

Creating space for resonance: Supporting career development through photovoice

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Abstract

This reflective article explores the use of photovoice, a participatory visual practice, to support international students navigating the emotional and relational challenges of transitioning into employment in the UK. Drawing on a small-scale project, it considers how participatory practices can foster inclusion and agency in career development. The reflection is situated within Hartmut Rosa's account of social acceleration, using resonance as the conceptual lens to examine how shared dialogue and storytelling can counter alienation and create conditions for connection. It highlights the potential and limitations of creative methods to deepen relational engagement in career education.

Key words: international students, social acceleration, resonance, photovoice, career development, inclusion

Introduction

The transition from university to employment is a pivotal stage for all students, yet international students frequently encounter distinctive barriers that shape this experience. These include language difficulties, unfamiliarity with UK workplace culture, visa restrictions, financial pressures, and, in some cases, discrimination (Nygren, 2025). Such challenges are not simply practical but can produce a deeper sense of alienation and disconnection. Students' confidence, motivation, and sense of self-worth are often

undermined when repeated rejection or silence follows their applications for part-time or graduate work (Levett, 2025). For many, the anticipated ease of securing employment in the UK contrasts sharply with the realities of the labour market.

UK universities have seen increased and sustained international recruitment in recent years. International students bring enormous benefits to academic communities and to the wider economy, as highlighted by national reports (HEPI, UUKi, & Kaplan, 2023). Yet with high numbers of international students come more complex and diverse support needs, particularly in relation to career education. Universities UK International (2020) stresses that while many institutions have adapted services, more must be done to address the mismatch between international students' expectations and their actual experiences in UK labour markets. Without careful attention to these differences, international students may face practical barriers and suffer diminished wellbeing, confidence, and belonging. More recent data shows the UK may be facing a reversal in the upward trend: the number of sponsored study-related visas granted in the year ending June 2025 was 4% lower than the previous year (House of Commons Library, 2025). This dip may increase pressure on institutions to adopt more inclusive, meaningful approaches to engagement and retention, such as participatory methods like photovoice.

This article offers a reflective exploration of photovoice as a creative and participatory practice that can respond to these challenges. Photovoice invites students to express their lived experiences visually and verbally, encouraging both individual reflection and collective dialogue. In doing so, it has potential to create the conditions for what Rosa (2019) calls *resonance*, a sense of meaningful connection and transformation that counters the alienation generated by life in accelerated societies. The aim of the article is to explore how practices such as photovoice can shed light on the emotional and social dimensions of career development. This reflection is particularly relevant for readers seeking ways to make career education more inclusive and attuned to the lived realities of diverse student groups.

Approach: A reflective lens

This article is written as a reflective piece, drawing on my experience of facilitating a photovoice project with international students seeking employment in the UK (Levett, 2025). Photovoice, developed by Wang and Burris (1997), is a participatory visual method that invites participants to document aspects of their lived experience through photography and then reflect on their images through captions and group discussion. The process is designed to surface hidden stories, foster dialogue, and generate collective insight. While often used in community-based health and social research (Catalani & Minkler, 2010), photovoice has growing relevance in educational and career contexts as a way of supporting inclusion, reflection, and shared meaning-making. The process prompted me, as facilitator, to reflect on the wider role of participatory and creative practices in career education, and how such practices might support inclusion in contexts often dominated by outcome-driven measures.

A useful way to frame this reflection is through Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. The cycle has four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This article echoes that pattern: it begins with the experience of facilitating a photovoice project, reflects on what emerged, connects the insights to Rosa's theory, and ends with implications for practice, policy, and research.

Reflections and insights

Photovoice as a resonant practice

In my project, photovoice created a slowing down effect, where students paused to reflect on the deeper significance of their experiences. By combining images with personal captions, the process opened opportunities for meaning-making and dialogue, laying the groundwork for resonant connections.

One participant explained:

This project has opened my horizons and made me see things from another angle. See opportunities where before I only saw challenges. Moreover, I can realise that those opportunities were always there waiting to be discovered.

Another described how the photovoice process built confidence and belonging:

The project helped me gain confidence and helped me become a part of like-minded people. I faced my fears of public speaking and got guidance by the experiences of my peers.

