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Summer Series of Journal Clubs: an opportunity to develop employability skills and a sense of community amongst students in secure environments

Keywords: SiSe, Secure units, prisons, journal club, skills, community

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Executive Summary

Project background

In keeping with the ethos 'open to all', The Open University (OU) has provided higher education opportunities to students in secure environments (SiSE) for over 40 years, currently reaching over 150 secure environments (Open University, 2020). Many such students have less than ideal educational backgrounds, for example, many SiSe students have experienced a history of disrupted education, with 60% of adult prisoners having been suspended/temporarily excluded from school (MacFarlane and Pike, 2018). SiSe students who enroll with the OU often have low prior levels of academic qualifications and tend to start their studies at Access or L1 modules. However, many SiSe students do not complete their qualifications; the reasons for this are multifactorial, and may include confidence and competence within their subject, general study skills, in-unit restrictions or financial concerns. This may have significant long-term implications in terms of their future employability.

Students studying with the OU whilst in prison have access to an OU tutor and may take part in telephone or face-to-face tutorials, depending on the secure unit, module, tutor availability and level of study. Such sessions are tailored to the particular needs of the student. However, such contact time is limited, and whilst it facilitates the development of tutor-student relationship, there is frequently limited time or facilities available within secure units for students to participate in peer-to-peer learning or to feel part of a wider 'OU student' community. Furthermore, once a module has finished, typically in May/June, with an examination or an EMA, students have no further interaction with the University until registration and commencement of the next module, in October.

This project builds on experiences from a previous Esteem project providing Online Journal Clubs (OJC) to OU students (Moorman and New, 2020), where students reported positively on participating in online journal clubs, and how OJC events made them feel part of a community. Our findings from OJC also indicated that students developed key skills and gained confidence as a result of participating in OJC events.

Whilst some secure units make use of Virtual Campus, which allows students in secure units to access a 'cut-down' version of the internet, it was apparent that this is not always available for all students, and hence SiSe were not able to participate in any OJC events in the same format as non-SiSe students. In this project, we developed a proof-of-concept model for providing Journal Clubs within secure units. In this setting, we aimed to provide face-to-face Journal Clubs, to not only eliminate ICT difficulties or restrictions, but also because we felt that face-to-face would facilitate more direct interaction amongst this group of students. At this point it is important to note that a key concept embedded within this project is that Journal Club events involve working *with* SiSe students, rather than *on* them.

We believe that face-to-face Journal Clubs for SiSE students offer an enrichment opportunity and may facilitate peer-peer learning and the development of a sense of community amongst participating students. In turn, this may have implications for motivation and retention. Furthermore, in agreement with Pike (2015) students who feel part of a learning community '*identify with a 'positive, pro-social student identity'*' which may have wider implications for 'in-unit' behaviour and recidivism. We suggest that Journal Clubs may provide the opportunity for SiSE students to develop key study skills, which will help their transition through academic levels. Participation may also develop employability skills, including communication and interpersonal skills, critical awareness and a proactive approach to self-development.

Following consultation with the Open University SiSe Team, we planned delivery of a "Summer Series" of Journal Club events, at HMP Bure, Norwich, Norfolk, HMP Whatton in Bingham, Nottinghamshire and

HMP Oakwood, Featherstone, West Midlands. All three prisons are Category C, male prisons. This project was advertised specifically as a “Summer Series” to develop an informal ‘catchy’ hook, to arouse curiosity, and because the events were planned to occur during the main OU presentation gap, between June-September. By holding the events within this period, the project aimed to help students reflect and make use of their prior study and motivate students to progress to the next module. The longer-term vision was to assess the model, with a view to calendar-wide roll out.

All three prisons have learning opportunities embedded in prison activities and offer a variety of programs to prepare prisoners for their lives after release. Additionally, all three are well supported by educational departments and have a large number of students studying Open University Access, level 1 and level 2 modules.

The project aims to identify any challenges providing such events, student perceptions of events, and specific student requirements.

Approach

Summer Series events were advertised via the Education Units within the prisons. To minimise workload for Education department staff, an advertiser ‘flyer’ was provided for each unit, providing an outline of the two-part events. The flyer emphasised the informal nature of the events, and that students could present on any topic that they felt passionate about, whether from the mainstream media, their module materials or other matter of interest. Education Managers displayed the flyer in prison libraries and also more generally around the education wings of the prisons. For internal management of prisoners, students were required to formally sign-up for sessions, which also provided a means for facilitators to gauge attendee numbers and prepare activities.

In this project, the three facilitators were Staff Tutors from the School of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences, all of whom were also very experienced Associate Lecturers, and all of whom had substantial experience working with SiSe students. Each facilitator planned events in a different secure environment, largely based on geographical location/travel constraints.

