Student Engagement for Employability: A Belonging Project case study

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More than ever there is a need for professionals who are responsive to economic, social, cultural/global, technical and environmental change. The current employment climate demands graduates who can work flexibly across a range of business contexts (Wright, Davis, & Bucolo, 2013). In turn this requires a broad range of employability skills and knowledge learned in many contexts and through a range of experiences.

This paper draws on the principles of The Belonging Project, a four-year qualitative research project based at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. The Belonging Project has explored curricular and co-curricular interventions to support key employability capacities across the whole of student lifecycle. The Belonging Project's research has highlighted the importance of supporting the development of disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global/intercultural competencies throughout student lifecycles. This paper draws on focus group data, interviews, and participant observation in support of The Belonging Project Narrative Model, an approach to student engagement for employability.

Keywords: Employability, creative industries, belonging

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 (Bridgstock, 2011; Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Universities Australia, 2014; Wye & Lim, 2009). More than ever there is a need for professionals who are responsive to economic, social, cultural/global, technical and environmental change. Graduates must work flexibly and intelligently across a range of business contexts including self-employment, networked clusters of small-to-medium enterprises, sole-traders and micro-businesses (Wright, Davis, & Bucolo, 2013). In turn this requires a broad range of employability skills and knowledge learned in many contexts and through a range of experiences.

This paper draws on the principles and findings of The Belonging Project, a four-year qualitative research project based at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. To date, The Belonging Project has explored curricular and co-curricular interventions to support the development of key employability capacities across the whole of student lifecycle. The Belonging Project's research has highlighted the importance of supporting the development of disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global/intercultural competencies throughout the entire curriculum, rather than primarily in first year and final year offerings. This paper draws on focus group data, interviews, and participant observation in an analysis of pilot project case studies. These case studies form the basis for a model for a whole of student life cycle approach to student engagement for employability.

The Belonging Project Narrative Model

The Belonging Project is a longitudinal learning and teaching research project investigating an improved student experience in RMIT University's School of Media and Communication. It utilizes narrative methodology (Abma, 2000) and ethnographically informed action research models (see e.g. Tacchi, Slater, & Hearn, 2003) in a research process that consists of "self-reflective spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting" (Kemmis, 2007, p. 168). The Belonging Project as a whole aims to be responsive to the needs of all students as it develops:

1. Strategies to support participation and integration of students from diverse backgrounds and especially Low Socio-Economic Status (LSES) students
2. Enhanced student retention and satisfaction rates
3. A distinctive RMIT student experience

Through its action research model, The Belonging Project seeks to embed RMIT's strategic goals in practical and tangible way across the formal and informal curriculum in order to create a unique, holistic student experience. Specifically, the project supports the University's goal to be global in reach and impact; to be work-relevant and industry-partnered; and to be urban in innovation and impact.

In order to achieve these goals, The Belonging Project developed the Belonging Project Narrative Model (Morieson et al, 2013). This model proposes a three-tier student experience, that emphasizes belonging:

1. To a disciplinary/professional cohort *(Program)*
2. Within an interdisciplinary learning environment *(School)*
3. And to a wider world of professional global intercultural networks (*Global*)

