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Enhancing perceptions of employability amongst first-year arts students and implications for student belonging

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ABSTRACT

Despite being a degree that leads to diverse employment in a wide range of industries, the Bachelor of Arts (BA) has long had a bad reputation when it comes to employment outcomes for graduates. The challenge of overcoming this disjuncture has significant implications for current and prospective BA students, especially with respect to attrition and student satisfaction. In this article, we examine whether interventions that highlight the professional outcomes of the BA have the potential to enhance students' perceived job prospects and sense of belonging in their study. Specifically, we sought to explore whether careers-focused events that introduce Arts students to professionals with a BA qualification can enhance their perceptions of employability and whether these enhanced perceptions of employability help improve their sense of belonging. The findings confirmed that students enrolled in generalist degrees like the BA do have lower perceived future career prospects, but that careers-focused interventions can enhance perceived career prospects as well as produce a higher sense of student belonging.

1. Introduction

The Bachelor of Arts (BA) is widely regarded as under threat in the contemporary higher education sector. Despite being a 'primordial' degree that has endured since universities began in the eleventh century, the BA is frequently derided in popular discourse as having no value or relevance in the modern knowledge economy (Gannaway, 2015). Central to this attack is the persistent refrain that Arts graduates lack practical skills necessary to enter the job market and are ultimately less employable (Ashton et al., 2023). Given the increasing importance of the discourse of employability to how the modern university conceives of its key mission (Lock & Kelly, 2020), this perception has significant implications for the precarious position of the BA (McCormack & Baron, 2023). As Gannaway (2015) writes, there is enormous pressure on the BA in countries like Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, with public funding for

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humanities and social science (HASS) departments slashed and universities variously restructuring, rationalising and refreshing Arts degrees.

In Australia, the notion that the BA is of less value from an employment perspective became enshrined in the university funding structure in 2020 with the passing of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill*. Intended to incentivise students to study areas deemed to be of national priority, the 'Job-Ready' reforms more than doubled student fees for HASS courses, making the BA the most expensive degree in the country. These reforms were widely condemned by HASS leaders, who declared them 'the greatest hit to the humanities sector in a century' and 'a slippery downward slope' (Damousi in Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2020).

But contrary to the perceived lack of 'job-readiness' of Arts graduates, evidence suggests a more nuanced picture. While true that traditional Arts degrees have a more generalist and less vocational emphasis (Carr, 2009), research indicates that Arts graduates achieve relatively good employment outcomes. A 2020 Australian study showed that more humanities graduates were in employment three years after finishing their degrees than science and maths graduates (91.1% compared to 90.1%); they also earnt higher average annual incomes at $70,300 compared to $68,900 (QILT, 2020). Not only that, but BA graduates enter a wider range of industries and are over-represented in the highest tiers of many sectors. Indeed, two-thirds of Chief Executives in ASX200 companies have a humanities degree, as do 62% of senior government executives and 66% of federal parliamentarians, with 10 out of 29 Australian Prime Ministers possessing a BA qualification (Academy of Social Sciences, 2017). Overall, according to the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, HASS graduates supply almost two-thirds of Australia's total workforce (DASSH, 2018). Employers, too, value the type of general skills the BA produces, from critical thinking, ethical reasoning, creativity to innovation (Deloitte, 2018). The broad flexible nature of a BA degree is frequently lauded as a 'training ground' that enables graduates to develop the necessary skills and adaptability required to meet rapidly changing job markets (Barnett, 2004).

Given this, a critical disjuncture emerges. On the one hand, there is a growing discourse portraying the BA as a degree with poor employment outcomes, which has led to numerous recent reforms – initiated both by those working within the sector as well as by politicians and policymakers – to variously refresh the degree or to incentivise students to study areas with better perceived employment outcomes. On the other hand, evidence shows that the BA both opens doors to employment in a diverse array of industries and sectors and is a degree that produces numerous graduate attributes that employers identify as invaluable.

The challenge of overcoming this disjuncture is vitally important for numerous reasons and stakeholders, but none more so than ensuring current and prospective BA students have an accurate appreciation of the degree's job-readiness. This is important as research has identified that the perceived lack of career purpose and direction in generalist degrees is a key factor contributing to student attrition, dissatisfaction and sense of belonging (Kahu et al., 2022; Mestan, 2016). Given this, there is a need for more interventions highlighting the BA's professional purpose to address these issues (Bridgeman, 2019; also see Pedler et al., 2022).

