



**Empowering Future Changemakers
Developing a Student Empowerment System for Business Schools
Supporting Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 10**

**Funded by the UK & Ireland PRME Chapter Seed Funding
Competition**

Abstract

This project investigated the use of creative self-portraiture workshops as transformative pedagogical tools to empower students from marginalised backgrounds. By inviting participants to imagine their future selves beyond traditional academic and career pathways, the workshops fostered authenticity, resilience, emotional wellbeing, and a renewed sense of hope.

Dr. Lucy Gill-Simmen
Lucy.Gill-Simmen@rhul.ac.uk

EMPOWERING FUTURE CHANGEMAKERS: A FRAMEWORK FOR BUSINESS SCHOOLS TO ADVANCE SDGS 5 AND 10

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project explored how creative self-portraiture workshops can serve as transformative pedagogical tools to empower students from marginalised backgrounds. By encouraging students to envision their future selves beyond conventional academic and career trajectories, the workshops cultivated authenticity, resilience, emotional wellbeing, and hope.

Thematic analysis of rich qualitative reflections from two workshops revealed profound emotional and cognitive shifts among students. Students articulated feelings of peace, a rediscovery of their creative identities, and a greater sense of agency and empowerment to navigate future challenges. Many students also reflected on personal struggles, cultural tensions, and societal expectations, linking these insights to their envisioned futures.

Building on these insights, we propose a Student Empowerment Framework for Business Schools. This framework offers practical, innovative strategies for cultivating student agency and enabling students to challenge oppressive systems, directly supporting SDGs 5 (Gender Equality) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

THEMATIC ANALYSIS: KEY STUDENT INSIGHTS

EMOTIONAL RELEASE AND WELLBEING

Students experienced emotional decompression, peace, and a sense of mindfulness.

- Examples: It felt like meditation. / A much-needed moment of peace. / I escaped everything for a while.

REDISCOVERY OF CREATIVITY AND PLAYFULNESS

Activities rekindled suppressed childhood creativity and joy, often lost in academic pressures.

- Examples: I felt like a kid again. / I realised it's okay to still have a playful side.

IDENTITY EXPLORATION AND AUTHENTICITY

Students deeply reflected on their cultural identities, aspirations, and the tension between authentic selves and societal expectations.

- Examples: The future goes back to the roots. / I want to stay true to myself, not a copy.

HOPE AND EMPOWERMENT FOR THE FUTURE

Students felt renewed hope and agency, recognising that their future success could be defined by personal fulfilment, not just external achievements.

- Examples: It made me more hopeful. / I realised I can control who I become.

REFLECTION ON PERSONAL CHALLENGES AND GROWTH

Students framed adversity as an integral and meaningful part of their personal development journey.

- Examples: Life has challenges, but I will overcome. / Challenges shape who I am becoming.

PEER CONNECTION AND SAFE SPACES

The workshops created non-judgmental, affirming environments where students formed genuine connections and supported one another.

- Examples: It was a space where I could just be me. / We supported and learned from each other.

PROPOSED STUDENT EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK FOR BUSINESS SCHOOLS

(ADVANCING SDGS 5 AND 10)

7 PRINCIPLES

1. CREATE INTENTIONAL SAFE SPACES

Design emotionally safe, judgment-free environments where students feel comfortable expressing vulnerabilities and aspirations.

Foster a sense of belonging, especially for those from marginalised or underrepresented backgrounds.

2. EMBED REFLECTIVE CREATIVE PRACTICES

Regularly integrate creative activities (self-portraiture, storytelling, collage) that invite students to explore identity, future aspirations, and wellbeing.

Use arts-based methods as legitimate academic tools for empowerment and critical reflection.

3. CENTRE PERSONAL AGENCY OVER INSTITUTIONAL GOALS

Encourage students to define success beyond grades or career milestones, focusing on personal growth, authenticity, and mental wellbeing.

Challenge the dominance of narrow achievement narratives within business education.

4. ACKNOWLEDGE AND ADDRESS STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES

Create opportunities for open dialogue about how societal systems of oppression impact students' futures.

Equip students with the tools to navigate, critique, and transform unjust systems in their professional and personal lives.

5. FOSTER GROWTH MINDSETS AND RESILIENCE

Normalise conversations around failure, uncertainty, and resilience-building.

Support students in viewing hardship not as failure, but as a pathway to personal strength and societal contribution.

6. PROMOTE PEER LEARNING AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Structure learning experiences that build solidarity, mutual support, and a collective sense of agency. Prioritise collaboration over competition, creating a learning community rooted in empathy and shared growth.