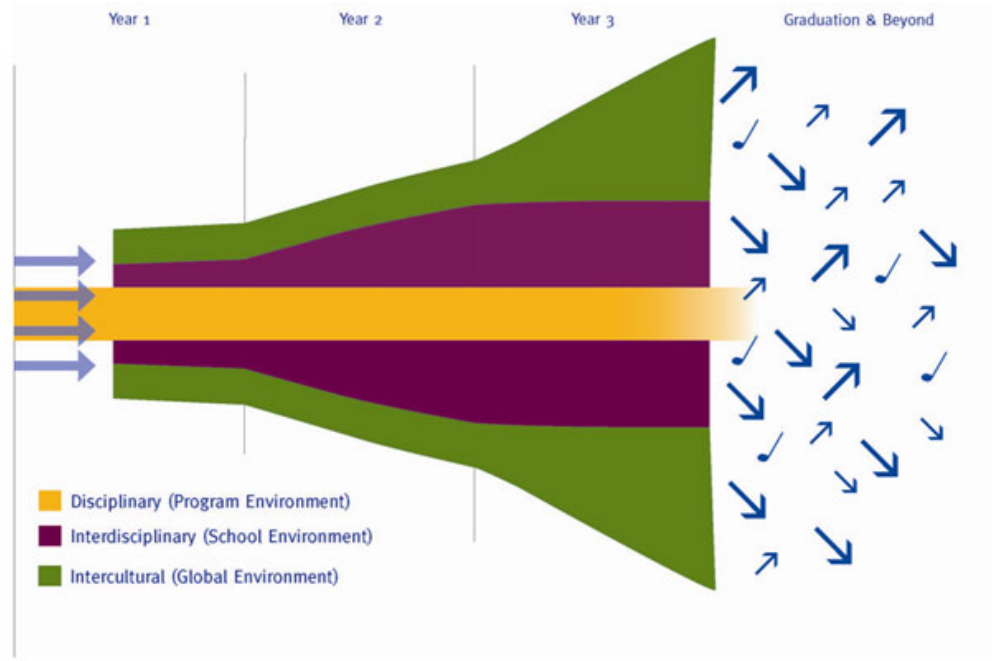


Diagram 1: The Belonging Project Narrative Model of Student Engagement

The tiers of the model work in tandem to create a holistic foundation for future graduates. They provide strong foundation in a *diverse disciplinary cohort experience* (Tier One). This is built upon through a process of scaffolded integration into the *interdisciplinary community of the school* (Tier Two), and ultimately supports an emerging professional identity as an *employable and ethical global citizen* (Tier Three).

The Belonging Project Approach to Employability

Higher Education institutions are increasingly facing the critical question of how best to position themselves at the intersection of rapidly evolving training and industry sectors (Wright et al, 2013). Like many universities, RMIT University has responded to these pressures by explicitly encouraging programs 'to foster the development of graduates as critical and creative thinkers, multi-skilled and collaborative practitioners, and responsible leaders with a global perspective' (School of Media and Communication Workplan, 2012). In conjunction with a new Australian Qualifications Framework agenda (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013), this strategic goal has precipitated a period of unprecedented curriculum redevelopment. This shift has emphasized the role of a number of practical internationalization strategies including: internationally engaged work-integrated-learning (WIL), study tours, and intercultural virtual collaboration. Together these initiatives aim to provide essential spaces within the curriculum for global ethical awareness and the development of globalized professional identities.

The Belonging Project Narrative Model aims to address the employability needs of graduates in a creative industries context in which industry is rapidly shifting toward new operational standards and cultural milieus (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011). We contend that the holistic approach to professional and personal development represented in our model actively speaks to the ways in which "future graduates in

Media and Communication will need to be connected across disciplines and borders" (Peterson & Hansen, 2012, p. 3).

The specific employability skills we have identified as key to graduate outcomes are informed by emerging data from the OLT project *Developing Graduate Employability* (Jollands et al, 2014). In interviews with chief investigators, employers in the creative industries identified five primary capacities as desirable in employees:

1. **Knowledge of the profession**
   This may include awareness of industry trends, acquisition of relevant disciplinary skills, and ability to develop and support professional relationships and networks
2. **Professionalism**
   Here professionalism is taken as the ability to present one's self and work in a context appropriate manner, accurately assess and respond to client needs, and operate according to professional etiquette standards.
3. **Flexible and collaborative work practices**
   The changing nature of the creative industries in Australia and, indeed, globally has altered the established company model. Today's graduates must be able to work flexible in interdisciplinary teams and virtual contexts and to collaborate with a diverse range of stakeholders.
4. **High level communication skills**
   Communication skills are essential not only for facilitating productive working relationships but also translating establishes and establishing common ground in complex relationships. They are the basis for interdisciplinary and intercultural work.
5. **Emotional intelligence**
   Employability requires the self-awareness and self-discipline to adequately respond to others in professional contexts.

These skills correspond to the disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global capacities that are the focus of The Belonging Project model.

