Improving students' engagement in co-curricular employability workshops: Student voice at NTU

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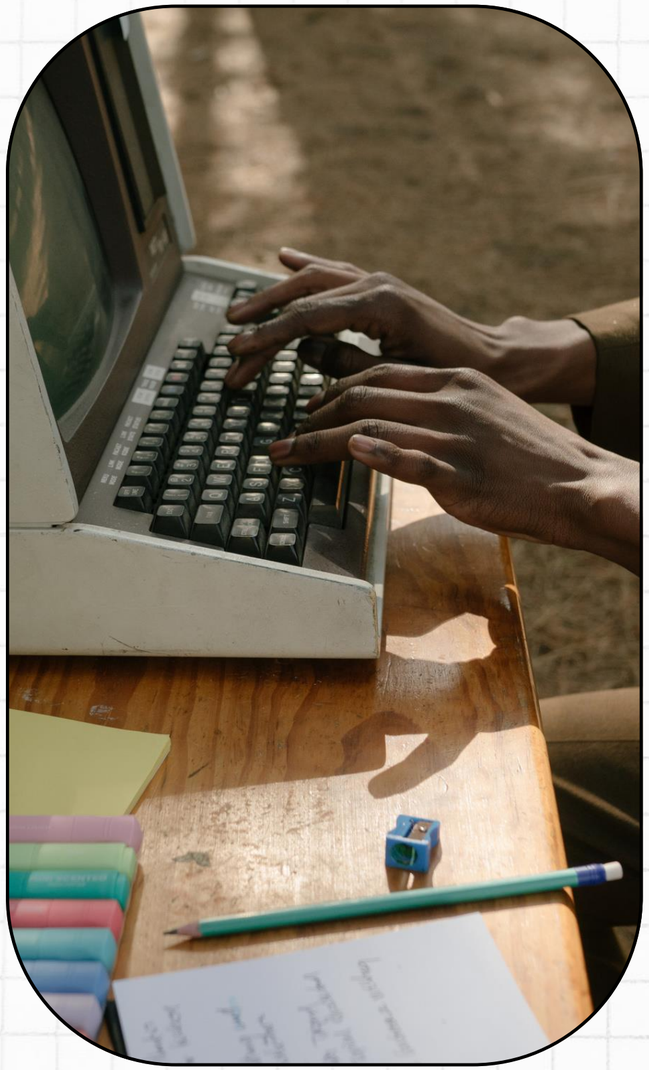
Co-curricular employability workshops at NTU

- A part of Project EVOLVE
- Redesigned the activities focusing on building practical recruitment skills with the support of employers and alumni where necessary
  - ✓ Employability Workshop Programme – “How to…” workshops with different topics
  - ✓ Employer Event Programme
  - ✓ Practice Assessment Centres
  - ✓ Online learning offer – e.g. bitesize videos
  - ✓ Podcast
  - ✓ Fairs
- Followed a streamlined approach



Challenges faced

- Low attendance numbers
- Unclear reasons for non-attendance
- Unclear if students recognise the values of the workshops
- Unclear which marketing approach works best

Aims and objectives

Aim: To investigate students' perspectives on co-curricular employability activities within SST.

Objectives:

(1) To explore barriers to attendance at co-curricular employability workshops;

(2) To understand students' motivations for attending co-curricular employability workshops;

(3) To gather students' views to improve students' attendance and engagement on those workshops.

What does literature say about students' engagement in employability workshops?

- 40% of UG and PG students at a research-focused university in the UK and another in Australia "never" or "rarely" took part in activities for career learning (Jackson and Tomlinson 2022).
- Merely about 10% of third-year psychology students had actively participated in career workshops which aimed at assisting them in navigating typical selection procedures (Bradley, Quigley and Bailey 2021).
- The 'portfolio' university which offered a wide range of co-curricular employability activities had very low percentage of participants:
  - Leadership program: 3%
  - Career development learning: 7%
  - Industry mentoring/internships: 1%

(Farenga and Quinlan 2016)

Lack of time

- Students struggle to balance studies, extracurricular activities, part-time jobs to engage in co-curriculars to enhance their employability (Bradley, Quigley and Bailey 2021; Thompson et al. 2013 and Jackson and Rowe 2023)
- Personal commitments hinder participation of disadvantaged students (Lowden et al. 2011; Stevenson and Clegg 2011),
- Equity concern: co-curricular activities often attract high-performing students with existing career capital (Bridgstock, Grant-Imaru and McAlpine 2019).

Students’ unawareness of activities’ values

- Disadvantaged students rely solely on their degree for jobs (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp 2020).
- Students prioritise academic studies over extracurricular career development (Bennett et al. 2020).
- Career-related activities are seen as gaining experience and skills only (Jackson and Bridgstock 2020).