The Summer Series of journal clubs were planned as two events per secure unit since, unlike other OU students, SiSe students would be unable to access the resources and guidance available on the OJC website:

Workshop 1: this session was an interactive face-to-face session explaining the aims of the two events, and discussing ‘finding and evaluation information’, ‘critical reading’, ‘presentation skills’. Various short individual and group activities were provided to the group as appropriate, to support skill development. Due to variations in the needs of the students attending, the sessions in each secure environment were not identical, but broadly covered the same skill areas. Students were also provided with a paper SiSe guide to Presentation Skills for future reference.

The second session was the face-to-face equivalent of the online journal club (Moorman and New, 2020) to take place approximately two weeks after the initial workshop. It was envisaged that this gap would enable students to have time to research, plan, prepare and practice their presentation:

Workshop 2: ‘Journal Club’ – this session was for oral presentations made by students who attended initial workshop.

Given limitations on contact with students in secure units, this study adopted a single approach to gathering feedback: paper questionnaires issued immediately following final events, which could be

passed back to Educational Officers on completion, and in turn passed back to the researchers for analysis.

Demographic data was obtained from centrally held student records.

Results and discussion

The first point of discussion is recognition of the fact that even with the full support of the Education Department, events in a secure unit can take longer than anticipated to be organised. The Summer Series events in HMP Bure took place in June 2019 and HMP Whatton in September 2019 (i.e. slightly later than originally anticipated, but nonetheless prior to new modules commencing). Unfortunately, due to administrative difficulties, events at HMP Oakwood were delayed further; and although planned to run early in 2020, only the initial workshop was able to take place, as all prisons were closed as a result of the first lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. As a result of the continued closures and restricted access to prisons, which are likely to continue for the foreseeable future, this Summer Series project finished without completing all three prisons. The data presented in this report is therefore based on events just at HMP Bure and HMP Whatton.

Attendee information

Twenty one students initially expressed an interest in participating in Summer Series journal club at HMP Bure: two dropped out due to conflicting commitments within the prison, and a further eleven dropped out with concerns over the workload, which may suggest that the publicity around each event needs to be reassessed to clarify this aspect. However, eight students attended the initial workshop and six attended the second workshop (three dropped out due to other, unexpected, conflicting commitments within the prison and an additional student attended). Based on centrally held HESA data, of these six students: four considered themselves White British, one other Asian (Pakistan) and one unknown. Ages ranged from 35 to 67 years of age. Two students had prior experience of higher education, the other four had no previous experience of higher education. All six attending this second session completed questionnaires.

Thirteen students expressed an interest in participating in Summer Series events at HMP Whatton. Based on centrally held HESA data, of these students: eight of the students considered themselves White British, one Black African, one White Welsh, one White Irish, one White Scottish. One student had an incorrect PI and hence data could not be obtained for this individual. Ages ranged from 24 to 71 years of age. Five students had prior experience of higher education, six had no prior experience with higher education, information on previous education was not held on two of the students. Unfortunately, due to issues with conflicting duties only seven of these thirteen interested students were able to attend the initial workshop, and seven attended the second workshop (one student dropped out of this second session and an additional student attended in their place, but did not present). Five attending this second session completed questionnaires.

Although a small study, this demographic snapshot suggests that Summer Series interest/uptake was primarily from individuals identifying as White British. Although data is not available on the proportions of BAME SiSe studying with the OU within the individual prisons, this finding may need to be considered in the context that approximately one quarter of the UK prison population are individuals from BAME backgrounds, contrasted with approximately 13% of the general population (Sturge, 2020).

Attendee experience and feedback

A free-text question in the questionnaire asked students why they were interested in the Summer Series of journal clubs and students fell into two main groups: students expressing an interest in wanting to improve their skills/confidence and those expressing an interest in maintaining 'study momentum' between modules. As such 'unusual events' are likely to be considered 'special occasions' within secure units, perhaps providing a means to relieve the everyday boredom and routine of prisons (Hughes, 2009), we had anticipated a wider range of responses to this free-text question, but only one student indicated that they came simply out of curiosity for what would happen.

