Do we listen to our students when it comes to employability? An investigation of working early childhood undergraduate students' needs regarding their employability skills.

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Abstract

Current research mainly focuses on employers' perspectives, leaving aside students' voice. This case study seeks to give a voice to working undergraduate students in early years education about the support they need in developing employability skills for the recruitment process. The sample consisted of 21 Level 6 undergraduate students in early childhood degrees in a university in London, who were working in the sector. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that students valued communication and teamwork as important employability skills and that they had plenty of opportunities to work on such skills through their studies. However, they identified exclusion as a discipline that affected their self-esteem and confidence in participation. Findings showed that students would value arts education in their curriculum so they could have skills to work effectively in the sector.

Introduction

In early childhood, joining the workforce after graduation can be a challenge for graduates, especially if they lack experience in the sector. Looking for a job can be a very demanding task. In a new job vacancy in an early years setting, applicants who have just graduated from university have to compete against applicants with extensive experience. This can be overwhelming since often recent graduates lack the necessary skills to convince the managers that they are more qualified for the job because of their state-of-art knowledge. Nursery managers admit that although there is a plethora of applicants, they often have inadequate view of the reality and practical responsibilities in the sector (Haux et al., 2022). Therefore, this might affect the employability rates and graduates might end up unemployed or working in a completely different sector and not being able to utilize their degree.

This has become a significant issue in the field, influencing the decisions of potential students as they choose which study programme to enrol in and invest the next 3 or 4 years of their life studying. Current research (see Bindawas, 2024; Urbancikova & Umarkhonov, 2024; Dangi & Singh, 2022) has primarily examined this aspect from the employers' perspective, leaving aside the needs of the working students while they are studying.

It is important to note that stakeholders are crucial in defining graduate's future by offering them opportunities to work for their business and utilize their degree. An interview is an opportunity for graduates to prove their value and knowledge and eventually convince the manager that they are fit for the job. However, addressing this issue only from the manager's perspective solves half of the problem, as considerate neglects the students' voice and needs in this process. This case study seeks to give a voice to undergraduate students in early years education regarding the support they need to develop teaching employability skills for the recruitment process.

Defining employability

Employability is a term broadly used in Higher Education and after graduation. According to Scandurra et al. (2023), this term has received a lot of criticism and often characterized as a 'buzzword' that most of the times is misunderstood. It is often related to a set of skills that applicants should have to thrive in the market. Attaining such skills is a very important part of people's journey and transition from their years of study to the workforce. It is what makes them special and stand out from the crowd when looking for a job when they must compete against other applicants. It is often related to a set of skills that aim to describe the graduates' behaviour and attitude.

Such a set of skills is often related to knowledge and understanding of the subject area but also to personal attributes (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Considering the rapid changes in our society, it is important to recognise that flexibility and adaptation to new realities should be included in this list. COVID-19 pandemic has also affected employability, especially in the early year sector, as it had a big impact in the financial viability of the settings (Haux et al., 2022). Recent graduates have to deal with new type of contracts and new paying conditions, and this includes adapting to a new reality in the workforce. Neugebauer and Evans-Brain (2016) acknowledge the fact that employability is much more than a specific set of skills and it needs to include the ability of a graduate to respond to upcoming changes in their workplace. This is further supported by Stiwne & Alves (2010) as they highlight that it is challenging to establish a simple link between education, learning outcomes and employability.

It is important to note that employability is also dependent on a variety of factors that might influence the applicants' profile when applying for a job. The context (e.g. Multinational corporations or family business) is one of the most important factors in making decisions of how to respond to an upcoming situation. Stiwne & Alves (2010) suggested that employability should be defined as a process of a complicated interaction among different contexts such as social groups, gender, age, and background.

Kirby Report (2000) agrees with this and focuses on factors such as the working environment and the socio-economic background. It presented strong arguments about an individual's ability to adapt to a new environment in light the rapidly evolving knowledge and societal needs of society. The Kirby Report (2000) acknowledged a strong link between employability and individuals' personal beliefs about themselves. This can be linked with several attributes of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Professional self-image is something that has been discussed extensively when considering employability. Neil (2020) made several arguments about the importance taking care of oneself as this can have an impact in their self-image and wellbeing. Another couple of researchers (Baird et al, 2024; Stadnicka & Zarzycka, 2023), also stressed in their findings the value of professional self-image and how it can affect the general attitude of the professionals. Based on this argument, it is only reasonable to believe that employability encompasses not only a set of general skills but also aspects of self-identity, often a challenge for undergraduate students, who may haven't yet developed a strong positive self-image.