Students’ unawareness of available activities

- Students often miss career service emails or fail to recognise the relation between exploring career options and securing employment (Bradley, Quigley and Bailey 2021).

→ Launching advertising campaigns on social media platforms (Junco, Heiberger and Loken 2011; Osborn and Lofrisco 2012)

→ Adopting gamification techniques such as leader boards, points, or progress bars (Scholtz, Raga and Baxter 2016).

Location

- Expand career services at secondary campuses (Donald, Ashleigh, and Baruch 2018)
- Offer online options for co-curricular events (Simpson and Ferguson 2013)
- Post-COVID preference for online platforms (O’Neill, Reinhardt and Jayasundera 2022)

→ Save travelling time and cost

Does co-curricular approach have its days?

Setting of the study

- Year 2 undergraduate students
- School of Science and Technology, NTU
- Inclusion of all students' opinions

➢ Preparation for a placement year

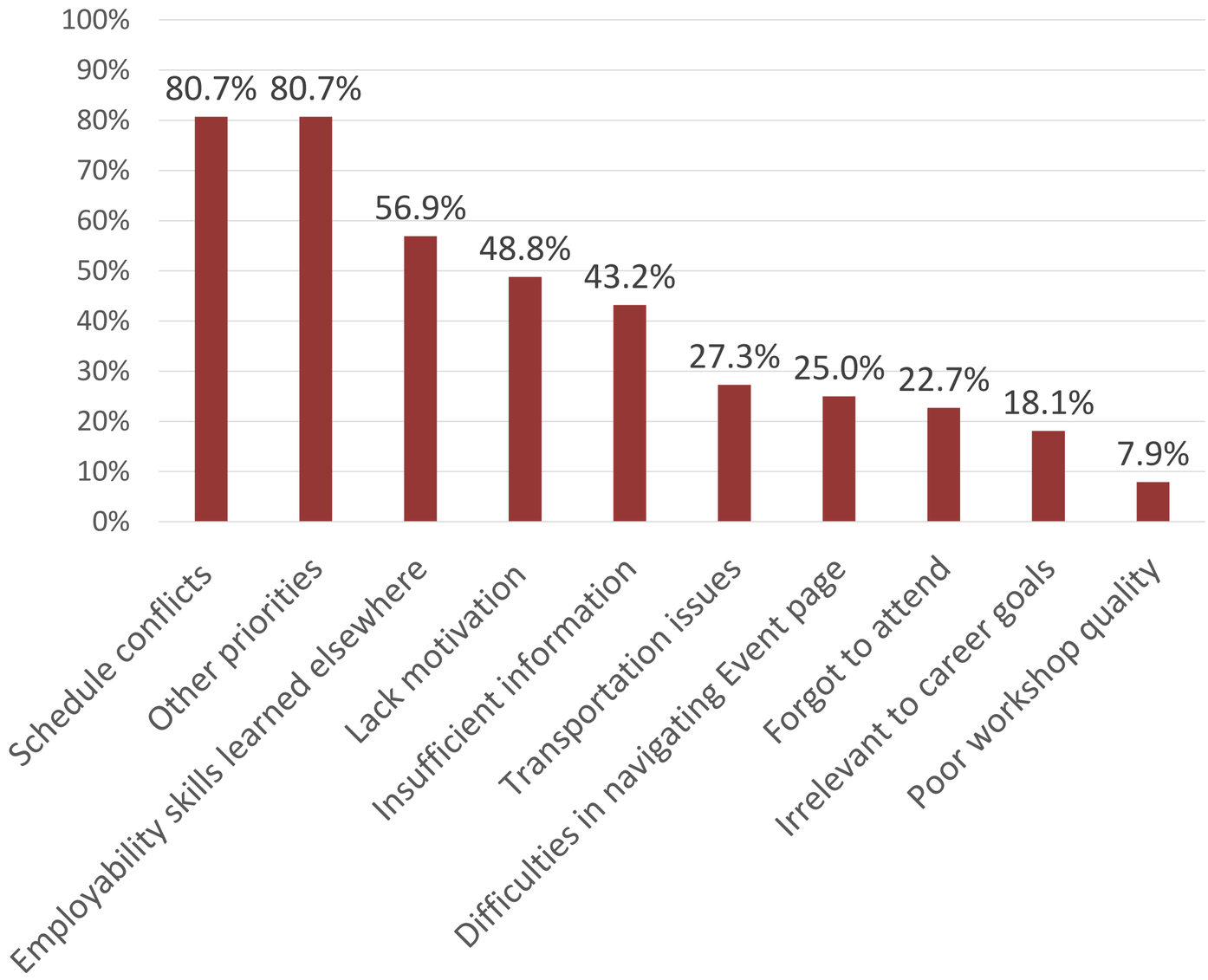
➢ The workshops are advertised on every channel of the Employability Team including in-curriculum placement briefings

