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# Online Enrichment Workshops – Enhancing Student Engagement and Employability



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## Abstract

A series of workshops were offered to biology and health sciences students at the Open University during June and July 2022. The aims of the workshops were to enhance our students' experience, help them to appreciate the employability benefits of engaging with practical science investigations in their modules, recognise their employability skills and employment possibilities, and feel a sense of belonging to a scientific community. Practical investigations are designed to help students develop employability skills such as numerical and problem-solving skills and also perseverance, creativity and resilience. Feedback from attendees showed that the programme had been successful in helping them articulate their employability skills and had led to an increased sense of community among students. The workshops also maintained engagement over the summer break, reducing the risk of students losing their study momentum. Following this success, a more extensive programme was offered in 2023, with a wider subject range from various scientific topics to general study and employability skills development. Input is included from one regular student participant who is included here as a co-author.

**Keywords:** Employability, Skills development, Enrichment, Community building, Active learning.

## Introduction and Literature Review

Employability is considered crucially important in contemporary Higher Education (HE). The Office for Students (OfS) has proposed numerical thresholds to underpin requirements for graduate employment (Advance HE, 2022). Many HE institutions have striven to develop and strengthen activities which relate to graduate employment because potential students are increasingly interested in graduate destination data. Based on analysis of definitions used in both higher education and the workplace, employability has recently been defined as a

composite of disciplinary knowledge and the general skills needed to perform a given occupation, with an emphasis on social and networking skills, life-long learning, adaptability in changing situations and environments and ability to self-reflect (Römgens, Scoupe & Beusaert, 2020). Given the broad definition, it is not surprising that employability is not always, interpreted or measured in the same way by different institutions and employers (Osmani *et al.*, 2019; Abelha *et al.*, 2020). For example, it may relate to the ability to keep a current job or progress to another job rather than to get a first graduate job (Clifton and Kellet, 2017).

Student success in higher education is dependent on a wide range of factors. The method and practice of teaching needs to support the development of appropriate skills to enable students to succeed in their studies, pass their modules and return to take their next ones, and hence achieve their study goals. Extra-curricular enrichment opportunities can add enormous value to a core curriculum which equips students with appropriate employability skills; in addition to their other benefits, they broaden perspectives and help students to relate degree work to life in the outside world (e.g. Wilson *et al.*, (2014); Arnold (2019)).



The Open University (OU) is a distance learning university where students rarely, if ever, meet their fellow students or tutors face-to-face, and this presents additional challenges, especially for helping students to develop practical and collaborative skills. A survey of OU biology students which explored students' perceptions of their practical skills progression and employability (Haresnape, 2022) revealed that many students do not consider they are developing employability skills through engaging with remote practical investigations which they undertake at home or in a garden or other local field site. Many OU students have considerable experience of the world of work already, so may already have these skills. However those who do not realise undertaking practical work can help them to develop creativity, resilience and perseverance as well as practical, problem-solving and numerical skills, or are poor at articulating these skills, may be disadvantaged when seeking employment. Also of crucial importance for employability, is being able to be sensitive to the feelings of peers, given that there is growing realisation that future graduates will need empathy as well as technical skills (Brett, 2018). Team working requires understanding and tolerance, and development of sensitivity to the feelings of others is likely to be helped by a sense of community and of belonging. In recent years, a sense of belonging has become an increasingly recognised concept in education. It has been suggested that learners may find it difficult to make use of the wider academic developmental possibilities offered through higher education without acquiring a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Moreover, those who feel a

sense of belonging tend to be more motivated and more engaged with their studies (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017; Meehan & Howells, 2018). Furthermore, a sense of belonging has been shown to be associated with not only improved learner satisfaction and lower attrition rates, but also with increased student attainment (O'Keefe, 2013). Indeed, a recent systematic review demonstrated that friendship and sense of belonging to the people around as well as connection with teachers were key themes in students' experience of resilience (Ang *et al.*, 2021). Most studies of sense of belonging relate to the experience of students at face-to-face institutions. However, the work of Meehan & Howells (2018) includes development of online communities and distance learning programmes enhanced through use of technology. Matheson & Sutcliffe (2017) emphasise the importance of flexibility in provision of learning opportunities, and this includes not only face-to-face extracurricular events but also student-led development of online communities. Haresnape, Aiken and Wynn (2022) describe a programme of online events for distance learning tutors at the OU which helped nurture a sense of community despite the participants rarely if ever having opportunities to meet face-to-face, and Palloff & Pratt (2007) in their work on building online communities explore how virtual classrooms can foster a sense of community among students.