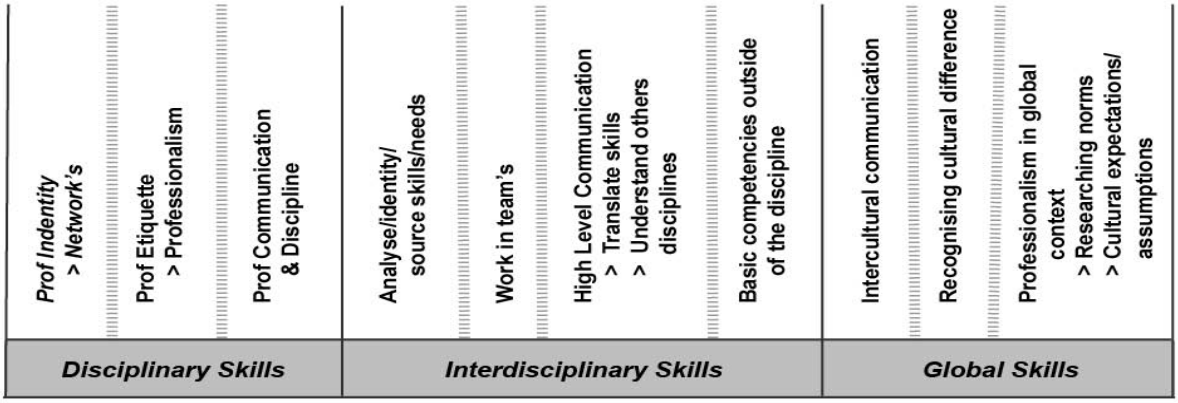


Figure 2: Belonging Project Employability Skills

Overall, The Belonging Project's approach to employability builds upon the established best practice. We have adopted and adapted approaches to employability that contend the complex learning necessary for employability must be promoted across whole undergraduate life-cycles in order for students to sufficiently evidence claims about professional readiness (Knight and Yorke, 2003). Holding that internationalisation and employability are fundamentally linked in increasingly global employment markets we have drawn on existing best practice global/internationalized curriculum models. These approaches recognize that employability must be conceived of broadly, developed consistently, and supported in both formal and informal curriculum.

Developing Disciplinary Confidence

From the perspective of the student experience, disciplinary knowledge is often perceived as the building block of the university experience and professional competency. Fluency in this disciplinary language and practice is assumed to be the baseline from which students should begin. For this reason, though the three tiers of The Belonging Project model—disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global—are designed to operate simultaneously in each of the three years of the RMIT undergraduate lifecycle, they are also designed to operate with varying emphasis. Establishing disciplinary confidence, both in terms of skills development and a sense of disciplinary belonging, is a key objective of the first year experience.

In 2011, we conducted a series of focus groups with 75 students representing 11 undergraduate programs. Collectively these focus groups confirmed our hypothesis that we should begin by focusing on the first year experience (FYE). The perspectives of student participants confirmed that transition into first year is the most challenging for students and the most crucial for universities, to ensure retention, success, and employability in the long term. Our focus groups data aligns with existing research that suggests that the transition to university represents both an academic and social shift for students "on a journey to becoming self-managing or self-directed learners" (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010, p. 3).

We found that our students, often much to their own surprise, require the assistance of teaching staff to make social connections with their cohort peers. Rather than being separate from issues of academic and professional success, these social transitions have direct impacts on individuals' disciplinary confidence. Another challenging transition was the introduction to a new academic environment. A number of participants expressed the need for assistance with transition to the academic environment of the university, particularly around key academic literacies that are often taken for granted by teaching staff.

As Hurtado and Carter (1997, p. 338) note, "specific activities may foster a broader sense of group cohesion and enhance an individual's sense of affiliation and identification with [higher education]". The Belonging Project's research suggests that these "specific activities' should function organically to support students multiple transitions into higher education, a discipline, and a cohort. We argue in line with the work of Kift, et al. (2010) that transition must be approached as an ongoing process that builds student skills and confidence in structured and iterative ways.

In line with this position, The Belonging Project trialled and evaluated five pilot initiatives to improve and support student engagement in disciplinary communities as part of a holistic approach to the first year experience (FYE). These included:

1. **Disciplinarily Relevant Orientation**
   Our participants identified that the disciplinary or professional focus of their program was in the forefront of their mind during orientation. A number of students explained that they expected an orientation event with a professional networking focus, rather than the university-wide social events that have traditionally dominated the orientation programming. Our participants suggested that they would prefer to connect with their program cohort in a way that more accurately prepares them for their professional lives. They desired to begin their professional training from day one. In response, we worked with professional and academic staff to develop School Welcomes and program orientations focused on a range of disciplinary, professional, and allied co-curricular activities.