Considering employability and Higher Education, it is important to think of the skills we need to teach to the students in order to make them more employable than other applicants when they graduate. It is important to include stakeholders in this discussion as failing to do so, risk educating and training students in subject areas and skills that are no longer relevant. Neugebauer & Evans-Brain (2016) describe cases in which students graduated only to find that the job they trained for is no longer needed. Therefore, this puts great emphasis on the employers' needs when discussing the topic of employability.

The argument of listening to employers in the provision of employability activities in undergraduate programmes is a valid one but there needs to be a careful consideration between consultation and demand. Asking for a list of desired skills from employers is very common, but the demands of society are constantly changing, which raises issues about the efficiency of such lists and the time that has been spent in analysing the data (Hager et al., 2002). Allowing employers to have a leading role in defining these skills could be problematic, as it risks shifting from a knowledge-oriented curriculum to one based on demand and supply, according to stakeholders. A relevant study in Malaysia by Yoong et al. (2016) demonstrated that when employers are powerful enough to make decisions about the undergraduate curriculum, it is likely to fail as often overlook important factors such as family or the institution. Therefore, it is only fair to say that we do need to consider the employers' perspectives in defining employability, but this needs to be done under a framework of thoughtful consideration of influencing factors. This means we need to seek their opinion but then to apply our academic judgement when integrating these perspectives into our curriculum when designing employability activities. This was a motivating factor in designing this case study, leading to the decision to examine this aspect from the working students' perspective to give them a voice in their learning journey.

Managing undergraduate students' expectations about employability

Focusing on early childhood undergraduate programmes, it seems to be a huge challenge trying to map students' expectations in the curriculum. Prospective students are seeking the best programme to invest the next few years of their lives to attain the knowledge they need to thrive in the work market. Stiwne & Alves (2010) state that sometimes it appears impossible to meet students' expectations as there might be emerging differences from students' previous levels of education.

The role of work experience has been highly recommended when looking for a job. Students are often advised to gain work experience, whether paid or voluntary, during their studies to enrich their skills and CV. Relevant work experience in the field of study cannot be stressed enough as an important part of their learning journey. Heyler & Lee (2014) make several strong arguments about the importance of learning through work experience and suggest a few ideas of how to best include this in education.

With this in mind, many undergraduate programmes include voluntary work, placements, or work-based learning modules in their curriculum.

However, a question is raised for those students who cannot take up this opportunity due to family commitments and financial constraints, and this might force them to work outside their field during their studies. Alternative solutions can come into place such as replacing teaching with field trips or working on real-life case studies as part of their learning and assessment. Regardless of the provision in terms of experiential learning, active engagement and reflection are very important so students can develop skills that will make them competitive in the job market (Heyler & Lee, 2014).

When seeking students' perspectives about employability, it is obvious that they give great importance to other things apart from knowledge in the subject field. Experience and confidence are two of the top qualities that students consider important in terms of employability (Heyler & Lee, 2014). However, the views of students are not often recognised and researched enough, as researchers are mainly focused on graduates or employers. When our research focus is limited to students, it becomes clear that researchers mainly concentrate on students on different majors than early years education. However, students who are already working in the sector can provide valuable insights into developing employability skills in the undergraduate curriculum. Listening to their voices can be an added value in the undergraduate programmes as providers can tailor made their provision to meet their needs. Tymon (2011) reports valuable findings on students' voices in business, marketing, and human resource management undergraduate programmes. He focused on finding differences in students' perspectives in terms of employability among the different years of study. One striking finding was the fact the students are more concerned about their employability skills in the last years of study instead of all their years of study. Therefore, in line with Heyler and Lee's (2014) arguments, he identified that engagement is of paramount importance when trying to support students to develop their employability skills.

Some years later, Griffin & Coelhoso (2018), found that business students were particularly concerned with generic employability skills such as critical thinking skills and taking initiative. However, these findings should be viewed in the context of the university where the study took place. The researchers agreed that being an all-female university in UAE might have influenced the findings, considering gender and cultural aspects.