Methods

Mixed methods approach with a “explanatory sequential design” (Denscombe 2021, p. 151): questionnaire + interview

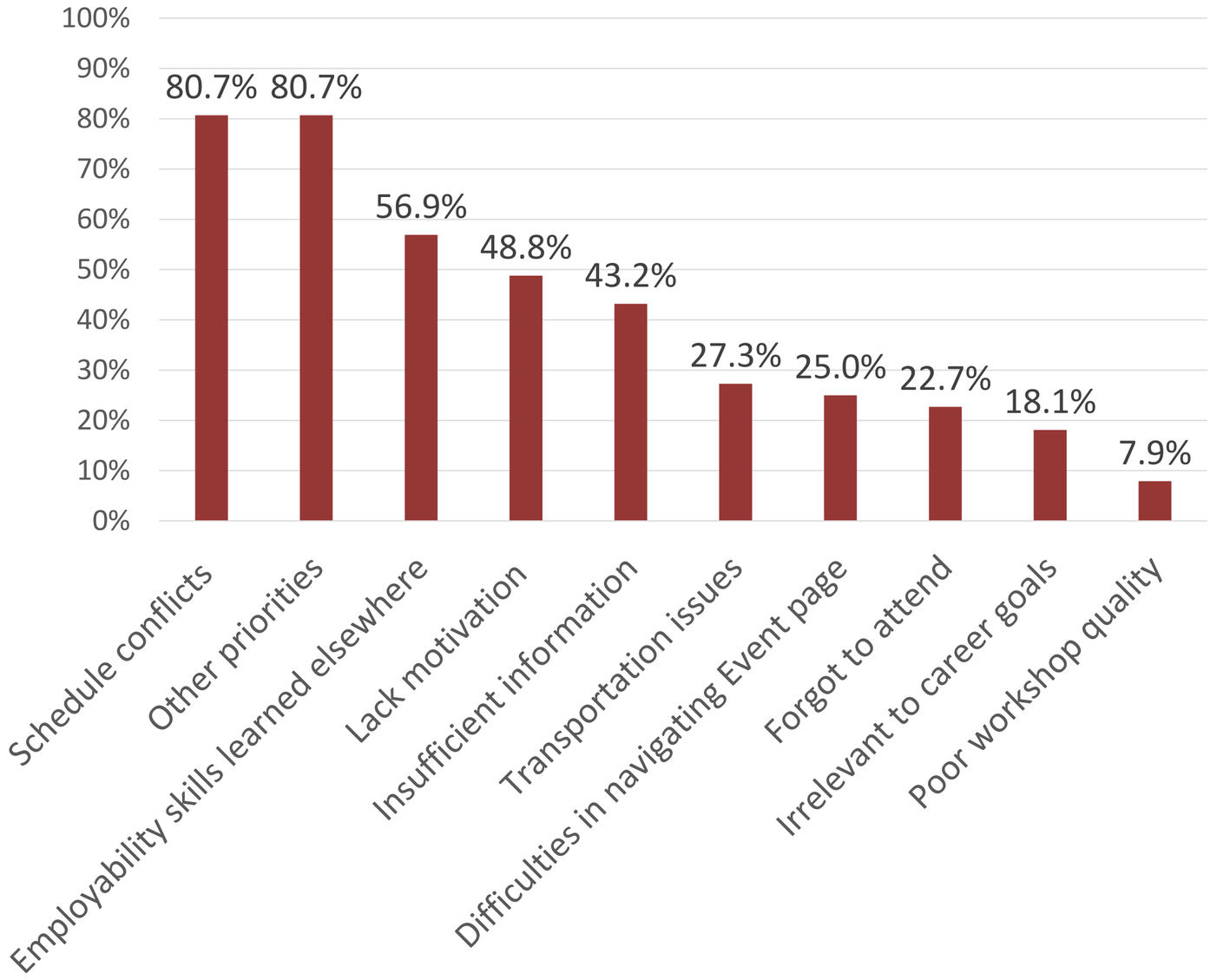
What difficulties may prevent students from attending the workshops?

