ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY AND STUDENT BELONGING THROUGH THE LEGACY PROJECTS

a Case Study by SARAH SWANN[i]

❶ **In which subject was your case study used?**	
BA (Hons) Childhood Studies (an interdisciplinary degree).	
❷ **How many** students has your work/example involved?	
Approximately 320 students	
❸ **How long** have you been doing this work for?	
4 years as a Course Director.	
❹ Was it **designed into** the course originally **or** added in and **subsequently embedded**? Explain in relation to your work	

The BA (Hons) Childhood Studies degree had been poorly performing and continuing with a downward trend in both NSS and DLHE statistics. It was revalidated in the summer of 2017-18 to include a core spine of 40-credit 'employability' modules which run throughout the three years (The Academic Self; The Professional Self; and The Graduate Self). Three factors underpinned the revalidation. First, the starting point was an NSS score of 36.9% which was substantially below the national benchmark of 88.2%.

The second factor was negative perceptions about Childhood Studies as a degree subject which was evident in our students' own narratives- they describe disparaging comments being made when they tell people they are doing a BA (Hons) Childhood Studies degree and being compared unfavourably to other 'more academic' degree courses.

The third factor was a course assessment strategy, perceived by the students as low in impact for their own learning, alienated from real world community settings they would need to address when employed and poor in impact in terms of offering opportunities to address real issues that children and families were facing.

Our solution was the Legacy Project assessment which had a problem-solving remit.

❺ **What was the aim** of your work?	

By progressing through the employment modules, we wanted to see our students grow in confidence, ambition, independence, knowledge and to be able to make the transition into 'highly-skilled' employment. In these modules, students undertook a placement of 180 hours, so by the time they graduated, students had accumulated 540 hours of practical work experience which we hoped would instil the graduate level skills and attributes appealing to employers. The assessment for these modules was based around students identifying a need in their placement setting; and, then designing, planning, and executing a 'Legacy Project.'

At L4 and L6 students, and (L5 students during the pandemic), students had free reign to choose a work experience of their choice. L4 and L6 students work with their Academic Advisor, the Placement team, and the module leader in L4 and L6 to seek out their own placement. This aims to equip them for the process of searching and securing a job. Students must use their initiative to identify opportunities, put up with knockbacks, and persevere.

L5 marks the beginning of developing a professional identity and in this year, students begin to specialise in areas of their choice of elective modules. Before the pandemic, we removed the scaffolding provided by the placement office as we try to simulate something of the realities- difficulties, obstacles, and challenges- of the job market. Before the pandemic, in L5

module The Professional Self students were provided with a Placement booklet containing nine pathways which is written in consultation with each placement provider and provides information about the nature and context of each placement; a 'person specification' of and suggestions of theoretical perspectives which students might use to frame their later analysis. Rather than simply allocate students to a professional pathway based on their preference alone, students submit an application for consideration, and they are then shortlisted and 'matched' to a pathway based on the strength of their skills, experiences and knowledge. The application itself is composed of three parts. The first is a CV which presents relevant skills and accomplishments and tells the story of each student's professional experience to date.

The second part is an academic reflection which tells us how each student believes the concepts and theories learnt in Y1 modules will connect to the main activities and goals of their first-choice placement. The final part of the application is a Personal Statement. As well as a 'sorting' tool, the application works usefully as a formative assessment tool that guides the Course Team to support transitions into postgraduate training or employment but also shows something of the 'distance travelled' from the start of Y2 to graduation. Students are shortlisted and matched into teams where they were given 20 weeks to design and execute a 'Legacy Project'. Each team is overseen by an Academic Advisor. The resulting Legacy Projects students designed and worked on are described in detail elsewhere (Swann 2021).

Here students work within an unfamiliar team (i.e., composed of students they might not yet know well) to agree a project, work on solutions and agree and execute roles and responsibilities to fulfil their team brief. Reflective work using Belbin's (1981, 1993) team roles helps each team unpick the strengths and weaknesses within their team.

⑥ What was the main purpose of this work and how does it link to the course and module learning outcomes?

