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# Arts employability and extracurricular communities of practice: A case study of the University of Melbourne's creative community connections

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## Abstract

Developing student employability is a key strategy within institutions of higher education, particularly for students in creative industries where labour market supply has outpaced employer demand. Existing literature shows that activities that promote communities of practice offer clear employability benefits for students. However, such activities are often centred within university curriculum or driven by career development units with limited student engagement. This article considers an alternative approach, an academically-supported career community delivered as an extracurricular activity within an arts and cultural management graduate program at the University of Melbourne. Drawing on program metrics and an anonymous survey of participants in the program's pilot iteration, we find evidence of a flexible career community built around the intelligent career theory tenets of *knowing how* and *knowing whom*, in which participants experienced positive and discipline-specific impacts related to employability and increased self-confidence in approaching the arts and cultural labour market.

## Keywords

Arts employability, communities of practice, arts education, career communities, arts and cultural management

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## Introduction

Aspiring cultural workers face significant obstacles in gaining employment. Work in the arts and cultural sector is characterized by its precarity, with careers often pieced together from a combination of casual and part-time contracts, self-employment, and unpaid internships (Cuny et al., 2022; Nelligan and Nelligan, 2021; Pennington and Eltham, 2021). Career sustainability and success in the arts are further impacted by a complex interplay of individual and social contexts, including personal agency, practical work experience, and professional connections (Australia Council for the Arts, 2015; Daniel, 2016; Vincent et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the production of "job-ready graduates" (Ashton et al., 2023: 106) has exceeded the number of available jobs, particularly in the creative industries where work is often flexible, casual and contractually based (McRobbie, 2016; Pennington and Eltham, 2021).

Given these challenges, higher education institutions that offer vocationally-focused arts management programs have a vested interest in enhancing student career outcomes after graduation (Bennett et al., 2019). For some institutions, post-graduation employment plays a role in recruitment strategies, with universities attempting to recruit potential students by highlighting their graduates' labour market success (Bennett et al., 2019). In the arts sector, however, educational pathways to employment are less institutionally or occupationally defined (Ashton, 2015a). Furthermore, research shows that the skills recruited in arts organizations are often more focused on the 'management' side of 'arts management' (Kershaw et al., 2022), which can leave students who come from arts backgrounds less prepared for available roles. Accordingly, recognizing the need to develop what Ashton (2013) calls "cultural workers in-the-making," many institutions of higher education have implemented varying strategies to try to promote student 'employability' (McCormack and Baron, 2023; Small et al., 2022). One such approach is the establishment of structured, student-facing communities of practice within the university setting (deChambeau, 2017).

Communities of practice, or systems that situate learning within a social context, have been shown to have a positive impact on participants. In addition to promoting skills development, communities of practice offer psychosocial benefits and function as places of identity formation (Goodwin, 2019; McLeod et al., 2011; Wenger, 1998). Career communities are framed as a specific sub-group of communities of practice built around the shared development of career-based knowledge and understanding. While still providing the broader benefits associated with communities of practice, career communities also help participants in the process of career 'sensemaking,' supporting career planning and professional self-efficacy (Parker et al., 2004; Weick, 1995).

Since the concept was introduced in the late 1990s, scholars such as Mavri et al. (2020), Trottier (2021), and Albrecht (2012) have considered how communities of practice function within educational contexts. These scholars commonly focus on communities of practice as aspects of curriculum design: implemented within both coursework content and formalized educational structures. However, less research has explored the use of communities of practice—or the sub-group career communities—as

an *extracurricular* component of an educational program. Given the demonstrated importance of employability as a means for promoting graduate labour market success, the extracurricular aspects of a program clearly pose potential as part of a broader employability strategy.

In order to expand understanding of this potential in practice, this article presents a case study of an extracurricular community of practice piloted by the University of Melbourne's Arts and Cultural Management graduate program in 2022. The Creative Community Connections initiative was designed to establish a career-focused community of practice, or career community, within the program's graduate student cohort. Using evaluative data compiled from an anonymous survey of 57 program participants and quantitative data compiled from event attendance and engagement with the initiative's online platform, this paper demonstrates how the program aligned with the objectives of a career community by increasing the self-perceived employability of participating students. We then consider the extent to which the program's extracurricular and 'opt-in' design facilitated this aim, illustrating the potential posed by extracurricular career communities as a critical supplement to support university employability schemes.