In a similar programme of study, Melhuish (2019) explored students' views through focus groups and interviews and asked students to reflect on their learning journey throughout their years of study. Her findings support Stiwne & Alves' (2010) argument about the challenging task to meet students' expectations in terms of employability. However, Melhuish (2019) highlighted a different aspect of this challenge, as her findings focus on students' differences in values, personality, and attitude. She agreed for the need to listen to students when considering our objectives in employability while designing an undergraduate curriculum. This was a motivating factor to design this study and shed light on students' voices in early childhood programmes, an area that has not yet been thoroughly investigated.

Moving to another discipline, students' views have some similarities with the above findings but also striking differences. Hung & Phuong (2019) focused their research on foreign language students using quantitative methods. Similar to Tymon (2011), they found differences in students' views among the different levels of study. However, in contrast to the above findings, students were more concerned with the university's name and reputation than anything else. They argued strongly that graduating from a high-profile university can more easily open doors to jobs. It is important to note that students also highly rated skills such as group work, public speaking, critical thinking, and adaptability which ties back to the content of the curriculum.

A year later, Pitan & Muller (2020) again investigated the same aspect using quantitative methods. Their research study was among the limited ones that included education students in their sample. However, in contrast with most of the previous studies that investigate this aspect in the UK, their research focused on South Africa. Similar to previous studies, their sample included students who haven't yet

entered the labour market. It was interesting to see that in their study, students scored work experience as the lowest one and curriculum knowledge as the highest one. This is contradictory to Heylet & Lee's (2014) arguments about the importance of work experience in terms of employability. In Pitan & Muller's (2020) study, students were more focuses on becoming knowledgeable experts in their field of study and learning about career development opportunities. This disagreement could be attributed to the different cultural background of the students as each context might value skills differently. However, it under-scores the need to seriously consider the context in which students live, as recognised earlier by Stinwe & Alves (2010). It also supports the argument for paying close attention to students' individuality when addressing their employability skills, a point also raised by Melhuish (2019).

To summarise, most existing research recognises the importance of contextual factors, individuality, and culture. Based on Melhuish (2019) and Stinwe & Alves (2010) arguments about individuality and context, it can be argued that instead of trying to make general arguments about the ways of supporting students to become more employable, it is better to look deeply into their needs and treat each university as an individual case study. This was a major motivating factor for conducting a case study, especially given that working students' voices in early childhood undergraduate programmes have yet to be thoroughly explored.

Purpose

There is plenty of research about employability skills, but it is mainly focused on employers' views. When research focuses on students' perspectives, it is mainly focused on disciplines other than early childhood studies. This case study seeks to give a voice to working undergraduate students in early years education, focusing on the support they need to develop teaching employability skills for the recruitment process.

Research Questions

This case study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' views on the support their programme of study offers in terms of developing their employability skills?
2. What aspects of their curriculum would they like to see enhanced to become more employable?

Participants

Based on Tymon's (2011) findings that students are more concerned about their employability skills in their last year of study, it was decided to seek students' views who are in their final years of study and already work in the sector of Early Childhood. It was considered that this would give us the opportunity to gain rich and in-depth data about this matter as they are more alarmed about this issue. Since individuality and culture were raised quite often in the research literature (e.g., Melhuish, 2019; Griffin and Coelhose, 2018), it was also decided to include students from one university so the culture of different settings would not act as a factor to influence the findings.

Therefore, the sample of this study included 21 Level 6 undergraduate students in Early Childhood (EC) programmes from one university in London, who work in the Early Childhood sector. In the UK, undergraduate programmes last 3 years and Level 6 undergraduate students are the students in their final year of study. After receiving ethical approval, a call was made to all students meeting these criteria to express their interest in participating in this study. Additionally, information sessions were held to

thoroughly explain the study's content and procedures, enabling students to make an informed choice before expressing their interest.

Procedures and measures

Following an interpretivist paradigm and a case study approach, we designed the methodology and general procedures of this study. Participants were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview, which lasted approximately 40-60 minutes. There was an option for face-to-face, in a quiet and private room at the university, or online using the TEAMS app with their university account. The interviews took place at a time and date that was convenient for the students. Funding was used to employ two research assistants to conduct the interviews and transcribe them. The research assistants were postgraduate students in the same university but had no links to the participants. There was a possibility that with this practice participants would be identified within the school after the interview, and this was an issue of anonymity. This is a real challenge that has been highlighted by Saunders et al. (2014) but they have also mentioned that it can also result in willingness from the participants to participate as they see a familiar face. Therefore, we asked from the research assistants to sign a confidentiality agreement before they conduct any interviews. There was also a day training for them to explain the research procedure, aims and practice mock interviews.