This article does this through a pilot intervention designed to enhance first-year student perceptions of the employability of Arts graduates through a series of careers-

focused events featuring professionals who hold a BA qualification. The project sought to answer two main research questions: (1) Do careers-focused events that introduce students to professionals with a BA qualification enhance perceptions of employability and awareness of career prospects for Arts students? (2) Do careers-focused events improve students' sense of belonging to the school and university? The findings confirmed that students enrolled in generalist degrees like the BA do have lower perceived future career prospects as per prominent findings in the literature. However, we found that these perceptions of career prospects and levels of student belonging did become more positive as a result of our intervention While our study is small and has some key limitations, we argue that it offers promising implications for theorising the relationships between employability, perceived career prospects and sense of belonging for BA students that can form the basis of future research.

2. Background: employability and the bachelor of arts

Transformations in higher education over the last two decades have seen employability become an increasingly central concern in the sector (Oliver, 2015; Small et al., 2022). This has seen universities routinely survey employers as part of their mandate and emphasise the employability of their students in marketing and promotional materials (Lock & Kelly, 2020). The rise of the 'employability agenda' (Moore & Morton, 2017) has been matched by a developing scholarly literature seeking to make sense of the concept and its implications for higher learning. Earlier studies tended to use the employability concept synonymously with the development of generic skills or alternatively as a simple proxy for employment (Jackson, 2016). More recent scholarship has sought a more robust conception of employability that accounts for personal and professional capabilities, career-management skills and the development of professional identity, among others (Jackson & Dean, 2022; Small et al., 2018). The question of what employability actually means and how best to operationalise it has given rise to a range of inquiries and debates, including the extent to which a narrow focus on work conflicts with the traditional purpose of higher education (Yorke & Knight, 2006).

Of growing significance in the literature are students' perceptions of their employability and how these impact study satisfaction and success (Lock & Kelly, 2020). Perceived employability refers to perceptions and expectations students hold about their future employment status, career opportunities and ability to find and maintain employment (Vanhercke et al., 2014). It is apparent that employability is of particular concern for students. While interest remains the predominant reason for the decision to enrol at university, the 2014 First-Year Experience survey saw 87% of students citing improving their job-prospects and 77% citing training for a specific job as key considerations (Baik et al., 2015, pp. 23–24). Furthermore, research indicates that students who have a level of certainty regarding their education-employment pathways achieve better outcomes within higher education (Lock & Kelly, 2020). Jackson and Wilton (2017), for instance, report a positive correlation between early informed career choices and student well-being as well as academic performance. There is also evidence that this has flow-on implications as students enter the workforce, with those who were less certain about their study choices experiencing greater feelings of incompetence at work (Daniels et al., 2006).

There are a range of internal and external factors that influence perceived employability, including feelings about one's skills and competencies, the current state of the labour market, university reputation, the nature of the degree and the prestige of the field of study (Rothwell et al., 2008). In the case of the BA, its low prestige and generalist nature, coupled with the consistent negative messaging about its value in the labour market, means it faces serious challenges when it comes to students' perceptions of employability. Not only is it more difficult for BA students to visualise and understand the relationship between study and employment (Gannaway, 2015), but the diverse nature and structure of the traditional BA makes it trickier to establish a strong sense of cohort identity, peer relationships and, ultimately, a sense of belonging. According to scholars such as Jackson (2016), Van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman (2020), student sense of belonging – conceptualised as either an 'affinity with their institution' or as 'communities of practice' comprised of professional associations, student societies, academics and careers services – is crucial both to mitigating against student attrition and helping students comprehend their intended profession. There is an evident relationship between a perceived lack of employability for BA graduates and these issues (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Mestan, 2016; Thomas, 2012; Wilcoxson & Wynder, 2010). However, research is only just beginning to appreciate how messaging about the value and career prospects of certain degrees influences student experiences (Bennett et al., 2020) and to date there are no studies explicitly exploring perceived employability in the context of the BA.

