

# Developing an institutional employability strategy – supporting diverse student cohorts

Final Version

Mick McCormick and Leanne Daniels

*The Open University, UK*

## Abstract

Promoting social justice, empowering people to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential are pillars of The Open University's (the OU) mission. It's the shared responsibility of all at the OU to contribute to these aims and we do this not only by providing life-changing learning, but also by embedding personal development planning, self-reflection, employability and the employer voice throughout the student journey.

Following an institutional review of employability at the OU, a strategic programme – Enhanced Employability and Career Progression (EECP) – was established to review and refresh the OU's approach to employability.

This paper will describe EECP's innovative approach to supporting students' understanding, development and articulation of employability – engaging stakeholders across the University; developing innovative working practices and supporting academic teams to understand employability in relation to their subject area.

In developing a supportive employability narrative across the institution, we have also addressed the diverse nature of OU students – many are already in employment, have a wealth of personal, study and work experiences, and are looking for study to either enhance their performance in their current roles or to be promoted into new roles in their employing organisations. Additionally, a significant number study for personal reasons and have no associated career intentions. Particularly challenging has been finding innovative ways of engaging with all students, regardless of study motivation and supporting them to 'bring the outside, in' as they develop their employability narrative.

**Keywords:** Employability Framework, Lifelong Learning, Learning Gain, Study Motivation, Part-time Learner, Distance Learning, Widening Participation

## Background

Employability is a prominent feature of contemporary debate in Higher Education (see, for example, Baker (2018), Cutterham (2019) and, Songhurst (2019)). There is a desire to strengthen and develop relevant activities due to a range of factors and influences such as graduate destination data, labour market detail, policy impact, and student expectations.

While employability per se looks set to remain a contested topic, there is consensus that student success is a priority and whilst definitions and interpretations of ‘Student Success’ are also varied and broad, there is general acknowledgment that it is dependent on a range of factors – employability being a key factor. Encapsulating pedagogies that support employability can help develop the critical components required to enable students to succeed. Not only are these components attractive to potential employers, they also act as the foundation for developing students throughout their learning journey to enhance and support their study, career and personal aspirations.

Cole and Tibby (2013) describe employability as an ongoing, reflective process, and student engagement with employability as the development of range of core employability skills and attributes – from their study, and from reflection on their previous career(s), study and life. This enables them to ‘bring the outside in’, enriching and enhancing their study. Supporting students to enhance their employability is about helping them to understand the breadth of learning across all areas of their lives, joining it all together in a coherent way and in so doing, Senior et al (2014) suggest, there is growing evidence of a clear relationship between student employability, engagement and retention (Senior et al., 2014).

Promoting social justice, empowering people to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential are pillars of The Open University’s (the OU) mission. It is the shared responsibility of all at the OU to contribute to these aims and we do this not only by providing life-changing learning, but also by embedding personal development planning, self-reflection, employability and the employer voice throughout the student journey.

Following an institutional review of employability at the OU, a strategic programme – Enhanced Employability and Career Progression (EECP) – was established to review and refresh the OU’s approach to employability.

This paper will describe EECP’s innovative approach to supporting students’ understanding, development and articulation of employability – engaging stakeholders across and beyond the University; developing innovative working practices and supporting academic teams to understand employability in relation to their subject area.

In developing a supportive employability narrative across the institution, we have also addressed the diverse nature of the OU student cohort – many are already in employment, have a wealth of personal, study and work experiences, and are looking for study to either enhance their performance in their current roles or to be promoted into new roles in their employing organisations. Additionally, a significant number study for personal reasons and have no associated career intentions. Particularly challenging has been finding innovative ways of engaging with all students, regardless of study motivation and supporting them to ‘bring the outside, in’ as they develop their employability narrative.

One of the OU’s central aims is to continue transforming lives by helping people to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. Supporting students to succeed in their study, career and personal goals is a key element in achieving this aim. At the same time – and in common with all UK universities - the OU is under increased scrutiny to provide clear evidence of employability skills and career progression performance (e.g. Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), Graduate Outcomes (GO)).

