

Using image-reflections to support undergraduate students' relational employability: A practitioner reflection

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Abstract

This practitioner reflection explores our integration of the Relational Employability Framework within the Health Research Project capstone unit of a Bachelor of Health Science degree. To address the historically low quality of student reflections, we incorporated image-based reflective activities to improve engagement and depth. These activities encouraged students to use visual media to examine their developing relational employability. We developed and implemented a series of tutorial activities designed to scaffold this process, aiming to foster deeper reflective practice and highlight its importance for career development and employability. Our reflections indicate that, while grades did not significantly increase, students showed enhanced critical thinking and engagement with reflective practice, suggesting the framework's effectiveness in broadening awareness and enriching employability overall. We discuss the need for peer support among educators to sustain and enhance reflective practices in teaching-learning and conclude with thoughts on our ongoing efforts to embed and expand reflective practices in teaching approaches.

Keywords

Relational employability; health science educators; teaching and learning; visual media; reflective practice; undergraduate student reflections; career development and employability; curriculum design

Introduction

Developing student employability is of critical importance as it aids understandings of selves and the skills necessary to navigate career pathways. However, students are not always proficient in articulating their own employability, nor aware of the process underpinning their employability development. In this paper, three members of a teaching team reflect on a unit redesign, which

introduced students to a new relational employability framework (REF) to enable deeper understandings of themselves and their developing employability. The redesign process was part of Cook's (2023b) doctoral thesis research project, with ethics approval granted by Lancaster University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. Permission to publish the students' work included in this practitioner reflection was obtained from the respective students.

The unit we refer to here, called Health Research Project (HRP), is a capstone in the three-year undergraduate Bachelor of Health Science degree at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Western Australia. This stage in the degree was selected for implementing the REF as most students undertake HRP in their final semester before graduation, then seek employment or enrol in postgraduate study. HRP requires students to reflect on their applied learning about the research process and their developing employability, framing assessment 'both as a means (a learning activity they do) and an end (a skill students develop for use throughout their lives)' (Veine et al., 2020, p. 155).

This paper presents our teaching team's (RW: Unit Coordinator; SD: Tutor; EJC: Tutor) reflections to highlight our collective experiences of integrating the REF into the unit and the benefits this espoused for students. While our roles vary, we each contribute deep appreciation, knowledge and advocacy for reflective practice as a powerful learning strategy for career and self-development. For example, RW appreciates the value of reflective practice, having completed ECU's Graduate Certificate of Academic Practice (GCAP), which broadened her knowledge about using reflective activities to reinforce learning (Harvey, et al., 2016). She honed her skills in holistic evaluative practice following Strampel's (2010) framework, which emphasises: 1) critical reflection should encompass reasoning and reconstruction by including multiple alternative viewpoints and contextual awareness; and 2) action planning is required to achieve transformation. Accordingly, as the Unit Coordinator for HRP, RW embedded the 'what' (reasoning), 'so what' (reconstruction), 'now what' (action plan) model (Rolfe et al., 2001; Driscoll, 2006) into the unit's design, prompting students to reflect on their research process experience, employability development and career.

The challenge

Historically, the standard of students' assessed reflections in HRP was low. Students often presented a single perspective, demonstrating surface-level understandings and a lack of criticality about their experiences, particularly in relation to employability (Cook et al., 2024). Despite being instructed in assessment descriptions, they regularly failed to cite peer-reviewed literature to support claims about current or changed behaviours, beliefs and actions.

Given it is widely acknowledged that students need to be explicitly taught how to reflect (Chaffey et al., 2012; Hargreaves, 2016; Hiscox et al., 2022), we questioned what opportunities students had to practice reflective thinking and writing during HRP. Although they were reminded each week to record their reflections (to support completing the assessment), we observed challenges arising due to a lack of knowing how to effectively reflect. We considered whether the timing of the assessment, being the last of three, might have impacted the quality of their reflections. However, it seemed more likely that the issue stemmed from the assessment requirement for deep personal contemplation, in stark contrast to the other two project-based assessments (ethics application; data collection, analysis and presentation of results), which required concrete project management and research skills – a challenging cognitive shift (Darcie et al., 2024).