These examples echo wider findings in photovoice research, which show that the method can provide participants with a language (visual, emotional, and collective) for expressing experiences that are difficult to articulate verbally (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Latz, 2017). Photovoice has previously been used to surface hidden stories of marginalisation in healthcare (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001) and in education (Latz, 2017) but is less common in the career development sector. Previous research has found that the practice not only generates insights but also fosters new relationships and shared understandings.

Social acceleration and alienation

Rosa (2013) describes social acceleration as the speeding up of technological innovation, social transformation, and the pace of everyday life. Although often celebrated as progress, acceleration can paradoxically lead to what he terms a *frenetic standstill* (Rosa, 2013, p. 89): constant activity without a sense of meaningful forward movement. For international students navigating UK labour markets, this description resonates strongly. Time itself can become a scarce and stressful resource, with visa deadlines and financial pressures intensifying this sense of urgency. Balancing academic responsibilities with job hunting can heighten the strain, leaving little room for self-care or social connection, and deepening the sense of alienation despite their efforts.

Participants expressed this sense of alienation in different ways. One caption read:

I have never had to look for work like I currently do in the UK. It's a new terrain, culture, CV format or even unspoken code.

Another student described the disorientation of stalled progress:

I am stuck in the middle not knowing if I am going forward or backward, waiting for the necessary impulse to move.

A third reflected on the repetitive grind of rejection:

One gets to apply for many jobs that you feel and know that you're qualified for and then 9 out of 10 times, you get a rejection mail mostly because you do not have UK work experience.

These reflections illustrate not only the practical barriers of visa regimes and unfamiliar job markets, but also the psychological toll of acceleration. As Bandura (1997) argues, repeated experiences of failure undermine self-efficacy, the belief in one's capacity to act and influence outcomes. The diminished self-efficacy expressed through participants' captions and discussions suggests that alienation is not only structural but also deeply personal and affective: a sense of disconnection from agency, belonging, and meaningful participation.

Resonance as an antidote

In contrast, Rosa (2019) proposes resonance as the counterpoint to alienation: a mode of relating to the world in which people are both affected and respond in ways that are meaningful and transformative. Resonance is dynamic and relational, not static. Rosa (2019) identifies four characteristics of a resonant connection: affectiveness (attuning and listening), self-efficacy (experiencing empowered voice), transformation (reciprocal change), and openness to unpredictability. Crucially, resonance cannot be forced (Rosa, 2019); it emerges unpredictably when individuals and their environments enter into a responsive relationship. This process was visible in the project. One participant reflected:

Being a part of Photovoice has given me a form of hope, enlightenment and camaraderie. It has given me a lot more insights into solutions that may exist through shared experiences with fellow researchers. Knowing that I'm not alone in my challenges has in some way motivated me to keep pushing towards my goals and dreams.

This illustrates how collective storytelling, and shared recognition can reframe experiences of struggle into opportunities for mutual support and growth. In career development contexts, such resonant encounters suggest that effective support is not only about building job application skills but also about fostering environments where students can experience recognition, belonging, and transformation through dialogue and connection. These relational and affective dimensions are often overlooked in employability-focused discourse. Such experiences, in turn, underpin the confidence, persistence, and agency needed to sustain efforts and engage more meaningfully with career development.

Discussion

Strengths

The photovoice project created a space where international students could pause, reflect, and share experiences that might otherwise remain hidden. For many, the process was empowering. They were able to represent themselves not only as job seekers but as whole people, with emotions, histories, and aspirations. This recognition is vital in a context where employability discourse can reduce students to CVs, competencies, or visa status.

By interpreting the photovoice experience through the lens of Rosa's (2013, 2019) social acceleration and resonance, we can better understand both the pressures international students face and the potential of participatory practices to foster connection and belonging. The synthesis of sociological theory with participatory method demonstrates how career development can benefit from engaging affective and relational dimensions alongside skills and labour market knowledge.

Beyond the project group, photovoice often culminates in exhibitions or presentations designed to raise awareness and influence decision-makers (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Such acts of sharing can themselves create possibilities for resonance, as audiences encounter participants' stories visually and emotionally. In this way, photovoice not only documents life but offers participants a way to resist the alienation of social acceleration, becoming a method through which individuals reconnect meaningfully with themselves, others, and the world. This wider engagement highlights photovoice's potential not only to generate reflection within groups but also to foster connection and recognition between students and the broader communities and institutions that shape their experiences.