## Employability in an OU context

A 2017 review of OU employability (HEA, 2017) concluded that OU students are not well-equipped to articulate the gains they make through their studies to support and develop their employability narrative. However, articulation of this narrative is critical in enabling students to progress in or enter their preferred career (Brett, 2018) and aligns with the OU’s aspirations for students in relation to employability, which we define as:

*a set of capabilities and achievements that support students in developing their careers, raising their aspirations and enhancing their contribution to society. (OU, 2011, p.5)*

Songhurst (2019) exhorts universities to, ‘...challenge the dominant discourse by creating a sector narrative that articulates and advocates both the quantitative and qualitative benefits of higher education.’ The OU’s wider definition and understanding of employability does just that – recognising that students engage with the academy for many reasons and have diverse motivations for study. Not all are career focussed and an employability strategy recognising the broad motivations and benefits of academic study cuts across the - often narrow - understanding of employability being synonymous with employment – an unhelpful conflation of ideas which only serves to alienate large numbers of our students who wish to engage with employability in the wider sense of the term and as defined above.

Kellett (2019) describes the OU’s scale, reach and relevance - we operate an open-entry policy to give the opportunity of a high-quality university education to anyone wishing to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. Through academic research, pedagogic innovation and collaborative partnership we seek to be a world leader in the design, content and delivery of personal open and distance learning. Our students are an extremely diverse group, and different from the sector as a whole. Nearly 50% of students come to us with less than one A-level or equivalent. More than 24,000 students self-report as having a disability, and 23% of our students come from the 25% most deprived areas of the UK. Our students make up 34% of the entire UK part-time student body, and 90% of distance-learning undergraduates. For some 36% of our students, their study goal and personal definitions of a successful outcome are not to obtain ‘a graduate-level job’ but to develop confidence and skills, to prove to themselves that they can study, or to enjoy study for its own sake – at the same time, 76% of our students remain in work whilst studying with us. The OU’s articulation of, and strategic approach to, employability addresses many of the challenges outlined by Thomas and Johns (2007, p3) and captures the ambition to ensure that, ‘Institutional and course commitment is linked to students’ motivation to study their chosen programme, and this may relate to notions of employability and achieving future goals.’

This breadth of student cohort brings its challenges - many OU students face significant barriers to accessing opportunities for highly skilled employment - related to a broad range of issues including caring responsibilities, health-related problems and geographic barriers. We’re committed to supporting our varied student cohorts across the UK to develop their employability skills throughout their learning journey, by actively supporting lifelong learning and the wider public benefits of education. Our emphasis, therefore, is on ensuring the continued development of employability and transferable skills.

At the same time – although acknowledging the good work and fine examples of engagement with the employability agenda in pockets - the HEA (2017) report recommended that we:

- Consider an institutional strategy for employability
- Broaden the OU’s existing skills-based employability approach to a framework that includes behaviours, values and attributes
- Increase employer engagement, building on areas of good practice
- Ensure that employability as a concept is understood across all staff groups.

(HEA, 2017)

EECP was established to consider these issues and point a way forward for the OU – taking into account the diverse student population and their equally diverse study motivations.

Over the past two years, EECP has engaged with a wide range of external and internal stakeholders and proposed an institutional strategy around three areas: student engagement; curriculum, and employer engagement – supported by robust scholarship, research and information management. Each of these three areas will be explored in turn – in doing so, we will discuss the challenges and achievements of the programme across these areas and discuss ways forward for the OU and implications for supporting diverse student cohorts. .

## Employability Strategy

Our student employability strategy is structured around fulfilling aims and objectives under three themes:

### 1. Enhancing **Student Support and Engagement**

2. Embedding Employability in **Curriculum Design**
3. Deepening our **Employer Engagement**

These are informed and supported by student consultation, focussed scholarship and research on employability, and a tailored, measured approach that will determine and shape the nature of our engagement across each of the three themes.



