

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Supporting Participation in Higher Education Equity Research Through the Visual Mapping Method

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**Research Domain:** Technical, Professional and Vocational Higher Education (TPV)

**Abstract:** Visual mapping is a powerful research tool as it allows for the creation of rich and reflective data about educational and vocational experiences and journeys within qualitative interview settings. This presentation draws on a research project which investigated best-practice career development learning (CDL) for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and outlines how visual maps were used within university student focus groups to obtain data about their educational and vocational journeys. Employing visual maps as a research tool allowed for the unlocking of memories, visual representation of experience across individuals' educational lives, and supported interview participation and talk. This presentation offers suggestions as to how this method might support other higher education research with equity groups.

**Paper: Introduction**

The adoption of alternate or complementary research methods such as visual research methods (VRM) offer the potential for gaining new or alternative perspectives on higher-education (HE) research problems (Rainford, 2020; Rose, 2014; Sharafizad, Brown, Jogulu, & Omari, 2020). One VRM which offers great potential for such research is visual mapping, a broad term which encompasses a range of drawing activities from highly structured 'concept maps' through to more open-ended 'mind maps' (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010; Schubring, Mayer, & Thiel, 2019).

Visual mapping is supportive of a critical research paradigm and can provide rich understandings of participants' learning experiences (Wilson, Mandich, & Magalhaes, 2016) but have been underutilised in social science research (Moss, 2013; Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). The aim of this paper is to discuss the benefits of using visual mapping as a data collection tool to explore the educational and career development experiences of students from diverse backgrounds.

**The Study**

Students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds have inequitable outcomes from education and employment (Cunningham, Orsmond, & Price, 2014; McLachlan, Gilfilan, & Gordon, 2013). The study sought to identify best practice principles for career education for these students.

A verbal/visual methodology (Sharafizad et al., 2020) was used with current university students from low SES backgrounds to explore how they viewed their educational and career trajectories; the critical decision points in their journeys; and the influences on their decisions including stakeholders and life events. During seven focus groups, 23 student participants participated in a visual mapping

activity. At the start of each focus group, each participant was provided with a piece of A4 paper and pens or coloured pencils and markers to use. Students were asked to visually represent their educational journey and then talk the researcher through what they had drawn.

## **Findings**

Analysis of the transcripts, maps and reflections of the interviewees found three significant benefits, outlined following.

The visual mapping method facilitated data creation which was more comprehensive and detailed than data produced by interview methods alone. In this study, the visual mapping activity conducted at the commencement of the focus group provided the student participants in this study with time to think and to deeply consider their past experiences in light of the instructions. The result of increased time to think through completing the visual maps was more depth and detail of responses, i.e., richer data.

The data from participants after visual mapping, in addition to being longer, more detailed and coherent, were also highly reflective. The reflective aspect of the visual mapping activity was verbalised by one participant, Yolanda, whilst she was doing the task: "It's very reflective looking back on what decisions were made and where the end result kind of came from". The mapping activity appeared to offer the opportunity for students to evaluate their journeys, compare them to those of others in the group and be able to share reflective understandings about their journeys.

Lastly, visual maps acted as artefacts to support participants' talk in the focus groups. The supportive role that the visual maps took was highly visible for one participant in particular, Leia who was a student with dyslexia, a specific learning difficulty. Visual mapping also supported other participants by acting as an artefact to speak to, helping to organise participants' thoughts and jogging their memories.

## **Recommendations**

In order to maximise the potential of this method for CDL and HE research, the following recommendations are made. Firstly, researchers should use visual maps in conjunction with another method such as interviews or focus groups as maps became much more meaningful when 'read' alongside the focus group transcripts (Sharafizad et al., 2020). Secondly, visual mapping should be done at the start of the focus group to provide participants with thinking time and an opportunity to engage with the themes of the research (Rainford, 2020). Third, it is recommended to consider approaches to ensure that participants engage with visual research methods such as preparing participants for the method (Sharafizad et al., 2020). Finally, a choice of materials which might support creativity and engagement with the activity should be offered to participants.

With these aspects well attended to, HE researchers might fully capitalise on the method's power to capture rich, reflective data about the educational and vocational experiences of a range of diverse participants.

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