Given its wide-ranging significance, the ways in which student perceptions of their employability can improve their overall university experiences has emerged as a critical issue for higher education (Akoto et al., 2022). As Lock and Kelly (2020) report, student expectations and knowledge about education-employment pathways are not always accurate due to the complex, dynamic, ambiguous and shifting character of the current and future world of work. Giving students up to date and accurate information about career pathways and employment opportunities is thus increasingly regarded as essential, even in those disciplines that are aligned with specific professions (Bennett et al., 2015). Studies have variously highlighted the importance of prompting students to make sense of their employability through the capabilities they develop throughout their degree (Jorre De St De Jorre & Beverley, 2018), embedding 'career previews' in university courses (Bennet & Bridgstock, 2014) and explicit career-conversations supported by career practitioners within discipline studies (Bennett et al., 2020). In a 2013 report on the employability of Arts graduates, Harvey and Shahjahan (2013, p. 6) similarly noted the importance of educating 'the community, employers and future BA graduates of the strengths [within the degree] as well as the value of a broad liberal education'. However, there is still little known about how to promote perceived employability in general (Bozgeyikli et al., 2023), and for BA students specifically.

3. The intervention

Our project sought to develop student understandings of career pathways and employment opportunities for BA graduates through a careers-focused orientation program. The pilot program was targeted at first-year students enrolled in the National School of Arts at the Melbourne campus of the Australian Catholic University (ACU). It involved two interventions: (1) a large careers panel event held in Semester One of

2021 and (2) a series of smaller careers-focused workshops held in Semester Two of 2021. The panel event featured four high-profile professionals from the private and public sectors who hold a BA qualification. The professionals were invited to speak about how their studies influenced their career trajectories and the ways in which they utilise their BA training in their working lives, followed by a question-and-answer session with students. The workshop events targeted career trajectories in the social sciences, humanities and creative industries and featured ACU alumni from these various Arts disciplines who spoke to their professional journeys post-graduation. The workshops were facilitated by an ACU faculty member with expertise in the specific area and involved small group discussion about career pathways with Arts alumni speakers as well as practical advice on writing CVs and where to look for jobs. Panel and workshop speakers were sourced through the organisers' personal networks. While both interventions were originally planned as in-person events to be held on campus, COVID-19 restrictions meant that all events were ultimately held online via Zoom.

3.1 Rationale and hypotheses

Inspired by Bennett et al.'s (2020) research on the relationship between the 'career thinking' of STEM students and public messaging about the future of work, and López-Íñiguez and Bennett's (2021) scaffolded employability intervention, we sought to explore whether holding a series of careers-focused events featuring professionals with a BA qualification would enhance perceptions of employability for Arts students and improve their sense of belonging at university. Holding career conversations as part of an extended orientation for first-year students was deemed appropriate, given the identification of the first-year of higher education study as a crucial adjustment period with important implications for student belonging, attrition and future study success (Kift, 2015). Not only are extended transition events extremely beneficial in fostering student engagement and belonging (Kift, 2015), but explicit careers-focused orientation events have been put to good effect in professional degrees like law, where they are used to develop a unique sense of cohort identity and degree prestige (Armstrong & Sanson, 2012). Furthermore, research has shown that a 'future orientation' – that is, an orientation programme with clear direction and sense of purpose – can enhance student success and sense of belonging to their studies (Horstmanhof & Zimitat, 2007). Given this, our project was driven by two hypotheses:

> H1: Careers-focused events featuring BA qualified professionals will enhance perceptions of employability for Arts students.

> H2: Careers-focused events will enhance cohort identity and future orientation for students and therefore foster an improved sense of belonging.

4. Research design and methods

In order to evaluate the extent to which the intervention was successful in changing perceptions of Arts graduate employability and increasing student sense of belonging, we conducted two online surveys in 2021: the first at the beginning of Semester 1 and second at the end of Semester 2. The research was carried out in accordance with

standards of ethical conduct and approved by ACU Ethics Committee (2020-250E). The mostly identical surveys were predominantly quantitative but had a qualitative component as well. The surveys were administered to first-year students across the entire National School of Arts, which includes campuses in North Sydney, Strathfield, Brisbane and Melbourne. Participants were recruited through emails sent by the School and those who consented to take part in the study were provided a link to the questionnaire, which was hosted on the Qualtrics online survey platform. Data for the first survey was collected during March 2021 while data for the second survey was collected during October 2021. Quantitative data were analysed by AC using SPSS v. 28.0.1.0. and Jamovi version 2.2.2. Qualitative responses were analysed using NVivo for common themes and differences between the two waves.