Students worked in a place of their choosing to solve a real-world problem. By completing a Legacy Project, the student's broad aim was to add value in their work *with* or *for* children, young people, or families. Examples include: volunteering in a food bank; working as a Childline counsellor; working as a playworker in a safe house; designing a scavenger hunt on a neonatal ward to help young siblings feel less scared about visiting the hospital; supporting pupils at school with reading and writing skills; supporting handover at a child contact centre; knitting bonnets and blankets to use with premature babies in a neonatal unit; a knife crime intervention project delivered to 'at risk' teenagers; and various fund-raising projects.

The physical work settings for work experience were diverse and included working in nurseries, schools, holiday playschemes, food banks, a baby bank, child contact centres, hospital wards, Childline, and even a Cat Café. Some students conducted their Legacy Projects online and worked to build connections with others through social media such as the student who demonstrated how to make quick, healthy meals for toddlers on YouTube. Building belonging was always a core component of the work of the Legacy Projects. Working directly with children, young people, and families brought about links to others. Working alongside skilled paid professionals (service managers, teachers, nurses, doctors) helped to make University education more relevant and meaningful to students; and gave them the specialised knowledge, skills, and experience for the demands of working in the 'real world'.

Student identities evolve through different processes of belonging and unbelonging. Different components of students' sense of belonging were captured in students' responses to the formal learning outcomes on each of the three modules. Transition to university and acquiring a healthy sense of belonging is about finding balance and achieving a feeling of a common sense of belonging so at L4, students were required to '*reflect on and evaluate transition by focusing on experiences in personal, professional, and academic contexts*'. Belonging through personal experiences might come from connecting with the immediate student community on

the course but also to the university. At L4 there is also the opportunity for students to develop an online community and support through participation in the learning outcome, '*develop and demonstrate digital literacy…*'.

In The Professional Self module, there is a shift in the meaning of a sense of belonging as students acquire '*Knowledge and understanding of the changing landscape of work with and for children*' (LO2).

In third and final year module, The Graduate Self, students '*Begin to attain an understanding about how to develop [their] leadership and management skills.*' While a sense of belonging in L4 and L5 modules placed the student on an equal footing, this criterion represents a professional step-up. The Graduate Self is the very last university assignment students submit so here we are expecting to see a deeper shift in both their academic and professional thinking which increases their ability to be successful not only in this module, but also as a beginning apprentice member of a disciplinary community/ community of practice. (i.e., students now are beginning to think like an EYFS teacher, or a Counsellor, or a Primary school teacher).

7 What academic **level** are the students? Why is it most suitable/suited for them?

This is an undergraduate course and the work we describe is undertaken by students at all levels. Typically this course is composed roughly of 97% females aged 18-24 and it has also been successful in attracting, recruiting, and retaining students from areas underrepresented in higher education.

8 Does your case study relate to any of the **literature** outlined in the introductory literature review? (Maybe pick no more than 2-3 strong links)?

Accessing 'highly skilled' employment is about obtaining and displaying profits in distinction and legitimacy so Tomlinson's development of cultural and social capital is most relevant. There are barriers for students from underprivileged backgrounds who lack both the social and cultural capital to make a seamless transition to 'highly skilled' employment. The Legacy Project can therefore be understood as a social and cultural capital intervention since it is about forng networks and connections with employers. In doing so, students are enhancing their knowledge, understanding and access to a specific professional field, but also become socialised into the values, ideas, and attitudes of a collective professional habitus. Through work experience, students gain access to the cultures of specific sectors and organisations, whether that be education, healthcare, hospitality, social care. Success depends on students being able to activate forms of cultural capital to secure work experiences which is what the role of the Academic Advisor supports.

9 Is your work **embedded** into a module/throughout a course?

Work experiences and the Legacy Project assignment was embedded at all the academic levels.