2. **Cohort Day Out**
   Students in our focus groups signaled a desire for transition activities that blended course work with the social aspects. A number of students, particularly international students, craved off-campus experiences that blended formal and informal curriculum to cement social bonds among their cohort and develop disciplinary skills in a "safe and fun" environment. Students in studio-based courses generally commented that group work was effective at breaking down any early cliques:

   > "Doing group work straight off was really good because you're surrounded with like-minded people, you don't really find people that you dislike, because it's such a small group and because everyone has kind of similar interests."

   The concept of the 'Cohort Day Out' emerged through workshops we conducted with undergraduate program staff in the School of Media and Communication in 2011. The Cohort Day Out took place in disciplinary cohort in Week 3 of the first semester. It included a self-paced off-campus outing with multiple aims including supporting stronger cohort bonds and encouraging students to develop confidence around sharing and critiquing work, developing strategies for generating ideas, and to improving individual and collaborative problem-solving skills. Above all, it was meant to be a fun activity for both students and staff during what can be a stressful time of semester.

   Students formed groups mixing Melbourne locals and students who had relocated from the country, interstate or overseas. Each group was given resources to respond to an assessment brief, which served the basis for an early assessed activity. The Cohort Day Out worked alongside a number of other activities to encourage practices around work sharing, critique and workshopping, as well as to assist students to make social connections.

3. **Student Informal Spaces Initiative**

While space is often overlooked in the study of curriculum, curriculum is, in fact, shaped by contextual and relational social and temporal factors that are deeply embedded in space (Judson, 2006). Recognising the importance of informal spaces to the development and exchange of essential social and academic skills**,** The Belonging Project worked with students and graduates to refurbish an existing but under-utilised student space on campus, the Student Atelier space. We worked to create a space of belonging for students to engage in a range of informal activities including: private study, group work, socialising, engaging in range of cohort events, including student-led exhibitions and industry events. The space was designed to become a cultural hub of the School, a place where students could connect with staff and other university services, rather than a 'rumpus room' solely for student use.

4. **Academic Transition Services**

Through focus groups it became apparent that for many first year students academic, and particularly disciplinary, transition required much anxiety and uncertainty. Integration into disciplinary communities and practices required improved communication from staff around key points of transition. For students in creative or studio-based programs, this anxiety was often focused on the attainment and possession of technical skills. Students in our focus groups expressed a view that skills-training is an essential part of the cost of attending university. As one student noted,

> "When I was starting the uni course, I was expecting some form of technical training and I later learnt that uni is not about technical training; it's about learning to think in a certain way".

While many students come to appreciate the self-directed nature of much of Higher Education learning, in early stages of the transition they are surprised when they are directed to YouTube videos or online forums or resources to learn the skills required to complete conceptual assignments. This suggested a need for further scaffolding around self-directed learning and expectation setting. In response we worked with academic and support staff to generate strategies for improved academic transition services.

5. **End of Year Festival of Events and Exhibitions**

For students, we envisaged that a series of end of year coordinated events and exhibitions would serve as an important transition moment. A formal structured co-curricular opportunity encourages cross-year and cross-program interactions, inspiring students as they transitioned from year to year, as well as attracting prospective students. Students participating and attending the End of Year Festival of Events and Exhibitions (EOYF) would develop professional skills in the creation and promotion of their work. It was also envisaged that working together, School staff could strengthen relationships with College and University marketing, and leverage existing and new connections with industry by making events more visible and easier to attend.

Together The Belonging Project's approach to disciplinary integration and transition focused on low-cost but high-impact initiatives that bridge the informal and formal curriculum. These initiatives serve to embed social and academic literacies at multiple points in the student lifecycle, while facilitating positive social, cultural, and academic transitions.

Fostering Interdisciplinary Connections

As Woods (2007, p. 854) notes "the ability to understand and be understood by a diverse group of specialists is essential" to address the "complex and significant, real world problems" that characterize both the socio-political and economic realities graduates face. Interdisciplinary approaches to education have been proposed as effective strategy for generating these high-level communication and problem-solving capabilities in students. For this reason, following its initial emphasis on disciplinary knowledge and transition in the first year experience, The Belonging Project has examined existing interdisciplinary practice within the School of Media and Communication and proposed strategies and recommendations for embedding interdisciplinarity within student lifecycles.