Despite being in the final stages of their degree and having completed reflections throughout their studies, there was a sense that students did not consider reflective practice important in employment and for careers; a phenomenon reported elsewhere (Chaffey et al., 2012; King et al., 2017). Therefore, we aimed to increase student engagement, deepen their reflective practice and provide an innovative solution for enhanced educational experience.

A possible solution

In 2022, an opportunity arose to test Cook's (2023a) REF (Figure 1), which we thought might help guide HRP students toward recognising their developing employability through abstract and creative reflective practice, as well as highlighting the value of reflective practice in employment and careers.

Relational employability (Cook, 2023b) represents a significant expansion of traditional notions of employability, employment and careers: a paradigm shift toward relationality (Lacković, 2019; Cook, 2022; Lacković & Olteanu, 2023). The REF supports educators to encourage students to consider the interactions, contributions and potentials that may occur in relation to other humans and more-than-human entities (i.e., other non-human species, environments, materials and technologies throughout learning and career experiences (Cook, 2023b). Key strengths of the REF – and our justification for using this framework – include its flexibility to be used in multiple ways, in different settings, by almost anyone (Cook, 2023c), to nurture creativity, imagination, sharing, collaboration and inclusion (Cook, 2023b) and to support global citizenship education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2021).

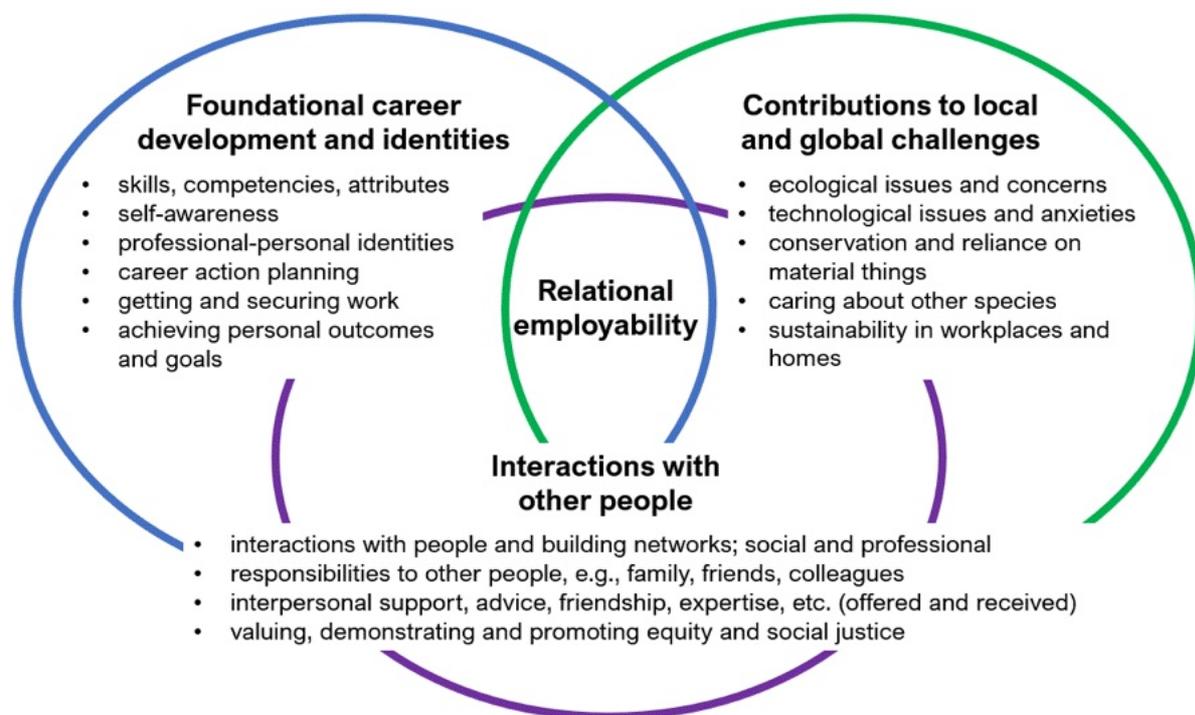


Figure 1: Relational Employability Teaching-Learning Framework (Cook, 2023a)