Fig 1: The core themes of student employability enhancement

### Enhancing student support and engagement

The OU student population represents a uniquely diverse cohort whose career and personal aspirations - described in Kellett (2019) ‘A manifesto for lifelong learning’ - change as they develop confidence in progressing through study. Students begin OU study from wide-ranging starting points and as their confidence and self-belief grow, they may change their goals thereby altering their needs in terms of support to succeed.

To support our students in making full use of their learning experiences it is imperative that we gain a better understanding of our students’ motivations for study, their aspirations and personal goals not just at the start of their studies but also as they evolve, change and mature over the course of the student journey. This is a particular challenge as our current registration process only manages to capture study motivation from approximately 60% of our students and this data doesn’t monitor any changes to their study, career or personal motivations over the course of study.

A key focus will therefore be on the enhancement of systems to capture aspiration on registration and for goal tracking at regular points across the study journey. This will provide a richer data set to understand and monitor student led goals, changing aspirations and distance travelled – seeking methods to measure learning gain, which many commentators acknowledge is particularly challenging (Kandiko Howson (2017), Clifton and Kellett (2017), Rogaten et al (2016)). As well as quantitative measurement, we are proposing a range of developments to engage students throughout their study and to ensure support and engagement is appropriate, effective, and customised according to individual need. These developments will ensure that the professional

career and/or personal development guidance to which all students are entitled is delivered in a timely way to maximise student confidence.

This will also be a key enabler to the development of new initiatives for targeted support. One such initiative currently being trialled in partnership with our Careers and Employability Services (CES) colleagues, is a tailored support programme with students across Scotland – offering differential student support services across a set of motivation categories: Career Starters, Changers and Developers, Personal Developers and those who are unsure about their motivations.

### Embedding employability in curriculum design

The HEA OU Employability Review (2017) clearly indicated that current OU curriculum – where it had an employability focus – was predominately skills based and that students didn't have a clear understanding of employability, or of the core employability skills and attributes they were developing over the course of their studies with the OU. As a result, they were often not able to effectively articulate those employability strengths developed or capitalise on the opportunities made available during study.

As an institution we needed to find more effective ways to embed core employability skills and attributes in the curriculum, to make employability more explicit and to support students to articulate their development of employability around career, personal and study motivations.

### *An Employability Framework*

EECP has worked collaboratively across the OU on the development of an institutional Employability Framework (the framework) to be woven across all curriculum areas and at all levels (including access, undergraduate, postgraduate and informal learning). The framework will assist our learners in the development of their employability narratives to support their career, personal and study aspirations. The purpose is to provide a common reference point for curriculum teams to use in determining how, and in what way, a more staged approach to employability can be integrated within and underpin learning outcomes and teaching activities. The framework is not intended to be prescriptive but supportive in making sure that the relevant skills, values and behaviours are developed and articulated to students in a way which makes it clear to them how they are interpreted in that subject/discipline area. The framework was developed in consultation with stakeholders across and beyond the OU and subjected to comprehensive consultation and governance approval.

A series of workshops were conducted with academic staff, careers consultants and other stakeholders to design a mapping toolkit and supportive guidance for curriculum teams to audit existing curriculum (at qualification level) against the framework (Tunnah and Peeran 2019). This collaborative approach proved effective in achieving stakeholder buy-in, however resourcing the mapping activity was an immediate barrier across some curriculum areas. In response EECP recruited a bank of associate lecturers (tutors/teaching staff for OU modules) to undertake the mapping and conducted several online staff training sessions to support the process.

Implementation has started across 10 early adopter qualifications, with increased roll out year-on-year with an aim for the framework to be adopted across all levels of the curriculum by 2024/25. EECP is also building the framework into new curriculum design by reviewing and revising criteria under module and qualification specifications and working with learning design teams and career learning and teaching consultants on including employability in their toolkits.

Our strategy recognises the essential relationship Personal Development Planning (PDP) has with the framework and curriculum mapping - to enable our students to reflect upon, articulate and evidence the core employability skills and attributes being developed and enhanced through OU study. Led by the framework, PDP support resources are being refreshed and enhanced, improving the honing and contextualisation of PDP by curriculum area. PDP will be integrated and accessible across the whole student journey and at all levels of study, to incorporate the development of study goals as well as being available for students to plan across their lives in work, study and personal contexts.