While Rosa's (2019) concept of resonance offers a powerful interpretive lens, it is not without critique. Susen (2019) points out that resonance is often described mainly as the opposite of alienation, which makes it vague and hard to pin down in practice. Johnsen (2025) argues that Rosa sometimes treats resonance as if it were the essence of human life, which can overlook inequality and the messy realities of social conflict. He also suggests that Rosa focuses too much on human relationships and does not fully consider our connections with the non-human world. In this reflection, I use Rosa's work not as a fixed model but as a way to spark thinking about how moments of connection and recognition might emerge in career development, and how creative methods like photovoice could help to respond to experiences of disconnection.

Challenges and limitations

Photovoice is not without its challenges. The practice can be resource-intensive, requiring careful facilitation, group sessions, and, ideally, exhibitions to disseminate findings. In busy career services with limited resources, such commitments may feel unrealistic. Furthermore, not all students may feel comfortable sharing personal images or stories, raising questions of consent, cultural sensitivity, and ethical safeguards (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Career practitioners must be prepared to adapt the method to diverse comfort levels, perhaps by offering options for anonymous contributions or by blending photovoice with other reflective tools.

A further limitation lies in scope. Photovoice can surface personal and collective experiences, but it cannot by itself dismantle systemic barriers such as restrictive visa regimes, labour market discrimination, or the financial structures of higher education. Without attention to these broader forces, there is a risk of over-claiming for what photovoice can achieve. It should therefore be seen as complementary to, not a replacement for, institutional and policy reforms that address structural inequities. However, photovoice offers a great deal of flexibility and can help raise awareness of structural inequities, which in turn can encourage others to take positive action.

Implications

In closing, I offer three practical recommendations for career development stakeholders:

For practitioners in career services, this reflection suggests that career education should not only build employability skills but also create reflective, dialogical spaces. Photovoice is one example, but the broader principle is that students benefit from opportunities to slow down, to share, and to feel heard. Even small-scale interventions, such as integrating image-based reflection, storytelling, or peer dialogue into workshops, may foster resonance and belonging.

For policymakers, the case of international students underscores the importance of inclusive career support strategies. Employability policies often prioritise speed, efficiency, and graduate outcomes, yet these may unintentionally exacerbate alienation. Investment in participatory approaches that centre lived experience could help institutions move beyond narrow metrics and towards more holistic definitions of success, including wellbeing, agency, and belonging.

For researchers, photovoice offers a methodology that bridges empirical data and affective experience. It encourages us to take seriously the emotional and social dimensions of career development, which are often marginalised in traditional research. Comparative studies could explore how resonance is experienced differently across settings, or how photovoice might intersect with digital storytelling, art-based methods, or other participatory approaches.

Conclusion

Finding employment can be demanding for all students, but for international students it is often intensified by the forces of social acceleration: fast-changing labour markets, financial and visa pressures, and the relentless demand to compete and adapt. These pressures not only affect practical career outcomes but also erode confidence, belonging, and wellbeing. Rosa's (2019) theory of resonance offers a way of reimagining career education as more than preparation for work, it is about fostering meaningful connection, recognition, and transformation.

Photovoice, as a participatory practice, provides a concrete way of enacting this vision. By inviting students to express their experiences visually and verbally, it creates a reflective pause in the midst of social acceleration. In group dialogue, students encounter one another not just as competitors for scarce jobs, but as peers with shared struggles and aspirations. This collective recognition creates a space of resistance. It is not resistance in the sense of protest against the system, but in the sense of resisting alienation; making space for presence, reciprocity, and human connection within accelerated contexts.

The potential of photovoice also extends beyond international students. It may be particularly valuable for other groups who face systemic disadvantage in education and employment, such as first-generation students, care leavers, and racially minoritised groups. For these populations, photovoice can surface hidden stories, challenge deficit-based assumptions, and build confidence through collective reflection.

By enabling students to slow down, to share meaning, and to be recognised, photovoice is not just a methodology, it is a way of practising career education that is inclusive, humanising, and socially just. In doing so, it responds not only to the needs of international students but to the wider challenge of supporting all students to thrive authentically in accelerated societies.

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