Enabling students to develop a sense of belonging and feel part of a community is inevitably more of a challenge in distance learning environments such as at the Open University than at campus-based

institutions where students have regular opportunities to meet face-to-face. Online learning can be a lonely experience, especially to start with. Encouraging students to develop connections with their peers helps online learners to flourish, and to avoid the sense of isolation and disengagement which distance learners may feel (Thomas, Herbert & Teras, 2014).

### **The pilot programme of enrichment workshops (June–July 2022)**

We offered eleven online workshops to biology and health sciences students from the OU during June and July 2022 when most were 'between modules'. They were facilitated by OU tutors, who often simultaneously hold positions in other organisations as well as tutoring at the OU, and focussed on practical employability skills, through the tutors' experiences of working in a biology or health-related laboratory or engaging with field work in a biological context.

Creating a sense of community is particularly challenging in a distance learning environment as we have at the OU, as is keeping students engaged over the summer – this can help student retention as OU students do not automatically enrol for the next modules for the new academic year as they usually would in a conventional university. Therefore, in addition to raising awareness of the potential employability benefits of engaging with module practical activities, the workshops were also intended to help create a sense of community and to encourage students to stay engaged over the summer months.

An online summer programme offers students an opportunity to continue their learning journey between modules and may help them return to study mode faster compared with having a long break.

The workshops took place online. Some focussed on biology-related jobs, with the facilitators giving first-hand knowledge of what a particular job was like (e.g. field-based job, lab-based job, and working in bioinformatics), elaborating on the particular skills required in each case. Others focussed on a biology or health science related topic of general interest (e.g. foodborne pathogens, microbiology of fermented foods, the state of the global HIV epidemic). One tutor was appointed to introduce the facilitator of each workshop and welcome the students to ensure they were perceived as part of a coordinated programme. She encouraged active participation, posted the link to a feedback survey at the end of each workshop, and passed follow-up questions from participants on to the facilitators. There was also an online forum which was available for communication with and between students to follow up discussions.

Invitations to the workshops were sent by email to students after their modules had finished. They were initially sent to those studying Level 6 (equivalent to 3rd Year undergraduate) biology modules (1446 students), who would be continuing further Level 6 study the following year. The invitation was later extended to all students studying Level 5 and 6 (equivalent to 2nd and 3rd Year undergraduate) biology and health science modules (2750 students). Details of the programme of workshops were also posted on the appropriate forum for each of the biology and health science modules.

Despite the large number of students invited to attend, the average number attending each

workshop was between 10 and 15. However, all workshops were recorded, and a total of 149 different students (~5% of invited students) either attended or accessed the recording of at least one workshop in the programme. Thirty-two students either attended or watched the recording of at least four of the workshops, and six students either attended or accessed the recording of all eleven workshops.

We had hoped to look at the characteristics of the students who attended to try to identify demographics for which there were gaps, but the numbers involved were too small for the comparisons to be meaningful.

It is difficult to establish what prevents live attendance at synchronous online tutorials and workshops because those who respond to surveys tend to be those who attend. It has been suggested by Gillis and Szabo, (2024) that problems with technology are the biggest barrier to hybrid teaching, where some students are online and others face-to-face; other barriers to learning in online events which they identified included pseudo-attendance, where a student is present but doing something else while listening, and the feeling that the online teaching environment is less conducive to asking questions.

### Feedback on 2022 pilot programme

A link to a feedback survey was posted in the chat box towards the end of each of the workshops. All respondents to the feedback survey reported that the session they attended had helped them to understand the skills required for a particular field of work (Figure 1(a)), and also that the programme had helped them to feel part of a community of biology students (Figure 1(b)). Nearly all the responses were from students who attended the live events.