The article begins by outlining the characteristics of communities of practice and career communities. Next, we examine the existing function of both communities of practice and career communities within broader employability strategies in higher education. In the third section, we introduce the case study of Creative Community Connections, including its structure, design, and programmed activities. The fourth section outlines the methodology used to assess the initiative's impact on participating students. In the fifth section, we present the findings from our analysis and draw on the career community model and intelligent career theories to consider the degree to which Creative Community Connections promoted students' employability skills by means of its structural design. We close by considering the broader implications of the program in the context of employability scholarship and consider practical applications in other university contexts and the broader cultural sector.

We present two key arguments as a result of our analysis. First, we argue that Creative Community Connections was largely successful as a career community, built on the shared practice of job search and skill development, that increased participants' employability skills. We identify measurable positive impacts on students who joined the initiative, including an increased understanding of the cultural labour market and how to navigate it, and improved self-confidence in seeking employment opportunities. Second, we argue that a number of the benefits of the initiative can be attributed to its extracurricular structural design, including its customizable layers of engagement modes. As a result, Creative Community Connections has the potential to serve as a best practice model for other educational institutions aiming to promote student employability through extracurricular means. More broadly, we frame this case study as making an active contribution to theoretical discussions of career-oriented communities of practice by means of its targeted analysis of employability and skill development in the context of cultural work.

## Career-oriented communities of practice

Communities of practice are generally presented as a learning system. They consist of groups of individuals who share a concern, issue, or passion about a topic and enhance their expertise in this area through regular interaction (Wenger et al., 2002: 4). Members join the community as a novice and, as they gradually build their knowledge and identity through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), move from the periphery to the centre of the community, where they ultimately function as 'experts' supporting new novices (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice can operate in person or virtually. However, virtual communities do not have the same advantages as physical communities of practice, which incorporate the social geniality of face-to-face contact and discussion (Haas et al., 2021).

Communities of practice offer the benefit of social learning, but also act as spaces for identity formation, where members negotiate the meaning of their experiences and membership in social communities (Wenger, 1998: 145). However, they can also have tangible career impacts: promoting a positive psychosocial outlook that helps participants develop a sense of optimism and self-efficacy (Goodwin, 2019) and build 'everyday leadership development' (Kjærgaard and Meier, 2022). Higgins et al. (2010: 9) argue that the kinds of "development networks" enabled through communities of practice impact "organizational commitment, work satisfaction, clarity of professional identity, and career advancement", all of which can support a participant's career trajectory.

As a key sub-group of communities of practice, career communities particularly emphasize professional identity development and focus on supporting participants' career advancement (Parker et al., 2004). Career communities engage in the shared practice of career understanding, supporting members through mutual networking, a shared construction of reputation, and connection with other individuals in the same discipline as a means for sharing experiences—all of which help to drive participants' understanding of their employability (Hennekam et al., 2021). As in communities of practice, community development is an emergent and continuous process in which participants regularly undertake "thinking together" (Pyrko et al., 2017) to approach and consider real-life issues and requisite skills for career satisfaction.

Career communities build on the work of Arthur et al.'s (1995) intelligent career theory to highlight the functionality of employability and how it can be developed. Arthur et al. refer to three ways of knowing: *knowing why, knowing how,* and *knowing whom*. *Knowing why* describes how an individual reflects on their motivation and values and constructs their professional identity, including non-professional factors such as geography and lifestyle. *Knowing how* describes an individual's skills and knowledge and how they can be applied to a work setting. Finally, *knowing whom* relates to the networks that enable an individual to succeed in their career goals, not only by providing psychosocial support but by helping them to establish their professional reputation. This framing emphasizes the holistic nature of employability in practice. As Ashton (2015a: 395) explains, "the possibilities for undertaking creative work cannot be separated from creative worker identities, workplace cultures and industry contexts."

Both communities of practice and career communities are recognized as being increasingly applicable to cultural labour markets because of the field's network-based and relational employment structures, as well as its longstanding structural inequalities (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020; Brook et al., 2020; Ashton, 2015b; Ashton, 2015a). As McRobbie (2016) argues, there have been growing levels of precarity in cultural employment and an increased expectation of entrepreneurialism and self-agency amongst self-employed and freelance workers throughout the twentieth century. Within this context, communities of practice and career communities have become important means for driving career knowledge, skills and identity development (Goodwin, 2019; McLeod et al., 2011). Not only do they function as spaces of social learning, but they provide opportunities for members to build collective understanding of both the labour market and their professional resilience (Goodwin, 2019). The importance of identity development is a facet that is particularly applicable to aspiring cultural workers who are making the education-to-work transition. Bridgstock et al. (2019: 57) explain that identity "provides both a frame through which students can interpret their capabilities and previous experiences and a meaningful way to focus future activity."