Implementation

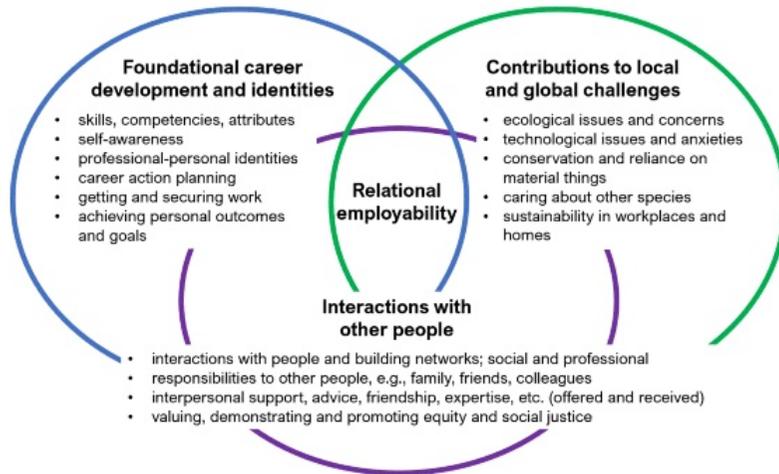
We collaboratively developed tutorial activities to scaffold student learning on how to reflect using the REF (Table 1).

Table 1: HRP Activities in 2022

Week	Activity	Led by
1	Introduction to the unit: Students asked to reflect on what they know about research and employability in preparation for Week 2.	RW
2	Relational employability presentation – introduction to the framework and associated learning activities. Explanatory slides provided to students.	EJC
3	Assessment three tip sheet introduced.	EJC
4	Educators’ image-reflections shared.	RW
5	Preparation for the image-reflections activity.	EJC
6	Image-reflections activity.	RW
7-11	Weekly reminders to reflect and make notes on the research process and employability.	All
12	Presentation – looking back through the unit – considering relational employability and the research process.	EJC
13	Assessment three reflections due.	EJC

In a brainstorming session, we created a ‘tip sheet’ featuring questions related to each component of the REF (Figure 2). This tip sheet served as a guide to help students consider their relational employability while reflecting on the research process experienced in HRP. For the image-reflection activity (conducted in Week 6), students were asked to bring to class or post in a dedicated REF discussion forum a visual artefact accompanied by a brief written description representing their relational employability identity at that point in time.

Relational Employability Framework – TIP SHEET for writing reflections



Foundational career development and identity

- This part is about how you felt you managed doing research and being a researcher.
- What employability skills you felt you drew on, were your strengths and areas for further development?
- Are you interested in becoming a researcher having experienced the process, and why? (perhaps it is related to your identity and/or your strengths and interests)
- What aspects of doing research you liked the most or didn't like, and why do you think that is?

Interactions with other people

- This part is about how you engaged with others in the project and process, and you felt about this.
- What worked in your interactions with others and what didn't work so well, and why might that be (does it relate to your strengths, weaknesses, values and/or identity)?
- How has doing research impacted your personal life and work?
- What research have others done that has benefited your project, or that could have benefited it if incorporated or referenced?
- Are you looking at what you read with a greater level of scrutiny? (not taking everything you read as fact?)
- How has your appreciation for, or value of, evidence-based research changed?
- What challenges did you encounter when conducting research with people in an ethically appropriate way?

Contributions and challenges to local and global challenges / interactions with more-than-humans

- This aspect is mainly about the aims or potential outcomes of your research project and existing research in this area.
- Think about the research topic you have chosen and consider the impact it is having on society (local and global) and why it is important to resolve.

- What aspects of the health research topic do you identify with or have been influenced by?
- Do you have future intentions with respect to this topic? How does that relate to your personal values and identity?
- Are you a "digital native" or was the experience of using new technologies a steep learning curve for you and/or others during the research?

For each circle reflect on:

1. What happened?
2. How that made you feel and behave/act. What have you learned about yourself, about others and the topic? Why does it matter and are there any implications?
3. Moving forward, how would you do things differently? What aspects of your behaviours, perceptions, values and actions will you continue? What aspects of your relational employability should you develop (foundational career development and self-discovery and/or how you interact and contribute to others/society more broadly)? What steps can you take right now towards doing that (to further enhance your relational employability)?

Figure 2: Tip Sheet for Students

As educators we felt it was important to provide students with example image-reflections because the students had rarely used visual media in their learning during the degree program; visual media are seldom used for employability development in higher education (examples include Bennett, 2015, 2016; Cook, 2023b); and examples are known to support student learning (Hawe et al., 2019; To et al., 2022). Therefore, each of us produced a visual artefact with a brief written reflection using the REF, drawing on our research experiences, employability development and identities (e.g., Figure 3).