### Deepening employer engagement

Employers are critical partners for the OU to ensure that our students' employability objectives are realised.

The OU engages with a huge range of employers across many business units. However, these relationships often involve us delivering a service to employers in a transactional manner and rarely develop beyond the initial reason for contact. By deepening our relationships with employers, we can leverage many opportunities that directly and indirectly enhance the employability of our students. To do this we need to present more 'joined up' working practises for managing employer relationships. A key focus for EECF is to nurture a culture of collaboration around employer engagement and equip staff with the skills and knowledge needed to engage effectively with employers.

To support students to pursue their career goals with confidence, they should recognise that employers place value on OU qualifications and the strengths of OU graduates. We can also provide direct opportunities for students to engage with employers and gain relevant work experience. EECF is pioneering virtual internships, allowing students and alumni to complete internships with employers in an online manner. This will furnish OU students with internship opportunities which they would be less likely to access via traditional internship routes. At the same time, employers will benefit from gaining a fresh insight from enthusiastic OU students. This developed capability will also increase our ability to offer and support more traditional face-to-face internships where appropriate.

Employer engagement isn't unidimensional. Employers and other external partners can contribute to the OU in many ways and at multiple levels. They can bring a fresh perspective and insight to our curriculum - leading to opportunities for innovation and, ultimately, more positive outcomes for our students. EECF is developing mechanisms and guidance to facilitate more pro-active engagement with employers in curriculum design and teaching, raising awareness of the benefits that engagement can bring to students.

#### Infrastructure for sustainability

Setting ambitions for an institutional strategy isn't enough to achieve success. "An infrastructure for employability needs to be developed to ensure that any strategic ambitions can be achieved within the resource limitations that exist .....having a clear, defined approach that is understood by all staff and embedded in existing OU processes to ensure maximum staff engagement is critical." (HEA 2017, p7)

To deliver institutional impact we're developing a sustainable governance and institutional infrastructure to ensure the student employability strategy is effectively embedded and tracked across OU processes.

Establishing the infrastructure and applying the business change required to underpin the strategy and its implementation involves:

- Reviewing and recommending suitable governance and organisational structures to ensure employability continues to be a key institutional focus
- Reviewing and making recommendations for any changes in roles and/or responsibilities across the institution with regard to embedding the employability strategy
- Engaging with staff to ensure a greater sense of shared understanding, ownership and responsibility for the strategy.
- Delivering a quality framework to assure the sustainable implementation of the strategy and to measure its impact on student success.

#### Increasing staff engagement and reaching a common understanding

Implementing the strategy and successfully embedding employability at an institutional level has been (and continues to be) reliant upon colleague approval and engagement. The HEA audit (2017) highlighted an inconsistent understanding of employability across staff groups and a variety of perspectives around the impact of employability, alongside a lack of clarity of individual roles and responsibilities in relation to employability.

In response EECF has established an enabling project focusing solely on staff engagement to achieve a shared understanding of employability across the institution and its impact on student success. In particular, this project aims to:

- Support colleagues to recognise their role in supporting employability and the impact it has on retention and student success
- Actively create opportunities to work with other stakeholders (including employers) in sectors relevant to subject area
- Offer opportunities to undertake employability focused scholarship.

This has been achieved through a wide variety of mechanisms. For example: through developing a repository for resources (the Employability Hub) for use by colleagues; Employability Fairs - to highlight and share best practice; Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses; development of employability scholarship networking and communities of practice; and numerous networking events across the institution. Such activities have yielded benefits across all workstreams within EECF, increasing engagement and collaboration with colleagues across the institution while the strategy and necessary business change are being implemented.

## Conclusion

Developing employability is a vital component of OU student success: enabling students to build the skills, behaviours, experience and knowledge to achieve their personal, educational and career outcomes.