10 Was your work **assessed**? **How**? Does this assessment **build on** any of the key themes?

Legacy Projects were assessed via two methods at all levels: a portfolio of evidence and a presentation. Both the portfolio of evidence and presentation had a reflective component where students share their experiences of designing and implementing a Legacy Project although the assessments are differentiated via the learning outcomes for each module and the set tasks implemented within each assessment. At Level 4, reflection took the form of reflecting on the skills and qualities developed through their work experience. They also begin to draw links between what they have seen in the 'real world' to their theoretical learning from their other modules. At level 5, students begin to report and reflect on specific facets which link to the types of topics they would typically be asked at a job interview- i.e.

safeguarding and child protection. By Level 6, their sense of belonging to a professional field tends to be reflecting in students' use of professional jargon.

⑪ Main theme:
What did your work do to maximise your students' sense of belonging?
Can you outline how it impacted on academic and social belonging and how?

Sense of belonging in the workplace and on the course: At every level, each student is overseen by an Academic Advisor who helps her students reconcile theory with practice and acts as a bridge between the academic world and the world of work. This is a crucial role in maximising each student's sense of belonging. Ongoing tutorials with their Academic Advisors throughout the year as well as their final assessments showed how connectivity to placement came out strongly in students' reflections. Most students adapted extremely well to the realities of work and connected well to their workplace, their colleagues, and the people whom their work served. This was particularly the case with our future teachers, who seemed to experience a sense of deep rootedness with their school settings and bonds and connections to the children and their colleagues.

All students were given the opportunity to undertake a full day of accredited paediatric first aid training which gave student's knowledge and confidence, but the practical activities also helped break down cliques. The quality of social connections with others also helped to overcome early moments of vulnerability on work experience: '*I began feeling nervous being in a new environment with new peers. I felt like the new girl on the block however, every staff member I met today were so lovely and welcoming I soon stopped feeling nervous and started thinking that I belonged*'. We can see belonging defined as a sense of safety here in accounts like these.

Gaining a sense of belonging was a process which did on occasion bring about some instances of tension and frustration which had to be navigated. This was particularly evident from The Professional Self module where students worked as a team to progress through their Legacy Project as a group. Rather than viewing this as problematic, we saw this as part of authentic learning akin to the '*storming'* stage of Mase et al.s (2016) '*forming, storming, norming and performing*' model of team development. Belonging in this sense is complex and messy and involves contradictory processes. By L6, there is however evidence of '*norming and performing*' in statements such as: '…*team working skills improved through group work presentations teaching me that working cohesively together can bring fresh ideas and perspectives while building bonds with others and improving my communication skills*'.

⑫ Sub-themes:
- **Did your work also address any/all of the following subthemes? (All the case studies do to a greater and lesser extent…)**
- **Inclusivity in its broadest sense (embedded, flexible learning environment, flexible assessment, relatable …. etc.**
- **Students as developing professionals**
- **Employability skills such as confidence building, impression management, collaboration and teamwork?**

Inclusivity: Inclusive design is central to the Legacy Project. Students are given autonomy to complete the work within a professional setting of their choosing. Although the premise for assessment is the same: students, rather than lecturers, must pose a real-world problem, issue, or challenge relevant to children, young people, or families which the student must work to solve.

Flexibility is also built into the course timetable to allow students to complete their work experiences to their own pace and timeline. The only stipulation is that they have from September until May to complete 180 hours

Students as developing professionals: Whatever students' choice of project, they work to construct knowledge from practical work experience. In the context of undertaking a Legacy Project, learning comes from students being proactive: they must ask their own questions; identify or create and act upon opportunities; and devise their own solutions. As an assessment, the Legacy Project was about thinking, problem-solving and persevering. The creative skill comes from students imagining, designing, creating, and building their own project. It was also about change: about the ability to manage change or unpredictability through adapting, but also, a deeper, more personal, developmental change which was evident in statements like, *'To my own surprise, I found that I thrive in high stress situations and I am very happy acting very independently' (Student X who aspires to be a counsellor).*

Employability skills: The 'employability' modules were designed to enhance employability in different ways: Across all years, the Legacy Project has a problem-solving remit which aims to simulate something of the realities of highly skilled professional work. Students must identify and understand a challenge in a real workplace and then design a solution.