At both Whatton and Bure, presentations were given in an informal manner, with attendees sitting in a semi-circle and each presenter taking turns to stand at the front. The format of presentations given in the second workshop varied – some students had access to/experience with ICT and produced a series of Powerpoint slides to support their talk; other students used flip-charts or handouts as visual aids to accompany their presentation. One student in HMP Bure, who had not been able to attend the initial workshop but wanted to give a presentation, gave his talk based on a few handwritten notes. Similarly, at HMP Whatton, one student had struggled to prepare a talk on a specific topic in advance and instead talked about his motivation to do the course, and the subjects he has studied so far. Nonetheless, it was clear that all of the students had given careful consideration to the event, and the groups had picked a varied and stimulating set of talks on subject areas that would appeal to the wider, non-subject specialist audience. Students in HMP Bure and Whatton were studying a variety of subjects at the OU and the Summer Series events were multidisciplinary in nature; for illustration, subjects covered included a discussion of the economic implications of bitcoin, the limitations of current languages as a tool for global communication, and the development of musical themes and variations. At both HMP Whatton and HMP Bure, the students demonstrated a respectful interest in both the topic under consideration and the nerve-wracking nature of giving a talk to your peers. The groups showed respect and support to one another by listening attentively, asking appropriate and intelligent questions and by praising each others efforts.

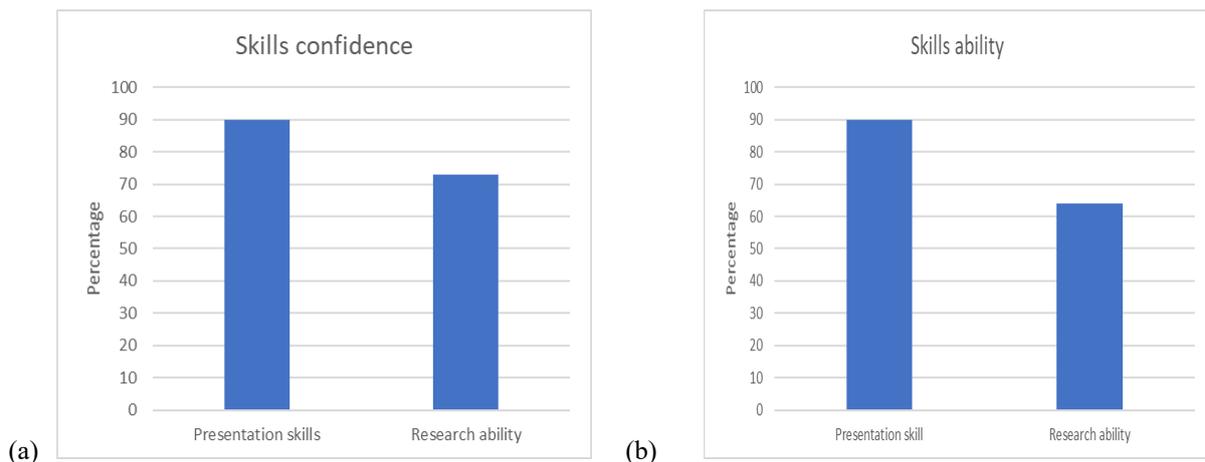


Figure 1(a) Self-reported confidence in skills and (b) ability, following participation in journal club events. Figures produced from all completed questionnaires (n=11)

As seen in Figure 1, the majority of students indicated that they felt that both their confidence (a) and assessment of their skills (b) had increased following participation in Summer Series journal club events. Although analysis of the impact of these self-reported measures was beyond the scope of this pilot project, increased confidence and perception of ability is anticipated to have a positive impact on students future learning.

It is important to note that prison populations are not homogenous. As identified previously, many individuals are from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups and/or with disrupted educational backgrounds. However, it is important to note that different educational profiles are seen in prisoners from the different categories of prisons (A-D, broadly running from high security to open conditions), with English and maths skills of those in Category C prisons tending to be higher than those in Categories A and B (Creese, 2016). This may be reflected in the response to our questionnaire, since although most students indicated that they had not given presentations before – and these students indicated that their confidence and skills had improved - at both HMP Bure and HMP Watton there were individuals who, in their former professional lives, had given presentations on a regular basis, and hence will have skewed results in these two areas.

Furthermore, at HMP Bure, one student indicated that they had not been able to fully participate in the preparation stage of the events, as they had been directed to other parts of the prison and so felt they had not improved due to their own lack of time management and due to these other prison duties. Nonetheless, they had been keen to get the experience of the presentation itself. This illustrates the difficulties faced by students studying within prison; planned educational events can be cancelled at short notice, demonstrating an inevitable mismatch between institutional and individual priorities. Indeed, at Whatton, although planned ahead, start and finish times for the workshops were disrupted with both sessions being cut short due to sudden changes in prison movement times. The first workshop was not completed, but all students who wished to present managed to give their presentations during the second workshop.

