Engaging distance learners in an academic community: Student Hub Live

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Doctorate in Education

11 January 2021
Abstract

In higher education (HE), studies of effective practice relating to student retention, progression and attainment suggest that student engagement is a major factor in terms of success, and this involves a sense of belonging to a community. Studies have identified initiatives that have proved successful in traditional HE contexts, however ideas of belonging and community are problematic when translated to distance-learning contexts. Many distance-learning students, who are often mature and part-time learners, appear to be successful in their studies without identifying as a student or interacting socially with others, which calls into question the way in which belonging is conceptualised in distance-learning settings. The focus of this research was to identify the value of attending specific, live, online, interactive events at Student Hub Live (SHL) which were designed by the Open University to facilitate academic community and to provide a space outside of the curriculum for students to socialise and perform other aspects of student identity that require interaction with others. Using an ethnographic approach and grounded theory methods, chatlogs of four SHL events were analysed and the emergent themes informed semi-structured interviews which were carried out with six participants, all of whom had attended SHL events. Both sets of findings were combined and further analysed using thematic network maps. The finding was that communities of practice with shared repertoires enabled students to feel a sense of belonging through participating in discussions which created a conducive learning environment to develop skills, share experiences and feel validated. Community and belonging enabled students to deeply apply learning to their studies through sharing the experience and their experiences with others. In this sense, belonging and community matter to distance-learning students but for different reasons than for face-to-face students. The findings are relevant to other distance and face-to-face HE providers who are keen to engage students in virtual extracurricular spaces to support learning and facilitate community.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisors, Liz Marr and Tim Coughlan who have not only guided me through this process but have also supported and inspired me. Thanks to John Butcher for his sage advice and support, and to Sally Anderson who edited and proofread this thesis, gave constructive feedback and support. My critical readers, Mychelle Pride and Alison Fox have been invaluable in broadening and clarifying the thesis. Thanks also to Gill Clifton and Alison Fox for my mock viva, and to my examiners Tharindu Liyanagunawardena and Lisa Harris, and Steven Huchinson who acted as chair.

I would also like to thank the Open University for funding this doctorate, and for supporting and enabling me and my colleagues to develop Student Hub Live. I would also like to extend my thanks to the interview participants who gave up their time to participate in this research.

The students, staff, production team and all of my colleagues involved in Student Hub Live make it one of the most wonderful spaces in the world to be, and I am thankful that I am able to spend so much time there with them.

Above all, I am thankful to all my family, Ray and Sophie, and to my friends who have supported and encouraged me.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>Associate lecturer (tutor at the Open University)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DL</td>
<td>Distance Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoP</td>
<td>Community of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoI</td>
<td>Community of inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMC</td>
<td>Computer mediated communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQF</td>
<td>European Qualifications Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTE</td>
<td>Full-time equivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEI</td>
<td>Higher education institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HREC</td>
<td>Human research ethics committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>National Student Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODL</td>
<td>Online distance-learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OU</td>
<td>Open University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUCU</td>
<td>Open University computer username</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUSA</td>
<td>Open University Students' Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ</td>
<td>Research question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHL</td>
<td>Student Hub Live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNS</td>
<td>Social networking site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TMA</td>
<td>Tutor Marked Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VLE</td>
<td>Virtual learning environment</td>
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Scene setting

It’s 11am on Monday and it’s Freshers week at the OU. Julia’s going to an online event which looked like fun, and why not - since the kids are at school, she has time to herself. Plus, she doesn’t really know where to start. Julia is going to become a clinical psychologist. Her books are placed on a small desk with some highlighters, pens and a brand-new notebook. Julia is so excited. This is the start of something new, something just for her. Although, she doesn’t really understand what a live event has to do with the weblink she has for her online course. Still, the kids will be so proud of her. And to think of that teacher Mr Briggs who said she’d never amount to anything, getting pregnant in her last year of school. It might have taken a while but she’s really going to do it now. It’s all going to be great…. Although if it is, why does she feel sick in her stomach and her hands are sweating?

The event is starting. There are lots of people there. Julia types hello in the chat and suddenly, the others respond. They are just as nervous as she is…

Derek has logged onto the event at work. He’s working at home today, but he still has a lot to do. People are chatting. He doesn’t want to know where they are and what they are doing. He needs information, and fast, if he is going to juggle a full-time business degree with his office job. The first topic is law. He doesn’t need to know about that. Although they are talking about whether it is morally right to kill someone and some interesting ethical cases… Derek thought law was a bit boring, but this sounds interesting…maybe he will just keep listening while he does his emails. Thankfully the law session didn’t go on for too long, and now he can watch what he was here for: to meet some academics on his course. They weren’t really what he expected. They were young and made the subject sound so relevant to things happening in the world right now. So many questions to ponder… which made Derek wonder for the first time whether he could actually fit this all in. This degree was certainly going to be different from the one he got when he was younger.

Yolanda has turned her computer on and is at a live event. Get her! Kids have left home and she’s doing a degree and attending a workshop. Who would have thought… the first person in her family to ever go to university? The only thing is, they haven’t gone to university for a very good reason. It’s very hard and she didn’t even make her GSCEs at school, and she’s doing a degree in her second language. Now that the kids have left who will help her when she gets stuck. She listens to a session about the support she can get as a student. They seem friendly. These are nice people. She says how relieved she is in the chat. She can use all the support she can get.

Julie’s had a great time. She’s made a commitment to further her stationery supply and has been talking to other young mums who are also studying when the kids are at school. There are also nice people like Yolanda, and she feels like she has something in common with her because they both think they aren’t good enough and are worried about failing. If she can do it, so can I, thinks Yolanda. I may have to think twice as long but at least my kids aren’t at home…. Derek is chatting to someone about referencing apps. The chat has a use actually, although he’s not going to socialise with some of these people. But at least he can get information quickly, and some of these other people seem to have some good ideas.
Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

In 2014, I created the Student Hub Live (SHL) for the Open University (explained in 2.3). SHL is a virtual place to support distance-learning students in their learning by creating a sense of community and belonging that I believed to be so important in distance learning. This research has given me the opportunity to explore the value that this has to students and the role of belonging and community as an antidote for feelings of isolation and unworthiness. This chapter explains the focus of research, key ideas about community, my role in the setting and ends with an overview of the thesis.

This research focuses on the benefit that distance-learning students experience when they engage with other students in learning activities that are delivered at SHL, the live, online, interactive platform for facilitating academic community and a sense of belonging at the Open University (OU). Student Hub Live is explained in detail in the following chapter, but broadly, SHL is an online platform that delivers live, interactive, extracurricular events that are not related to specific modules or qualifications. This is done through developing and refreshing core academic skills in study-skills workshops, and using livestream technology embedded in a bespoke platform that includes polls and chat to showcase the OU’s curriculum, promote services such as careers and library resources, and to discuss the OU’s involvement in other areas such as research, broadcasting and international development. Student Hub Live events are available to all OU students, irrespective of level, qualification or ability. The aim of SHL is to offer something of value to students that enables them to feel part of something more expansive than their individual course or module. It is hoped that in participating at events, students will be able to reach out to others who may feel the same way as they do, and that the Hub will facilitate inclusion in an institution whose mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. In addition to teaching content, which is either knowledge or skills-based, SHL is a social space, offering real-time interaction while being moderated by the OU. More importantly, it opens a portal, in real time, for students to access a distance-learning community.