OU students demonstrate a range of differing employability needs. Our open access policy means that students come to us from an unparalleled range of diverse backgrounds and start their studies at different stages in their careers. Many are working whilst studying and so are already in employment. Many aspire to develop or change their careers because of their OU study – demonstrating career-related motivations and looking to use their studies to progress in their existing sector or change career direction. By contrast, 40% of OU students don't directly study for career-related reasons, so their support needs are different from those who are studying for more career-orientated reasons. Addressing the employability needs of all OU students, therefore, requires a range of interventions and a degree of customisation.

Employability at The OU applies to all students whatever their situation, or motivation for study. It's about supporting students to develop a range of core employability skills and attributes which will enable their learning to support them to be successful in any given context and across all aspects of life. We recognise that employability is not simply about preparing students for employment. Every student's journey is unique; their experience, motivation and aims are individual. We have a key role in helping them understand the breadth of learning across all areas of their lives and support them in joining it all together in a coherent way.

The OU's employability strategy supports our students in personalising employability. It helps them recognize, record, reflect and articulate the employability attributes they have already gained through previous life, work and study experiences, and will develop through further through study.

We believe all students are entitled to develop core employability skills and attributes and our strategic approach to employability is key to embedding these core employability skills and attributes within the curriculum. Supporting students to articulate their core employability skills and attributes is essential if we are to support them to be successful in their study, career and life goals and to be ambitious in creating those goals.

## References

- Artess, J., Hooley, T. and Mellors-Bourne, R. (2017) *Employability: A Review of the Literature 2012 to 2016*, York: The Higher Education Academy (online). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y9xvg92u> (Accessed December 2018).
- Baker, S. (2018) 'Global University Employability Ranking 2018: China's rise stalls' Times Higher Education (online) Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/global-university-employability-ranking-2018-chinas-rise-stalls> (Accessed February 2019).
- Cutterham, T. (2019) 'Employability is an Ethical Issue' Times Higher Education (online) Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/employability-ethical-issue> (Accessed June 2019).
- Higher Education conference proceedings, 13–14 April 2010, University of Surrey (online). Available at: <http://lifewideeducation.pbworks.com/f/RON+BARNETT.pdf> (Accessed December 2018).
- Brett, N. 'Future graduates will need creativity and empathy – not just technical skills', *The Guardian*, 20 December (online). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/dec/20/future-graduates-will-need-creativity-and-empathy-not-just-technical-skills> (Accessed February 2019).
- Clifton, G. and Kellett, M. (2017) 'Measuring gains and employability for part-time students', *Wonkhe*, 3 May (online). Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/analysis-measuring-gains-and-employability-for-part-time-students/> (Accessed December 2018).
- Cole, D. and Tibby, M. (2013) *Defining and Developing Your Approach to Employability: A Framework for Higher Education Institutions*, York: The Higher Education Academy (online). Available at: [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/employability\\_framework.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/employability_framework.pdf) (Accessed December 2018).
- Commission of the European Communities (2001) *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*, Communication from the Commission, COM(2001) 678 final, 21 November, Brussels: European Commission (online). Available at: [http://viaa.gov.lv/files/free/48/748/pol\\_10\\_com\\_en.pdf](http://viaa.gov.lv/files/free/48/748/pol_10_com_en.pdf) (Accessed February 2019).
- Confederation of British Industry/National Union of Students (CBI/NUS) (2011) *Working Towards Your Future: Making the Most of Your Time in Higher Education*, CBI (online). Available at: [https://www.nus.org.uk/Global/CBI\\_NUS\\_Employability%20report\\_May%202011.pdf](https://www.nus.org.uk/Global/CBI_NUS_Employability%20report_May%202011.pdf) (Accessed February 2019).
- Department for Education (2018) 'Review of Post-18 Education and Funding: terms of reference', London: Department for Education (online). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/ybshnyrx> (Accessed February 2019).
- Higher Education Academy (HEA) (2017) *The Open University Employability Review*, York: The Higher Education Academy (online). Available at: [https://learn3.open.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/153533/mod\\_resource/content/1/OU%20Employability%20Review%202017.pdf](https://learn3.open.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/153533/mod_resource/content/1/OU%20Employability%20Review%202017.pdf) (Accessed February 2019).
- HM Government (2017) *Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain Fit for the Future*, London: HM Government (online). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yap4ozfj> (Accessed February 2019).
- Jackson, N.J. (ed.) (2011) *Learning for a Complex World: A Lifewide Concept of Learning, Education and Personal Development*, Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse Publishing.
- Kandiko Howson, C. (2017) 'Measuring learning gain isn't easy, but it has become necessary', *Wonkhe* (July 2017) Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/analysis-measuring-learning-gain-isnt-easy-but-it-has-become-necessary/> (Accessed May 2019).