## *Employability programs and communities of practice in higher education*

The concept of employability is importantly more than the mere development of job-ready skills: it is "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations" (Yorke, 2006). In order to be employable after earning an academic qualification, aspiring workers must have a particular understanding of structures of work within their chosen sector and how their capabilities might be applied within that context. Another critical factor is driven by personal identity, including an individual's sense of resilience and confidence in their potential work and career pathways (Bridgstock et al., 2019). Resilience has been widely considered and critiqued as a tool of neoliberal cultural policy related to the ability to withstand precarity (Newsinger and Serafini, 2021; Pasquinelli and Sjöholm, 2015). In the context of this study, however, resilience aligns with the career theories of individual self-efficacy and optimism in the face of an inability to 'break in' (Lyons et al., 2015; Seibert et al., 2016), both highly relevant for aspiring workers who are attempting to access the cultural labour market.

Gaining visibility into the reality of work and the skills necessary for success can be particularly important for aspiring cultural workers *before* commencing work. Many aspiring workers are unprepared for the corporatization of the arts sector and the requirements of such environments (Kershaw et al., 2022). Accordingly, in their study of museum, gallery and heritage studies students, Coffield et al. (2022) found that students entered postgraduate programs with a sense of 'lack' around their employability and job readiness for the sector and ranked their abilities as being 'behind' their peers. Ashton (2015b) shows evidence of a clear transitional period for new cultural workers in his study of media labour markets, with workers forced to contest and negotiate with the existing power structures and hierarchies of their employment structures in real-time.

In higher education, efforts to drive student employability take multiple forms, and research often discusses these strategies en masse and without differentiating owners or modes of delivery. Bennett et al. (2016: 11) summarise the vast range of potential employability initiatives as being "…variously embedded or bolted-on to the curriculum, mandatory or optional, and formally assessed or recognized in other ways." Across the variations of such initiatives in practice, we can draw three loose classifications: curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular (Bridgestock et al., 2019).

*Curricular* employability initiatives often take a 'whole of program' approach, in which career development is embedded in every subject and facet of a graduate or undergraduate program (Bridgstock and Hearn, 2012). Manifestations commonly include using guest lecturers within classes to connect students to industry experts (Albrecht, 2012) or involving industry 'clients' in certain subjects as project owners (Mavri et al., 2020). Incorporating employability into curricula can be challenging, however, given the amount of existing content already included in course design, as well as the common perception that focussing on employability might detract from content delivery or exceed the capability and expertise of teaching staff (Bridgstock et al., 2019; Cotronei-Baird, 2020). *Co-curricular* initiatives generally occur outside the educational context but align with curricular outcomes. Common examples include work-integrated learning programs or internship placements that count for subject credit but involve close industry partnerships or practical work experience (Daniel and Daniel, 2015). In contrast, *extracurricular* employability programs are initiatives that function separately from curricular content. These programs are frequently the domain of centralized career services at universities (Bridgstock et al., 2019) and often lack discipline specificity. A further challenge is engagement: because extracurricular initiatives are not compulsory, they often suffer from low participation. In their case study of UK universities, Farenga and Quinlan (2016) found that most extra- or co-curricular programs attracted less than 10% of the target cohort.

Notably, there has been limited scholarly consideration of extracurricular communities of practice that have both clear employability aims and explicit links to a particular employment sector. For example, Dunstone (2021) and Fegan (2017) consider student-led communities of practice. However, neither is connected to a specific course of study or post-graduation employability goals. Gerber et al. (2012) establish a more explicit link between communities of practice and employability skills through a case study of extracurricular design-based learning within student-led studios at Northwestern University. However, the analysis is based exclusively on the specific disciplinary activity rather than targeted efforts to build career skills and knowledge through a career community. While the students increased aspects of engagement and employability skills, particularly Arthur et al.'s (1995) k*nowing why,* through participation, these positive impacts were not the result of intentional structural design.

One exception, Trottier (2021) considers an extracurricular community of practice that targets low-socioeconomic students at the University of Glasgow with the specific aim of increasing employability. This example reflects both a targeted and strategic focus on employability skills, though both short-term and small in scale. Nevertheless, the employability initiative was notably coordinated by a centralized career service rather than

being discipline-specific and thus preparing students to gain employment in a specific sector post-graduation. These are important distinctions that reflect the degree to which existing studies into employability and communities of practice often fail to tease out the intersecting factors that may drive (or hinder) the efficacy of university efforts in this space, particularly whether employability skills are discipline-specific, linked to specific programs, and framed as an intentional aim of the activity.

Our case study of the University of Melbourne Arts and Cultural Management program's Creative Community Connections pilot therefore presents a unique opportunity to examine an extracurricular program that is not only embedded within a specific disciplinary program (and its associated labour market) but was intentionally designed to establish a career community that would increase the employability skills of its students participants. Given the absence of existing scholarship that considers arts-facing employability strategies through extracurricular communities, our analysis provides valuable insight into the structure, design, and outcomes of a program that has the potential for extended applications across other creative disciplines and within broader university contexts.

