

# Research Unravelling: The Messiness of an Evaluation Project of LinkedIn for Business-School Connections in Youth Employment

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## ABSTRACT

Our youth employability project, aimed at improving employment outcomes, serves as a vital case study on the complexities of social research, with a particular focus on the usability of LinkedIn for connecting local businesses with schools. The project highlights how evolving research questions, unexpected methodological challenges, and contradictory findings are integral to a messy research process, reflecting insights shared by Clark et al. (2007) on the untidy realities of inquiry. Initially focused on assessing barriers to education and employment, stakeholder feedback shifted our approach to evaluating LinkedIn's effectiveness in fostering connections. Such evolution underscores the importance of a user-centred approach, where adaptability to feedback is key. However, implementation revealed usability challenges, as many businesses struggled to navigate the platform effectively, leading to an awareness gap among youth regarding job opportunities. The project also faced methodological surprises in participant engagement; despite extensive outreach, low response rates prompted the team to refine strategies. Discrepancies between positive engagement metrics and negative qualitative feedback highlighted usability issues, emphasising the need for robust user-centred design principles. Businesses reported that LinkedIn lacked essential user-friendly features, hindering effective use. Finally, publication dilemmas arose from low participation rates and conflicting stakeholder feedback complicating result interpretation. Echoing Clark et al. (2007), this paper stresses the importance of transparency in sharing both successes and setbacks in usability discussions. The lessons from this case study provide valuable insights for future researchers, highlighting the need for flexible frameworks prioritising stakeholder input, effective engagement strategies, and the integration of online and offline support systems to bridge education and employment gaps. By sharing these "messy" experiences, we encourage researchers to creatively embrace challenges, enhancing understanding of user interactions and supporting effective interventions to empower young people.

**Keywords:** LinkedIn user experience, Usability challenges, Youth employability, Messy research

## INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment is a pressing issue, particularly in economically disadvantaged regions. The necessity for research focused on youth employment outcomes cannot be overstated, particularly in regions marked by significant socio-economic challenges. Nationwide, UK youth unemployment rates have consistently outstripped those of other age groups, with detrimental effects on mental health, self-esteem, and future career prospects (Sanderson, 2020; Kim, 2024). This issue was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, intensifying their vulnerability to financial instability and unemployment (Foley et al., 2020; Cross et al., 2022). Understanding these dynamics through social research is critical for developing informed, effective interventions that can facilitate better employment prospects for youth, ultimately promoting social mobility and well-being.

### Youth Employability Project

Our youth employability project was aimed at addressing the multifaceted barriers faced by young individuals in securing education, training, and employment opportunities in a suburb within a prominent district of Hampshire. With a population of approximately 27,500, this area is among the most economically deprived in England, contributing to a high prevalence of unemployment and poor living standards among its residents (Hampshire County Council, n.d.; ONS, 2021). Grounded in the understanding that economic deprivation is linked to limited career prospects (Malti & Ngoepe, 2021), the initiative aimed to uncover specific obstacles contributing to youth disengagement. By exploring various factors, including socio-economic conditions and access to resources, we developed targeted interventions to effectively support young individuals in achieving better employment outcomes. Addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by the community requires an understanding of the complex and unpredictable dynamics involved. The concept of messy research is particularly relevant here, as such initiatives encompass a range of interrelated variables and stakeholder interactions. An adaptable approach is essential to respond to the shifting realities of real-world settings, highlighting the need for flexible research frameworks that can accommodate the evolving needs of the community (Clark et al., 2007).

This paper examines the initiative to utilise a digital platform for enhancing connections between local businesses and educational institutions, demonstrating how the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods sheds light on the complexities encountered while navigating stakeholder feedback. Subsequent sections will detail the surprising results in participant engagement and the adjustments made throughout the process, highlighting the iterative nature of this initiative. Importantly, this is not a traditional research paper that strictly outlines the project methodology or presents statistically significant results. Instead, it aims to explore the concept of messy research, recognising that real-life research does not always yield clear-cut

outcomes. Often, valuable insights arise from navigating the uncertainties and challenges inherent in the research process, even when results may not meet the conventional standards for publication in prominent journals like *Nature*. Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of social issues allows for more adaptable and responsive approaches, ultimately leading to more impactful outcomes. This perspective emphasises that worthwhile research can provide essential lessons and strategies for dealing with complex real-world scenarios, reinforcing the idea that meaningful findings can emerge from the messiness of genuine engagement and exploration (Thomas-Hughes, 2018).