Schedule conflicts & Other priorities



“I have got classes during the day and then I play hockey as well. Therefore, sometimes they might clash, or they might just be like odd timings.” (student C)

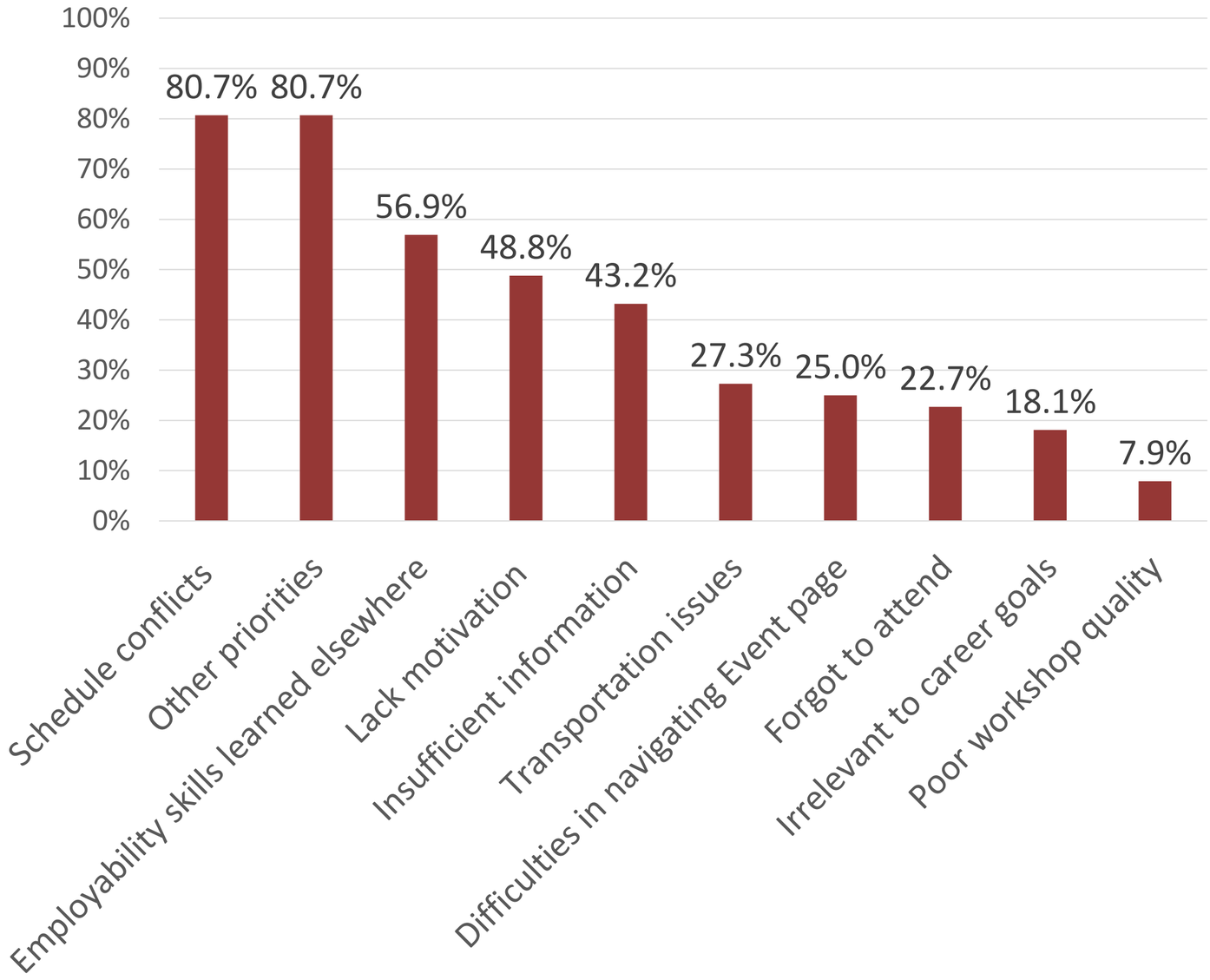
Workload



"When it comes to 2nd year, we have got a bunch of assignments at the same time. I think that's why people do not go because on their heads, they're just like: Oh, I just need to get this assignment done." (student A)

"meet up with groups to do coursework as well as battling that with attending labs and lectures as well as having to get ready for night shifts" (anonymous)

Employability skills learned elsewhere



"I like talked to people who had been through the process and like, also talked to a couple of lecturers about what to do and showed my CV to a few people. I also did have a meeting with someone to go over my CV from Trent. I used CV360 and that helps a lot." (student C)

Lack motivation for optional workshops (48.8%)

“I feel like if you were to put it into the curriculum, not everyone would benefit. I guess like in your final year when you are searching for jobs and stuff, maybe. I think it should be sort of left to the students to sort of reach out if they feel like they need that help.” (student B)

“If it’s something compulsory, it’ll encourage me to attend more”. (Student C)