The research took place in the context of the OU, the UK’s largest university with over 170,000 students, and over 50 years experience of delivering higher education by distance learning. The OU has an open access policy and a diverse student population. Due to the nature of distance-learning and the challenges that it presents, it has consistently been found that distance-learning students feel isolated from the institution and from other students, with little sense of community (Kwon, Han, Bang & Armstrong, 2010, Owens, Hardcastle & Richardson, 2009, Bartlett, 2008; Huijser, Kimmins & Evans, 2008). This can be compounded when students are from marginalised groups, and, as at the OU, a larger proportion disclose disabilities than in most other institutions (HESA, 2018/2019). While there are opportunities to learn together at the OU in both online and face-to-face settings, the typical focus of learning events tends to be very specific, and the emphasis is often on module material and assessment. There is very little space outside of these events for distance-learning students to relax together and talk not only about what they are studying,
but how they are learning. The cognitive dimension of what is learnt and the knowledge that is acquired is distinct from the affective experience, how students emotionally connect with their studies, and it has been argued that affective experiences are linked to effective learning (Boyle, Maguire, Martin, Milsom, Nash, Rawlinson, Turner, Wurthmann & Conchie, 2007). Community and belonging have been identified as important to student success in mainstream HE contexts (Thomas, 2012), and this will be discussed in detail in section 3.4. However, the exact nature of belonging and community in a distance-learning context takes on different meanings because students do not experience face-to-face interaction with others, and therefore community needs to be understood in different ways. While the actions of ‘engaged’ learners in traditional contexts, which often include an element of interaction with others, can clearly be seen to correlate with success (Thomas, Hill, O’Mahony & Yorke, 2017), the number of students who have successfully completed qualifications with institutions like the OU shows that in distance-learning environments, students can study effectively and successfully independently. There are challenges in providing community and a sense of belonging for distance-learning students. This is compounded when there is much diversity in the student population (see section 2.2 for demographic data). It is largely still the case that students at a traditional university (campus-based with a full-time student population) are a more homogenous group in terms of age than part-time and distance-learning students. They can compare progress outside the lecture theatre, and exclusively live the life of a student. In contrast, many OU students have other pressures on their time and may have challenges that lead them to think they are doing less well than others. This perception can be heightened when they are behind with their coursework or are not achieving their desired grades. While creating an equitable experience for distance learning students may involve a similar kind of social or everyday interaction, because time poor and unconfident students may be reluctant to participate, creating an engaging environment is difficult.

At a time when many universities are expanding their provision to include distance-learning options, and in a context where COVID-19 restrictions have resulted in universities changing their mode of delivery to a more blended approach, the issue of facilitating community and belonging in non-traditional contexts has applications in many other settings apart from the OU in HE and beyond.

1.2 Community and sense of belonging in UK higher education

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have been increasingly concerned with understanding how they can increase retention rates (Simpson, 2005; Yorke, 2004). The student engagement narrative that began in the last few decades focused on understanding the factors involved with students successfully completing their qualifications (Trowler, 2010). While attainment was a factor, research on student engagement has also focused on satisfaction, persistence and social engagement. It was found that the more students engaged with the institution in
terms of learning activities as well as other student roles in the institution, the more likely they were to have successful outcomes in relation to these factors (Thomas et al., 2017).

The student engagement narrative has been developed to include emotional aspects of social engagement, and this relates mainly to belonging and sense of community which are subjective and difficult to measure (Zepke, 2014). It has been argued that groups in themselves do not necessarily form communities (Wenger, 2000); it has also been argued that it is important that HEIs facilitate and support a sense of belonging (Kuh, 2009a). In order to gain greater understanding of how community and belonging can be shaped by HEIs, there have been case studies of initiatives in the sector. A high-profile piece of collaborative work in this instance is What Works? Student Retention and Success (Higher Education Academy, 2017), which built from the initial What Works?1 report that identified the importance of belonging and engagement in retention and success (Thomas, 2012). Thomas reiterates the point “It is the human side of higher education that comes first – finding friends, feeling confident and above all feeling part of your course of study and the institution” (Thomas et al., 2017, p8).

The 2017 What Works report outlined some of the factors that are linked with improving retention and progression, and many of these involve relationship-building (Thomas et al., 2017). The What Works initiative, funded by the Paul Hamlyn foundation, drew together evidence from 13 UK universities (all of which are campus-based and predominantly use face-to-face modes of teaching) and 43 discipline areas (Thomas et al., 2017). These institutions submitted case studies of initiatives that they had implemented with a view to improving student retention and success. The aim was to gain deeper understanding of what was working, and to make recommendations to the sector. Successful interventions included staff–student relationships, group-based learning, personal tutoring, peer relationships/cohort identity, and belonging to a particular part of the university, all of which are seen to have a positive impact on student success. Many of these are facilitated in face-to-face settings and are led by the HE provider. However, Coates (2005), a leading figure in student engagement research, argues that even when there may be a physical community present, community building is more complex than bringing together a body of people, and universities are also responsible for developing frameworks that students can tap into. If community is implicated in student success and is based on physical interactions on a university campus, the question about how or even whether it can be facilitated in distance-learning environments is important for institutions.

Facilitating students’ sense of belonging to a community was initially perceived by some as an institutions’ moral obligation to students (Kuh, 2009). It was then identified as being important to student success, and is now included in policy, making it a broad area of both interest and concern. Not only does community and sense of belonging result in happier students who are more likely to succeed (Thomas, 2012), policy makers in the UK have included these aspects as measures of institutional success. Within the National Student
Survey (NSS)\(^1\) in particular, HEIs are ranked on, among other things, the extent to which students feel that they belong and have a voice, and this further increases the need for universities to scaffold or shape ways to help students feel they belong.

Funding and fee policies are increasingly shaping the way that universities measure their performance in the UK (Gunn, 2018). There has also been a rebalancing in terms of how success is institutionally measured, with attendance and attainment being included with the more emotional aspects of university life, such as belonging to a community and ensuring that the student voice is heard (Gunn, 2018). These measures and the implications they have in terms of the way a university’s success is judged, are discussed more fully in the literature review where the role of belonging and community in relation to the NSS are explained.

The literature review will discuss the importance of retention in HE, and how this relates to student engagement. However, much of the available research originated in and focused on traditional settings (Thomas, 2012; Trowler, 2010). While it is common for universities to be thought of as operating from a campus base, with young, full-time learners living away from home, the reality is in fact far more complex and diverse than this. Thomas (2015) found that part-time and mature students at campus-based institutions also experienced a lack of belonging because they were distinct from most of the student population. One hypothesis is that these issues are more difficult for distance learners than campus-based learners to deal with because they do not have the immediacy of community and support that more traditional learning environments offer.

Many universities offer distance-learning alternatives, and mature students also study at so-called “traditional” institutions. In the UK, 69% of HE students are under 25, 30% are over 25 (1% unknown), whereas at the OU, 20% of students are under 25, 80% are over 25 (HESA, 2018/19). 78% of UK students study full-time, and 22% part-time, and of those who study part-time, 44% study with the OU (HESA, 2018/19).