### Responses to two survey questions.

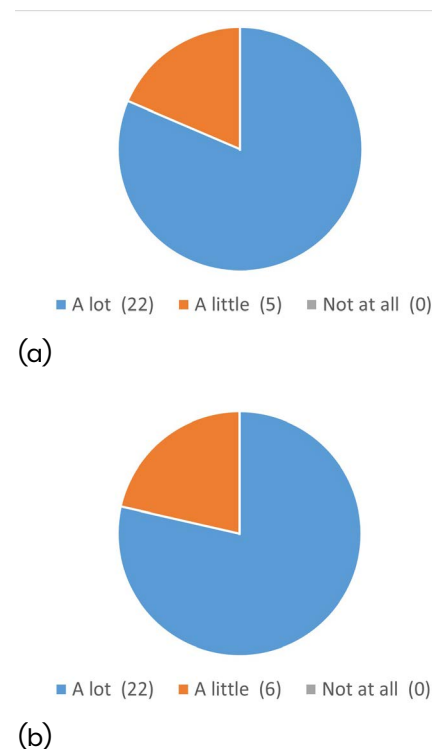


Figure 1 (a) Responses to 'Did this session help you to understand the skills required for a particular field of work?' (b) Responses to 'Is this programme helping you to feel part of an OU community of biology students?'

Twenty-eight responses were received from a total of 64 attendees, but some attendees may have left workshops before the end and therefore missed seeing the link to the survey, and some students submitted responses after more than one workshop, so it is difficult to give an accurate response rate.

A thematic analysis of the free text comments was undertaken following the six-phase framework method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). From initial scrutiny and manual coding of the comments, multiple themes were generated, and these were reduced to three following several rounds of review. The final themes identified were: Building employability, Bringing studies to life and Feeling part of a community (Haresnape, Gilbert & Fraser, 2024).



## Building employability

Many comments indicated that the sessions had helped participants understand both the skills and the challenges involved in undertaking field work. Comments indicated that workshops had:

- Opened my eyes to opportunities out there to do field work.
- [Provided] details of the work experience of the tutor, what she thought was important/not important in terms of skills.

Students had been encouraged to relate their studies to possible future employment opportunities. The programme raised awareness of different possible career paths and led participants to consider avenues they had not previously been aware of. One student reported realising how many different career roles are involved in food safety. Another reported that she had never heard of bioinformatics and was delighted to realise that this could be a possible career.

## Bringing studies to life

Many students reported that the real-life experience and enthusiasm of the presenters had brought their studies to life.

- [The presenter] had a clear passion and interest which shone through and was very engaging.
- [Learnt] how science is applied in the real world from people who are passionate about what they research

They found it informative, interesting and engaging to learn more about science in action – troubleshooting and what informs research questions, and how biological techniques are used to research real-world problems. They enjoyed the emphasis on cross-disciplinary aspects and were pleased to learn more about topics they had touched on in their modules but not studied in great depth.

## Feeling part of a community

The students reported that participating in the programme had helped them to feel part of a community of biology students (Figure 1(b)). The comments from individual participants indicated that they had particularly appreciated the opportunity for broader discussions, and for informal dialogue with not only other students, but also the tutors.

- [This format] really involved people

Participants were fascinated by the collaborative nature of large projects, and enjoyed the opportunity for intellectual conversation in a relaxed context, away from the stresses of assignments and exams. Several also mentioned how important it had been to keep their study momentum going over the summer break.

## The extended programme of enrichment workshops (May–September 2023)

Following the success of the June–July 2022 pilot, and building on the feedback received, the programme was significantly expanded for 2023 to include a wider range of topics, and was advertised to all students studying modules in the School of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences (approximately 6,000 students). It started earlier, in May 2023, because many students stop checking emails as soon as their assessments are over, and therefore missed the announcements about the launch of the 2022 programme. Following a pause for the fortnight in June when most students were taking final assessments, the programme continued until the end of September. It was advertised regularly via email to promote those workshops scheduled during each four-week period. Student-facing staff were asked to advertise the programme to their students.

The 2023 programme included a wider range of workshop topics and styles, covering general employability skills and also some different workshop approaches and styles as listed below.

- Overviews of research being undertaken at the OU.
- Coverage of transferable and technical employability skills such as workshops on using Excel and increasing self-awareness,
- Overview of services available from the OU Careers and Employability Service.
- A workshop on library skills development facilitated by staff from the OU Library.
- Panel discussion with both current and completed PhD students.

Open for all online Journal Club in which students are encouraged to discuss a journal article (See New *et al.*, 2024).

A total of 22 events took place between May and September 2023. The numbers of students attending each event ranged from 5 to 29, with a mean of 13. The number of students accessing the recording of each session by the end of September 2023 ranged from 15 to 63, with the recordings still available for download.