## *Case study: Creative Community Connections*

Creative Community Connections (hereafter CCC) is an extracurricular program first implemented by the University of Melbourne's Arts and Cultural Management graduate program in 2022. Funded as a pilot initiative by a University Chancellery grant, the primary objective of CCC was to facilitate a discipline-specific and career-oriented community of practice across the range of students studying within the Arts and Cultural Management program, as well as recent alumni. The Arts and Cultural Management program is a vocational master's program designed to equip students with transferable skills to pursue management careers in the cultural sector, with an average enrolment of approximately 350 students each year. In addition to a high percentage of international students, the program has significant variation within its student population, including a range of ages, career stages, and previous work experience, which can pose a challenge in building peer-to-peer networks and a sense of community.

CCC was conceived, designed, and led by one of the co-authors of this paper, an academic staff member in the Arts and Cultural Management program with prior experience working within the cultural sector and an extensive background in recruitment, leadership development and human resources. Throughout the program's pilot stage, 127 students joined CCC, along with approximately 10 alumni and industry professionals—a little more than one third of the program's enrolled student population.

The pilot form of CCC consisted of five components designed to collectively facilitate a career community. The first component was an online community space on Slack, a platform selected due to its ease of use and availability to both current students and recent alumni. The CCC Slack community was administered by the program lead, who regularly posted listings of available job opportunities and internship openings, as well as general career information and discussion prompts about challenges in the cultural sector. The second component was a series of careers-oriented discussion sessions called "Creative

Career Conversations." Deliberately designed without a formal agenda, these sessions were meant to create a casual opportunity for attendees to ask questions, give advice to their peers, and share personal experiences with work in the cultural sector. Eight sessions took place in 2022: three online and five in-person. The third component of the program was a series of practical workshops, which focused on technical skills development (e.g., learning how to use arts customer relationship manager software) and recruitment training (e.g., understanding behavioural event interviewing). The fourth component of the program was a 6-week peer coaching program, in which five small groups of CCC participants worked with an industry facilitator. The fifth component of the program was a series of casual social events offered over the year, including a reception at the end of each semester and a group excursion to visit a local arts organization.

Designing a career community in this context posed several challenges. Firstly, communities of practice typically evolve organically over time. As Wenger et al. (2002: 137) state, "a community of practice is not just a Web site, a database, or a collection of best practices. It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships and, in the process, develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment." More specific to the university context, Lee and Patel (2019) also describe communities of practice as creating an organic sense of belonging, trust and accessibility. This means a community should be "highly customized to the student and exclusive in its membership," with key information flowing hierarchically from expert to novice (Lee and Patel, 2019: 9) and a sense of shared practice. This meant that CCC needed to strike a balance between flexibility as a way of meeting student needs while also creating the conditions for collective identity development and shared learning about the cultural labour market. These considerations—particularly the ability to enable interaction, create a sense of belonging, and allow for a customizable experience—were vital to CCC's initial development and planning stages.

The need for adaptability informed the topics and themes chosen for discussion during the Creative Career Conversations and the topics of the practical workshops and conversational posts in Slack. A further consideration for the program's design was that participants needed to be able to choose how they wanted to engage with the program depending on their interests, location, and time availability: participation needed to be customizable. Here, CCC's online space was intentionally designed to allow participants to actively comment and share, participate in both public and private communication, or to exist as a 'lurker,' only interacting passively (Haas et al., 2021). While it was deemed important to create a sense of excitement and novelty so that students felt they were contributing to an exclusive activity, there was also a set rhythm to activities, including daily job postings. This helped students clearly understand what to expect from the group.

Importantly, participation in CCC remained entirely extracurricular and opt-in, with both in-person and online sessions scheduled outside of standard classroom times to provide flexibility in involvement. Students were informed of the launch of CCC in a program-wide announcement and encouraged to join during brief presentations made during classroom sessions. However, there was no further overlap between CCC and any of the Arts and Cultural Management program's curricular components. Nonetheless, the program remained firmly embedded within the confines of the Arts and Cultural

Management program, with all staffing and organization of the initiative managed in-house, rather than involving any external University staff resources or the careers service office.

## Methodology

To measure the impact and function of CCC as a career community for student participants, we applied a mixed methods approach. First, we compiled quantitative data linked to attendance at program events, both in-person and online, as well as data linked to activity on CCC's Slack platform. Second, we drew on the results of an anonymous questionnaire survey sent to the 127 program participants in October 2022, approximately 7 months after the program's launch. Fifty-seven responses were received, a response rate of 44.8%.