As students engage in interdisciplinary opportunities they must actively participate in a reflective and explicit process of knowledge translation and creation. They must reflect upon disciplinary assumptions, identify differences or conflicts between multiple disciplinary approaches, actively pursue or create common ground, and then integrate approaches in order to produce an agreed upon outcome or create new interdisciplinary understanding (Borrego & Newswander, 2010, p. 67). Interdisciplinary learning is not merely a supplementary enhancement of core disciplinary experiences, but is rather an essential exercise in refining and putting into practice disciplinary knowledge and identity.

Interdisciplinary learning is also an essential aspect of developing competent and competitive graduates. It is in and of itself a core experience for the development of effective communication practices, conflict management skills, and project management proficiencies required of work-ready graduates in the current professional environment. As traditional hierarchies within industry continue to "flatten out" the increasingly the dominant model of the workplace is now one of cross-disciplinary teams and "collaborative digital enterprises" (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2011). In these teams, members are expected to have multiple and adaptive skills to contribute in evolving and sometimes transient workplaces.

In line with the Belonging Project's work around transition and disciplinary identity (Tier One), a focus on mapping and explicitly embedding interdisciplinary experiences within the student lifecycle is a means of increasing students' social and cultural capital and thereby supporting positive long-term outcomes. This has important implications for the professional development and employability objectives that are increasingly the subject of strategic investment from funding and governmental bodies.

RMIT students in our focus groups also identified the equally important role of interdisciplinary experience in social development and wellbeing as a means of

broadening horizons and facilitating critical reflection, self-reflection, self-esteem, and perceptions of empowerment. As Ivanitskaya et al (2002) note, such processes may bring about radical transformations in students' perceptions of their own lives as well as their work and increase their awareness of their own capabilities and opportunities more broadly. Through complex negotiations of difference, interdisciplinarity offers the kind of transformative learning experience that may facilitate a student's sense of belonging within diverse educational and professional contexts. Benefits are not limited to the interdisciplinary experience but feedback to the disciplinary core and extend beyond the university to graduates' professional lives.

In response to focus groups, interviews, and workshops with staff and students in the School of Media and Communication, between 2011-2013, The Belonging Project developed a number of strategies for embedding interdisciplinarity in the established formal and informal curriculum. This included emphasis on a range of opportunities including:

Individual interdisciplinary assessments – encouraging individuals to develop skills and knowledge outside of their narrow disciplinary experience.

Interdisciplinary class projects – bringing together students from a range of different programs and disciplinary backgrounds to work in a group on a common problem for a single assessment task. Interdisciplinary class project require lecturers from two or more courses to design a common assessment that brings together students across courses.

Interdisciplinary courses – purposefully bringing together students from two or more different disciplines to work on shared problems/projects for the duration of a semester. Such courses should require students to extend their skills and knowledge base beyond disciplinary boundaries. Working together on shared problems, students should be encouraged to generate new understanding and approaches.

Interdisciplinary capstone collaboration – coordinating or providing opportunities for collaboration on a more substantial assessment task or graduate capstone project. A capstone project provides advanced students the opportunity to showcase their skills and new knowledge.

Informal skills workshops – these are designed to be intentionally broad, to cut across disciplines and cohorts, and allow students to embed new or traditionally 'outside of the discipline' skills within disciplinary practice.

Opportunities for student-led collaboration – providing a time and space for students from a range of disciplines to meet and develop productive collaborative relationships, e.g. speed dating, networking nights.

These can be easily adapted to integrate into existing curriculum and assessment, thereby minimizing the risk of artificial or heavy-handed approach to the acquisition of this key suite of skills.

Empowering Global Professional Identity

Global awareness and ethical global citizenship are essential, if sometimes overlooked aspects of professional identity in the creative industries. As is now well established in the literature, intercultural sensitivity and skill are developed through a broad spectrum of experiences that collectively shape 'mindsets' and 'skillsets' (Bennett, 2001). Like any learning experience, these opportunities provide basic tools for capacity building, which when scaffolded to other learning experiences and self-reflective practice may prove transformative. The acquisition of these capacities occurs in stops and starts that must be supported in myriad ways through the formal and informal curriculum. Importantly, such awareness develops over time.