## **IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF THE LINKEDIN INITIATIVE**

As the project progressed, feedback from businesses, schools, and youth representatives revealed a demand for better networking opportunities and highlighted gaps in understanding career pathways. Participants also stressed the need for transparent communication about job opportunities. The initiative aimed to address these goals through a LinkedIn page designed to facilitate reciprocal information sharing, build connections, and foster communication and collaboration among businesses, schools, and young people in the community. By creating a space for reciprocal information sharing, this platform aimed to address networking gaps, improve access to job opportunities, and enhance overall youth employability in the area.

### **User Centred Approach**

Recognising the intricacies involved, we developed an appreciation for the significance of a user-centred approach, as emphasised by Monk (2000) and Haklay (2010). The evaluation utilised both quantitative and qualitative methods. We created two questionnaires: the first was administered prior to the LinkedIn page launch, and the second was conducted 2–3 weeks post-launch, both designed to assess local businesses' perceptions of their connections to educational institutions. This method aligns with Kamil's (2023) study, who employed the Usability Metric for User Experience (UMUX) to evaluate LinkedIn's usability and user satisfaction. Additionally, qualitative interviews provided in-depth insights into the experiences of business representatives, offering a comprehensive understanding of user interactions and enabling us to assess the platform's functionality in fostering connections.

### **Participant Engagement**

Throughout the project, the research team encountered unexpected challenges in participant engagement and response rates. Despite extensive outreach efforts—including distributing questionnaires via business newsletters, emails, and the community connection LinkedIn page—the response was significantly lower than anticipated. Although the project aimed to reach over 3,000 businesses, only a small fraction completed the questionnaires, with just eight responses for Questionnaire 1 and three for Questionnaire 2. This low engagement prompted the team to reflect

on potential barriers to participation, such as time constraints, lack of incentives, and insufficient awareness of the initiative's relevance to local businesses. These barriers align with findings in survey research that indicate participation rates are significantly affected by time constraints and a lack of incentives (Singer, 1999). In response to these challenges, the research team made several strategic adjustments to enhance outreach efforts. Recognising the necessity for tailored communication (Thomas, 2019; Matthews, 2018), the team emphasised the value of participating in the study—specifically, how participants' input could contribute to improving youth employment opportunities and strengthening community connections.

### **Facilitation of Connections**

Evaluating LinkedIn's effectiveness as a platform for creating youth opportunities was central to the initiative. As mentioned, the LinkedIn page was designed to facilitate engagement between local businesses, schools, and young people, promoting information sharing about career opportunities, recruitment, and networking initiatives. Initial engagement metrics revealed a varied follower base, with encouraging preliminary rates indicating strong potential for fostering meaningful connections. This aligns with Kamil (2023), who demonstrated LinkedIn's capacity to enhance user engagement within professional networks. While the low participation rates raise questions about the depth of these connections, the initial findings highlight a solid foundation for future interactions. Further exploration will enhance our understanding of how effectively LinkedIn bridges the gap between businesses and youth, particularly in nurturing reciprocal interactions, as emphasised by Ibrahim et al. (2024), who noted the importance of user experience in facilitating effective communication and networking on the platform.

### **Identified Usability Challenges**

Despite its potential, the evaluation uncovered significant usability challenges faced by businesses using LinkedIn. Feedback from business representatives highlighted common issues such as navigation difficulties, unclear messaging, and a lack of user-friendly features essential for engaging with educational institutions. Many participants reported that the interface was cumbersome and did not provide intuitive pathways for connecting with local schools or accessing relevant career information. These findings align with Liu's (2021) observation that usability issues can negatively impact user engagement and satisfaction. Furthermore, businesses expressed frustration over the visibility of their postings and the platform's overall effectiveness in reaching young people. They found it challenging to share relevant opportunities with their intended audience, which echoes Sarder et al.'s (2024) discussion of similar challenges in managing consistent messaging and engagement across social media platforms used for educational branding. These usability challenges suggest the need for improvements in LinkedIn's design and functionality to better meet user needs in this way.