7. LINK TO THE SDGS EXPLICITLY

Demonstrate how personal empowerment directly connects to achieving global goals for equality and reduced inequalities.

Position students as active changemakers who can contribute meaningfully to a sustainable and inclusive future.

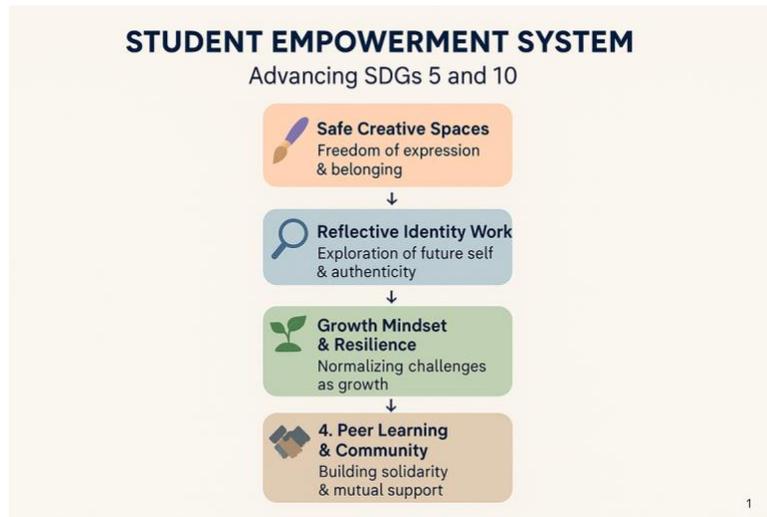
STUDENT EMPOWERMENT SYSTEM TOOLKIT

Table 1: Examples of How

Framework Step	Activity Example in Management Education	Toolkit Details
Create Intentional Safe Spaces	Host "Story Circles" where students share personal narratives about a time they overcame an obstacle, creating mutual trust and empathy.	Provide guidelines for empathetic listening; train facilitators in trauma-informed pedagogy; set ground rules collaboratively with students.
Embed Reflective Creative Practices	Conduct a "Future Self Vision Board" session using collage, drawing, or digital tools to imagine their future personal and professional selves.	Supply diverse materials (e.g., magazines, fabrics, digital templates); offer prompts to inspire future thinking; allow open interpretation.

<p>Centre Personal Agency over Institutional Goals</p>	<p>Facilitate a "Personal Success Manifesto" assignment where students define what success means to them beyond grades and job titles.</p>	<p>Encourage students to explore multiple dimensions of success (wellbeing, relationships, impact); use reflective writing templates; offer peer review sessions.</p>
<p>Acknowledge and Address Structural Inequalities</p>	<p>Run "Barrier Mapping" workshops where students identify and map systemic barriers in their fields and brainstorm personal and collective strategies for change.</p>	<p>Provide frameworks for analysing systemic oppression; facilitate discussions on lived experiences; create action maps for personal and collective strategies.</p>
<p>Foster Growth Mindsets and Resilience</p>	<p>Integrate "Failure Resume" exercises where students list and reflect on personal failures and the lessons learned to normalise resilience-building.</p>	<p>Offer structured templates encouraging reflection on lessons learned; model vulnerability by sharing instructor experiences; debrief collectively to normalise setbacks.</p>
<p>Promote Peer Learning and Community Building</p>	<p>Set up "Changemaker Peer Pods," small interdisciplinary groups that meet biweekly to share challenges, celebrate wins, and support each other's growth journeys.</p>	<p>Curate small, diverse peer groups; provide a discussion agenda for biweekly meetings; encourage goal-setting, mutual mentoring, and group projects.</p>
<p>Link to the SDGs Explicitly</p>	<p>Facilitate "SDG Personal Impact Projects" where students identify one SDG they are passionate about and design a small, actionable contribution plan.</p>	<p>Provide a toolkit mapping each SDG to possible actions; host brainstorming workshops; mentor students on turning small ideas into tangible initiatives.</p>

Figure 1: A student Empowerment System



CONCLUSION

This project demonstrates the transformative potential of creative pedagogies in business education. By fostering authenticity, resilience, and hope, business schools can empower a new generation of changemakers prepared to dismantle oppressive structures and pursue a more sustainable, inclusive future.

The research revealed that students thrive when given the opportunity to reconnect with their authentic selves in supportive, creative environments. Business education must embrace this holistic approach to empowerment, placing student voice, identity, and wellbeing at the heart of sustainability and social impact education.

Workshops available upon request.