The Open University is an example of an exclusively distance-learning-based model, with students usually studying part-time and combining their learning with other commitments, although the number of young students is increasing, as is the proportion of students who are studying at accelerated part-time intensity (see section 2.2). For this heterogeneous student body with different student experiences, the part-time nature of learning increases the time during which changes in life circumstances may occur which can lead to drop-out. Furthermore, it has been seen that attrition rates in distance-learning are higher than in campus-based settings, and there are many factors that influence this in addition to changes in life circumstances, such as inability to navigate systems, changes in motivation, and because some students may have mistakenly assumed that distance learning was an easier approach than face-to-face learning (Moody, 2004). Despite differences in fees, entry criteria,

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\(^1\) The National Student Survey (NSS) is an annual survey of up to 500,000 students in the UK. The survey gathers opinions about students’ time at their higher education institution. Commissioned by the Office for Students on behalf of the UK funding and regulatory bodies in the four nations, the NSS is undertaken independently by Ipsos MORI. The survey consists of 27 questions, and 8 focus on the student experience.
attainment, structure and methods of delivery, an issue common to all HEIs is the desire to retain and progress students through their degrees.

The research study in this report recognises these challenges, and focuses on belonging and community, and how this can be created and supported in distance-learning settings such as the OU. It is discussed in Chapter 3 that while much has been found in terms of facilitating community in face-to-face campus-based institutions (Thomas et al., 2017), there is limited research to date focusing on the way that institutions can facilitate a sense of belonging in distance-learning environments, and where there is research, much of it focuses on collaborating on group tasks that are often course-related (Rovai, 2002). The distinctions between the learning experiences of campus-based and distance-learning students have been well considered (Richardson, 2000; Diaz & Cartnal, 1999), however one distinction that is fundamental to this research is that online communities require a greater direction from an educator or the institution compared to face-to-face settings (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014; Rovai, 2002). For all the reasons alluded to in the discussions above, it is important to understand how to scaffold opportunities for distance learning students to establish community and sense of belonging, which is the focus of this research. SHL is considered to be an effective mechanism to achieve this scaffolding in the context of distance-learning, and that while it is a specific instance, there are applications that may apply to other settings.

1.3 Research focus

This research aims to understand how attendance at SHL events creates a sense of belonging which adds value to the student experience. To achieve this, chatlogs, which were created by participants during live events, were analysed and interviews were carried out with SHL participants.

The research focuses on how people have experienced the SHL events, and how these compare with other learning opportunities and alternative spaces where students connect with each other, both physically and virtually. The aim of SHL is to create an academic community. The extent to which student identity is evident and the way it is experienced are key areas of focus in examining notions of community, and therefore the concept of student identity for distance-learners is explored. There is an underlying assumption in this research that there are different levels of student engagement, that engagement is positive, and that some students have a desire for community involvement whereas others do not.

It is the aspect of community or belonging that links to the student engagement agenda, and since there has been little research on understanding this aspect in distance-learning settings, this research hopes to remedy this, using artefacts from the SHL digital platform in the form of chatlogs, and interviews with participants at events to find out more about the meaning of these events and their role in community.

Before this research began, it was noted in the chatlogs that many participants signed off from a session saying things like “I feel so much better now”. The rationale therefore was
based on the idea that if it is understood who might feel better (i.e. the types of students), how that happens (for a range of individuals), and what it might mean in terms of study, SHL can evolve in conjunction with the community it serves.

The research questions (RQs) are:

RQ1 What is the value or perceived benefit to students of SHL as an online interactive event? If there is value in interactive online events, how does this compare with other online or face-to-face opportunities to interact with students/academics?

RQ2 How does interaction at SHL events fit within the OU student experience overall (including forums, tutorials, course content and assessment, and distance-learning).

RQ3 Does interaction/attendance of SHL events relate to a sense of identity as a student?
   a. How important is student identity to students who attend SHL events?
   b. To what extent is it important to interact with other students in terms of perceiving a ‘student community’?

RQ4 Does interaction with/attendance at SHL events relate to a sense of belonging to the academic institution (The Open University)?

This research uses a constructivist, grounded theory approach and ethnographic methods to explore the interactions, experiences and value of participation in online events that supplement curriculum, using SHL events at the Open University as a case study. Whether and how students experienced feeling connected to others was explored using chatlogs, which were generated by participants at four live events, and six semi-structured interviews. While the chatlogs provided a record of participants’ text-based interactions and experiences during events, and some indication of how they developed a sense of community and belonging, they do not convey the value of these interactions for the individuals involved. Therefore, individual interviews were set up to explore issues more deeply. The themes identified through analysing the chatlogs provided focus for the semi-structured interviews, which included discussions about the experience of the events, notions of identity as a student, and a comparison between SHL and other learning and social interactions with other students. Thematic network analysis was then used to develop emergent themes from both the chatlog data and the interview data and show how they related to each other and to the student experience.

A grounded theory approach appealed for two reasons: it accommodated the approach to thematic coding of the data and allowed for the inclusion of a reflexive contribution from the researcher who is involved in the conceptual design and the delivery of SHL. The iterative approach associated with grounded theory lends itself well to exploring from the bottom up, how ideas about belonging translate to the distance-learning environment. The research was designed to consider what participants did (in terms of chat-based participation) during events in order to understand how interactions with others were initiated, developed, and valued. It was also intended to understand, through interviews, how participants experienced
their contributions to the live discussion and how that linked to their sense of belonging. Thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001) were used to map links between emergent themes and the student experience within the distance-learning context.

The concept and development of SHL is explained in detail in the next chapter. However, since SHL was created, developed, and delivered by the researcher, which has impacted on assumptions and the direction of research, it is important to provide some background information about the researcher’s role at the OU.

1.4 Role of the researcher in the research setting

I have worked at the Open University for the last 11 years in multiple roles: As an associate lecturer (AL), consultant on Student Connections and SHL, assistant staff tutor (overseeing tuition delivery and managing ALs) and most recently as a lecturer. I was and am still an OU student. I studied a combined arts degree (Theatre and Film and Literature) at Victoria University in New Zealand straight from school.

I developed the idea of SHL after working with a colleague in 2014 on a project called Student Connections, a livestreamed, 5 day conference, during which we created a virtual conference with academic and student presenters from the Faculty of Social Sciences, one of the faculties at the OU (see Foley & Fribbance, 2018; Foley, Middleton & Fribbance, 2015). It was initially anticipated that academic contributions would be more highly valued by the audience than student contributions, and that participants would attend sessions based on their interest in the topic. Instead, it was found that participants enjoyed the discussion sessions where they could talk in the chat about aspects of student life in addition to the topic that was being discussed and streamed, and the viewing figures were based more on the availability of time in which participants could attend, than on the scheduling of the topics themselves.

Developing and hosting these conferences made use of both my theatre and film degree, and my psychology and counselling qualifications in establishing rapport and interviewing people. I had worked with colleagues recording videos and recognised that many good thinkers were not necessarily good speakers or communicators, and that an interview approach could help scaffold the delivery of content and make it more engaging than a live lecture. It also created a more relaxed tone which appeared to make the content more engaging and accessible. I was mindful of the reaction that remote attendees had also when their comments were included, or their questions were raised, and this led me to try and include as many comments as possible, and also to facilitate a playful, safe and supportive place where no question was inappropriate.

When the OU wanted a virtual freshers’ fair, they asked that I develop this based on what I had learned during the Student Connections project. The SHL project was piloted for about three years in which a range of freshers’ fairs were funded on an ad hoc basis for each of the two main annual intakes of students (October and February). It had a very low budget, but with the help of OU colleagues, a website was created, a logo was developed, and the event
was marketed to students on the OU website. I produced and presented the events and worked with contributors to get their sessions prepared so that they could deliver a good live performance. Later I built many different sets including the quiz set and the Hotdesk, styled the stage, and made the cakes. I worked with the production team, driving the direction of the events in terms of tone I wanted to evoke, and later included an internal team comprised of people in different areas of the university.