Eighty-four percent of the 57 respondents were currently studying in the Arts and Cultural Management program when completing the survey, while 16% were alumni. Respondent characteristics aligned closely with the Arts and Cultural Management program's broader student demographics, with 69% of respondents identifying as international (non-Australian) students as opposed to domestic. Ninety-two percent of respondents were based in Australia, while 8% lived overseas and studied remotely while participating in the program. At the time of the evaluation, 40% of respondents were employed within the cultural sector, while 60% were not.

The questionnaire included qualitative and quantitative questions related to participant demographics, perceptions of CCC, and employment outcomes achieved during participation. The quantitative components provided data in four areas, including (1) engagement with and perceived value of the individual program components, (2) self-assessment of employability skills, including their understanding of the mechanics of recruitment (e.g., applications and interviews) and their confidence in undertaking work (e.g., perceived leadership, coaching and collaboration capability), (3) self-evaluation of key learnings from participation in the program, and (4) appraisal of the program's benefits. Several open-ended questions then asked respondents to identify any other positive aspects of the program and areas needing improvement.

As the theoretical underpinning for this methodology, we drew on two aspects of Arthur et al.'s (1995) intelligent career theory, or the tenets of *knowing how* and *knowing whom*. These tenets were selected due to their close alignment with practical employability-based skills, including career understanding and network capacity. Arthur et al.'s third tenet, *knowing why,* was excluded as a measure of analysis due to its focus on motivational understanding. Because the cohort of survey respondents was already enrolled or had graduated from an arts management graduate course—thereby reflecting a pre-existing motivation to pursue careers in the arts and cultural sector—this indicator was seen as providing less valuable data for our analysis of the efficacy of CCC in driving employability skills.

We applied manual coding techniques within this analytical framework to align the survey questions and participant responses to the two tenets. Questions that considered skill development, including those related to arts management or recruitment, were

mapped against *knowing how.* Key topics or themes coded under this category included references to understanding the cultural sector, self-assurance in searching for and applying for opportunities, perceived leadership and coaching abilities, and general confidence in approaching an arts career (key terms: confidence, experiences, understanding, skills). Questions that considered connections and networks with others, both within the program and across the cultural sector, were mapped to the *knowing whom* tenet. Key themes and topics within this category included ways of connecting with others, the value of the community aspects of CCC, and broader recognition of the importance of connecting with others in the industry (key terms: community, peers, relationship, connection, supportive).

A limitation of the study is that the survey design only measured participants' perceived employability after the program's first year. Due to ethical and privacy concerns over student anonymity, it was impossible to assess respondents' perceived understanding of the labour market and employability skills *before* participating in the program as a means of comparison. The study design, measuring the outcomes from one academic year, also did not allow for an assessment of the program's potential role in supporting actual success in the labour market (e.g., through measurable employment opportunities) or long-term career development. Accordingly, we cannot establish a causal relationship between participation in the program and a specific degree of actual, rather than perceived, capability improvement. The study is also limited in capturing the experiences of international students who were either studying remotely or returned to their home country post-graduation. Data provided by international students based outside of Australia was limited and lacked significant qualitative content. As a result, this study primarily considers the program's impact on employability, for both international and domestic students, in the Australian context. Nevertheless, the data collected provides a rich source of quantitative and qualitative reflection on the perceived impacts of CCC as a demonstration of an extracurricular career community in practice.

## Findings

### *Establishment of a career community*

In order to measure the potential impact that CCC had on participant employability, it is necessary first to determine whether CCC established a career community as intended. Despite having 127 registered members over the course of the year, active engagement in CCC appeared to be relatively low from a quantitative perspective. As tracked by the program lead, attendance at individual events ranged between 10 and 30 participants, with the highest attendance at industry-based skills and careers workshops. Across all the CCC activities, a core group of approximately 25 participants emerged; these were not only most likely to attend in-person events but most likely to attend more than one. As the virtual arm of the initiative, the Slack channel also appeared to have low engagement. While the platform had 119 overall members, data showed an average of just 29 users who were "active" in terms of posting original content and questions. As with the structured events, the same core group of 25 students were primarily involved in this virtual

platform. The majority of the other participants remained largely passive, waiting for staff to drive the discussion through direct posts, rather than actively engaging with their peers or driving the virtual conversation themselves. This suggests that CCC did not operate as a peer-driven community of practice, where more experienced members guide the new entrants or novices (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Instead, the dynamic within the virtual platform generally mirrored the more traditional faculty-led learning relationship already established within the program's classroom contexts.