4.1 Survey design

Both anonymous surveys collected demographic information (gender, age, degree type and campus), however the second survey also collected information related to the two careers events held just for students on the Melbourne campus. The surveys included two pilot scales designed to measure students' perceived career prospects and sense of belonging, as well as two qualitative questions.

4.1.1 Career prospects scale

Firstly, a questionnaire consisting of 14 items was constructed to measure student perceptions of Arts graduate employability and their own imagined future career prospects (see Appendix A1). Respondents were required to respond to each item on a Likert scale, with 1 = *Strongly Agree* to 5 = *Strongly Disagree*. Examples of the items include *My degree will help me get the job that I want* and *The job prospects for Arts graduates are positive*. Items were reverse coded so that higher scores represented higher perceived career prospects. Preliminary analyses showed strong inter-item reliability, Cronbach's α = .815. Three items (7,8 and 14) were removed due to low and negative correlations with other items. The final scale of 11 items showed a marked increase in reliability, Cronbach's α = .873. Missing values ($n = 6$) were substituted with the sample mean.

4.1.2 Belonging scale

Secondly, a questionnaire of 11 items was constructed to measure student sense of belonging to their cohort and university (see Appendix A2). Respondents were required to respond to each item on a Likert scale, with 1 = *Strongly Agree* to 5 = *Strongly Disagree*. Examples of the items include *I feel like I really belong to the University* and *I feel connected to my peers and fellow Arts students*. Items were reverse coded so that higher scores represented a higher sense of belonging. Preliminary analysis showed strong inter-item reliability, Cronbach's α = .914. Missing values ($n = 5$) were substituted with the sample mean.

4.1.3 Qualitative questions

Survey respondents were also asked two open-ended questions. The first was included immediately following the Career Prospects scale, asking *Where do you see yourself in five years time, career-wise?* This question was intended as a proxy for future orientation.

The second immediately followed the Belonging scale at the end of the survey, asking *Is there anything else about your study experience that you'd like to add?* to garner additional information on measures that may have inadvertently been excluded from the scale.

5. Data analysis and findings

A total of 158 survey responses were received across both time points, with 100 (63%) responses recorded in Semester 1 and 58 (37%) responses in Semester 2. The career prospects qualitative question had 135 responses across both collection waves (85% response rate; Semester 1 [$n = 88$], Semester 2 [$n = 47$]) while the belonging qualitative question had 38 responses across both collection waves (24% response rate; Semester 1 [$n = 17$], Semester 2 [$n = 21$]). Frequencies for gender, age, degree type, campus and event attendance are presented in Table 1. An iterative process to collapse the degree types into general categories was undertaken due to the diversity of degrees pursued by students. Students studying Education as part of a dual Arts degree were collapsed into an 'Education' category. Students studying so-called 'tagged' degrees that draw on Arts majors (Gannaway, 2015), like Global Studies, were collapsed into an 'Arts' category alongside BA students. Finally, students studying dual Arts degrees with Law and Commerce and degrees with a more professional focus, like Youth Work, International Development Studies and Visual Arts and Design, were collapsed into a 'Vocational' category. The BA was the most frequently reported degree in Semesters 1 ($n = 22$) and 2 ($n = 31$).

A total of 58 students attended the Careers Panel ($n = 32$) and the Careers Workshops ($n = 26$). It is unclear how many students attended both events. However, only nine survey respondents indicated they had attended one or both events, comprising a minority of attendees in any case. Thus, a single measure of Attendance, incorporating attendees to one or both events, was utilised when analysing the differences in Career Prospects and Belonging outcomes. Inferential analyses concerning Attendance only included Melbourne campus students from Semester Two ($n = 32$), as this was the time and location from which the data on Attendance was collected. Of the nine

Table 1. Participant characteristics in Semester 1 and Semester 2, frequency (percentage).