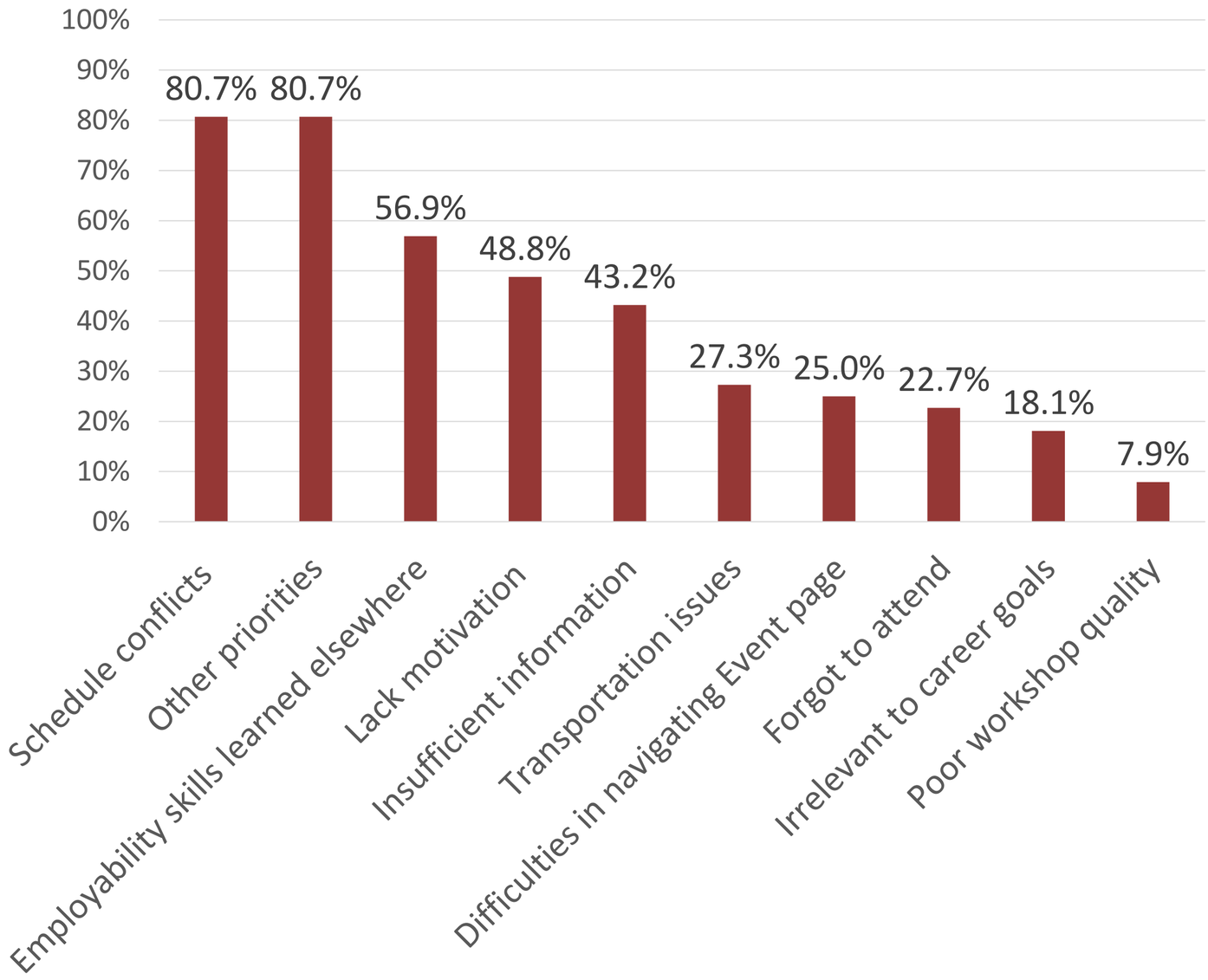
“I think that [adding these workshops to the curriculum] would overall help those who struggle to fit in a time where they can prioritise a career, work or career aspect instead of academics if you intertwine them.” (student D)

Insufficient details about the workshops (43.2%)

Channels	Number of students
My tutor	10
My friends	1
The placement briefings	11
Adverts at the Employability Hub	17
‘What’s on’ bulletins	3
Other	10

Table 1. Where did the students hear about the workshops?

