Why Belonging Still Matters:
Student Success Beyond Generic Employability Skills

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Drawing on 2014 pilot initiatives from The Belonging Project, a four-year research project at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, this paper argues for more humanistic and holistic approaches to employability. It maintains that in theorizing and implementing employability models educators must not lose sight of holistic understandings of student success. While generic skills in numeracy, literacy, and communication are important, the foundation of employability must always be a sense of belonging that enables increased self-awareness, confidence, and connection throughout all stages of the student lifecycle. This paper proposes a model for employability that focuses not only on key generic skills, but also on capturing and supporting existing diversity in the classroom, appropriately scaffolded professionally embedded curriculum and relevant assessment, and ensuring all students have access to peak global professional experiences.

Employability in a Changing Sector

Recent shifts in the education sector have brought increasing attention and resource allocation to the issue of employability. More than ever before, educators are being asked to produce the “repository of human capital” that “provides the workforce capability that underpins economic growth” (Universities Australia, 2014, p. 4). Employers, universities, and professional bodies agree that Australia needs to develop professionals who are highly skilled and ready to face the challenges of increased global competition (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Wye & Lim, 2009). University graduates face pressure to become professionals who are responsive to economic, social, cultural, global, technical and environmental change. Graduates must work flexibly and intelligently across a range of contexts including self-employment, networked clusters of small-to-medium enterprises, sole-traders and micro-businesses (Wright, Davis, & Bucolo, 2013).

Traditionally, one of the chief mechanisms by which universities have engaged with the graduate employability agenda is via development of programs to support the acquisition of generic ‘key’ skills and graduate capabilities frameworks. However, there remains a risk that the skills and knowledge produced are reduced to neatly packaged separate modules offered to all students without being fully contextualized within disciplinary or professional practice. This distances “employability” skills and knowledge from other forms of core disciplinary curriculum and outcomes (Knight & Yorke, 2002).

Another key challenge of the prevailing model is that it often leads to conceptualizations of employability that are alternately too narrow—for example, basic numeracy, or literacy—or overly prescriptive and universalistic. It may ignore the intangible qualities and multitude of experiences that contribute to student success. To be successful, these approaches must be tempered with reflective practices that allow educators and students alike to critically assess myriad professional and personal trajectories. They cannot be one size fits all. Nor can
employability skills come at the expense of the transition, personal development, and student enrichment objectives that not long ago were a primary focus of the sector. If they do, they may create an artificial divide between those skills viewed as necessary to “employable graduates” with marketable key skills, on the one hand, and those required of empathetically engaged social citizens on the other.

Drawing on research and initiatives from the final tier of The Belonging Project, a four-year learning and teaching project at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, we argue for more humanistic and holistic approaches to employability. We maintain that in theorizing and implementing employability approaches we must not lose sight of holistic understandings of student success. While generic skills in numeracy, literacy, and communication are important, the foundation of employability must always be a sense of belonging that enables increased self-awareness, confidence, and connection throughout all stages of the student lifecycle. We propose a model for employability that focuses not only on key generic skills, but also on capturing and supporting existing diversity in the classroom, appropriately scaffolded professionally embedded curriculum and relevant assessment from the beginning of and throughout the higher education experience, and ensuring all students have access to peak global professional experiences. This model focuses on capacity building in order to enhance the cultural capital of all members of the university cohort.

A Belonging Project approach to employability and student success

Aims and objectives

In 2014, The Belonging Project launched Focus on the Global Experience, which piloted initiatives aimed at developing and supporting students’ emerging professional, global competencies. Focus on the Global Experience aims to embed global employability competencies across the entire student lifecycle for students in the creative disciplines at RMIT. In order to achieve this whole of lifecycle program, the tier was divided into three phases, each of which reflects a key temporal and contextual point of emphasis:

1. Recognising and celebrating the students’ existing diversity and strengths.
2. Embedding employers to scaffold the cumulative development of key disciplinarily relevant professional literacies.
3. Mapping and developing alternative peak ‘global’ professional experiences based from the student’s home campus and accessible to all students.

Together these phases work to embed understandings of self, others, and individual aspirations; create iterative assessments that correspond to employer identified relevant graduate attributes; and produce “at-home” opportunities for practicing these skills in a global environment.