	Semester One	Semester Two	Total
Gender			
Female	78 (78)	39 (67)	117 (74)
Male	22 (22)	16 (28)	38 (24)
Non-binary	0 (0)	3 (5)	3 (2)
Age			
17–19	72 (72)	35 (60)	107 (68)
20+	28 (28)	23 (40)	51 (32)
Degree type			
Education	30 (30)	21 (36)	51 (32)
Arts	36 (36)	29 (50)	65 (41)
Vocational	34 (34)	8 (14)	42 (27)
Campus			
Non-Melbourne	64 (64)	26 (45)	90 (57)
Melbourne	36 (36)	32 (55)	68 (43)
[a]Did you attend a Careers Panel/Workshop?			
Yes	N/A	9 (26)	9 (26)
No	N/A	26 (74)	26 (74)

[a]Differs from sample size ($n = 158$) as Careers events took place in Semester Two, at Melbourne Campus ($n = 9$).

participants who indicated attendance at the Careers Panel, only one did not also attend the Careers Workshop. Due to the relatively low number of Panel and Workshop attendees who participated in the survey ($n = 9$), it was decided that this participant's scores on Career Prospects (mean score of individual = 4.45) and Belonging (mean score of individual = 4.92) would be included amongst those who attended both events in subsequent analyses.

Chi-square tests for independence found significant differences in the group sizes for gender, χ^2 ($df = 2$, $N = 158$) = 6.22, $p = .045$ and campus, χ^2 ($df = 1$, $N = 158$) = 5.50, $p = .019$. To compensate for the unequal gender distribution, a weighting based on Australian population data (ABS, 2016) was applied to subsequent analyses. Due to a lack of population level data on non-binary people, the weighting was unfortunately unable to adjust for them adequately and they were excluded from subsequent quantitative analyses. Campus enrolment data broken down by gender and pertaining specifically to the sample pool was not available, and so we were unable to weight by campus and gender.

A bivariate Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the association between the dependent variables. The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between Career Prospects and Belonging, $r = .54$, $N = 168$, $p < .001$. This moderate correlation suggests that perceived career prospects account for 29% of the variance in sense of belonging. Furthermore, the relationship between the variables is not strong enough to indicate concerns with collinearity.

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations and range values for the dependent variables. The table demonstrates some range restriction in both Career Prospects and Belonging, with minimum values close to or exceeding the mid points of both scales.

5.1 Career prospects by attendance

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether perceived Career Prospects differed by attendance at a careers event. A significant difference in Career

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values of dependent variables.

	Career prospects				Belonging			
	M	SD	Min	Max	M	SD	Min	Max
Gender								
Female	3.9	0.60	2.36	5.00	4.1	0.64	2.50	5.00
Male	3.9	0.81	1.91	5.00	4.03	0.69	2.67	5.00
Non-binary	4.61	0.53	4.00	5.00	4.72	0.48	4.17	5.00
Age								
17–19	3.95	0.62	1.91	5.00	4.11	0.66	2.50	5.00
20+	3.86	0.75	1.91	5.00	4.09	0.65	2.58	5.00
Degree								
Arts	3.72	0.70	1.91	5.00	4.08	0.65	2.67	5.00
Vocational	3.87	0.67	2.36	5.00	4.17	0.67	2.50	5.00
Education	4.21	0.49	2.82	5.00	4.07	0.65	2.58	5.00
Campus								
Non-Melbourne	3.88	0.66	1.91	5.00	4.04	0.67	2.58	5.00
Melbourne	3.96	0.66	1.91	5.00	4.18	0.62	2.50	5.00
Semester								
One	3.89	0.62	1.91	5.00	4.08	0.63	2.58	5.00
Two	3.96	0.73	1.91	5.00	4.14	0.70	2.50	5.00
Total	3.92	0.66	1.91	5.00	4.1	0.65	2.50	5.00

Prospects between those who attended ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.53$) and those who did not attend the careers events ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.48$) was found, with attendees reporting significantly higher Career Prospects, t (33) = 3.41, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.27$, 95% CI [0.47, 2.06].

A standard multiple regression was conducted to determine whether gender, age, degree type, campus group and semester group predicted perceived Career Prospects. In combination, the predictors made a significant contribution to prediction of the DV, accounting for approximately 18% of variance in Career Prospects, $R^2 = .18$, (*Adj.* $R^2 = .16$), F(5, 162) = 7.24, $p < .001$. Of the five predictors, only degree type ($\beta = .40$, $t = 5.48$ $p < .001$) and campus group ($\beta = .17$, $t = 2.32$, $p = .022$) made significant unique contributions, accounting for 16% and 3% of the variance in the DV, respectively.

Not all students who attended a careers event responded to the qualitative question of where they saw their career in five years' time. Of those who did, most were very clear on their goals (e.g., *public service*, *legal profession*, *non-profit sector*, *research and sociology field*) while others were vaguer but still purposeful (e.g., *hopefully making a positive impact to my community through my career*).