Questions were often raised by colleagues about the impact of events, and although the SHL team had measures of attendance, and it was possible to see some of the individual impact at a behavioural level through the chatlogs, it was very difficult to develop a deeper understanding of what effect these events had on students. It was also challenging to gain a comprehensive quantitative insight into the impact of SHL event attendance on an individual student for a variety of reasons, mainly to do with accessing the data for individual students who had attended, and also availability of resources for data gathering. Another issue in terms of impact was that attendance was based not only on availability but also on the successful marketing of events. Marketing SHL events had been difficult because while there are areas in the virtual learning environment that cover extracurricular opportunities, many students focus on their modules exclusively and do not read notices. In addition, since SHL events were extra-curricular, many students found it challenging in terms of time to do anything over and above their study on the module. Understanding the reasons that students attend SHL events and the value they get out of them is another reason for undertaking this research.

Despite the difficulties noted above, it was evident through interactions at SHL events, that for some people, particularly those who did not have much contact with others, these events were very meaningful and were a lifeline to an outside world with which they wanted to connect. Some students came and went, and the events were useful at the time, but many others attended regularly, shared their experiences and facilitated community for many other appreciative students. Despite the transient nature of some of the audience and that we were broadcasting from a studio, the sense of a global and vibrant dialogue was very real, each interaction was like a synaptic connection that reinforced our community.

Initiatives like SHL have the potential to scaffold community and engagement at a distance, but research is needed to understand more fully how and why it does this, and the audiences it benefits. This doctoral project has therefore focused on understanding the value that attendance has for participants and explores how meaningful connections are made. It also seeks to understand the impact of belonging in the context of the student experience.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

Chapter 2 sets the context of the research and explains the OU’s approach to distance-learning and the impact on the student experience, assessment and potential for interaction with others. The reasons for distance-learning students potentially experiencing a sense of isolation are explored. Issues and potential problems around the delivery of specific skills modules and embedding skills in the curriculum are also discussed. In the second part of the
chapter, SHL is explained in detail, and the two main platforms are described, accompanied by short videos illustrating how SHL is experienced.

Relevant literature is presented and critically analysed in Chapter 3. Embedded in the student engagement narrative, student success and a sense of belonging are highlighted as important attributes of HE systems. These are linked to measurements which relate to the success of the student, seen in terms of attainment and progression, and of the institution in terms of the quality of teaching and consequently its reputation. It has been argued that belonging and community are so important that there is a responsibility for HEIs to scaffold these (Thomas, 2012). However, most of the ideas about successful scaffolds for belonging are from settings in which students progress from school to a full-time, campus-based institution and then go on to seek graduate jobs. There is much to be learned from non-traditional student populations, in particular mature, part-time and distance-learning cohorts. The idea of student identity for different student bodies is explored and its relationship with community and belonging for these groups is discussed. The distance-learning aspect is of most concern in this research, since virtual interaction represents a challenge to delivering the face-to-face interventions that are seen to facilitate belonging at traditional HEIs.

Chapter 4 focuses on methodology. Knowledge is seen as constructed by individuals and interpretation by researchers can reveal some common facets of people’s experiences. Methodologically, therefore, a qualitative approach was appropriate because experiences are rich and broad, and since the area is underexplored, the development of a conceptual understanding is necessary before quantitative measurement would be feasible. Working within an interpretivist paradigm, the methodological approach is ethnographic. The researcher was immersed in the setting and grounded theory was the chosen theoretical approach because the theory emerges from the data, rather than the data fitting or not fitting other pre-researched constructs. Finally, in order to provide the type of rich data required which reflects the actual lived experience, analysis of in situ chat and interviews were the chosen methods.

Chapter 5 follows from the theoretical discussion about the choices made in chapter 4, with a detailed account of the methods used. The choice of data sources, chatlogs and interviews, is explained and the implications of using these sources are discussed. The recruitment of participants for the interviews is outlined and the process of designing the questions is explained. The coding process is explained for both sources of data, and then the way in which they were used for developing thematic network maps is presented. A discussion of ethical considerations concludes the chapter.

Chapter 6 presents the findings. The chapter is split into three parts: the findings from the chatlogs, then interviews and then the thematic network maps. The chatlogs generated ten emergent themes, all of which are discussed, but the first four (don’t I know you?, social networks, interactive participation establishes community, and collective repertoires) are instrumental in addressing the RQs;. The interviews generated three main themes, the challenges of distance learning, belonging and within or beyond institutional parameters. These themes all have sub themes, as do the main themes for the thematic network maps. Thematic network analysis combined both data sources and their findings and the main
themes were: how does SHL fit into the OU student experience; belonging; and facilitating community in online spaces.

Chapter 7 considers the findings in the context of the research questions and relates these to theory and ideas that were introduced in the literature review (Chapter 3). The chapter is in four parts, specifically addressing each research question, and focuses on belonging and sense of community, SHL as part of the student experience, student identity, and finally the value that SHL adds to an OU student’s learning experience.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis, presenting a summary of the findings and the original contribution they make to policy and practice. The limitations are considered, particularly regarding the methods chosen and the extent to which this specific case study can apply to other settings. Areas for future work are suggested and the thesis ends with a personal reflection.
Chapter 2. Context of the Open University and Student Hub Live

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the research context, beginning with an overview of the Open University UK. Thereafter, the distance-learning model is outlined, and it is explained how the large number of learners and their diversity has implications in terms of the way that community can be considered. The second half of the chapter outlines the SHL concept in detail, and several short videos showcase the interface to provide the reader with some experience of the different platforms.

2.2 The Open University

The OU is the UKs largest university, offering both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications (HESA, 2018/2019). Through a distance learning model, for over 50 years, the OU has appealed to students who want to combine work and study or for whom campus-based study may not be suitable; 76% of directly registered OU students work full-time or part-time during their studies (OU data). In 2018/19 there were 122,360 OU students (HESA, 2018/2019), although the total number of students including those registered with partner institutions is 168,116 (2018/19, OU data). In addition, OU learners form a diverse population, comprising a mixture of young, mature (over 25), full-time, part-time, UK-based and international students.

![OU Students by age](image)

*Figure 1. OU Students by age HESA 2018/19.*

Some OU students do not speak English as a first language, and 22% of students declare a known disability (HESA, 2018/2019). This disability figure is considerably higher than the
national average of 14%, which has increased nationally due to more students reporting mental health conditions (HESA, 2018/2019)

The OU has an open access policy and a commitment to widening participation in HE, which means that most courses do not require prior qualifications. This means that in some instances, students may begin their studies with insufficient skills for higher level study. They previously may have had unsatisfactory educational experiences or be returning to study after a considerable amount of time, and consequently may lack confidence in their abilities, or not have suitable skills to succeed on their own.