However, the qualitative feedback suggests that CCC was more closely aligned to a career community than the quantitative data implies. While attendance at individual events appeared low, almost half of the survey respondents participated in at least one in-person Creative Career Conversation (45%) or the peer coaching program (42%), while more than half (55%) attended a recruitment skills workshop. Here, we see the manifestation of the program's customizable structure, where students could choose which events to participate in, depending on their interests. Most participants notably also cited the Slack community as key to their engagement with the CCC, with 69% of respondents noting they engaged with this element in some way over the course of the year. This suggests that the platform had a high number of 'lurkers', who, despite remaining passive on the platform from a quantitative perspective, still received benefits from their participation, most notably by observing the conversations of more active members or responding to direct prompts from program staff (Haas et al., 2021). Furthermore, digital and physical attendance tracking fails to consider the shared practice activity to enhance employability, facilitated by CCC, that occurred outside events or offline.

A number of survey respondents referenced the "community" facilitated by CCC, with one suggesting that the program's main benefit was a "sense of a belonging and community with support to get through the scariness of career uncertainty." Other recurring themes from qualitative responses included feeling supported and encouraged by involvement in the program and benefiting from space to share experiences and make meaningful connections with other students. The ability to meet peers and learn from both facilitators and colleagues was described as particularly beneficial. As one participant wrote, "The network starts with a group of people that I already know or have connections with. This makes the reaching out process less intimidating." These qualitative findings suggest that statistical data around attendance at events and participation in the Slack channel did not accurately capture the scope, quality, or underlying nuance of the community engagement enabled by the platform.

In this way, we posit that CCC ultimately functioned as a career community by helping its members undertake the sensemaking and communal learning characteristic of such communities of practice (Parker et al., 2004). According to the research undertaken on these groups (Hennekam et al., 2021; Parker and Arthur, 2000; Parker et al., 2004), CCC most closely aligns with the occupational and alumni model of a career community (Parker et al., 2004), in which participants establish connections not only by belonging to a particular disciplinary community but by joining the labour market following a shared educational experience (in this case, in the Arts and Cultural Management program).

## Impact on knowing how

The development of explicit or tacit career skills and knowledge—or what Arthur et al. (1995) terms 'knowing how'—can be considered across two overarching areas: (1) recruitment knowledge (e.g., resume preparation and interview skills) and (2) industry skills and knowledge. Our analysis of the survey data suggests that Creative Community Connections had a tangible impact across both areas for participating students, with the more practical and industry-oriented activities perceived as delivering the highest value. This was illustrated by qualitative comments such as, "I loved how proactive and encouraging CCC has been in opening doors to developing skills through practical things such as the Tessitura workshop and the grants provision."

The recruitment activities were particularly popular, with 83% of participants rating the recruitment skills workshop as being valuable or extremely valuable. Several respondents recalled that they had reviewed the material from the interview skills workshop immediately before participating in job interviews. As one participant wrote, "The interview session was incredibly valuable at helping me refine my skills in being interviewed." Of the 43% of respondents who secured new employment opportunities during the year, 72% believed that CCC had helped them develop more effective job search strategies and enhance their job applications. A further 67% felt that CCC had improved their performance in interviews. Those who obtained new roles while participating in the program also rated CCC as extremely valuable for connecting with other arts and cultural workers (50%) and extremely valuable for accessing potential work opportunities (44%).

The Slack community was repeatedly identified as a critical program attribute that helped to further members' knowledge of the cultural labour market. Respondents not only engaged with the Slack community in higher numbers than was measured through quantitative means (e.g., through active posting) but 80.5% rated the platform as valuable or extremely valuable as an aspect of CCC. Seventy-four percent of respondents considered the virtual platform particularly important for sharing career and job opportunities. This is supported by qualitative comments such as "The Slack posts for job opportunities has (sic) been very helpful. Even if I'm currently not yet looking for a job, it's been really helpful learning about what types of jobs are available in this industry" and "I love checking the Slack community daily to see what new job opportunities are out there and hear industry news."

One of the strongest themes in the qualitative feedback was a sense of shared experience, particularly around the anxiety of *knowing how* to enter the labour market. For example, one respondent wrote, "It truly makes a difference in the way that I see the arts sector here in Melbourne — maybe it's not as scary as I thought it would be to step into an industry that is notorious for being quite hard to break into." For some international students, CCC also appeared crucial in demystifying the Australian-specific labour market. This was illustrated by feedback such as, "As an international student, I get the chance to learn about the real situation of the market and real experience from others…making meaningful connections makes me feel part of it." Another international student explained, "Without participating in the CCC, I may have difficulty finding channels that tell me about latest industry insights."