5.1.1 Career prospects by degree type

Further statistical investigations were conducted to examine the role of the unique predictors revealed in the multiple regression analyses. A factorial analysis of variance was conducted to examine the group differences in perceived Career Prospects between degree types in combination with campus groups. This two-way ANOVA demonstrated no significant interaction between degree type and campus group, despite a significant yet weak negative correlation between them ($r = -.18$, $p = .010$), and no main effect of campus group. A main effect of degree type was found, F(3, 185) = 13.92, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$. Tukey's HSD post hoc analyses revealed perceived Career Prospects were significantly lower among students studying Arts degrees ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.77$) than those studying Vocational ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.68$) or Education degrees ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.48$). Vocational students also had significantly lower perceived Career Prospects than Education students (see Figure 1).

This was strongly reflected in the qualitative data where students studying Arts degrees were more likely to indicate uncertainty about future career paths than students in Vocational degrees who typically cited their specific area of study. Education students had clearer and more robust answers connected to teaching. A word cloud visualisation confirmed that the most prevalent words used in this answer from both waves were those related to education, such as *Teaching*, *School* and *Teacher*.

5.3 Relationship to belonging

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether sense of belonging differed by attendance at a careers event. A significant difference in belonging between those who attended ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 0.39$) and those who did not attend the careers events ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.63$) was found, with attendees reporting a significantly higher sense of belonging, t (33) = 3.39, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.27$, 95% CI [0.47, 2.06].

A standard multiple regression was conducted to determine whether gender, age, degree type, campus group and semester group predicted sense of belonging. In
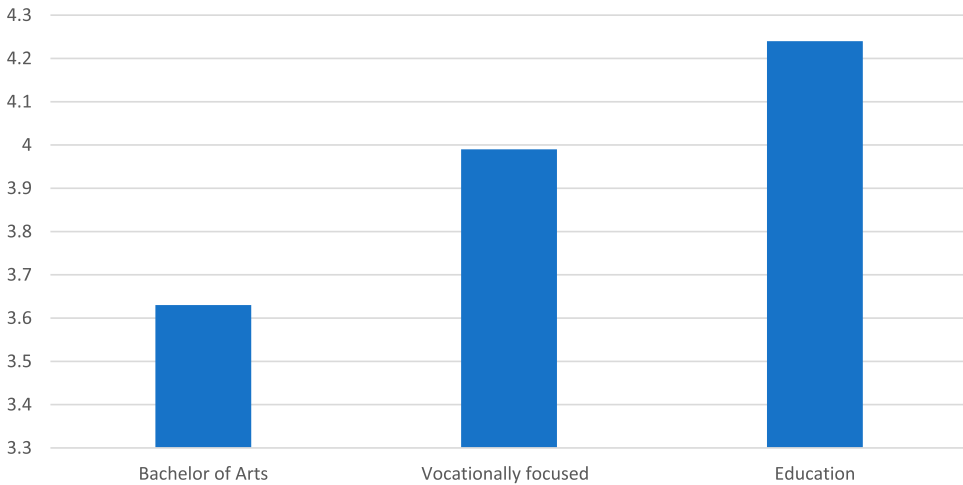
Figure 1. Mean career prospects by degree type (weighted by gender).

combination, the five predictors did not make a significant contribution to prediction of the DV. However, degree type made a significant unique contribution ($\beta = .17$, $t = 2.10$, $p = .037$), accounting for approximately 3% of the variance in the DV.

A One-Way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference in sense of belonging between students enrolled in different degrees. There was no main effect of degree type on belonging according to a One-Way ANOVA analysis.

More students responded to the qualitative belonging question in Semester 2 ($n = 18$) than Semester 1 ($n = 11$). Responses were generally more positive in the first wave with COVID-19 and dissatisfaction with online study featuring prominently in the second wave, particularly for those who indicated attendance at a careers event.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study trialled a pilot program intended to enhance first-year student perceptions of the employability of Arts graduates through a series of career-focused events featuring professionals with a BA qualification. Our hypotheses were that students who attended these events would have significantly higher perceived career prospects (H1) and higher levels of belonging (H2) than those who did not. Both hypotheses were broadly supported through our intervention, which suggests that the program could be viewed as successful.