These circumstances and situations can present barriers and/or risks to successful study. The specific nature of part-time distance learning and the associated barriers have been explored by Kahu, Stephens, Zepke & Leach, (2014) who found that successful distance-learning students found space and time to fit study into their lives. Distance learning has typically been seen to have a lower level of retention and progression than traditional, face-to-face, campus-based settings. However, it can also be argued that the comparison is not equitable, leading to a distortion based on typical trajectories of full-time campus-based students (Howell, Laws & Lindsay, 2004). This can be attributed to a number of factors including the time taken to complete a part-time qualification and the other commitments that may interfere, however there also appear to be qualitative differences in terms of the learning focus. Owens et al., (2009) found that distance-learning students are typically goal-orientated and assessment-focused and had little interest in social interaction.

In their 2015 study, Butcher and Rose-Adams found that many OU students do not identify as ‘students’, and instead focus on studying as one of the many activities that consume their time. The OU students included in their research commonly expressed that the overall study goal was personal, and while it was a key motivator, if that goal was superseded by other commitments, students might cease their studies either temporarily or permanently (Butcher & Rose Adams, 2015). Furthermore, Baxter and Britton (2001) argue that for mature students, the decision to engage in HE represents a conscious shift in identity, often away
from a previous concept of self, making it even more challenging to negotiate new identities than it may be for young, campus-based students (Baxter & Britton, 2001). Given these issues, it is all the more important to understand how to inculcate a sense of belonging and community to help support these students and thereby potentially increase their likelihood to meet their aspirations.

2.2.1 The Open University’s method of learning and assessment

The OU is a distance-learning provider, and module materials are delivered to students in a variety of forms including books and online resources. Irrespective of the medium of delivery, students are directed through their studies by an online virtual learning environment (VLE) and have support from an associate lecturer (AL). Qualifications are split into modules, typically 30 or 60 credits, which are commonly 30 weeks in duration, and there are two main, annual start dates, in October and February. Some students choose to study full-time equivalent (FTE) with 120 credits per year for part of their degree, but most (48%) are part-time learners (HESA 2018/2019). Modules are linked together to form qualification pathways and, while there is an Open Degree that allows students to study any subjects in any combination, many students follow a named qualification route. The OU’s framework has two specific effects on the student experience: firstly, students enrolled on a qualification pathway may feel a sense of community since they may get to know other students or Associate Lecturers (ALs) on the same pathway; secondly, since the emphasis is modular both in terms of content and the timescale of the module (as opposed to it being qualification based), and academic skills are embedded in the curriculum, some students may struggle to detach skills from the content. This may mean that students do not fully develop the necessary academic skills that can be applied to other contexts, particularly if they predominantly focus on the course content to complete their assignments. This consequence of goal focused study is included in the SHL programme, which includes stand-alone skills workshops aimed to develop specific skills that may have been missed.

In addition to the standard VLE and module materials, there are opportunities to connect with staff and students. OU students have access to optional online tutorials and forums, and in some cases, face-to-face tutorials or day schools are offered. Students can meet ALs, and students at these learning events. While all students receive written feedback on each piece of assessment from their associate lecturer, they can also choose to connect via email, telephone or at tutorials.

Students submit assignments that are usually written pieces of work that are marked by their AL with personalised feedback. There is normally also a summative assessment such as an end-of-module assessment or an examination. Completing and passing the minimum assessment criteria is the only compulsory aspect to completing each module. While there may be collaborative tasks that are sometimes linked to assessment, students are graded on their individual performance, not that of others. This means that many students study on their own, and can therefore feel alone, both physically and, in many cases, psychologically.
The main appeal of the OU is flexibility (Butcher, 2015). Each module starts and ends at a specific date, but students can study at their own pace within the parameters of the module, requesting extensions to the assignment submission dates if needed. While many students stay broadly on track in terms of completing the weekly learning tasks, some students fall behind. If this happens, they may need additional support, and may also not realise that many other students are in the same situation. Connecting with a community enables them to articulate their concerns and find out not just that others are in the same boat, but to explore ways to get back on track based on others’ experiences.

2.2.2 Opportunities for student peer-to-peer interaction

There are opportunities for OU students to engage with each other within the parameters of their modules and qualifications, and they can also access social media platforms to connect with others. Some of these platforms are moderated by the OU and others are not. In addition to the module-based learning platforms such as tutorials and forums, the OU has a social media presence, including corporate OU Facebook and Twitter accounts which offer spaces for students to interact. The Open University Students Association (OUS) also develops and supports the OU student community. OUSA arrange physical and virtual community events for students through the association itself and its affiliated clubs. There are also many student-initiated and student-moderated social media groups, typically organised by module or qualification. The OU’s approach is not to intervene in these spaces through moderation, and as they are run by students, OU staff may not be able to participate in them in their official capacity.

While there are OU-moderated platforms where students can interact socially as well as academically, the main distinction between these and student-initiated social media platforms is that those run by the OU tend to be asynchronous and structured because they are based on a forum design, whereas the student-initiated platforms operate on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, and therefore tend to be more synchronous and unstructured.

Sharing photos and videos provide a richer experience and these have been designed for social media platforms. In addition, these social spaces can be integrated (for example a Facebook feed may include friends and study groups) and accessed on devices which are in frequent use by students, and therefore response times can be almost immediate.

The SHL offers a middle ground. It is a space that is moderated by the OU, but which offers live synchronous connection because of the live nature of the events.

2.3 Student Hub Live

Student Hub Live is a live, online, interactive platform that was created and developed at the OU by the researcher, and it delivers events that are intended to facilitate academic community among OU distance-learning students. The setting also affords the opportunity to
evaluate the impact of the platform in an already established initiative. In this section, the background and development of SHL is explained, and then the two platforms through which events are delivered are outlined.

This short video explains SHL (See Appendix 1 for the transcript).

https://youtu.be/SnYEC4CzISw

Note: The videos in this section can be accessed from the YouTube links or the QR codes, which are a way of allowing smartphones and tablets to link to online content by scanning the QR codes using a smartphone. To scan a QR code, you may need to download a QR code reader application (app) to your smartphone or tablet. You can do this using the app store on your phone or tablet. As with many apps, there are both free and paid-for versions; the main difference is that free apps tend to carry adverts. To use QR codes, once you have installed a QR reader on your smartphone or tablet, open the app and point the camera on your device at the QR code. The camera will automatically scan the code and the app will take you to the relevant video or audio content.

2.3.1 Student Hub Live background and objective

As previously mentioned, SHL is the OU’s engagement programme comprising a range of formats that all offer live, online, interactive learning events. The SHL initiative was set up in 2014 to be a virtual Freshers’ Fair, based on the assumptions that the OU’s often mature, part-time, distance-learning students would enjoy being ‘Freshers’, and that it was possible to have a virtual ‘fair’. While students enjoyed the format as a way to get acquainted with the university and meet other students, it was agreed that the platform had greater potential to open up the university to a remote audience, both physically and practically but also in terms of communication. SHL rapidly expanded in terms of scope of content and platforms of delivery.

There was interest in creating specific events for various areas of the university, and there was also an increase in funding of the project by the university. This resulted in greater frequency of SHL events meeting different agendas and objectives, and it was possible to pilot new ways to offer students the potential to connect with the academic community. This investment and development resulted in a shift in the purpose of SHL, from its initial proposition as a virtual Freshers’ Fair to a platform to develop academic community, creating a space for students to learn and to share their learning through induction spaces, workshops, chat show formats, quizzes and interviews. SHL now includes academic skills-based
workshops, new curriculum showcases, debates, demonstrations, workshops aimed at supporting students through exams and assessment in general terms, and bridging programmes between module end and start dates. The events are all extra-curricular, non-modular and entirely optional, and are open to all OU students, available both live and on ‘catch up’, and the research reported here was intended to explore the value of SHL.