Although numbers attending each event were still relatively low, over 200 different students (~3% of those invited) attended at least one live event (c.f. 64 in 2022) and 443 different students (~7%) either attended or viewed the recording of at least one event (c.f. 149 in 2022). One regular participant was invited to help with the planning and presenting of the eSTeEM conference workshop and appears here as a co-author.

Interaction during each event was excellent with active participation in polls, internet searches, discussions and other online activities.

The comments from our student co-author summarising what she had particularly valued and found most useful are summarised in the next section of this report, considering each of the three themes identified earlier in turn.

## Building employability

Our student coauthor particularly emphasised how inspiring she found it that many of the facilitators shared a short history of their personal career journeys to date.

The ability to learn a concept or topic ..... and see the result of the study material in a career – this is what gives the motive for studying some extra fuel. It is easy to read about the application of a concept in a career, but it is a different experience to journey with someone in a live session. It becomes more personal and 'real'.

**Coauthor  
OU student**

Overall, the workshops had highlighted many different aspects of employability to our student co-author – some examples are given below:

- Invaluable skills students developed during their studies and how to emphasise these in CVs/job applications and at interviews.
- Use of practical investigation experience to demonstrate not only problem solving, communication and numerical skills, but also creativity, networking and resilience.
- Resources and support available via the University Careers and Employability Services, including a professional planning tool, FutureYOU.
- The concept of Global Citizenship and what it entails in the context of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences.

## Bringing studies to life

Our student coauthor reported that every workshop she attended had included content which she could relate to material from her OU modules, and that this provided deeper insight into various different specialist areas. The real experience of the facilitators had brought each topic to life and helped her to relate her degree work to the outside world, for example in learning how biological techniques are used in research to explore real-world problems.

For example, learning about primary, secondary and tertiary proteins, and the force types that are responsible for each attraction at an R group may seem tedious and irrelevant – not helped if the concept is a struggle to grasp. This is where the enrichment sessions give purpose to the study material. It puts the “because” into the “why are we learning this?”. Suddenly the knowledge of protein folding is essential in creating a drug to target a specific active site. Here the knowledge of study material is placed in a new setting – a job, research....

The enrichment sessions are at the right level to link directly to the study material, so they are understandable in the context.

**Coauthor  
OU student**

By participating in these workshops led by OU experts, students were able to better appreciate the relevance of their studies and feel more connected to the broader scientific community at OU. This engagement not only enhances their learning experience but also reinforces their identity as part of a vibrant research-driven institution.



## Feeling part of a community

Our student coauthor reported that the workshop facilitators were all very approachable and open to questions. The wide range of interaction techniques that were facilitated by these enrichment sessions such as polls, anonymously typing a keyword to create a word cloud, the use of drawing tools etc, led her to report that she had felt entirely comfortable about asking questions and engaging in further discussion on each topic. The interactive tasks and questioning style, which asked student participants for their own views, had led her to feel very much part of a scientific research community, and had provided inspiration and confidence, and raised her self-esteem.



to journey with someone in a live session – It becomes more personal and ‘real’. And that leads to raised self-esteem with the belief to say “there is no reason why that person delivering the talk couldn’t be me in a few years because I’m studying this”

**Coauthor  
OU student**

The Online Journal Club (OJC) sessions gave the participating students the opportunity to practice their information literacy and communications skills in a comfortable, safe environment. In the first session, two tutors and one student each presented a summary of a paper they had read. Through leading by example, the tutors were able to encourage students to join in themselves – although OJCs at the OU are not usually recorded (New *et al.*, 2024), this first one was recorded so that students could watch before committing to presenting themselves. Fifty-one different students accessed the recording. Subsequent Online Journal Clubs

were held monthly but not recorded to make it less intimidating for students to participate and had an enthusiastic following of regular attendees and contributors, indicating that it had helped to create a sense of belonging among those who participated.

Our student coauthor emphasised how important it was that the facilitators were engaging and supportive, that the workshops focussed on important skills and offered different ways of interacting, and that they helped her to feel part of a science community and to feel inspired. Farrell and Brunton (2020), who followed 24 online humanities students over one academic year at Dublin City University, concluded that the most important factors for engaging with online learning were the presence of formal and informal community, engaging and supportive online teachers, multiple means of interaction, and opportunities for skill development, confidence building and self-regulation. Thus there was a clear overlap between these factors and the aspects of our enrichment programme which were identified by our student coauthor as being particularly important for her and those identified elsewhere.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The enrichment workshops enhanced employability awareness and community building among OU students. Students who attended gained a deeper understanding of the skills which different employment paths require, and ways in which these can be developed as they undertake their studies – particularly through undertaking practical investigations. It also resulted in students feeling part of a community of scientists, and resulted in an increased sense of belonging. Developing a sense of community and being sensitive to the feelings of peers is important for employability as well as for student success

(Brett, 2018). Sense of belonging amongst peers as well as the staff members has also been linked to higher resilience in students (Ang *et al.*, 2021). Hence the programme of enrichment workshops was successful in achieving its original aims – to improve awareness of employability skills, and nurture a feeling of community and sense of belonging.