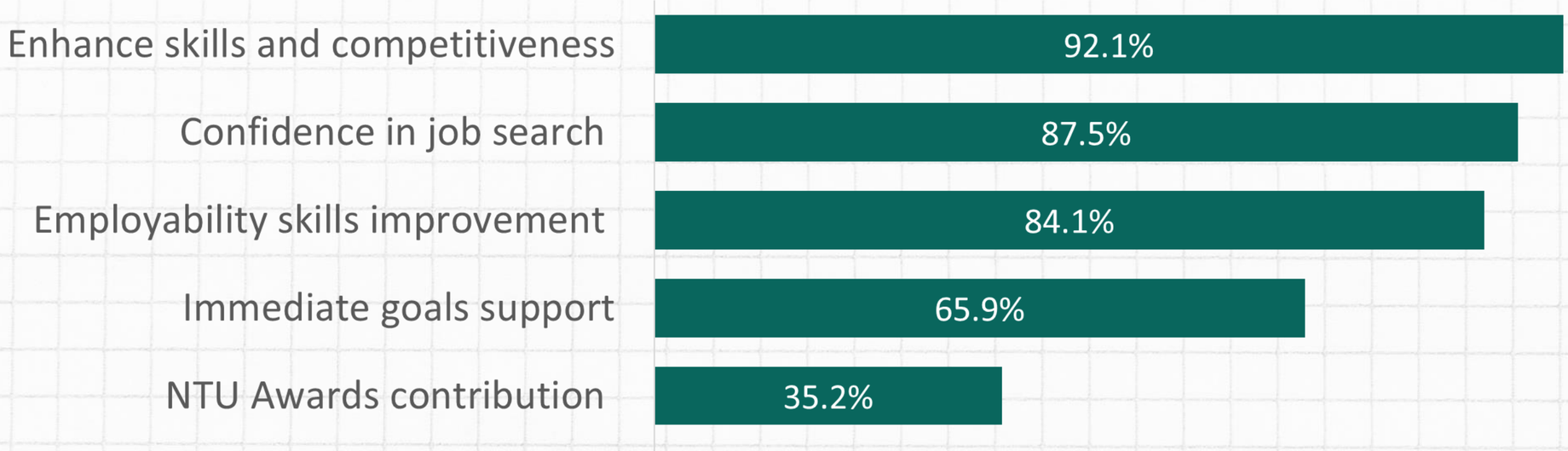
Students forgot to attend



“Sometimes with Teams meetings, you can add it to your calendar the same way it comes up on your timetable. Whereas when you book [an event on my Employability], it doesn’t give you that option. That is why I was forgetting about them.” (student B)

What are students’ motivations to attend the workshops?

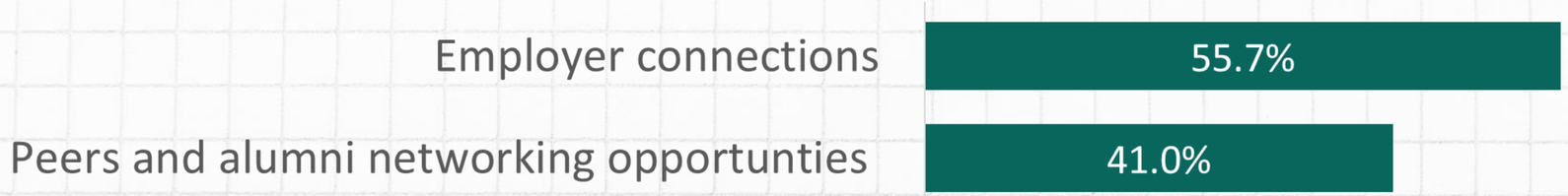
a. Personal and professional development



- **“I chose to attend them was because I thought it’d help me secure a placement and give me that sort of step up arising to my peers.” (Student B)**
- **“I do notice that it would be delayed learning how to apply for it then, but I feel like ultimately, I’d be able to put more in a hypothetical portfolio to show an employer so that although I don’t have experience in directly applying, an employer can see that I have potential in that, maybe it’ll even out from my experience.” (Student D)**

→ Students may be at different stages on their career planning, thus leads to different actions

b. Networking opportunities

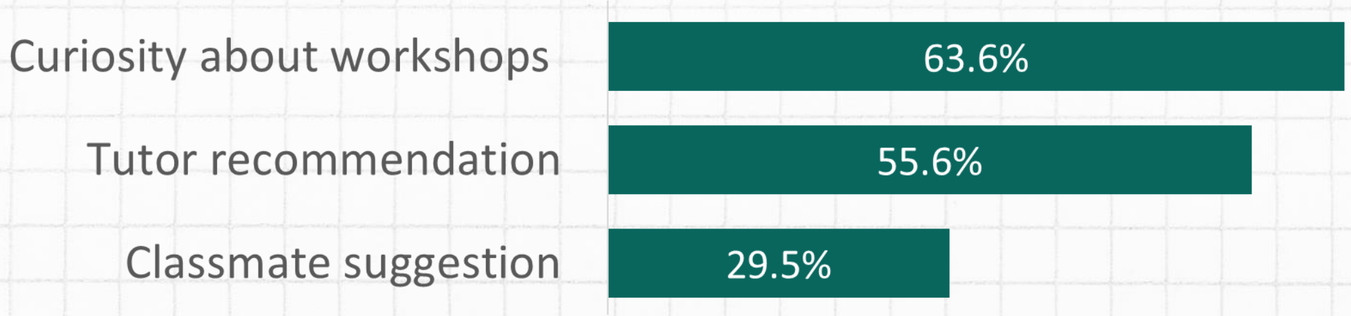


- Areas for improvement as they are not a part of these workshops.