### **Contradictory Feedback**

The evaluation also revealed a striking disparity between quantitative metrics and qualitative insights. As highlighted by Almalki (2016), integrating both types of data is crucial for addressing the complexities of such projects, as quantitative data provides an overview of engagement levels, while qualitative insights uncover deeper issues that numbers alone cannot capture. This approach enabled the research team to develop a comprehensive understanding of the specific challenges faced by participants. For instance, although aggregated data from questionnaires suggested some level of engagement and positive sentiment towards the LinkedIn page, qualitative interviews with businesses painted a more nuanced picture. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction, stating that, despite following the page, they felt disconnected from both other businesses and local youth. This contradictory feedback emphasises the limitations of relying solely on quantitative metrics and underscores the critical role of qualitative data in exploring user experiences, identifying specific concerns or frustrations, and understanding the reasons behind low engagement.

### **Complications in Presenting Findings**

One of the significant challenges faced during the publication process of the LinkedIn initiative was articulating results against the backdrop of low participant engagement and mixed feedback. The limited responses, with only eight businesses completing Questionnaire 1 and three completing Questionnaire 2, made it difficult to draw robust conclusions (Wong, 2021). The small sample size hindered our ability to generalise findings or assess the effectiveness of the community connection platform initiative comprehensively. Furthermore, the contrasting qualitative insights—where participants expressed dissatisfaction with the platform despite some quantitative metrics suggesting potential for engagement—complicated the interpretation of results. This divergence raised questions about the validity of positive assertions regarding the initiative's impact and necessitated careful navigation of these complexities by the research team when presenting findings. In light of these challenges, incorporating 'messiness' in research accounts is crucial, as it helps to better articulate the complexities and ethical dilemmas encountered in co-produced projects (Thomas-Hughes, 2018), making this consideration particularly relevant in our situation.

### **Importance of Transparency**

In addressing these publication dilemmas, the call for transparency in research findings, emphasised by Clark et al. (2007), became especially pertinent. It was essential to represent both successes and setbacks, not only to maintain the initiative's integrity but also to foster constructive dialogue about the challenges encountered. By openly discussing the initiative's limitations, such as the small participant pool and contradictory data, the research team aims to provide an honest portrayal of their outcomes. Loveridge et al. (2024) supports this perspective, highlighting how transparency fosters openness, accountability,

and trust in research. Additionally, Tuval-Mashiach (2017) underscores the importance of transparency in qualitative research for promoting dialogue and understanding.

In the context of our project, this approach encourages a deeper comprehension of the barriers faced by businesses and youth in the region and reinforces the need for ongoing feedback and iteration when implementing interventions. Transparency also facilitates more nuanced discussions among stakeholders, enhancing the potential for collaborative solutions that truly address the community's needs. Ultimately, embracing both the challenges and achievements of the LinkedIn page initiative enriches the research narrative and contributes to more effective practices in social research and user engagement.

## **KEY TAKEAWAYS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The evaluation of the LinkedIn page initiative highlights three vital themes: flexible research frameworks, engagement strategies, and holistic approaches. These insights align with broader lessons from youth employability projects, emphasising the importance of stakeholder-driven, community-focused initiatives that address the interconnected challenges young people face in transitioning from education to employment.

### **Flexible Research Frameworks**

One of the key takeaways from this evaluation of the LinkedIn page initiative is the importance of prioritising stakeholder input in designing and implementing research frameworks. As Shrestha et al. (2022) discusses, actively engaging local stakeholders including businesses, educational institutions, and youth representatives throughout the research process is essential. This engagement can involve facilitating regular discussions, feedback workshops, and participatory design sessions, which not only ensure that initiatives reflect genuine community needs but also create opportunities for collaboration and shared learning. By incorporating diverse perspectives, researchers can adapt their objectives and methodologies to remain flexible and responsive to the evolving challenges faced by young people. This initiative highlights that such flexibility in research frameworks enhances the relevance, inclusivity, and sustainability of interventions, while also fostering a sense of ownership and accountability among stakeholders. Chamberlain et al. (2013) further emphasises the pivotal role of community engagement in design-based research projects, reinforcing the notion that stakeholder collaboration is critical for achieving meaningful and impactful outcomes in future studies. Ultimately, prioritising stakeholder input ensures that research initiatives are not only effective but also deeply rooted in the communities they aim to serve, creating a foundation for long-term success.