- Kellett, M. (2019) 'A manifesto for lifelong learning', Wonkhe (March 2019) Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/a-manifesto-for-lifelong-learning/> (Accessed May 2019).
- Kellett, M. (2019) 'The Open University at 50: still radical, still relevant', Wonkhe (March 2019) Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-open-university-at-50-still-radical-still-relevant/> (Accessed April 2019).
- Kumar, A. (2007) *Personal, Academic and Career Development in Higher Education*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- The Open University (OU) (2011) 'Student employability policy', 16 May (online). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y7a65fj3> (Accessed February 2019).
- The Open University (OU) (2018) 'Staff awareness survey 2018' (online). Available at: <https://learn3.open.ac.uk/course/format/oustudyplan/resource.php?id=147871> (Accessed 7 February 2019).
- Oxford Economics (2017) *The Economic Impact of Universities in 2014–15: Report for Universities UK*, October (online). Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2017/the-economic-impact-of-universities.pdf> (Accessed 7 February 2019).
- Rogaten, J., Whitelock, D. and Rientes, B. (2016) Assessing learning gains. In: *Technology Enhanced Assessment*, Communications in Computer and Information Science, pp. 117–132.
- Senior, C., Reddy, P. and Senior R. (2014) 'The relationship between student employability and student engagement: working toward a more unified theory', *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 5, article 238, 20 March (online). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y9d9fwb8> (Accessed February 2019).
- Songhurst, A. (2019) 'Employability: panacea or Pandora's box?' *Times Higher Education* (online) Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/employability-panacea-or-pandoras-box> (Accessed June 2019).
- Thomas, L. and Jones, R. (2007) 'Embedding employability in the context of widening participation'. Learning and Employability Series 2, York The Higher Education Academy (online). Available at: <http://www.employability.ed.ac.uk/documents/Staff/HEABriefings/ESECT-6-WideningParticipation.pdf> (Accessed April 2019).
- Tunnah, E and Peeran, A. (2019) 'A Joint Approach to Curriculum Design and Development' (online). Available at: [https://issuu.com/agcas\\_00/docs/agcas\\_-\\_phoenix\\_157\\_aw\\_single\\_pages/1?ff](https://issuu.com/agcas_00/docs/agcas_-_phoenix_157_aw_single_pages/1?ff). (Accessed June 2019).
- Williams, S., Dodd, L.J., Steele, C. and Randall, R. (2015) 'A systematic review of current understandings of employability', *Journal of Education and Work*, vol. 29, no. 8, pp. 877–901.
- Yorke, M. (2006) 'Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not', Learning & Employability Series 1, York: The Higher Education Academy (online). Available at: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/employability-higher-education-what-it-what-it-not> (Accessed December 2018).
- Yorke, M. and Knight, P. T. (2006) 'Embedding Employability into the Curriculum', Learning & Employability Series 1, The Higher Education Academy (online). Available at: [http://www.employability.ed.ac.uk/documents/Staff/HEABriefings/ESECT-3-Embedding\\_employability\\_into\\_curriculum.pdf](http://www.employability.ed.ac.uk/documents/Staff/HEABriefings/ESECT-3-Embedding_employability_into_curriculum.pdf) (Accessed March 2019).

## The Authors

Mick McCormick is Senior Lecturer and Academic Lead for Enhanced Employability and Career Progression at The Open University. Email: [mick.mccormickopen.ac.uk](mailto:mick.mccormickopen.ac.uk)

Leanne Daniels is Programme Manager for Enhanced Employability and Career Progression at The Open University. Email: [leannedaniels@open.ac.uk](mailto:leannedaniels@open.ac.uk)