Jo McKenzie from the University of Technology, Sydney, who consider how the student voice could influence the implementation of Higher Education policies. Crosby and McKenzie illustrate an approach using rapidly formulated collaborative scenario designs to explore students’ preferred academic futures. These potential futures were then coded thematically resulting in three themes: Changing Context, Learning Environments and Independent Learning. The aspects that contributed to each theme are explained, together with the features that contribute to each theme. Crosby and McKenzie then take the important step of illustrating how findings concerning the students’ voice can contribute to university strategy and learning change management in universities. Their explanation of the methodology utilised in the Student Voices project provides a model for others to use in their personal academic context.

The second paper is by Dr Karenanne Knight, contributing author on the Creating Academic Learning Futures (CALF) project in the UK, a precursor to the Australian Student Voices project (Buzwell et al., 2015). The aim of the CALF project, funded by the Higher Education Academy in the UK, was to involve students in creating and exploring a variety of plausible ‘alternative futures’ for learning and teaching in higher education (http://www.le.ac.uk/beyonddistance/calf/). The summary of the findings from the project, which are presented in the article, have been implemented broadly to inform UK teachers, academics, managers and policy-makers of the student voice for the future of learning. The findings have also impacted UK Higher Education policy. The article is an illustration of the importance of listening to
the student voice. Knight’s paper takes the innovative approach of including the author’s creative fiction, an allegorical narrative delivered in instalments via public blog, as an accompaniment to the CALF project development process. This story-blog format demonstrates one of the creative processes used in the CALF project to help students conceptualise their possible learning futures.

Associate Professor Scott Beattie from Central Queensland University presents a quite different approach to exploring how the student experience and perspective could be incorporated to enhance university learning by focussing on the Australian academic quality context. First, Beattie uses concepts from cultural theory to analyse the academic quality structures underlying much of higher education development as principally an issue of information design. Second, he offers a reflective analysis of the Landmarks Project developed at Central Queensland University’s Business and Law faculty. Beattie argues for the importance of contextualised interpretation in assessment processes, and a need to prioritise student engagement over policy compliance. Importantly, the paper illustrates a potential tool for how these concerns and tensions may be managed. Dr Joel Anderson, from the University of Geneva, takes a different slant in exploring the student perspective by focussing on the development of a teaching resource that utilises the Student Voice to enhance student engagement. He explains the importance of bolstering student engagement while maintaining student motivation and details a theoretically based program by which to achieve that end. In the article, the results from the program evaluation are presented so readers can determine the suitability of a similar program for their own courses.

In the final article, Buzwell, Farrugia and Williams take a different approach, focusing on the student voice from a recent, but rapidly increasing, student cohort—those students conducting their studies fully online. In the article, students studying in two different online modalities are examined and compared on the aspects of learning that online students prefer contrasted with traditional on-campus students. The findings represent the first time student cohorts completing the same subject in both online and on-campus modalities have been compared. Further, the findings are important as they provide directions for universities to consider in improving their online offerings for both online and on-campus students. In addition, the ways in which universities may incorporate offline experiences into an online environment are considered.

All articles presented in this special edition offer different perspectives on the importance of listening to the students’ voice. We hope that this collection, in presenting some of the ways that knowledge of what an important stakeholder—the learner—wants for their learning, will inspire others to take heed. An improved understanding by university governance and curriculum development bodies of what students want will ultimately improve students’ higher education experience, resulting in a more positive environment, not only for students, but also for the academics conducting the teaching, the administrators assisting the academics and the university management. When the argument is put forward in this way: why would we not want to explore the student voice?

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