### **Engagement Strategies**

Effective engagement requires a multifaceted approach that combines personalised communication with the strategic use of local networks to maximise participation. Key strategies include utilising community

champions to promote initiatives, hosting informational sessions to provide clarity and build trust, and employing a range of communication channels such as social media, newsletters, and community events to reach diverse audiences. These approaches not only encourage involvement but also create opportunities for open dialogue and collaboration. As Fikryanita et al. (2024) and Gruss et al. (2019) highlight, tailored outreach efforts that address the specific needs and interests of stakeholders are essential for fostering meaningful connections, increasing response rates, and ensuring sustained participation. By adopting these methods, researchers and practitioners can enhance the effectiveness of their initiatives and build stronger relationships with the communities they serve.

### **Holistic Approaches**

Finally, the evaluation highlighted the importance of adopting holistic approaches to bridge the gap between education and employment. Integrating online platforms with offline support systems such as mentorship programmes, skills training workshops, and networking events is crucial for addressing the multifaceted challenges young people face in securing opportunities. As Meyer (2018) highlights, holistic approaches can enhance psychological capital and facilitate personal transformation among youth not in employment, education, or training. These strategies should prioritise building social capital by fostering connections with local businesses and providing access to resources that empower young people in their job search. The lessons learned from this initiative advocate for comprehensive, participatory interventions that create sustainable pathways for employment, ultimately enhancing outcomes for young people in the community. Additionally, Rodriguez (2021) emphasises the importance of mentorship and experiential learning in developing the skills and networks necessary for career advancement, reinforcing the significance of these approaches. By addressing these interconnected challenges, researchers and practitioners can create impactful, long-term solutions that empower young people and strengthen their communities.

These lessons reinforce the value of resilience, creativity, and collaboration in designing impactful initiatives that address the complex and evolving challenges faced by young people. Resilience is essential for navigating the uncertainties and “messy” realities inherent in social research and implementation, enabling researchers and practitioners to adapt to unforeseen obstacles and changing circumstances. Creativity plays a pivotal role in developing innovative solutions that bridge gaps between education and employment, ensuring that interventions remain relevant and effective in diverse contexts. Collaboration, meanwhile, fosters a sense of shared ownership and accountability among stakeholders, creating stronger partnerships between communities, businesses, educational institutions, and policymakers. Together, these principles provide a robust foundation for future efforts, enabling researchers and practitioners to foster meaningful connections, build trust, and co-create solutions that empower young people. By integrating these values into their work, researchers can ensure that

future initiatives will enhance the overall effectiveness, creating sustainable pathways to employment and contributing to the long-term wellbeing of individuals and their communities.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evaluation of the LinkedIn initiative has provided valuable insights into the complexities of youth unemployment and the multifaceted strategies required to address this pressing issue. By prioritising stakeholder engagement, embracing flexible research frameworks, and adopting holistic approaches, we have highlighted the need for adaptable and collaborative solutions that genuinely reflect the community's needs. The lessons learned underscore the importance of fostering meaningful connections between local businesses, educational institutions, and young individuals, as well as integrating online and offline support systems to create sustainable pathways to employment.

Furthermore, this paper deviates from the traditional research format by focusing not solely on specific methodologies and quantifiable results, but rather on the broader insights gained from navigating the messy realities of research. This perspective emphasises that valuable knowledge can emerge even when studies do not yield statistically significant outcomes. Acknowledging the unpredictable nature of social interventions reinforces the importance of transparency and continuous learning. Through these efforts, we aim to enhance the effectiveness of our interventions and contribute to improved employment outcomes for young people in economically disadvantaged regions, demonstrating that meaningful lessons can arise from engaging with the complexities and challenges inherent in real-life research contexts.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to extend their heartfelt gratitude to all the business representatives who participated in the interviews and completed the questionnaires. Your insights and contributions were invaluable to this research. We also wish to express our appreciation to the council authorities for their support in facilitating the distribution of invitations for the evaluation, as their collaboration was instrumental in the success of this project. Additionally, we recognise the dedication and hard work of the research team members: Ruxandra Popa, Aniketh Perumthodi, Connor Sutherland, Lucy-Marie Hatton, Michelle Thomas, Katherine Short, and Lena Slood. Thank you to all involved for your commitment and support.

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