The number of attendees per workshop was similar in 2023 to 2022 despite extending the programme over a longer period and inviting a larger cohort of students in 2023. It may be that widening the variety of events meant that some events appealed to only a small number of participants. For example, the panel discussion with PhD students may only have been of interest to those students considering embarking on doing a PhD themselves. Tutorial participation in the OU is not compulsory, and an attendance of 10–20 percent of a cohort can be the norm, even when tutorials are part of the core teaching within a module. For enrichment workshops which are not part of the core curriculum, we would expect a lower proportion of students to engage. Yet over 440 different students (~7% of those invited) either attended or downloaded the recording of at least one event from the 2023 programme (compared with 149 in 2022, ~5% of those invited).

Including a greater variety of events in the 2023 programme and spreading them out over a longer period had therefore widened access to different enrichment opportunities for our students and enabled more individual students to find something of interest within the programme. However, the larger number of individual students accessing the programme in 2023 can be explained by the larger size of the invited cohort, as the percentage attendance for 2022 and 2023 were similar at ~5 and ~7% respectively. Moreover, since the online enrichment program started,



we have become aware of an interest in students contributing to and building their own communities. This was evidenced by students who had participated in the enrichment sessions setting up a student-led writing journal club and a student club on biomedical science. It would be interesting to compare the longevity of this initiative with other student-led groups.

We suggest that similar summer programmes of interactive online enrichment events would provide valuable opportunities at other HE Institutions, for example:

- PhD students could use such a programme to practise online presentation skills by giving research talks, while also sharing their experiences with undergraduates.
- Online events enable students to continue their learning journey whatever their geographic location, so can help UK and international students who return home over the summer feel less isolated during the long break. At many face-to-face HE Institutions, students have other commitments during the summer, and international students who return to their communities over the summer may not want to participate in additional workshops. However it is interesting that attending summer sessions was found to increase student attainment and degree completion in a US private technical college (Franke and Bicknell, 2018).

There was a very clear overlap with the aspects of our enrichment programme which were identified by our student coauthor as being particularly important for her, and those identified by Farrell and Brunton (2020) as being the most important factors for engaging with online learning.

## Further enhancements and future work

It is difficult to establish reasons why students do not attend online events, but Gillis and Szabo (2024) suggest that problems with technology are a major barrier. Various avenues have been suggested for making enhancement workshops more accessible and attractive.

It is important to make workshop titles catchy to attract students to attend, especially for topics which might at first seem rather dry. Giving awards for active participation in certain workshops such as one on Excel skills, might make these events more appealing. More direct links to employability could be attractive, for example, including input from industry, involving graduates now working in industry, embedding graduate interview videos, or by linking the events to conferences taking place, for example on Women in maths, physics or engineering. To motivate more students to attend events and involve a wider range of participants, multidisciplinary sessions could be valuable, and enrichment events could take place regularly throughout the year. Suggestions for the future include innovative sessions to explain how online science experiments can be created. Other possible suggestions are to advertise through multiple channels, since emails are easy to miss or ignore, and to use a different medium such as perhaps a live digital whiteboard for the workshops, and using a mobile phone layout since many students don't use laptops regularly.

It would also be useful to ask students what would interest them. At the risk of inhibiting the students, perhaps staff could be invited to join in the workshops alongside students; this might not only encourage the development of an improved sense of a STEM academic community but could help staff gain a better understanding of student perspectives.

Many of the suggestions outlined here have come from colleagues who attended a workshop on this programme.

In summary, this online enrichment programme was successful in enhancing transferrable employability skills, community building and engagement. Many students are interested in a range of subjects beyond the main focus of their study. If resources were available, it would be valuable to explore the potential benefits and challenges of running a more extensive programme to cover more disciplines, involve a wider range of stakeholders, and reach more STEM students, both at the OU and at other HE Institutions.

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