However, some of students' thoughts are:

- "I think that I'm not very chatty. If I'm going for the information, I'll just go there just to get like the information and not necessarily talk and try and network with people". (student C)
- "ease the stress of job search as you have got someone to share your worries or any difficulties you are finding with writing a cover letter or CV." (anonymous response)

c. Curiosity and recommendations

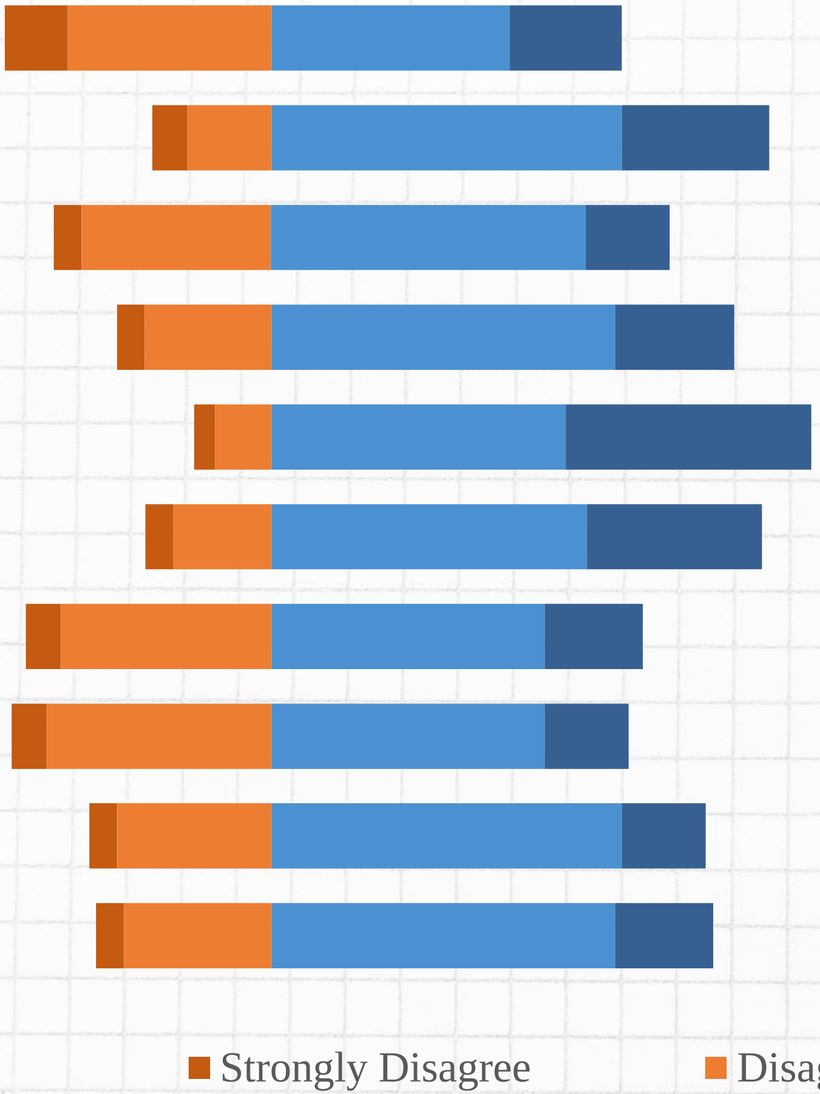


Tutor recommendation figure >< interviewees' responses

- [My tutor mentioned it] "at the end of the lecture when everyone is leaving, but they don't heavily emphasise it" (student C)
- "I don't remember my tutor saying anything" (student A)
- [My tutor] "recommended us going to Employability to have help with the CV but they didn't mention the workshop on how to write a CV." (student B)

→ Somehow a positive impact

What can be done to improve students' attendance and engagement to the workshops?