At the time of publication (2020), SHL events were delivered through two platforms: studio broadcasts using Livestream with an interface that includes chat and polls; and study-skills workshops in Adobe Connect, the interface through which online tutorials are currently delivered at the OU. The study skills workshops have a different objective from the studio broadcasts, and focus mainly on developing one specific skill, such as ‘addressing the assessment question’.

All SHL events have the primary aim of facilitating academic community through carefully structured, live, online learning events which include structured discussions, interactive elements (some of which are anonymous since they are visually detached from individuals names, allowing anonymous contributions), and the opportunity to connect with other students and members of OU staff. During all live events, irrespective of the platform through which they are delivered, participants can ask questions, share their views and have parallel discussions with other participants through the chat function. As technology develops and new platforms become available, there will undoubtedly be ways to further develop SHL events and improve student connections which makes understanding the functionality of the various aspects of community important since they need to precede technological changes.

SHL was shortlisted in the Times Higher Education awards 2016 in the ‘Best support for students’ category and was winner of the innovation category at the UALL 2018 awards, demonstrating its innovation in the sector.

The website, which is how many events are promoted and accessed has a substantial volume of traffic with 62,155 users between September 2019 and September 2020, and nearly half of the users return (42%), demonstrating repeated interaction and the possibility of some form of connection.
In addition to quantitative measures of engagement such as viewing figures or website traffic (which are beyond the scope of this research, but are included above for context), the chatlogs and researcher’s reflections on the success of events have been important in developing the learning activities and format of events. This doctoral research has designed to understand the value of SHL in facilitating community and sense of belonging in distance education.

2.3.2 Student Hub Live Platform 1: studio broadcasts

Studio broadcasts use ‘Livestream’ (a video live-streaming platform which allows customers to broadcast live video content - see www.livestream.com) to broadcast from a studio at the OU to a remote audience who access events online. Studio broadcast events are 2 to 9 hours in total duration and are made up of individual sessions which are typically 15 to 25 minutes in length but can be up to an hour. Sessions are broken up by short video breaks of approximately five minutes, and these videos supplement the discussion or contain additional useful information, rather like in-house advertisement breaks.

The SHL website contains information about events including future events, programmes of events, and an optional email subscription request. The programme or schedule for each individual event is also available, along with information about the studio participants and a TV-listing-style description of the session. The website is the main point of access to the event, and viewers are encouraged to sign in and then click on the watch live event button. Participants can log on to an event from the SHL website at any time during the live event and stay for as long as they want to.
Welcome, Karen Foley

Welcome to Student Hub Live, a series of live, online and interactive events open to everyone at The Open University. We produce a range of activities designed to support all OU students in their studies and facilitate academic community. Visit our About page to find out more about what kinds of events we run, and how you can join them using your device of choice.

All SHL events are recorded and available to view the following day. Head to Event catch-ups and click on the study skills workshop or broadcast that you would like to view, then scroll down for a link to the recording.

Upcoming events

The OU-wide (re)Fresher Orientation – 28 September 2020

Welcome to The Open University (OU). This live, online and interactive event is a great opportunity to find out about us and meet other students.

COVID can't keep us apart: you can log on remotely to view the event, chat with other students and take part in the sessions. We'll outline some of the key things you will need to know about studying at the OU, introduce you to the online OU library and the OU Study App, and showcase how to keep digitally secure.

We also have sessions on what it's like to be an OU student, how to manage your time and look after yourself in your studies, and how your tutors and student services can help you.

Join us from 10am to 4pm, we hope to see you there! Please register your interest for this event here.

Figure 4. The SHL website showing an event programme.
Studio broadcast events are predominantly an opportunity to ‘show and tell’ and are fun, visual, interactive and feature several learning goals. They also include accessible entry points for participation in the design of each session to ensure that even when complex ideas are discussed, there is a way for all students to participate, irrespective of what they are studying or their level on their learning journey.

Events are hosted by one presenter (the researcher) who produces each session in conjunction with the guest participant(s) and the technical director. The planned studio discussions are structured with flexibility to include live, online participant contributions.

The studio is styled like a chat show to reflect the informal nature of discussions and to instil a sense of conversation between the host and panellists and the remote online audience. The set was developed when it was observed that the setting was important to those at home who commented on the background and appreciated the informal and eclectic things in the setting. The set design ensures that SHL invites an audience to a place that is comfortable, accessible, and full of real people. The chat show format also means that academic colleagues do not lecture students, or present PowerPoint slides. Instead they are invited to use props to make points, for example using a lemon meringue ‘pie chart’ to demonstrate the weighting of assessment. Teaching in the studio is about being friendly, accessible and dynamic.

Figure 5. Using a ‘pie’ chart prop to demonstrate weighting of assessment.
Studio broadcasts are vision-mixed live, and several cameras are positioned in the studio to include a wide shot of the set, the hot desk (which will be explained shortly), a close-up of the guests and the presenter. There is also potential to use remote connections through Skype or Network Device Interface (NDI) to access multiple locations outside the studio. Live mixing and using a range of cameras create visual variety and a sense of intimacy as viewers can see the entire studio but also close-ups of the contributors. In addition to the contributors, the show can include images or slides, video and audio inserts, demonstrations of computer programs or spaces such as the virtual learning environment and other visual aspects. These create visual variety but, most importantly, the visual materials and props place emphasis on introducing viewers to OU people, places and spaces, and allow teaching that is visual, accessible and, most of all, fun.
The livestream video feed is incorporated within an interface that was designed by the Knowledge Media Institute (KMi) at the OU called Stadium Live. Students and those with an OU computer user account can log into events in Stadium Live which includes the livestream (Fig. 8, top left) in addition to chat (Fig. 8, bottom left) and interactive voting tools or widgets (Fig 8, right). There is a range of display options, and the chat can be made larger or smaller according to personal preference.
Discussions from the chat (Fig. 8, bottom left) and images sent from the remote audience on email or twitter are relayed into the studio by the hot desk team.

The hot desk is a second, small set in the same studio from which two people facilitate the discussions between the studio and the remote online audience. They also collate contributions from the remote audience via email and twitter which can include images of pets or ‘study buddies’, tips, or specific activities related to sessions.

Figure 9. The hot desk relay the discussion, questions and include audience contributions such as tips or photographs on the board behind them.

This short video explains the SHL studio broadcast events (See Appendix 2 for the transcript).

https://youtu.be/FdGYDo3fz7A
2.3.3 Student Hub Live Platform 2: Study skills workshops in Adobe Connect

The second platform through which SHL is delivered is Adobe Connect, which is used for study skills workshops only. Adobe Connect is the OU’s current online, synchronous tutorial delivery platform, which can be accessed only by OU students and staff, meaning that in terms of live engagement there are parameters to the community.

Using Adobe Connect provides the potential to include functions, such as audio, video, screen-sharing, file-sharing, chat, anonymous polls, the ability for presenters to change the layout of the overall interface, and for participants to adjust the size of certain parts of the interface. Before explaining how Adobe Connect is used for SHL workshops, this section will cover the use of the interface in the context of OU tutorials.

As previously mentioned, Adobe Connect is the OU’s platform for online module tutorials which can be delivered live or pre-recorded. Tutorials are learning events that are optional for students but nonetheless are planned as part of the curriculum. Tutorial provision varies by module but is commonly delivered by a rota of ALs organised geographically. Typically, module tutorials are attended by 2 to 20 students, and focus on specific learning outcomes.