When asked what they valued the most from the Summer Series experience, students qualitative free-text responses indicated that students valued the opportunity to practice researching and presenting skills and, as one student expressed it, the chance to develop their "*rusty self-confidence*", sentiments echoed in both prisons. This finding, although from a small group, may illustrate the findings of Champion and Noble, (2016) that some prisoners have limited self-confidence and self-esteem. In turn, this may suggest that the Summer Series journal club events may offer a contribution towards positive identity change (McNeill, 2009).

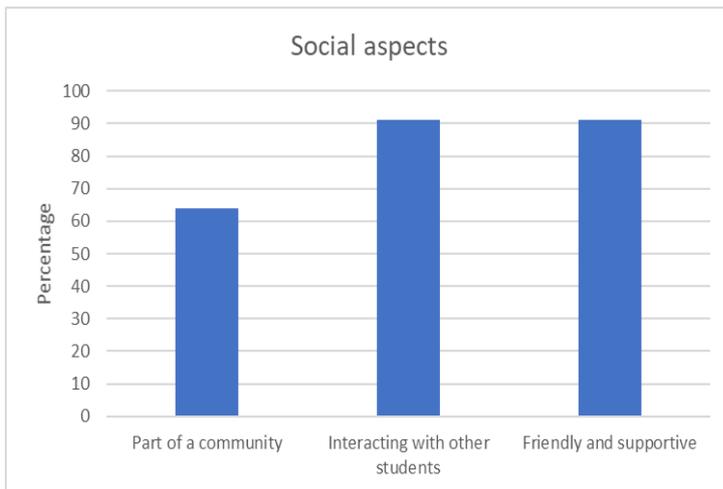


Figure 2: Exploration of the social impact of the Summer Series of journal club events. Figures produced from all completed questionnaires (n=11)

Although the majority of participants expressed that participating in Summer Series events had made them feel part of a community, this figure was not as high as we might have predicted, based on our experiences of Online Journal Club (Moorman and New, 2020). However, a factor to consider when interpreting the social impact of participating in Summer Series events (Figure 2), is that participation did not take into consideration any pre-existing relationships between students. In the Online Journal Club model, students were all distance learners and were geographically isolated from each other, both in their general study and during club events. In contrast, in secure units, students interact with one another on prison wings and communal areas, and social interactions within the prison culture are likely to be complex. Indeed, there were students in both HMP Bure and HMP Whatton who had not felt supported by their group, although they indicated that they had felt supported by the Summer Series Journal Club events themselves. Of note, subsequent conversations with members of the Education Team in HMP Bure indicated that this was due to pre-existing relationships outside of the Summer Series journal club. Nonetheless, overall, our results suggest that the Summer Series of journal clubs provided a supportive mechanism, which might overcome some of the isolation often experienced by students in prison (Pike, 2015).

Most prisoners at HMP Bure and HMP Whatton are accommodated in individual cells (i.e. not shared accommodation) and have specific jobs spread across the unit, with differently allocated study times. Hence individuals in both prisons may be unaware of others studying within the OU in the same unit and generally lack opportunities for peer support; indeed, during post-initial workshop conversations with prisoners at HMP Bure, students expressed surprise that some of the members of the group were OU students, as they had not been aware of who else was studying. A fundamental aim of Summer Series journal club is to create a place for individuals to come together and create a community of practice, where OU students can feel part of a community, regardless of subject or level of study, or indeed other influences. However, our findings emphasise the need to be carefully managed, to provide an appropriate 'safe space' defined by Szifris et al (2018).

Students were asked what advice they would give to future participants of Summer Series journal club events, and free-text comments included the need to prepare, dedicate appropriate time to the work – and also related to confidence building, including:

“to relax, it isnt as bad as it sounds”

“even if you’re nervous and think you cant do it, give it a try”

All of the students, in both prisons, indicated that they would like to participate in more journal club events.

In order to incorporate student voice into Summer Series events, students were also asked what could be done to improve Summer Series journal club events, and over half the students would have liked more time for each event; this had been particularly problematic at Whatton. Students in both prisons were keen to have more journal club events. Our findings suggest that students are keen to take advantage of opportunities for educational activities and that Summer Series events may provide the ‘*mechanism*’ towards education (Szifris, et al., 2018). Summer Series events would therefore seem to be in alignment with Crabbe and James (2016) who, although talking about accredited courses, suggested that a series of very short courses, not necessarily academic, might provide transferable skills aiding future employment.

One student indicated that they would have liked supervised internet searching to help research, but acknowledged that, in their environment, that was unlikely to be permitted. Indeed, use of Virtual Campus, including the OU Library, remains limited and not available to all students and this online approach is unlikely to be available to students for the foreseeable future. Two students indicated that they would have valued ‘tutor feedback’ on their presentations which was an aspect we had deliverately avoided in order to retain the relaxed atmosphere. However, future clubs could offer this if requested.