After participating in the program, 59% of respondents believed they had a better understanding of what it would take to be successful in the cultural labour market (with only 9% responding negatively), while 52% felt optimistic about their future careers. Overall, respondents indicated that being a member of CCC helped increase their sense of self-efficacy regarding their employment trajectories. Qualitative comments included explicit recognition that CCC helped students to "build confidence", "forge connections", "learn about the real situations", and "meet[…] people in similar situations."

As noted earlier, a challenge for building employability in higher education is the gap in understanding workplace norms (Ashton, 2015a). Here engagement in 'shadow' experiences is critical as a way to learn about the problematic characteristics of the cultural labour market (Ashton, 2013). However, learning about these realities can also lead to pessimism. Within CCC, members were able to undertake "work on the self" to align their skills and behaviour to fit into the often exclusionary labour market (Ashton, 2016: 269) while also building individual psychological resilience and self-efficacy (Goodwin, 2019). Evaluative data from this study shows that CCC actively reduced the trepidation or fear that certain participants had in joining the cultural labour market, addressing the notion of 'lack' identified by Coffield et al. (2022) and connecting members to others also trying to gain a foothold.

## *Impact on knowing whom*

Our analysis of the data against the tenet of *knowing whom* was framed around community and peer networking, both of which support employability. As with *knowing how,* the data from the participant survey suggests that CCC had a significant impact by facilitating a strong sense of community and peer-to-peer interaction. Sixty-nine percent of respondents rated the connection established with their peers through the program as valuable or extremely valuable. Respondents appeared to particularly value the ability to discuss career issues with other individuals at a similar career level, as well as with the program facilitators. Nearly 70% of participants rated the Creative Career Conversation sessions as being valuable or extremely valuable by presenting a safe and cost-free space to ask questions and get advice from other participants. One student wrote, "the ability to talk to peers from the same sectors and hear their experience I think was personally the most valuable [element of the program]." Here, the comment highlights the degree to which the program was not exclusively 'top-down' in nature, despite the prominent role played by the 'expert' educators in coordinating activities.

The strongest theme to emerge in the qualitative data was a recognition of the sense of belonging that had emerged amongst members and an appreciation for the community that had been established. One respondent wrote, "The most positive outcome of participating in the CCC is knowing that you have a community. Now I know where to go if I need support or some encouraging words." Another respondent noted: "It is a great supportive community that gathers like-minded people who are preparing to step into or are in the beginning phase of their career in the arts and cultural industry…The sense of community and the insightful knowledge provided in CCC was very precious and valuable."

In addition to valuing the community that emerged within CCC, many survey respondents believed they had also developed an increased capacity to build such communities and networks outside of the university context. Sixty-two percent of respondents said they had greater confidence in their ability to connect with others in the cultural sector, while 95% had a greater understanding of the importance of developing a community of professional colleagues. This illustrates the psychosocial benefits that can emerge from career communities.

For many participants, CCC was seen as the basis of a broader professional community, with the understanding that students would graduate and enter the workforce but still remain connected to CCC. One respondent noted, "I can see the community power of CCC will continue snowballing into a stronger community in the future as more new students and alumni accumulate in the community." Comments such as this suggest that CCC may evolve into a larger, even more valuable community of practice over time. In this way, CCC aligns with Wenger et al.'s (2002) principles for a flourishing community of practice. The authors argue that, while engineering a successful community can be challenging, there are principles that support their success and longevity, including that the community must be designed for evolution and that they must open dialogue between inside and outside perspectives. As CCC develops beyond its pilot stage, it has the potential to bring in new novices with each new student cohort and, through alumni connections, reach further into the arts and cultural sector.

## Discussion

Creative Community Connections was launched to establish an employability-focused career community within the University of Melbourne's Arts and Cultural Management program. Our analysis shows that, while community members were more likely to be passive participants than active drivers of their career learning, CCC was largely successful in creating an occupational or support-oriented career community (Parker et al., 2004). When examined through the lens of intelligent career theory, we found that CCC delivered value across both the *knowing how* and *knowing whom* tenets. Participants gained a greater understanding of recruitment processes, practical skills, and a broader understanding of the context of the cultural labour market (*knowing how*) while also building professional and personal connections to support their career (*knowing whom*). These connections importantly provided information, learning, and psychosocial support—crucial benefits of participating in communities of practice (Goodwin, 2019)—while also increasing knowledge of the labour market in a way that addressed negative self-perceptions of employment prospects (Coffield et al., 2022). The recognition of the importance of the collective created by CCC further highlights the role career communities can play in addressing the structural inequities of the labour market (Ashton, 2015a), with CCC enabling access to students who may have been previously excluded.