While students are allocated to certain tutorial ‘rooms’ for module tutorials, there are also some open access rooms, such as the SHL Adobe Connect room and the library training room which all students can access. In these spaces, SHL study skills workshops are advertised and delivered to students. Free tickets are issued via Eventbrite to those who register, as numbers are limited (due to the licensing agreement and functionality of the Adobe Connect platform). Study skills workshops focus on developing key academic skills, such as critical thinking, essay-planning, essay-writing, and time management. Although these skills are often embedded into module material and are developed if students follow the learning pathway and complete most activities, with a focus on assessment and many other responsibilities, it is easy for students to miss skills work. Furthermore, it can then be challenging for students to recognise skills development work in their learning materials. Providing skills modules separately helps to address these issues and fits with the flexibility ethos of the OU.

The study skills workshops are an hour in length and are tightly structured. They begin with scene-setting and establishing a focus for participants. Then there is a taught component that progresses from a holistic explanation of the concept in focus, to its application in a generic way, and finally to a specific application. There are large and small group activities (and sometimes individual activities) and a plenary. The learning process is designed in such a way that there are repetitions of key concepts, and students can remain anonymous while applying skills to their own learning situations using multi-choice-based interactions and making short text responses. Finally, students can express their ideas in discussions with others. The participation options provide students who may feel anxious about contributing with a valid space to interact, and since there are no right or wrong answers as such, students can try out ideas and gain confidence through their interactions.
Compared with module tutorials, SHL workshops are attended by much larger numbers with anywhere between 20 and 200 students per session. Because of the scale and structure of the sessions, participants are invited to use polls and chat in the first part of the session only, and microphones are disabled, whereas in tutorials these are encouraged but are not frequently used. Testing sound and explaining functionality can be cumbersome when there are many participants.

Below is an example of the SHL Adobe Connect interface.

The teaching slides are central to the study skills workshops, and various anonymous polls (such as the one shown at the bottom left of Fig. 10) are introduced to focus students on their reasons for attending, and so that they can see the variety of motivations, both similar and different from their own. They also allow the facilitators to establish some of the key drivers for participation. Instead of using video to personalise the interface, which can cause problems due to end-user internet speed, images of the facilitators are shown.

Reflective questions are used in anonymous polls (see examples in Figure 10) to encourage students to think about their own study. For example, in an essay-writing workshop, students were asked to comment about the grade they were trying to achieve (see results on bottom left poll in Fig. 11) and to share their emotional response to the essay task they were working on.
These kinds of activities can facilitate reflection. Many students do not consciously think about the grade they are aiming for but are often disappointed despite not having a clear idea about what their goal was in the first place. At workshops, students are encouraged to think about benefits of learning other than simply achieving high grades; in the example above, for instance, they are considering the extent to which they are enjoying the task.

After the teaching section of the workshop, students are presented with a discussion activity and are put into breakout rooms. The maximum number of rooms is 20 per session, and students are randomly allocated to small groups of between 8 and 20 students. Students can interact only in the breakout room to which they are allocated, and they can use their microphone, chat, polls and notes to discuss the task. Groups are asked to nominate one person to feed back to the group in the plenary.

Breakout room tasks are simple and focus on applying what students have learned in the session to their own study and sharing useful information in the group.
Discussion activity

• Discuss with your group how you could put what you have learnt about planning into practice.
• You could discuss which type of plan you prefer or how to make the plan active.
• Please bring back a few points that you can share with the rest of the group.

You will have different modules and topics so this is about the approaches to planning essays appropriately

Figure 12. An example of the instructions for a breakout discussion activity.

After the discussion and plenary, students are invited to participate in feedback polls. This provides information about the value of the event and encourages students to identify and commit to personal actions that they will take away from the session.
Figure 13. Adobe connect polls: Example of end of session feedback and commitment to next steps.

This short video explains the Adobe Connect workshops (See appendix 3 for the transcript).

https://youtu.be/PDi-rOCsNJg

2.4 Student Hub Live catch-up: studio broadcasts and study skills workshops

Studio broadcast sessions are available to watch on catch-up on the SHL website or the SHL You Tube channel. The catch-up includes only video feed of the events (i.e. the chat and
other aspects of the interface are not included). All events are listed, and You Tube contains a search function. At the time of writing, playlists are being created and the videos tagged. As of 16 September 2020, there are 3,274 subscribers and there were 195,642 views, with 696 videos available.

Adobe Connect workshops are available to watch on catch-up and these are accessed in the Adobe Connect room.

### 2.5 Summary

This chapter has outlined the OU’s method of distance learning and the various opportunities there are for OU students to interact with others. Some students feel isolated and without support which can lead to withdrawal. While interaction is predominantly optional, the tools described in this chapter are designed to help students connect with each other and the institution. The OU’s emphasis on success at a modular level can mean that some students focus on content to the detriment of skill development. Study skills workshops delivered through SHL offer the potential to develop general skills in a non-modular way, in bite-sized
chunks with a focus on specific skills that are learned, applied and discussed. Studio broadcast events through SHL present an opportunity for students to gain a window into the OU, meet staff and interact with other students.

The value of SHL, however, is not just in the development of skills, and this chapter has explained the main aim, which is to facilitate academic community. The literature review in the next chapter explains how community is implicated in student engagement and success. It looks at the way this is facilitated in traditional contexts and evaluates whether this translates to distance-learning settings. In exploring the value of community, this chapter covered the challenges for non-traditional students in developing a student identity and discussed some of the differences between the traditional setting, which has hitherto been the main focus of study in this area, and non-traditional settings. Research about virtual communities and communities of practice is also covered, as this relates to the distance-learning aspect of this research.
Chapter 3. Literature review

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explained that, as a result of having a non-traditional student population and a distance-learning delivery model, the ways in which community could be beneficial and best provided for students are not as clear. This has resulted in different approaches from traditional HE providers. Chapter 3 begins with an outline of the research questions in the context of the student engagement narrative and the view that facilitating community is important for many reasons. The concept of student engagement is explained, and the way that success is conceptualised and measured in traditional HE contexts is discussed along with the implications in terms of institutional and individual student success. It is also argued that since distance learning makes many of the face-to-face interventions typically put in place to encourage community difficult, or even impossible to reproduce, when face-to-face interactions are infrequent, other ways to facilitate community are necessary. While many non-traditional students experience community in different ways from traditional, undergraduate, under 25-year-old students studying full-time on campus, a sense of community is important in terms of learning generally, and this is explored with reference to the concept of communities of practice (CoPs). Virtual and online communities are also explored, as are online communities in education as many CoPs operate virtually in distance-learning environments, although there are some distinctions.

The next section provides a broad overview of the literature informing the research questions, and the aspects of it that they seek to explore.