The interview schedule was organised under the following categories: Experience and qualifications, personal motivation and aspirations, views on employability, support in their programme of study, and ideas for curriculum provision. This was flexible to accommodate aspects that weren't originally included. Data analysis and discussion were sent to a colleague to act as a critical friend and provide feedback about our interpretation. Data was also sent to participants for confirmation and records were kept in all phases of the research and sent to a colleague for a critical review.

A vital part of the research process was constant reflection of the researchers of their approach to research. This is based on the arguments of Clark et al. (2019) that highlight the importance of reflexivity and positionality in qualitative research. The principal investigator and the research assistants were asked to keep a reflective research journal of their thoughts as emerged from the research process and reflect in order to identify any personal bias. As the research team majored in education, it was to be acknowledged that some element of personal biased existed as they all had their own views of about teaching and learning and personal journey as students in the field. The reflective journal also helped to identify the researcher's positionality identifying different viewpoints of their identity and how this might have influenced the research process. The research team had a couple of meeting to discuss aspects that emerged from the reflective journals and support each other to improve, evaluate and learn.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The interviews were analysed using a thematic analysis approach in which we were looking for common themes across the data. The principal investigator reviewed the transcribe of the anonymised interviews and looked for common themes. Initially, we identified 2 main themes namely Support and Ideas, each containing 6 subthemes such as collaboration, trust and respect, classroom culture, reflective practices, self-improvement, activities, courses, events, guest speakers and job opportunities, to organise the data in the first read. The data was reviewed 4 more times for a more detailed analysis, during which an additional 71 subthemes emerged under the initially 6 subthemes (see table 1). Afterwards, data and themes were reviewed by another researcher to provide feedback between the data and interpretation.

Table 1 *Themes in thematic analysis*

Themes	
Support • Collaboration • Trust and respect • Classroom culture • Classroom participation • Reflective practices • Opportunities for self-improvement	Ideas • Extra-curricular activities after graduation • Useful courses or qualifications • Placements • Events in career workshops • Guest speaker's topic • Job opportunities

The code S was used to present students' views to maintain anonymity. Each participant was allocated a number (1-24) to maintain anonymity. Initially there were 24 participants but 3 of them withdrew for personal reasons before the data analysis. Therefore, we maintained the original numbering to avoid confusion with the coding system we had initially established.

In a recent study, Francis-Devine & Hutton (2024) demonstrated that 70% of staff in education are women. This was similar to our sample as all the students identified themselves as females, reflecting the gender distribution in the programme and across the EC field. Students were parents with a significant work experience in the field. One of them had work experience in a different discipline, and 2 had work experience both in early childhood and in different discipline. Students entered the programme with substantial knowledge of the subject area, most holding a Level 2 or Level 3 qualification in childcare or its equivalent, with 2 of them in a different discipline. It was inspiring to see that some had earned a BA in previous studies, and one had pursued postgraduate studies in different discipline. Also, there was one student who had completed teaching training overseas (see table 2).

Table 2 *Students characteristics*

Students Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Female	21	100%
Parents	13	62%
Work experience in EC and different discipline	2	9.5%
Work experience in EC and a different field	1	5%
Level 2 or 3 qualification in EC	19	90%
Level 2 or 3 in a different discipline	2	9.5%
BA in different discipline	6	28.5%
Postgraduate studies in different discipline	1	5%
Teaching training overseas	1	5%

In contrast with Hung's & Phuong's (2019) study, in which students' value university reputation in employability, our students entered the course with different motives, which mainly focused on personal reasons or on making a difference to children. It was really inspiring to see that parenthood was also a

strong motive for the students to gain more knowledge about early childhood, understand more about their role as parents but also to follow their passion. Students stated that spending so much time with their children, inspired them to gain more knowledge in the field and self-improve and this was a major influence to start this course. This indicates that students were internally motivated to study and apply the expertise and skills towards their personal development.