In the 2021 assessments, students also reference employability skills they have gained through work experiences. In their L6 professional portfolios, there were 673 references to *'skill'*; 180 to *'communication'*; 109 mentions of *'confidence'*; 189 to *organisation*; 32 to *'time-management'*; 221 mentions of *'team'* and 15 of *'teamwork'*; Students also discussed their experiences of emotional labour in one of the L6 professional portfolio tasks.

Accountability is an important characteristic of the twenty-first century workplace so in asking students to set clear and precise objectives for themselves, and holding themselves accountable to these, the goal is to prepare students to feel comfortable for a range of careers where they will be accountable for their work with, and outcomes on children (social worker, nurse, teacher, counsellor etc.). Accountability was encouraged directly through so for instance, in *The Professional Self* module, students were told that each group had a total of 1800 hours to be accounted for.

Individual coaching conversations between students and their Academic Advisor were designed to develop students' developing identities. The Academic Advisor acts as a coach - she listens, guides, questions and challenges but does not necessarily devise the solution to students' problems (one example in Swann, 2022).

⓭ **Main benefits and successes of your work**
(for example, student feedback, sustainable, improved data/ results, noticeable change in behaviours, good feedback from stakeholders and employers, measurable change in metrics)

Because of the flexibility, freedom and autonomy, students worked on diverse legacy projects of their own choosing. The main benefits were the specialist skills and knowledge students gained from real world work experience. This was reflected in both the assessed presentations and portfolios:

> *…working alongside children with special educational needs and engaging with those who needed extra help with their speech and language development offered me a wider understanding of the different battles which children can overcome through the use of language programmes. Expanding my knowledge of Makaton developed my communication skills and my ability to balance control and empathy in group activities. Working in this setting highlighted the importance of stability between aid and*

independence, particularly whilst working with older children, in order to preserve their dignity.

The work experiences coupled with module learning often led to various twists and turns in end career goal for students. By L6, and with the specialisms afforded by the elective modules, students were often able to reach a firm career goal:

I would love to [become] *a psychotherapist as it has become a real passion and of high interest to me due to one of my elective modules from my third year in university. I realised that, throughout my degree, I began to change my mind with regards to career direction and after participating in my counselling electorate, I found I had a real passion and drive that I hadn't found in my other academic journeys and would be incredibly happy to continue learning and improving on my journey to become a psychotherapist.*

The following student commented on how the degree had equipped her with knowledge of human rights, law and legislation, mental health, social inequalities which would benefit her on her postgraduate path to become a Social Worker. Her enthusiasm shines through in her comment:

While studying Childhood studies at Leeds Beckett University I have had the fantastic opportunity to find a placement in which I would gain valuable skills and experiences for my life after the degree. I was lucky enough to obtain a placement at an [inclusion] *school in Leeds. I worked with many children from various backgrounds which truly educated me in the importance of providing the best support to children so they can reach their best potentiality. This placement allowed me to gain skills in not only communication but also actively listening, which is a valuable tool to use while supporting people.*

The theoretical perspectives we covered on the module helped students adjust adapt to the unexpected situations which came up on placement. For instance, there is evidence that the lectures on impression management and emotional labour seem to have helped students positively. Examples from 'student voice' include:

[A staff member] had to tell the parents of a young person in their care that they could not return home for Christmas due to the current crisis of the global pandemic. Understandably, the parents were very upset. (…) I found the situation unexpected and stressful, but I had to present a reassuring and uplifting front which I had to carry through to the next meeting (L6 student and future Speech Therapist).

One of the students used the concept of emotional labour to describe how she handled an incident when a little boy become *'stressed, overwhelmed and frustrated'* when other children were attempting to play with the toys he was using:

'The boy found it difficult to express his emotions, which lead to him crying and screaming within the nursery playroom. I tried to suggest other toys to play with to the other children, but two children then started to get frustrated. This was a difficult situation to deal with for me as I was not sure how to handle it or what to do, as I had never experienced a situation like this, especially because this was the first time in the nursery. Even though I felt stressed and anxious about the situation, I ensured that I suppressed my feelings and emotions so that the children did not notice and so the situation did not get my worst. I was self-aware and ensured my emotions stayed regulated to diffuse the situation, without the children getting more annoyed. This is an example of emotional labour as the emotions I displayed to the children, were different to the emotions I felt on the inside. In the end, another practitioner came over to give me help on what to do in the situation. The practitioner ensured that the other children were taken out of the situation to help. She went through

some strategies for me to carry out to help diffuse the situation and calm him down. She suggested taking the boy to the side of the room with his toys and music player to help calm him down. She then took charge of the situation, showing me what to do if it occurred again. This is a perfect example of emotional labour within the workplace, as I was able to "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild, 1983). I believe that I handled the situation in the best way I could, hiding my real emotions and staying professional'.

Another student found volunteering with vulnerable young people helped her to understand the complexities around developing positive, professional and trusting relationships as there were *'many occasions'* when she *'had to conceal my emotions to remain professional'*. Gaining experience of disclosures which were *'emotionally challenging to listen to'* enabled this student to truly *uunderstand how critical it is to "induce or supress feeling" (Hochschild, 1983, p7) when the young people are present'*. She concluded her reflection by stating that she had *'grown as a person'* since volunteering and the experience had '*allowed me to develop a form of emotional resilience'* which would benefit her in pursuing a career in social work.

⑭ **Main challenges for your work** (for example, is it scalable, manageable again, too difficult to evaluate, resource heavy, too risky, not enough ownership…?)

To improve and evolve a more responsive mode of delivery, greater investment is needed in terms of resourcing: namely staff time as reported by the Academic Advisors who were given 30 hours per group of 10 students. Drilling down into facts, I looked at the basic comparisons of the undergraduate degree courses in 2019-20, there appeared to be some correlation between the number of students on degree courses and the rates of satisfaction which begs answers to basic questions: were we resourcing the BA (Hons) Childhood Studies degree for the number of students enrolled? Were we truly ensuring every BA (Hons) Childhood Studies student had adequate support throughout their time with us? How does provision, the allocation of roles and responsibilities on the BA (Hons) Childhood Studies course, time spent on each student, compare with the degree courses who are scoring higher on the NSS? All these factors work to create or destabilise a course identity.

⑮ **Main outcomes**
How do you know it was successful? (was your work measurable? Any Data? Student views? Feedback from colleagues? Other evaluation such as change at wider course and institutional level?)

The postgraduate employment trajectories of students became more ambitious and diverse. In the first cohort, we had our first round of students entering postgraduate nursing, midwifery and police training programmes because of the experience accrued on their placement. We had a 100% success rate in postgraduate applications to teacher-training programmes (EYFS, Primary and Secondary).

Improvement was made in course performance relating to student progression, achievement, employability and NSS indicators. Deferrals were lower; retention was higher and there were no formal student complaints.

Getting myself involved with academic studies alongside a placement allows me to apply practical skills to my academic knowledge acquiring transferable skills and meaning to real life scenarios.
Attending Leeds Beckett university and following the Childhood studies course has applied a lot of skills to my set Alternatively, my experience at university has allowed to become self-efficient teaching me prioritisation and time management of task at hand.

> The education I have received from studying Childhood Studies has only ever encouraged me to want to learn more, motivating my efforts to do the best work possible. The programme has taught me a huge wide range of knowledge from education, psychology, sociology and a whole lot more. This has opened my eyes to the fundamental issues that are involved with childhood and reasoning behind these taking a child-centred approach throughout as children deserve to have a happy and healthy childhood at no cost (L6 portfolio of evidence).

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[i] Dr. Sarah Swann is Course Director of the following courses: MA Childhood and Early Years; MA Inclusive Practice in Education; MA Education, Ethics and Leadership; MA School Mental Health Specialist (DfE approved); and MA School Leadership of Mental Health and Wellbeing (DfE approved). Being a member of the Institute for Learning in Higher Education (LiHE based at the Copenhagen Business School) means that she is part of an international community of scholars who specialize in combining practice and academia. Her case study describes the work undertaken when she led the BA (Hons) Childhood Studies degree from 2017-2021.