Our evaluation of CCC did, however, reveal barriers to the kinds of mutual engagement that typically characterize communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2000; Wenger et al., 2002). This included participants feeling apprehensive about sharing their own experiences with others (Trottier, 2021) and a tendency to default to a traditional

faculty-led dynamic. Nevertheless, there was clear evidence of joint enterprise, the establishment of collective norms of behaviour, and strong evidence of shared repertoire through consistent language—all key characteristics of communities of practice. CCC members were particularly mindful of both community and the power of collaboration. They demonstrated a shared notion of identity as members of CCC as well as the Arts and Cultural Management program.

Overall, the structural design of the CCC community was also clearly beneficial in building employability skills. However, these benefits were not consistent across the participants. Because students could determine their level of engagement with CCC, the program could not establish a standardized benchmark of careers-based understanding or peer-to-peer connection. Consider CCC's core group—the 25 students who consistently attended in-person events and engaged in active discussion via the Slack channel. This cohort arguably experienced significantly more consistent and extended impacts from their participation in CCC compared to other program participants who chose only to engage sporadically or passively. While employability initiatives embedded within classroom subjects pose certain difficulties in practice, they do enable a more consistent impact for participants due to their compulsory nature. In comparison, the scale of the benefits of CCC were individualized, determined by each participant's personal agency and choice. This aligns with Vincent et al.'s (2021) analysis of a professional development program for aspiring arts workers at the Venice Biennale, which was successful in supporting the education-to-work transition but only for participants who chose to take advantage of the opportunity. In the same way as CCC, the Venice Biennale program created the conditions for peer learning, networking, and professional development. Yet, the benefits of participation were driven by entrepreneurial self-interest, a quality linked to and driven by social and class-based inequalities in the cultural sector (Vincent et al., 2021).

A further challenge that emerged within the structural design of CCC was the extent to which the initiative was driven by the leadership and social capital of the individual staff member who led it. Much of the initial willingness for students to join the pilot program was due to their existing relationship with the staff leader as a longstanding member of the Arts and Cultural Management program. The design and tone of both the Slack posts and the facilitated discussions were similarly shaped by the personality and skill set of the lead staff member. Accordingly, it is unclear whether CCC would continue to remain relevant to, and attract, student community membership with subsequent changes to staff and leadership.

Despite these limitations, our evaluation of CCC reveals important findings for employability efforts within university contexts and broader arts career development scholarship. We use this case study to extend existing considerations of the role of communities of practice in educational contexts, electing to focus on an under-examined and under-utilized extracurricular model that is both discipline-specific and intentionally careers-facing. Our research demonstrates that extracurricular and program-led employability efforts can actively help to address inconsistency of employability skill provisions within solely-curricula approaches (Cotronei-Baird, 2020). At the same time, our findings suggest that extracurricular initiatives may function best as part of a larger

suite of employability initiatives. CCC's blended and customizable approach to career community development allowed students to engage in the way that best suited their needs. Nevertheless, this also led to an imbalance in impacts and learning outcomes depending on individual agency. For university programs aiming to establish a consistent benchmark of employability skills across an entire student cohort, the CCC model would need to be placed in coordination with other curricular and co-curricular initiatives that could engage with more passive participants.

The CCC model is theoretically replicable in other disciplinary contexts because of its basis in the principles of community of practice design and career communities theory. The benefit of careers knowledge being generated and shared by community participants also means that it can be local and labour market specific. It does require, however, community leaders with specific knowledge of context to help build the community and the capital and capacity to engage with the student cohort. Here, CCC relied on a foundation of arts management knowledge and credibility to encourage early community membership and responsiveness to member needs to ensure fit for purpose. CCC was also built upon an explicit understanding of employability amongst its program staff, who facilitated recruitment activities, shared industry content, and acted as a career coach. This may be challenging to replicate in other university environments (Cotronei-Baird, 2020; McCormack and Baron, 2023).

More research is needed to evaluate the longitudinal impact of extracurricular initiatives like CCC, including explicit correlation to labour market success. In addition, there is a need for a longer-term evaluation of this initiative that considers the benefits to participants who advance beyond their initial education-to-work transition in the cultural labour market. A similar program has also been established within the University of Melbourne to focus on Chinese alumni working in the arts locally and internationally, hoping to build on the learnings of CCC. For academic programs like Arts and Cultural Management that have a highly diverse student cohort, future research avenues would also consider the impacts of extracurricular career communities on international students who aspire to have careers in their home countries, as well as mature-age students who bring existing professional networks and understandings of work to their engagement with the initiative. CCC, however, has demonstrated that career communities built around discipline specific knowledge play a valuable role in enhancing student employability and supporting curriculum.

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