> *S3 For me the first six years of life are the most important. I was very lucky to stay at home as a mum. It's very important to have trained staff that understands about the needs of children that very young age. So I was always passionate about …trying to learn more and then trying to understand why they're behaving like that, what they need at a certain age, what level they need and help them because if parents can't do it and I totally understand, you know you need to go to work, you need to do stuff, but at least you can trust that when you're leaving your children, you know they're on the best hands.*

Students also highlighted their need to contribute and influence children in their development and learning as their main reason for entering this course. Making a difference in the field and turning their passion into their career were topics that constantly came up in their discussion. It seemed that students were passionate about their field of study, and it was a long-standing dream to fulfil. This has made them strong advocates of the early childhood sector, determined to strive for the best in children's education and care.

> *S2 I wanted to support children, to impact knowledge on them and to support them in their journey of education because some children have, from the early age, the interest of education going to school and some don't. You know, when you bring a child to school, some will be crying to go back with their parents, and some would like to stay there. I am a kind of person that like interacting with kids a lot anywhere.*

Students' goals when they graduate revealed a variety of different options they would like to pursue, showing strong prospective candidates in the field. Opening their own nursery was an option that occurred very often, showing a willingness to implement their entrepreneurial skills that they gained during the course. They mentioned wanting to use this knowledge and to help their communities both here and back in their home countries.

> *S19 I honestly have passion for children. It was my plan to just study, to upgrade myself more on the area that I have passion for, to get the best out there and planning in future if I can have my own setup nursery for my community.*

Having now discussed the characteristics and aspirations of the participants, the next section will focus on students' views regarding the support they received during their time in the university as students in this course.

Support (Findings and discussion linked to the first research question)

To answer the first research question, we focused on the first part of the interview. Students revealed numerous opportunities to develop in their employability skills during their course of study, reflecting positively on the curriculum's general provision and effort from the teaching team.

Collaboration and teamwork are two important generic skills closely linked to employability. Hager et al. (2002) emphasize the significance of developing such skills to enhance the graduates' employability. They highlighted that prospective employers highly value generic skills in candidates for job vacancies and suggested that these are key to securing and maintaining employment in any sector. Some years later, Humburg et al. (2013) produced a report demonstrating that teamwork ranks among the most desired skill for integrating graduates into workforce. Thus, incorporating group work opportunities into the curriculum is crucial, as it allows students to practice these skills and become more employable.

It was very positive to see that students revealed they had plenty of opportunities to work on such skills and valued such opportunities. They mentioned that the support from lecturers and colleagues was exceptional. Students stressed personal and professional benefits from such practices and the creation of a support group that helped them to go through their studies. Students also appreciated the opportunities to work with their tutors and made references to exceptional lecturers who provided useful guidance to develop such skills.

S8 I end up having social anxiety, so I wasn't really able to interact with any of my peers. But I did have one friend who did the same course. I was always around her and the second year I made another friend. I didn't really interact with my colleagues much like with my peers. But when I needed the help, they'll all come and try and give me advice which is really nice.

S2 Collaborating with my tutors was great. I had very supportive lecturers who can guide you and let me be myself. For example, they have guided me all through my journey with directions on where to get information or guiding me regarding the topic. Sometimes in the classroom after the lecture, I might not understand what the topics are about. I can always go back to my lecturer for one to one. So, working with my lecturer has helped me in so many ways to get the qualification I need, to get all the knowledge I need in this journey.

Our findings are in line with the findings from Griffin & Coelshoso (2018). Although their investigation focused on business school students, it appears that students value the same qualities across discipline. In their study, students emphasized the importance of good communication and teamwork, which facilitated opportunities for collaboration. Our study contributes to this area by offering additional insights into the importance of collaboration in developing employability skills. Additionally, it is very positive that our students reported plenty opportunities for meaningful collaboration and teamwork during their studies, enhancing their learning journey.

Embracing inclusivity and accepting people's identities are the cornerstone of effective collaboration and teamwork. Melhuish (2019) stressed that demonstrating skills in respecting individual cultures and identities can beneficially contribute to career and employability. Therefore, it can be argued that it is important to offer to students the opportunity to develop such skills as part of their course, as they can recreate similar opportunities in their workplace. Being a role model to them and showing that respect and trust are important values in their profession is vital as they can take this knowledge and experience and apply it in their workplace. It is very positive to see that they made comments about a safe and non-judgement environment during classes. Students raised arguments about mutual respect among the team of students and tutors that was developed over time.