Focus on the Global Experience is the final tier of the Belonging Project Narrative Model. This model has developed a three-tiered approach to the student lifecycle that emphasizes belonging:

1. to a disciplinary/professional cohort (Focus on the First Year Experience);
2. within an interdisciplinary learning environment (Focus on the Interdisciplinary Experience);
3. and, to a wider world of global intercultural networks (Focus on the Global Experience)

This tiered approach, which is loosely mapped to the student lifecycle, sees disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global learning as not only providing the opportunity to expand core graduate competencies, but also as being essential to the welfare and sense of identity and belonging of students as members of the School environment, university culture, and of a broader professional community.

Throughout the project, the theoretical concept of belonging has been used as a core underlying philosophy. It has also been used as a strategic tactic to engage both staff and students in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University to improve the student experience. The framework has been designed to improve the student cohort experience aligned to common undergraduate degree structures, and therefore is transferable more broadly to other schools and higher education institutions.

**Approach**

In *Focus on the Global Experience* the term “global” is used in the broadest sense. It signifies the broadening of students’ experiences beyond the confines of the university and to worldwide networks of professional contacts. Global experience here also captures the developing intercultural awareness and cross-cultural experiences that we argue are necessary “key employability skills” for creative industries graduates. As Woods (2007, p. 854) notes, “the ability to understand and be understood by a diverse group of specialists is essential” to addressing the “complex and significant, real world problems” that characterize both the socio-political and economic realities graduates face.

Our approach draws upon and extends existing best practice frameworks. Approaches such as Stephenson and Yorke’s (1998) Capability Envelop draw on a sequence of curriculum stages to provide students with opportunities “to formulate and manage their own strategic education development according to their distinctive circumstances and longer-term aspirations” (p. 194). The Capability Envelop relies on stages of exploration, review, and demonstration to allow students to negotiate and demonstrate a range of specialist and generalist skills throughout the academic lifecycle. Similarly, we have scaffolded opportunities for the development and deployment of employability skills. In developing an employability framework for the creative industries students in our school, we have aligned with the basic structure of the Capability Envelop by focusing on those elements that are necessary for exploration, review, and demonstration of discipline relevant graduate skills.

However, we have also expanded on the Capability Envelop with an eye toward ensuring the sense of belonging that we maintain is necessary for equitable access. The success of the Capability Envelop depends heavily on binary relationships of accountability between students and educators, whose actions are assumed to be informed and autonomous. A challenge of this approach is that in both cases parties are asked to act based on knowledge they may not possess or fully understand. Assumptions may lead practice. As result, the employability skills developed through the curriculum may not, in fact, accord to student needs or employer desires. Moreover, those most vulnerable may be those most likely to
suffer or be alienated as a result of the very interventions meant to support their long-term development.

This approach to employability accords with the broader agenda of the Belonging Project, which seeks to develop and define an integrated approach to student engagement. It utilizes a narrative methodology (Abma, 2000) and ethnographically informed action research models (Tacchi, Slater, & Hearn, 2003). Together these approaches seek to ensure that research participants are positioned as active partners in social inquiry (Abma, Nierse, & Widdershoven, 2009) and that the research process as a whole consists of a “self-reflective spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting” (Kemmis, 2007, p. 168). Specifically, the project supports the University’s goal to be global in reach and impact, to be work-relevant and industry-partnered, to be urban in innovation and impact. Further, the Belonging Project supports the participation, retention and/or success of low Socio-Economic Status (SES) higher education students in undergraduate studies.

Methods

In order to develop a model for employability appropriate to the needs of creative industries students in our School and the rapidly changing creative industries sector, we returned our previous research on the student experience and transition (Carlin, Clarke, Wilson, Lukas, & Morieson, 2011; Wilson, Clarke, Carlin, Morieson, & Lukas, 2012). We engaged in an analysis of 2011-2014 Belonging Project focus group, interview, and participant observation data generated from students and staff members in the School of Media and Communication. This analysis combined with an investigation of existing best practice models in key areas, including assessment, work-integrated-learning (WIL), and the virtual engagement of students.

This provided us with a qualitative basis for engaging academic and professional staff and employers in a process of co-creation of the initiatives. In late 2013 and early 2014, we engaged in discussions, workshops, and forums during which professional and academic staff contributed to the development of pilot initiatives. These events were documented and analysed as part of the development process. We then approached self-identified “champions” within the school to work with the Belonging Project on three pilot initiatives related to transition and existing diversity, curriculum and assessment, and accessible peak global professional experiences.