(Lake Medewege: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medeweger_See)

This is the Medewege lake situated near Schwerin, Germany. I used to live about 100m from this lake, and it was a serene yet ever-changing feature of our lives. It would freeze over completely in winter yet be a place for cooling off and swimming in the heat of summer. I am using this image to help me to reflect on my current self/relational employability, drawing on the past and thinking about my future?

I like the analogy of reflections in the water and within myself. Sometimes I could see my reflection and easily understand what was going on around me. Other times, e.g., when the lake was frozen over, represents times when I have to think deeper and perhaps even further back in life to understand what motivates me.

Looking at the lake now and drawing connections with my past has led me to reflect on the Graduate Certificate I completed at the end of last year. A significant element of this qualification was to engage in peer-reviewed critical reflection – where I was expected to holistically evaluate my teaching and learning, to be aware of the context, self-question and transform this new knowledge and awareness into actions or intended actions. One particular task was to write a teaching philosophy and a context statement – this context statement made me consider my journey into academia – by no means traditional – and consider my background or my roots to acknowledge what continues to drive me in this new teaching focused role.

The image of the lake can be thought of as having the colours of the relational employability framework within it. Here is what these colours in the lake represent, from my perspective, in relation to the framework:

Blue – having the opportunity to critically reflect often to develop a greater understanding of what I needed to do for promotion (how to 'play' the game), receiving peer-review feedback and giving feedback to others, supporting my colleagues in their own professional development journeys.

Green – greater appreciation for working at home, especially being able to enjoy the beautiful work space I have and a growing appreciation for the materials and resources I have at my fingertips – clean water, internet, electricity, technology etc. Importantly, it allows me to spend more time with my pups!



(Billie & Bella: Authors own photo)

Purple – having the opportunity to reflect, give and receive peer-review feedback has allowed me to dwell on and unpack my teaching philosophy and what is centric to my teaching – the student experience.

Figure 3: RW's Image-Reflection

In Week 4, we shared our image-reflections in the REF discussion forum of HRP's learning management system and in class with the on-campus students. In Week 5, students were informed about how to prepare for Week 6, which would provide them the opportunity to practice reflecting using the REF in preparation for the assessment.

Students reflected on their progress and sentiments regarding their learning and research experiences in Week 6 by finding or creating an image, multimedia or other digital or hardcopy visual artefact to represent their reflective writing. This activity challenged students to think deeply and creatively. On-campus students discussed their image-reflections in small groups before posting them in the discussion forum. Online students participated in the discussion forum and could ask questions during tutorials. Of the 55 students in HRP, 13 (23.6%) posted their image-reflections in the discussion forum. We encouraged participation by providing personalised feedback to each student and they responded well to this feedback (e.g., Figure 4).

During Weeks 7-11, students were encouraged to continue reflecting through notetaking, critical thinking and using images, according to their preference. In Week 12, a presentation by EJC expanded on the assessment, compelling students to deeply reflect on their relational employability development, identities and the research process they had experienced in HRP. The following section presents our reflections on this implementation process.



Elizabeth COOK (She / Her / Hers)

AUTHOR | TEACHER

Jun 29, 2022 13:27 Edited Dec 12, 2022 23:59

58 Replies

Relational Employability

Use this forum to ask Elizabeth questions about relational employability and discuss/consider how you might represent your relational employability using visual or multimedia for the Week 6 activity. **This activity is OPTIONAL but is designed to help to prepare you for Assignment 3.** It will also benefit your self-awareness and your relational employability.

Online students will be posting their artefacts here and Elizabeth will respond with feedback/support to help scaffold your learning in preparation for Assignment 3.

On campus students will be bringing their artefacts to class (whether shown on a device or in hand) and can also post their artefacts here if they wish to receive feedback/support from Elizabeth.

As the Relational Employability Framework is part of Elizabeth's PhD research, she has provided a [participant information sheet](#) ↓ (PIS) that explains her research project and gives you the option to opt out of her using your de-identified data in her analysis or publications. It also invites you to participate in a 30 min online interview as part of her research. **Please read the PIS carefully and email Elizabeth if you wish to opt out, or opt in for an interview.** You can also give Elizabeth feedback in the Relational Employability discussion forum or by email if you would prefer not to participate in an interview, but still wish to share your thoughts of her framework and your experience in using it to reflect.