S14 I think it's just something that's been developed over time there's no judgment, everyone can express themselves. But I feel like everyone is kind of old enough and responsible enough to be like, OK, they can express themselves and no one's gonna judge them or have any problems with them. And even one tutor said it was so nice to see how at break time, the class is all talking to each other and chatting to each other.

Being able to perform in a safe environment, where mutual respect is the foundation of every interaction, is vital in developing employability skills. This argument has stood for some time, with McLaughlin (1992) stating that respect is one of the important employability skill in teamwork from employers' perspective. Our study aligns with these arguments, revealing significant opportunities to develop such skills during the years students spend at this university.

The general culture within an organisation is a vital aspect of improving or hindering people's employability skills. According to Helyer & Lee (2014), there should be a strong link between organisational

culture and academic culture to facilitate the development of students' employability skills. Being able to identify oneself within the organisational or academic culture is essential for the professional development of employees or students. One main argument is that the feeling of belonging could result in motivation and commitment, which, according to Tymon (2011), is a fundamental condition for a successful learning journey.

Looking at the classroom culture, it can be argued that there was an area that received both positive and negative feedback. To begin with the positives, students made comments about exceptional lecturers and peers who respected individuality. Being in the same room with people of different backgrounds, religions and values can be challenging, but it seems that this university met this challenge and created an environment in which everyone is welcome and accepted.

S3 There were no ladies from my country there. Everyone was from everywhere and it felt so amazing. Just like sharing bits and pieces and all that being in a diverse classroom it's amazing.

It must be acknowledged that although students valued this diverse community within their classroom, they also provided some feedback about the cohort's identity as part of the classroom culture. The aspect of identity in the employment journey has received considerable attention in the research field. Luyckx et al. (2008) highlighted in their research that the way an individual perceives their identity can influence the perception of their identity. This places great importance on the personal characteristics, but also on the setting in which the individual interacts. The space within which people interact can affect identify formation daily and the perception of oneself. This is not a new argument, as Little (1997) described different environments in the workplace and how they can affect the female employees' identity. Considering the above argument, this aspect seems to be vital in the curriculum provision that aims to support students' employability skills.

In our case study, EC students were required to attend lectures with students from other programmes and this was not always well received. Having a lecturer with an EC background was very well received and made them feel confident to interact and raise their voice. It seemed they felt less pressure and more relaxed about participating due to the strong bonds that they have developed over the years.

S17 Sometimes it was different. There were some modules we did together with education studies and special educational needs. Depending on the module leader, for example she is a SEND teacher, then you see that the SEN students tend to come up more because they are familiar. They kind of have that bond. They feel more confident, and I will say the early years or the other ones are a bit calmer because probably they are not too confident.

The data above revealed aspects of self-confidence that are intertwined with cohort identity. The aspect of self-confidence is a very important one in human psychology. According to Sar et al. (2012), self-confidence, especially in undergraduate students, can vary according to the programme of study, with some disciplines scoring higher than others. They found that students from the Departments of Education scored lower in this area compared to other departments. This is in line with our study as our students revealed the same perceptions. However, in our study, we didn't compare early childhood students' perspectives with students from other programmes.

Chesser-Smyth & Long (2012) have investigated the same aspect but with a different focus. They showed that students' self-confidence and motivation can increase academic achievement. Our study did not aim to test academic achievement, and thus we didn't have access to students' performance and degree classification across the other programmes. However, considering this argument, it does raise some questions that need to be further investigated in subsequent research.

The above data and arguments about self-confidence and identity could be strongly linked to the next area of investigation about self-perception. According to our data, another area of improvement in cohort identity was the general attitude toward the EC students. Students felt their discipline was not as

respected as it should be, and there was exclusion due to this fact. They raised concerns that there were times they felt excluded and disrespected by students from other programmes, attributing this to differences in curriculum.

> *S13 I feel like maybe ECS is not as respected as those other courses. If you're doing education studies or focusing on special needs … you're just kind of like "they're just doing early childhood studies." Sometimes I kind of felt that from the other groups because they were doing certain modules like politics and when certain things were raised in the group that we hadn't really looked at, it was just kind of like "they only working with young children. And maybe a couple of other colleagues have said as well that they feel that they're smarter.*

According to Moasa (2013), identity is strongly linked with the voice or silence of the individual, and this can either improve or not improve their performance. He highlighted that identity construction can be affected by this process and giving people a voice can provide opportunities for redefining themselves. Looking at the data, it seems that EC students felt that their voice was not as strong as that of students in other programmes, and they were in a lower position. This mirrors the current situation in the workforce concerning EC practitioners. Although the importance of the early years and the work of the EC practitioners in child development is recognised worldwide, it seems that this recognition does not reflect their payment and working conditions. Several pieces of research (Powell et al., 2020; Ullrich et al., 2016; Razavi & Staab, 2011) confirm these inequalities among EC professionals and primary or secondary school teachers. However, Sherif et al. (2023) reported that EC professionals are internally motivated to make a difference despite the working conditions, viewing their job as a career choice.