With respect to H1, the opportunity to learn about what kinds of careers a BA can lead to was associated with higher perceived career prospects. This finding therefore adds weight to existing studies that show explicit career discussions are beneficial for improving student perceptions of employability (Bennett et al., 2015). It also addresses a notable gap by bringing this to bear on BA students specifically. Although we were not able to measure the accuracy of students' career prospects (Lock & Kelly, 2020), providing students with examples of and information about career pathways is likely to reduce misconceptions some students may have about the opportunities these degrees provide.

Given the prevalence and persistence of negative representations of the job relevance of BA degrees, it indicates that this type of messaging is amenable to intervention, at least for students. In this regard, the study suggests that these kinds of initiatives may improve outcomes for students if implemented on a broader scale within university settings.

With respect to H2, while our careers events attendees reported higher levels of belonging, the precise relationship between event attendance and belonging was not clear. It could be that the career conversations themselves afforded students the type of future orientation that has been shown to be significant in fostering student belonging (Horstmanhof & Zimitat, 2007). It is also possible that the opportunity to meet other students and faculty members was instrumental in creating a greater sense of belonging, which would support existing findings on the importance of extended first-year orientation programs (Kift, 2015) as well as opportunities for staff-student interaction and peer relations (Thomas, 2012). Our sample was also self-selecting, meaning that those students who attended the events and responded to the survey may well have already been more engaged with their studies and the life of the university. Their elevated sense of belonging may be attributed to this. Interestingly, though, we found that campus had no significant effect on levels of belonging in our sample. This was surprising because Melbourne was mostly locked down throughout 2021 as a result of COVID-19 restrictions whereas the other cities were not. Given this, Melbourne students did not experience the normal first-year orientation events and in-person classes and seminars that non-Melbourne students did. It is possible that the level of face-to-face interaction that Melbourne students had, in conjunction with their online learning environments, was enough to help them feel connected and integrated with their peers and faculty, but the precise nature of this relationship is unclear.

Given this, the connection between awareness of career pathways, opportunities for staff-peer-student interaction, type of interaction (virtual or face-to-face) and sense of belonging is an important area for future inquiry as disaggregating these variables would assist in program design. Integrating discussions of employability into curriculum (Bennett et al., 2020) as opposed to holding them as extracurricular activities would be beneficial in this regard. We were also unable to test the outcome of the intervention on actual student attrition, with which belonging has a close relationship (Thomas, 2012) as does clarity on study-career pathways (Wilcoxson & Wynder, 2010). This is an important avenue for future investigation given the recognised impact of attrition in BA degrees and the importance of enhancing student retention rates for universities (Mestan, 2016).

Overall, our study lends support to broader findings that students in generalist degrees like the BA have lower perceptions of their employability than students in professional or specialist degrees. Indeed, we found that degree type was the most significant variable in predicting higher perceived career prospects. Students studying more specifically career-focused degrees had higher perceived career prospects than those studying generalist degrees. While this finding has obvious implications for the BA and other generalist degrees, it may be necessary to interpret this data against other studies that have shown that the BA tends to be more attractive to students who are less certain about what they would like to do in their future career (Mestan, 2016).

Finally, unlike other studies (Bowles & Brindle, 2017; Bozgeyikli et al., 2023), our study did not show variables such as gender and age to impact on the awareness of career

pathways and perceived employability. With respect to the effect of campus, the regression indicated a weak significant prediction between campus and perceived career prospects, but this could be an artefact of the campus group's correlation with degree type and the uneven distributions of degree type across campus (see Table 2).

While this study's findings offer promising implications for increasing Arts students' perception of their career prospects and sense of belonging, there are limitations that need to be acknowledged, too. The average Careers Prospects and Belonging levels in the sample were high relative to the mid-point and range of the scales, suggesting that students who were inclined to participate in the survey were those already more aware of the opportunities enabled by their degree and more engaged with their cohort, lecturers, and the university. As such, our sample may not be generalisable to the broader population of undergraduate Arts students. Furthermore, the limited response rate from those who attended the careers events is of particular concern. It is possible that confounding factors influenced this low rate, such as attrition from university or disengagement from the course. This would in turn inflate the levels of Careers Prospects and Belonging, increasing the chance our significant findings are false positives. Future research could potentially offer incentives for participation to increase the overall response rate, such as entry into a prize draw. Notably, we are unable to infer a direct influence of the careers events on the levels of Career Prospects and Belonging as we did not intentionally sample the same students in Semester 1 and Semester 2, which would have allowed us to compare any changes within those who attended the events. Future interventions could also include a question in the follow-up survey on whether and in what ways the careers events – and any other factors or experiences – influenced students' career thinking following the first survey.