The pilot initiatives involved staff and students from six programs within the School of Media and Communication. They directly engaged 132 undergraduate students, and indirectly involved the entirety of the Bachelor of Communication Design cohort. Extensive discussion of each individual initiative is beyond the scope of this paper. Still, it should be noted that the initiatives were documented through ethnographic participant-observation, interviews and focus groups, surveys, and review of students’ self-analyses both in the form of written assessments that were shared with the researchers and through CES data. This information was then fed-back to key internal and external stakeholders. In 2015, the pilot initiatives will undergo their second iterations.

1 The Belonging Project is governed by RMIT’s human ethics procedures. The project has obtained appropriate human ethics clearances to conduct interviews and focus groups; photograph, video, and audio record consenting participants, conduct participant-observation, and access quantitative data about cohorts and programs. In all instances, participants provide voluntary consent.
The Pilot Initiatives

It is our contention that effective employability models must begin by meaningfully responding to and supporting the diverse transition needs of students. Once students gain confidence in the university environment, themselves, and in their desired trajectory, then it is essential that curriculum and assessment be designed to effectively support the acquisition of relevant employability skills. The determination of these skills requires a greater degree of connection between educators and employers than is currently standard in higher education. Employer embedded assessment ensures a degree of accountability and knowledge-transfer not available in current models. Finally, we contend that employability and student success in the current market require intercultural awareness and global opportunities that are accessible to all students. The initiatives described below are designed to be integrated the student lifecycle so as to create a holistic and iterative approach to student success and employability.

Recognising and celebrating the students’ existing diversity and strengths

As Keneley and Jackling (2011) have noted, individual students’ cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds may play a significant role in their commitment to and appreciation of the generic skills that form the foundation of many employability approaches. While existing dominant models for employability do acknowledge students’ diverse career interests, the responsiveness of these models is limited by the self-awareness and communication abilities of already enrolled students. However, for many students, including those from Low Socio-Economic Status backgrounds, first in family students, and those who may otherwise be socially isolated by geographic, cultural, or personal circumstances, “the culture of the institution [may be] foreign and at times alienating and uninviting” (Krause, 2005, p. 9). Students may not automatically possess the high-level foundational skills, confidence, and the life experience necessary to clearly express career goals.

Whilst the concept of ‘knowing your students’ is not new to the higher education sector, staff members often have limited access to precise data pertaining to cohort makeup, unless they independently seek such information directly from students. Typically, such data collection takes the form of “ice-breakers” or “getting to know you” worksheets undertaken in the first weeks of a teaching period. This is problematic for three primary reasons. First, the collection of relevant data relies entirely on the initiative teaching staff who may be time and resource poor at a busy time in the teaching period. Second, the individual assumptions and biases of staff may determine the kinds of information gathered. Third, and perhaps most significant, essential data about cohort composition and diversity only reach staff after the majority of curriculum and assessment has already been put in place.

Accurate knowledge of cohort diversity is key to supporting the transitions of higher education students and in effectively promoting student engagement. In order to promote a better understanding of the diverse experiences, abilities and orientations in each cohort, The Belonging Project worked with central intelligence units within RMIT to mine, analyse and present key student data for explicit use in both planning and curriculum development at a School-level. This data was presented to relevant staff in the Bachelor of Communication Design via de-identified and visually represented data packs. These provided key demographic and educational information while adhering to strict privacy protocols. The dissemination of the data packs to teaching staff was made before the commencement of the teaching period and contained information that proved useful to both academic and
professional staff within the School. It included such things as the number of low socio-economic status students, number of equity students; geographic data; English as Second Language status; first in family status; age distributions; and educational background.

It is important to note that the dissemination of the data packs was also supported by workshops for program staff in which the content was further explained and discussed. These forums provided an opportunity for staff to brainstorm responsive and adaptive cohort strategies not only for individual subjects, but also for programs as a whole. Importantly, they enabled conversations between staff members teaching at different levels so as to ensure smoother transitions between year levels. In these workshops, staff noted that many of their assumptions around cohort diversity were incorrect and that the data packs lead to more responsive and relevant curriculum planning. Participating staff reported having gained a transformative understanding of what students could realistically be expected to have achieved at the conclusion of a teaching term. By bringing programs together with this information, staff at all levels were able to respond to the existing diversity and make meaningful plans for the changing diversity of cohorts at multiple transition points within programs.