After discussing the findings on students' views regarding the support they received during their studies in terms of employability skills, the next section will analyse and discuss their ideas of curriculum provision in this area.

Ideas (Findings and discussion linked with the second research question)

To answer the second research question, we focused on the second part of the interview where students expressed their ideas of curriculum provision regarding employability. Students suggested numerous activities that the university could implement to support their employability skills throughout their course.

Timing of the employability activities is a crucial factor influencing students' decision-making whether or not to attend. Students' academic and personal lives can become very busy during term time, and equally challenging during school holidays, as they juggle personal and family responsibilities. There is a dilemma whether such activities should take place during or outside term time. However, considering students' perspectives on this matter, it appears most prefer these activities to occur alongside their modules. Many raised concerns about job responsibilities and family obligations preventing them from attending outside term time. Our findings might respond to Bradley's (2020) arguments regarding students' lack of engagement with careers events in universities.

> *S8 Maybe one day during a lecture time. When it comes outside of university hours, people are working, have children, have other commitments and so it's not accessible.*

> *S13 I look at the times that they were on offer. There were mainly offered during the half term. As a mom I'm most likely not going to attend because I don't have childcare.*

The content of such activities also merits discussion. Upon reviewing the subject benchmarks from QAA (2022), which define the expectations of early years curriculum for undergraduate courses in the UK, it appears the arts are notably absent as a clearly stated component in both the subject-specific and ge-

neric skills. While elements that could hint at the arts are mentioned as 'creative learning opportunities', this does not explicitly mandate the inclusion of the arts in curriculum provision.

The guidance in the statutory framework for the early years (see DfE, 2023) identifies the arts as a specific area on which childcare providers must focus and support children. Therefore, it is importance to equip students in EC undergraduate courses with the necessary skills and knowledge to meet this expectation upon graduation and enrich their employability skills. Such activities and modules could be added in the curriculum of undergraduate programmes in EC as they are often stuffed with mandated content and standards to meet safeguarding policies and teach the national curriculum. This aspect was something raised by students, who mentioned a lack of such skills, especially when interacting with children in their workplace. They highlighted the importance of art education and identified as something missing from their course.

S1 Because we work with children, we need skills to be able to work with children. I've seen at my work that teachers that were reading mechanically with no face expressions to children; children were easily getting bored and distracted. Arts are very important in our education so it is something that all employers want to hear how good you are with arts, how expressive you are. Something related with arts will be very beneficial.

Providing students with a range of skills and opportunities during their course is crucial for developing employability skills. This development can occur through direct interaction with various opportunities during their studies (Pool & Sewell, 2007). Guest speakers can effectively bring this argument to life, offering students direct interaction and fresh insights from their expertise. Researchers examined this argument, advocating for its integration into teaching practice in undergraduate courses. Riebe et al. (2013) emphasized the significance of guest speakers for business students. They concluded that guest speakers are crucial for providing students with real-world experience and improving their employability skills. Later, Nzama (2021) agreed with this finding with their empirical research among accounting students. They found that students felt more employable after attending guest lectures, which saw higher attendance rates comparing to regular lectures. Although the above papers focus on students from different subject areas than EC, our findings show a strong connection. In our study, students agreed on the benefits of guest lectures. They recognized learning advantages and associated guest lecturers with role models in their profession.

S1 There will be an advantage to meet some of them and to know their experience. We can learn probably from their success, and their failure. We can get a clue of what it's outside there, …having heard how she started during the pandemic, it was actually really encouraging. Then it was also beneficial because she was able to answer a few questions for us and it was good.

S19 Guest speakers are very good, especially when they come with their own experience. What they have done and remember…there was this young lady who was able to talk about her life, how she started and how now she owns her own nursery. What things she went through how she overcame them and how she is now. So, it's motivating when you hear people like this speaking.