[Relational Employability Framework for Students + IG Accessibility Checked.pdf](#)



Hi Everyone,

This is a photo of the breakfast my Son made me on the weekend. It doesn't necessarily represent my research journey (in relation to this unit), but rather symbolic of undergraduate studies throughout the past 4.5 years. My goal, as a future public health nutritionist, is to prevent diet related diseases by simplifying nutrition information so that healthy eating is accessible and achievable by all. 'Bear toast' is a regular in our home, created by my Son when given freedom to make his own dinner.

Blue: My undergraduate journey has allowed me to build upon many employability skills such as time management, communication and collaboration. More so, course work and volunteer opportunities have led to development of industry specific skills, strengthening my professional identity, resulting in employment within the field.

Green: The food itself is representative of my passion towards combating the global issue of obesity and associated chronic disease rates. Additionally, this signifies my drive to support local food systems, to ensure all have access to health food. I'm also grateful for the technology, both at home and ECU, that has allowed me to complete my studies through a hybrid on-campus/online arrangement, that works around my family/work/life.

Purple: Interactions with peers, academics and colleagues throughout the journey has been invaluable. It has allowed me to draw and learn from others experiences, reflect on my processes and develop a professional network. More so, this photo represents my connection with my family, the importance of 'meeting someone where they're at' (food skill wise) and empowering people to make healthy (and fun) food choices.



Elizabeth COOK (She / Her / Hers)

AUTHOR | TEACHER

Edited Aug 23, 2022 17:50

Hi everyone!

[Here's my reflection with artefact](#) ↓ .

I wrote a lot more than you need to, but hopefully my **colour-coding of the text** helps you to build your knowledge/understandings of the framework and gives you some ideas for how you might like to use the framework to reflect on your relational employability.

Your text can be a few dot points.

My artefact is a photo I took with my mobile phone prior to writing my reflection. Before I took the photo I had to think about my relational employability, and my life and work/study - you'll need to do the same.

The artefact you choose/produce can be a drawing of your own, a referenced image sourced on the net, a photo you take - literally any visual representation created by you or found (created by someone else). If you source a visual representation created by someone else, you should reference the source as per APA 7th style (as should always be done when using or referring to something produced by someone else - it's part of **being considerate and respectful of others/acknowledging their contributions**, which is a purple circle aspect of your relational employability!).

Be reassured, there is no right and wrong way to represent your thoughts as **they are your thoughts**, not anyone else's - the challenge is knowing what you think - lots of people don't know that! So, by doing this activity, you're one step ahead of the game. :)

I hope you enjoy reflecting in this way and the opportunity to practice **being creative** (a key employability skill and part of developing your blue circle aspect of your relational employability).

Best wishes,

Elizabeth :)

Sep 3, 2022 10:25 Last reply Sep 8, 2022 15:28

Hi everyone

Sorry if this is a little bit late. This week has been a big one. My artefact is a picture of a hedge maze which accurately represents my university journey and is exactly how I feel right now.

Blue: When I first started my course in 2019, I had no idea what I was getting into, and I felt like I was at the start of a maze with no idea how to navigate it. Which way do I go? Left, right, maybe I should just turn around. I somehow had to figure out how I was going to balance work, study, and my external relationships. Over the last 3 and half years, I have had to become very self-aware and have recognised that taking time to look after myself is crucial. By taking that time to recharge, I can achieve all the personal goals I set and I can continue to thrive at work.

Purple: As I ventured into uni, I found other people who were just like me. Lost and confused in a maze. I have met some amazing people during my time at ECU and we have all supported each other through assignments and exams. As we kept navigating the maze, we encountered the teaching staff, who have been there to guide us through the journey and to give us perspective (the viewing platform). Each interaction I've had both academically and professionally has helped me to push further into the maze and has given me the tools and confidence to reorientate myself when I hit a dead end.

Green: Right now, I feel like I am right in the thick of it all. I know where the end is, but I am still stumbling around trying to find the exit. When lost in a hedge maze, it is tempting to just cut through the carefully crafted walls but doing so would cause a lot of damage. I feel like as a society, we are always in a rush, trying to get to the end goal, with no regard for the environment. By taking the time to slow down and consider the natural environment, we can make better choices that will help ensure the whole world has resources for as long as possible.