Accurate and accessible information concerning cohort diversity may also facilitate more adaptive, responsive, and innovative approaches to assessment and other indicators of student success. In addition, equipping staff with this information early and throughout the cohort lifecycle enables educators and higher education institutions to mediate student and employer expectations. In doing so, it may facilitate new approaches to employability exercises and opportunities such as those explored in Focus on the Global Experiences’ second initiative.

**Embedding Employers**

There is a growing body of literature, particularly from the UK, that advocates embedding employability frameworks early and throughout the student life cycle (see e.g. Fallows & Steven, 2000; Knight & Yorke, 2002). Expanding on existing best practice models of employer embedded curriculum and assessment design, The Belonging Project worked in a first year core Bachelor of Communication Design course to create assessment opportunities that support students in developing aspects of their professional identity within the context of the interconnected, globalised world. The participating cohort was comprised of 50% local (Australian) student and 50% onshore international students, with a range of backgrounds and language skills. Staff worked directly with industry employers to design three assessments across two semesters that directly brought these first year students and employers together to work collaboratively on a series of live design briefs.

The first of the assessments, a design brief culminating in an exhibition attended by employers in week 3 of the first semester, asked students to reflect upon and represent visually the unique voice and attributes they bring to interactions with clients. This task focused students’ attention on reflecting upon and communicating their own strengths to third parties. In interviews, students identified that this early exposure to employers helped “clarify professional goals” as well as “build confidence” in their pre-existing skills. In focus groups, students reported that this early intervention promoted a deeper sense of belonging to the professional discipline, increased their enthusiasm for the discipline, and cemented their commitment to improve generic and specialist skills.
A second assessment task built upon this foundation and developed students’ skills in adapting their outputs to the needs of audiences. Students were given 48 hours to produce a zine, an informal publication, and then several weeks to adapt their initial prototype based on employer and professional feedback. Following the model established in the first assessment, this culminated in an open exhibition attended and judged by employers from a broad range of professional and personal backgrounds. Because students had the opportunity to receive direct employer feedback at the prototype stage and then incorporate this into the design presented at the exhibition, they were able to engage in a genuine dialogue with the participating employers. Students interviewed following the exhibition reported that this reinforced a sense of belonging to the profession and encouraged the development of their professional identity.

In the final six weeks of the second semester, students worked directly with an internationally renowned firm to create a pitch for a genuine client. Students were expected to adhere to existing professional standards as communicated by the employer. This required students, all of whom were first years, to both incorporate foundational skills and push beyond them. Importantly it also encouraged them to move beyond their own cultural understandings in order to develop internationally relevant communications and creative solutions for the short-term, long-term, and future innovation needs of the client.

Directly connecting students, educators, employers, and, indeed, clients encouraged a sustained dialogue from the beginning of the higher education experience. As one student noted in focus groups this allowed students to develop their professional identity “organically and naturally” while simultaneously building core disciplinary skills. For the student, this meant that while “different people may take different things out of [the assessments], everyone is taking something away in terms of skills and contacts.” While this structure was beneficial to a cohort of students with varied skills and needs, it was also valuable to the participating employers and clients. Participation placed fewer time and resource demands on employers than typically presented by WIL commitments, and yet allowed for a longer-term engagement. One of the employer representatives expressed his views on the value of participation,

To see these students grow over the semester so quickly and professionally is surprising. Their ability to clearly communicate about their design process and understand the clients’ language was very advanced. We want to watch these students in 2nd and 3rd year. There are a number of students that I think we will want to employ as graduates.

In this way, participation allowed for the emergence of more meaningful understandings of the baseline skills and capacities that can be expected and achieved from graduates. Importantly, employer-embedded assessment served to increase equity and professional connections for all members of the cohort by facilitating relationships between employers and students who might not otherwise participate in WIL opportunities.

*Alternative Peak Global Professional Experiences*

Just as employer-integrated experiences provide students with significant opportunities to develop and test professional identities and employability skills, intercultural exchanges are increasing pivotal to long-term success in the creative industries. Study abroad remains a key tool in the development of global professional competencies in an increasingly transnational
job market and in the personal development of empathetically engaged global citizens (Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic & Jon, 2009). Yet, for students from Low SES and non-traditional backgrounds such opportunities may be largely inaccessible due to the time and financial commitments required, among other barriers (see e.g. Waters & Brooks, 2010).