In 2014, The Belonging Project launched initiatives focused on the Model's global tier. These initiatives were aimed at developing and supporting students' emerging professional, global competencies. In its practical application this tier of The Belonging Project Narrative Model has been divided into **three phases,** each of which reflects a key point of emphasis:

1. **Recognising and celebrating the 'already global' cohort**
   A key assumption of this initiative and one confirmed in interviews and workshops with staff is that staff at school, program and course level can better understand the diversity of their student cohorts. Greater knowledge of existing diversity informs meaningful, purposeful, timely and lasting change for student engagement and, therefore, employability.

   Through action research with academic and professional staff, we identified that information concerning a range of demographics would be useful to staff for purpose of curriculum development and forward planning. Ideally this information would be presented in a de-identified, visually representative manner that could protect student privacy, but still be made available to programs no later than two weeks prior to each semester's commencement dates.

   In 2014, The Belonging Project trialled representative data packs for programs. We worked with four programs in the School. Each pack was given to a program with support on how they might start to use this material to combat prevailing and constraining assumptions and facilitate responsive curriculum development. Programs self-documented their response to the trial packs. In all cases the data we were able to present, indicated cohorts were more diverse than staff realised. Programs discussed better ways to plan transition models, and build assessment capturing the opportunities this diversity presents.

2. **Scaffolding the further development of global literacies**
   We worked across two courses within a creative industries program in the School of Media and Communication to embed professionally focused and employer co-created assessment from the first year of the student lifecycle. From the first class students were presented with the idea and expectation that they begin building their professional identity from the moment they accept their university place. In terms of formal curriculum, the first objective in this phase

was to build an early assessment in the first weeks of the semester that could push students to conceptualize themselves as emerging professionals. Students were given a brief aimed at building their understanding of their professional identity by developing an artefact that presented their values and attitudes as a designer at this stage of their professional career. At week three the students presented their outcomes to peers, academic staff and industry representatives at exhibition.

In second semester a live industry brief was presented to first year students for the first time in the program history. Specifically, we approached a company that is a global professional leader with internationally-based clients who would be prepared to work with students in the first year on a live brief. Both agreed and a global digital service design brief was presented to students. This was a project that both partners had been working on for three months prior to student engagement. Both industry representatives and the client were interested to see the students' approaches. The top three pitches enabled the teams of six students to have the opportunity to work within the Creative Industries company for three to four months following the event and to implement their solutions in a world situation for a real world client.

3. **Mapping and developing alternative peak 'global' experiences based from the student's home campus**
   International exchange remains one of the primary tools in the development of global professional competencies in higher education sector. However, the existing models may entrench privilege and alienate vulnerable or already disadvantaged students (Waters & Brooks, 2010). In an attempt to create more equitable global opportunities, The Belonging Project identified and mapped the feasibility of a range of 'at home' peak global experiences relevant to students with the creative disciplines in Media and Communication including cross institutional/campus assessment activities, virtual global experiences or 'At home' study tours.

   We worked with Vietnam colleagues to trial a co-created employer embedded global assessment activities in courses delivered in virtual sites in the form of a re-designed "at home" cross-campus study tour. Mapped the logistical & conceptual barriers to wider application of these activities, and created a detailed case study and review for the purposes of transferability across a School's range of programs and professions.

Together these phases work toward embedding understanding of self, others, and individual aspirations. It created iterative assessments that correspond to employer identified relevant graduate attributes and provided students the opportunity to practice these skills in a global environment. This tier worked to help students to develop intercultural skills, knowledge and awareness through a series of phased experiences situated 'At Home' in local contexts.

Conclusion

In discussing the development of professional identity in other contexts, Stern and Papadakis (2006, p. 1795) argue that teaching professionalism requires a focus on expectation setting, providing meaningful practical experiences, and purposefully evaluating outcomes. They maintain that it is not sufficient to produce "technically competent pool of professionals" if the skills that constitute "competency" are divorced from the broader context of professional identity and behavior. Throughout its research The Belonging Project has explored the idea that the core discipline-based cohort experience can be improved by integrating both interdisciplinary and international experiences across the whole student lifecycle

The focus on inter-connected disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global experience in The Belonging Project Narrative Model can be contextualised in terms of the overall student experience and student employability in the creative sector. We contend that employability skills and knowledge cannot be separated from other forms of core disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global curriculum and outcomes. Employability emerges from a richness and depth of broader student experiences.

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