Next steps

Although this study ended prematurely due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in closure of secure units to external providers, our results indicate that students valued the Summer Series of events and demonstrate the success of this ‘proof-of-concept’ model. In contrast to Crabbe and James (2016), who suggested that ‘*selling the idea of developing speaking and listing skills can be a hard task*’, feedback from this study indicates that students valued the opportunities for communication provided by our events.

Based on our experiences from this project, the success of Summer Series journal clubs depends heavily on the support from the members of the Education Department at the prison, as these individuals act as the bridge between students and the OU. Individuals involved in education within prisons are often already over-stretched; nonetheless, in the prisons considered here, the Educational Managers/Officers were keen to facilitate events, making use of the ‘advertising flyer’ we created to advertise and taking time to further explain the sessions in advance to students. We would encourage the development of dialogue between OU club facilitators and individual prisons.

We suggest that Summer Series of journal club events should be offered on a wider, more regular basis. Inevitably, funding for such a programme is problematic, although it may be interesting to consider such events in the context of changes to the AL Contract from 2021. A number of ALs tutor in secure units and it might be possible to utilise tuition hours for those tutors with an interest in supporting these students.

Furthermore, with appropriate training and support, it might be possible to facilitate student-led journal clubs; where, following initial training, students, in conjunction with the Education Departments, could

facilitate their own journal club events. The management of such events could be incorporated into the role of an OU Orderly (MacFarlane and Morris, 2018) and events could provide the opportunity for the development of self-regulated community of learners, which may further increase student responsibility for, and ownership of, study. From a logistical perspective, enabling an OU Orderly to support the organisation/facilitation of workshops has the potential to ease the organisation difficulties arising from external facilitators attending on site.

The Summer Series journal clubs in this project were aimed specifically at OU students, to take place in the gap between modules, however, there may be a role for Summer Series events to be run for outreach purposes, for non-OU students. Anecdotally, other inmates expressed interest in the Summer Series events in HMP Bure, supporting the suggestion by MacFarlane and Pike (2019) that an interest in study can be sparked by seeing others engage in educational activities. Such events may have the potential to increase student uptake on study pathways, whether within the OU or other programmes in place within secure units. One Summer Series participant indicated in their free-text response within the questionnaire, that they valued the opportunity to talk about *'their passion'* and another particularly enjoyed listening to the other presentations. Such opportunities may provide the first steps (the *'hook'* Szifris, et al 2018) towards developing communication skills and developing new interests. It is worth mentioning here that undertaking an OU course whilst in a secure unit has been linked to a 4-8% reduction in re-offending (Ministry of Justice, 2014, cited in Earle and Mehigan 2019)

Both prisons used in this project were male, sex offender units, where prisoners had over 6 months of time left of their sentences. It would be useful to explore the use of Summer Series events in female-only prisons. Women prisoners represent a small proportion of people in prison in England and Wales, and in general, tend to serve shorter sentences than men. This may make formation of community and support of the development of educational skills – and communication skills generally - a challenge (Ministry of Justice, 2018). We would recommend that this project is extended into female-only prisons, to support confidence and skills in this group of students.

List of deliverables

New, K. J., Moorman, F. and Gauci, H. (2019) 'Summer Series of Journal Clubs: an opportunity to develop employability skills and a sense of community amongst students in secure environments', Poster presentation, *STEM faculty/Esteem stand at Launch of Access, Participation and Success (APS) Strategy, September 2019*

New, K.J. (2019) 'Summer series: a pilot project expanding the reach of Journal Club', invited oral presentation, *Prison Education and STEM symposium, innovation, challenges and opportunities (100% contribution)*

SiSe Instructions for Summer Series (OU facilitator guide – which could be further adapted to provide an OU-Orderly facilitator guide, but input from individual units would be necessary)

SiSe advertising flyer

SiSe Guide to Presentation Skills (handout for students)

Figures and tables

Figure 1(a) Self-reported confidence in skills and (b) ability, following participation in journal club events.
Figure 2: Exploration of the social impact of the Summer Series of journal club events

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University approval processes

If your project required specific approval from university committees, please provide the appropriate information below. This is a necessary requirement for future publication of outputs from your project.

- *SRPP/SSPP – Approval from the Student Research Project Panel/Staff Survey Project Panel was obtained according to the Open University's code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Application number 2019/062*
- *Ethical review – An ethical review was obtained according to the Open University's code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Reference number HREC/3278/New*
- *Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check – A Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check was obtained according to the Open University's code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Data Protection registration number XXXX*