For this reason, as part of our third interconnected initiative, we worked to establish an ‘at home’ peak global experience relevant to students within the creative disciplines. This included cross institutional/campus assessment activities and virtual global professional experiences as part of a hybridized ‘at home’ semester long exchange between our RMIT Melbourne and RMIT Vietnam campuses. In 2014, Melbourne-based staff members worked with Vietnam colleagues to trial a co-created client-led global assessment activity in courses delivered at both sites in the form of a re-conceptualized exchange. Students from the Melbourne and Vietnam campuses worked in cross-cultural trans-border virtual teams to create, implement, and manage a live marketing campaign for two clients based in Melbourne and Ho Chi Minh City.

Focusing on the global experience ‘at home’ can enhance the student experience and impact graduate outcomes and retention. Such experiences allow students to develop the complex skills required for changing professional contexts. Global skills development such as increasing intercultural awareness and communication skills can work to build students’ capacity and employability within an increasingly transnational professional environment (Crossman & Clarke, 2010). These experiences are also essential to develop connections to broader groups. Access to sustained international and intercultural learning is important to the welfare and sense of identity and belonging of students as members of a common school environment, university culture, and of a professional community. The model of “at home” exchange piloted ensures that all students have the opportunity to benefit from institutional connections and cultural capital. Indeed, though the initiative did not specifically target Low SES students, in post-interviews the overwhelming majority of the twenty participants acknowledged that the “at home” experience allowed for a meaningful international experience that would have otherwise been financially prohibitive.

Virtual WIL and virtual communities of practice (CoP) have been criticized for lack of contact, inconsistent engagement, weak relationships, information flow problems, and a tendency to produce tacit and transactive knowledge (Gannon-Leary & Fontainha, 2007). To combat these barriers, the “at home” experience created long-term, sustained, and hybridized relationships between student teams, academics, and clients. Participants utilized a broad range of information delivery methods and communication techniques and focused not only on task completion but also explicitly on relationship building and intercultural communication.

The result of this approach was a significant global and intercultural professional and personal development experience that was accessible to students who may not have otherwise accessed RMIT’s WIL or global opportunities. As one student identified in a statement echoed by her peers,

This experience was […] a highlight of my university career. Having the opportunity to develop real, practical skills in a supportive and engaging environment was so interesting, and I learned a lot in a very short time. This includes how to plan, organise, carry out and present real world projects, as well as cross-cultural skills that couldn't be learned in a classroom […] Being able to
present a real project and receive a real critique from industry professionals was an invaluable experience. On top of that, I made lasting friendships and connections in Vietnam and in Australia.

As identified here and noted by students in our focus groups, the initiative fostered social development and wellbeing as a means of broadening horizons and facilitating critical reflection, self-reflection, self-esteem, and the perceptions of empowerment that are critical to employability.

**Conclusion: Lessons in Belonging**

Achieving meaningful, long-term success for students in the area of employability requires an integrated approach. Such an approach must support the multiple transitions that occur during the higher education experience. It must systemically, innovatively, and iteratively develop informed expectations and goals not only for students approaching a transition to employment, but also for those at all stages of higher education. At present the students most likely to access the limited WIL and global opportunities available in most higher education institutions “remain a highly privileged group and their experiences [may] serve only to facilitate the reproduction of their privilege” (Waters & Brooks, 2010). For this reason, we must consciously work to provide relevant opportunities to showcase, expand, and connect to globally integrated spheres of practice for all students, from all backgrounds, and at all stages of higher education.

Over the past four years of our Belonging Project initiatives have been designed to work in tandem to support students at all stages of their academic, social and professional development. The common uniting thread between them is the conviction that students need to feel that they belong in order to develop the confidence to fully explore and demonstrate their skills. Models for imparting employability skills that ignore or subordinate transition issues, the overall student experience, discipline specificity, and concepts of belonging are too narrow and may ultimately be ineffective. Promoting feelings of belonging helps build the social capital necessary for the autonomy, exploration and innovation advocated for by models such as the Capability Envelop. As students build confidence, they require challenging opportunities to assess their emerging skills in relevant and exciting ways. Where these assessments bring students into direct contact with employers our research suggests that the element of human connection increases motivation and professional identity. Finally, a global market place demands opportunities for global professional development. While international WIL and study tours are dominant models of global education, hybridized long-term virtual opportunities may offer accessible alternatives that appeal to a diverse range of students.

**References**


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