Nevertheless, this study makes several important practical and theoretical contributions. Practically, the study comes at an important political juncture when university leaders and politicians across Australia are again debating the assumptions embedded in the Job-ready Graduates Package. For advocates of degrees such as the BA, which has been so adversely affected by the Job-ready policy, this debate is an important opportunity to demonstrate why the degree is careers-focused and how it can offer graduates a diverse range of in-demand graduate attributes and career pathways. The key practical contribution that our study makes in this respect is to show that enhancing students' perceived career prospects and sense of belonging – critical attributes for graduate success – can be achieved via a relatively simple and cost-effective intervention in the form of a careers-focused orientation program. While our findings have their limitations, it raises key questions about the necessity of the heavy-handed, and in some instances costly, initiatives currently seen in universities to restructure and refresh their Arts degrees to ensure they become more professional and careers-focused. Beyond smarter initiatives to emphasise the diverse types of careers and skills that the BA produces to its students, what studies like this ultimately demonstrate is that leaving the BA to do what it has done for centuries – exposing students to different understandings of the human condition while developing their skills in critical and creative thinking, problem solving, literacy, communication and self-awareness – may be the best thing we can do to ensure a workforce that is truly ready for the future.

Theoretically, our study brings the BA as a degree to bear on discussions of how students' perceived career prospects and sense of belonging can be enhanced through

transition and future orientations, particularly those featuring careers-focused events (Armstrong & Sanson, 2012; Kift, 2015). The broad takeaway is that even for degrees like the BA, which have diverse career pathways and weaker cohort identity and peer relationships relative to professional degrees, there is scope to nurture students' perceived career prospects and sense of belonging through careers-focused future orientation events. Such findings speak directly to the scholarship that contends that communities of practice in higher education can lead both to a greater sense of student belonging within universities as well as a pre-professional identity that links students to their intended profession once they leave university (Jackson, 2016). Careers-focused future orientations for BA students, who may be less aware of or concerned with what professional outcomes an Arts degree can produce, should thus be seen as an essential community of practice that more universities should initiate to engage new students with the diverse array of professionals, employers and careers in their fields. Embedding BA students within this community of practice, among the many others they will encounter at university, will not only 'give them a sense of purpose and meaning in relation to their current position' as students, according to Jackson (2016, p., p. 926). It will also enable them to 'visualise and imagine themselves as a graduate and novice professional' – an essential attribute for enhanced perceived career prospects and graduate employability.

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Appendices

Appendix A1

Career Prospects Scale.

Item number and content	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I have a clear idea of what career I would like to pursue when I complete my studies.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. My future career plans played a role in my decision to study Arts.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Future employment prospects matter a lot for what I choose to study.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. My degree will help me to get the job that I want.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. I feel informed about the future career options for Arts graduates.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. The job prospects for Arts graduates are positive.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Finding a job is the most important thing when studying.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. I am not sure what subject knowledge I will need for my preferred future career.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. Arts graduates have valuable skills to offer employers.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. My possibilities of finding and maintaining employment after I complete my degree are good.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. Arts degrees are worth the fees.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. I am confident that my Arts degree will be an asset on the labour market once I have graduated.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13. I have a clear idea of the specific skills afforded by my arts degree.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14. If you're combining a Bachelor of Arts with another degree, I see my career prospects as higher in my non-Arts degree.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Note: Italicised items were removed from the final scale due to negative (items 7 and 8), and low (item 14) correlations with the total scale.

Appendix A2

Belonging Scale.

Item number and content	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I have found the School of Arts to be welcoming.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. I feel like I really belong to the University.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. I have meaningful interactions with teaching staff.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. I am proud to study Arts.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. I feel connected to my peers and fellow Arts students.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. I find my studies engaging.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. There is a good culture on campus.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. There is a good culture in the School of Arts.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. I am happy with my choice to study Arts at ACU.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. I feel supported and respected on campus.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. Arts students have a distinct identity at ACU.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