Students also went the extra mile and suggested a few guest speakers that they would really value having during their course. They suggested a range of childcare professionals and alumni, explaining the reasons for suggesting them. It was really fascinating to see that they were passionate about this topic and used their critical thinking skills to come up with ideas that could enrich their employability skills.

S3 I would have loved to see managers, proper managers from nursery just coming and talk. How they started, what they need to do. It will be nice to get perspectives of how they deal with it when they're struggling, what are they going?

S4 …speak to people that work within SEND, what they want to specialise in, and having direct talks with them might help to be more confident in the field.

S10 I'll probably say people that have just left, let's say someone that has graduated, if I just got into university. Those graduated not long ago to come and speak to me about their current experience and how they're coping.

Supporting students in developing their employability skills includes offering job opportunities during their course and providing support. Career services play an important role in this aspect, offering occupational and networking opportunities to students (Schlesinger et al., 2021). Organising a career fair and making it available to students during their time at the university are vital to help them build their CV and gain skills to make them more employable. Just a simple talk with a recruiter or a manager can provide them a vital experience of how to interact and respond. However, most of the times, opportunities like this come towards the end of their programme when they are ready to receive their degree. Students from our study praised opportunities like this, but they mentioned timing again as an important aspect of this process. They suggested that opportunities like this should be available from the beginning of their studies, embedded in their modules, and not just towards their graduation, so they can start considering the options they might pursue. It was also exciting to see that they wanted to be considered qualified professionals, not just graduates capable of basic jobs in childcare.

S2 Events like this should start early not towards the end of graduation. Knowing the career that comes with it is better to start it early so that the person will know the career path you have after studying this course. To start early to guide the person. Starting early to create awareness for students, to be embedded in the modules earlier, it will help, and it is going to help me if started early, let me put myself in it.

S9 Employers come and open the jobs, but I find out most of the places are for basic jobs. They have their management; they have their leaders and just need practitioners with minimum wage.

In a relevant study by Nilsson & Ripmeester (2016) on students' expectations upon graduation, job opportunities and career prospects scored higher than any item in their data. Students' main motivation was to enhance their career opportunities throughout their course, echoing the importance of job opportunities. This finding is similar to ours, with students emphasizing the same aspect. However, they also highlighted the importance of incorporating such aspects from the beginning of their studies, not towards the end.

Conclusions

To summarise, this study focused on EC students' perspectives on developing their employability skills, an area previously overlooked in the field. Most existing research concentrates on employers and neglects students' needs. Furthermore, research in EC is limited, with most of the studies focusing on other disciplines. This research aimed to bridge this gap.

The sample consisted of a robust cohort of working EC undergraduate students with strong motivation to study and high aspirations to help the community and improve lives after graduation. They had extensive work experience in the field and solid knowledge from previous studies. Findings align with previous research; our students rated social skills, such as teamwork and collaboration, as crucial skills in their employability learning journey and reported ample opportunities to develop these skills during their studies. They appreciated the diverse community in their lectures, but they provided strong feedback on cohort identity revealing issues of exclusion as a discipline. This finding reflects payment inequalities in the education sector across different levels. Findings show that students would appreci-

ate their curriculum to focus on employability throughout their studies and not just in the end and the importance of guest speakers as an integral part of their lectures. Including meaningful art activities in their modules was also something that they stressed. The findings indicated that students valued arts education and wished for its elements to be included in the curriculum. Finally, the timing of employability activities emerged as an issue in our findings.

Some limitations must be discussed before drawing any conclusions about the generalizability of the findings. It has to be acknowledged that the sample size was adequate for a qualitative study as it allowed us the opportunity to delve into more details of our findings, but it can limit the generalizability of the findings to the general population. In addition, we only included students from one university in our sample and this might not reflect of the diversity of experiences and perspectives across different institutions and regions. Lastly, gender is also a limitation that has to be considered as the sample included only female participants and the perspectives of different genders were not included. Therefore, more research is suggested to address the above limitations before drawing any conclusions.

The above findings suggest revisiting the culture of mixing different cohorts together in learning environments and establishing mutual respect among students across all disciplines within undergraduate education. Additionally, it is recommended is to rethink the undergraduate curriculum provision to align the expectations of the early years statutory framework, providing students with the skills to implement art activities and carefully considering the timing of such events.

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