Figure 4. Activity Instructions and Teacher-Student Dialogue in the Discussion Forum

Reflection on teaching practice

Initially, RW and SD found the REF quite complex, so developing their own image-reflections, alongside the learning materials and activities for students, was particularly helpful. This process deepened our appreciation for how the REF enables more holistic and profound reflection than we had previously experienced. For RW, this experience was especially significant as she had supported the delivery of HRP in Sri Lanka, where staff and students were experiencing great civil unrest and a scarcity of basic resources. Rather than focusing solely on herself, the REF impelled her to consider the broader impact of her actions on others both within and outside the workplace. This included reflecting on her surrounding environment and society, as well as the resources everyone uses, sometimes quite carelessly without consideration for their value and sustainability. For example, in her image-reflection, RW wrote about having ‘a greater appreciation for working from home, especially being able to enjoy the beautiful workspace I have and a growing appreciation for the materials and resources I have at my fingertips...clean water, internet, electricity, etc.’

Importantly, we identified parallels between the REF and the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization, 2024) within the existing content taught in the Health Sciences degree program. The Charter emphasises that good health is supported by enabling individuals to achieve their aspirations, satisfy their needs and manage their environment, thereby focusing on social, personal and physical capacities. Given that the Charter underpins much of the teaching in the Health Science degree, the REF was particularly relevant for supporting our students’ learning. We found the image-reflections activity and assessment effectively broadened students’ thinking.

Reflection on student learning

Following the implementation of the REF, assessment grades did not significantly increase compared to the previous year. However, high-achieving students were more effectively challenged, and some students who had struggled with the earlier assessments performed well in these reflective tasks. While a few students remained sceptical about the REF, many were curious and embraced this new approach to thinking about their employability. Students were required to think altruistically and deeply, with some beginning to realise the importance of reflective practice for employability (Tikkamäki & Hilden, 2014).

In 2023, we sought feedback from graduates who had experienced the REF in 2022. Some voluntarily reported using the REF to reflect on their roles as employees. One graduate noted the REF reminded

her to consider all aspects of a workplace problem holistically, which enabled her to deliver more effective work health and safety training to her colleagues.

Not all students grasped the conceptual and abstract thinking required by the REF; producing descriptive accounts of events rather than delving deeper to gain a heightened sense of self. However, the purpose of the assessment, and indeed the course, is not to produce 'robots' whose thinking aligns with predetermined answers. Graduates said they valued being taught to think critically and had fun doing so and, even though it was hard, appreciated the opportunity to be heard in the discussion forum. Their sentiments helped us to realise we had created a learning environment that supported their becoming as independent, self-regulated learners (Hawe et al., 2020) and, ultimately, capable employees.

In 2023, we continued to use the REF in HRP and, again, student feedback was mixed. Nevertheless, we are optimistic that future HRP cohorts will better appreciate reflective practice. In 2024, we have integrated career development modules across the entire Health Sciences degree, further emphasising the importance of reflective practice to educators and students.

Next steps

While we are now proficient in supporting students to use the REF (and will continue to do so), new challenges emerge, including the need to support other educators to incorporate reflection into their practice and that of students. To help other educators appreciate the value of reflective practice, our plan is to provide peer support and offer training and professional development as suggested by Lim et al. (2023). This is important because reflective practice (particularly when using the REF with imagery) supports enhanced understandings of ourselves and others, thus contributing to the development and sustainability of selves, others and our planet (Cook, 2023b).

Critical reflection is challenging, even for those well-versed in the practice. Writing this article was no exception. However, when we reflect on the human aspects of health science practices (Eaton, 2016), we are reminded that reflective practice is a worthwhile challenge; not only for ourselves, but also for the benefit of the wider community we serve as health professionals. The community-of-practice RW experienced during her GCAP studies, and that the teaching team have experienced to date, highlight to us the benefit of peer support as part of reflective practice. Students who engaged in the image-reflection activity seemed genuinely excited to share their work in the discussion forum and this seemed to ignite a 'warm vibe' that reverberated across the cohort, including the teaching team. How we might create similar peer-to-peer opportunities across curricula for educators and students is another topic worthy of deeper reflection as part of our own ongoing relational employability development.

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