1. Provide workshop incentives
2. Promoting workshops in lectures
3. Purposes of workshops introduced by Employability staff
4. Introduce workshop calendar in 'What's on' bulletins
5. Offer in-person and online options.
6. Flexible scheduling
7. Increase interaction
8. Allow practice time
9. Offer different levels for each topic
10. Introduce more topics

a. Promotion strategies

Explanations about the benefits and purposes of the workshops

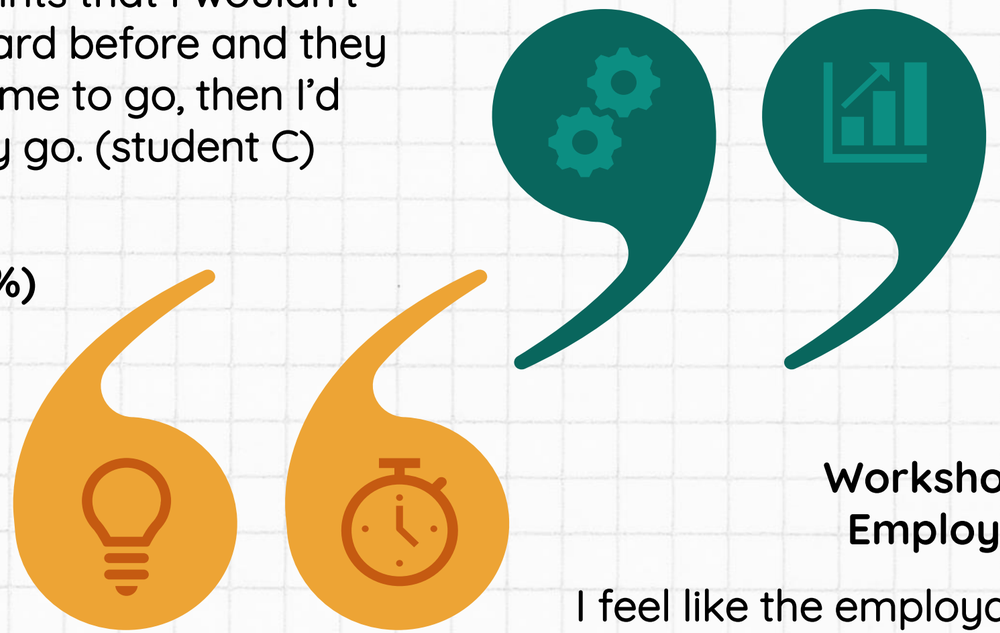
If they emphasise what was happening in it, and say some good points that I wouldn't have heard before and they advised me to go, then I'd probably go. (student C)

Introducing an event calendar (75%)

- a good addition (student D)
- more visual for people (student B)
- be able to know if it would work for and fit in with my timetable (student C)

Tutor's recommendations (80.7%)

If only the lecturer wouldn't mind adding just one slide at the end so that people can just take a picture of or scan the QR code. (student A)



Workshops introduced by the Employability staff (64.7%)

I feel like the employability staffs will be a preferred choice. That would be able to familiarise students with who they could talk to for that specific topic, rather than just having the word of a tutor which to some students may be negligible seen as. (student D)

a. Promotion strategies

Emails

- Students are overwhelmed by daily email volume.
- Similar appearance of emails sent from academics, student unions, and Employability causes confusion

→ Examining "the frequency of emails and ensuring their content stands out" (student B).

→ Employability staff can collaborate to avoid repetitive email content

→ Employability staff can be trained on crafting engaging emails, particularly focusing on effective subject lines and placing key information in the upper portion of the email (Dawkins 2019)

Emails are "probably the best way to get to everyone" (student A) – consistent with the study by Robson, Cook and Habgood (2016)

b. Accessibility and flexibility

Online delivery (approx. 90%)

- “You can just jump on when you don’t have lectures or when you’re studying at home.” (student B)
- “I’m probably better in person” (student C)
- “Record a workshop and then upload in somewhere for me to revisit in my own time” (student D)

Multiple time slots (approx. 80%)

“They might just be odd timings” (student C).

c. Workshop design and content

- Increasing interactions (60.2%)
- Providing practice time during the workshops (57.9%)
- More polls with anonymous answers:

“You don’t ever want to ask questions where you sound like you don’t know what you’re doing. So it’s better if it’s anonymous.” (student A)

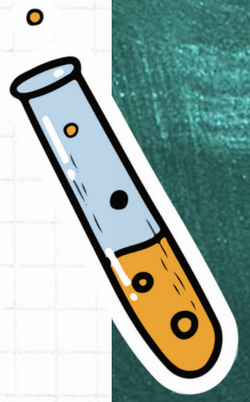
Summary of suggestions

- Academics’ support to promote the workshops
- Clearer explanations of the purposes and benefits of workshops
- Re-evaluation of the frequency of email sent and avoid repeated content
- Training for Employability staff to write more eye-catching content
- Introduce Event calendar
- Option to add the event to students’ calendar

Limitations of the study

- Findings might not be applicable to other schools at NTU.
- Predominantly responses from Biosciences, Computing, and Engineering students
- Unclear wording and complex concepts may confuse students

Q & A



Thank you