3.2 Research questions in the context of the literature

It has been widely agreed that student engagement (defined in 3.3) is important to the success and wellbeing of the student (Thomas, 2012), and it is also important in terms of retention (Simpson, 2005). A sense of belonging is part of the complex notion of what an “engaged” student may do and feel, and Thomas argues that it is important that institutions put in place measures which enable students to be successful (Thomas, 2012). The importance of belonging (defined in 3.4) is reflected in the fact that it is included in some satisfaction scales, such as the National Student Survey (NSS), that impact on university ranking in the UK. Recognition of the links between a sense of belonging, student engagement and student success is just one of the many reasons that institutions attempt to engage students in various ways, such as by involving students as partners (Trowler, 2010). Many of the interventions identified as helpful in increasing engagement (those for example in the What Works initiative, Thomas et al., 2017) have been conceptually and demographically explored in campus-based institutions with full-time student populations and are not neatly transferrable to distance-learning settings because they rely on face-to-face interactions. While not every distance-learning student wants to engage with other students (Owens et al., 2009), a sense of belonging can be beneficial, but it needs to be conceptualised in a different way in
distance-learning settings. With the increase in face-to-face institutions offering distance-learning provision in addition to specialists such as the OU, there is more value than ever before in exploring how belonging and community can be embedded, nurtured and facilitated in a distance-learning learning environment.

Distance-learning settings are also a useful context in which to explore these ideas because, in removing the physical aspects that often accompany community, distance environments offer the potential to decouple the social aspects of learning from the content of learning, allowing the value of community and belonging to be considered independently of place. Understanding community in both distance and face-to-face settings will enable HE providers to shape future communities more effectively, which is important in an academic context that increasingly uses global networks and virtual communication.

This research considers the value of attending SHL events in the context of a distance-learning student’s experience. While SHL events are specific to the OU, the notion of community and the impact it has on the distance-learning student’s experience has applications beyond the research setting itself. Community and sense of belonging are important to student engagement and success, but they have not been fully explored in distance-learning settings, particularly in terms of extra-curricular initiatives. The notion of student identity is important to this research and the extent to which part-time, mature learners experience student identity is considered as distinct from the prominent identity that is common with typical young, full-time and campus-based undergraduates (Thomas, 2015; Baxter & Britton, 2001).

While many academics researching student engagement, such as Kuh (2009a) and Thomas, (2012), agree that HE institutions should be responsible for facilitating community and a sense of belonging, it is also agreed that community does not just emerge from a collective of individuals sharing a similar experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991). There appears to be little understanding of how community is established in educational settings when students do not interact face-to-face. Despite some research on online learners and community, particularly the work of Rovai (2005, 2002a), the focus tends to be on aspects that emerge from established forms of communication, such as social interactions, collaborative working, or interaction on forums, in addition to the relationship between reported engagement and cognitive development. There has been little research about how an institution can create a space and place for students to develop some of the aspects associated with community, such as trust, friendship and shared goals (Rovai, 2002a). The notion of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is a useful and popular framework (Baxter, 2019) in understanding some of the qualities of spaces in which students can learn effectively, and in particular developing an understanding of the ways that communities develop from a collective of individuals. This is further explored in section 3.5.

The way the issues highlighted above and throughout this literature survey are evident during SHL events and the subjective experience of attending events, are explored through this study’s research questions (RQ).
RQ1 focuses on the value of SHL in terms of benefit to the student. This links to the research about student experience and it facilitates a dialogue about how community and a sense of belonging impact on the learning experience. Unlike previous research in this area that looks at a relationship between engaged or successful students and those that claim they feel connected (for example, Rovai, 2005, 2002a), RQ1 focuses specifically on the subjective nature of the value of community to students.

RQ2 focuses on a comparison between SHL events and other parts of the student experience. While previous research has focused on community in terms of collaborative or learning activities (Thomas et al., 2017), this question focuses on distance-learning students’ sense of belonging in the various academic settings they find themselves in and considers the value of this.

RQ3 builds on the notion of student identity, which has been identified as important to student success in face-to-face, campus-based contexts (Kasworm, 2010) but is also identified as less of a priority in part-time (Thomas, 2015; Chapman 2013) and distance-learning (Butcher, 2015) contexts.

RQ4 explores whether there is a relationship between participation at SHL events and students’ sense of belonging, which links with ideas about shared activities and values that are part of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

3.3 Student engagement

As indicated above, community and sense of belonging were borne out of the student engagement narrative, where belonging was an important measure of engagement, and more recently has been a measure of student satisfaction (Thomas, 2012; Trowler, 2010). Since its early beginnings as a recognised contributor to student success, the concept of student engagement has developed substantially, involving contested definitions (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015), numerous different models (Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010) and, more recently, case studies that demonstrate effective interventions and recommendations from a range of face-to-face, campus-based institutions (Thomas et al., 2017).

The concept of student engagement originated in the US and Australasia, and was a fundamental part of the Australian National Student Surveys that preceded the UK’s NSS. Student engagement was an area of subjective (and objective) measurement in HE that grew in popularity, and it preceded student satisfaction as one of many measures of institutional success (Trowler, 2010). While it is closely linked with retention and attainment, the concept of student engagement, and alongside it, student satisfaction, is concerned with belonging and community and the positive effect that this has on students (Thomas, 2012).

The student engagement arena highlights some important factors in the relationship between students and their institutions, such as power dynamics, physical interactions, the demographic of the student population, and nature of interaction, be it face-to-face or virtual, in real-time or asynchronously (Trowler, 2010). While many of these factors are beyond the
scope of this research, the notion of a physical space and the timeliness of interactions in creating a sense of community and belonging have been recognised for some time (Harrison & Dourish, 1996). Other issues such as the power dynamics between teacher and learner, and the often heterogeneous group of students at many face-to-face, campus-based universities have distinct relevance in distance-learning settings, and these issues are addressed in more detail in section 3.4.5. The other issue that is highlighted is the focus on behaviour as a measure.

3.3.1 Defining student engagement

The term student engagement was initially coined by policy-makers (Trowler, 2010), and despite previous considerable debate about the definition of the term, some components are widely agreed, with three dimensions of engagement: behavioural, emotional and cognitive that are distinct and operate on a continuum with a positive and negative pole (Trowler, 2010). It will be argued in this thesis that behavioural aspects of engagement should be more broadly conceived than the measures typically associated with student success (for example attendance) and that behaviours such as interactions with others can link to emotions such as a sense of belonging which can then be linked with more effective cognitive engagement with learning. The notion of distinct dimension of engagement is therefore contested and it is argued that there is a relationship between them.

While engagement has been described in largely positive terms, in some cases where an antithesis is considered, it is contrasted with alienation (Mann, 2001). Krause (2005) proposes ideas such as inertia, apathy and disillusionment as opposites to engagement. Krause also draws on the other meaning of engagement, i.e. as an appointment or meeting, discussing the idea that, as an engagement takes place in a given setting at a particular time, the term student engagement may also reflect the foreign or uninviting nature of a university for a new student (Krause, 2005).

In this thesis, the definition provided by Trowler (2010) is used, as it has wide currency in the HE sector:

“[Student engagement is] … the interaction between the time, effort and other resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance learning outcomes and the development of students and the performance and reputation of the institution”

(Trowler, 2010, p. 3)

Based on this definition, there is a mutually beneficial interaction, with behavioural, emotional and physical components, between the student and institution. However, when the key measures which institutions use for student engagement are considered, it becomes apparent that different agendas are involved. For the student, the benefits of engagement relate to performance, with a correlation having been identified between higher attainment and engaged students (Thomas, 2012). For the institution, the benefits are university ranking
and more satisfied students, which in turn lead to fewer complaints and, more importantly, more students persisting in their studies (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2007; Pascrella & Terenzini, 2005; Pace, 1995; Goodsell, Maher & Tinto, 1992). As a result, engagement is not only seen as positive, but is also linked to success, albeit in mainstream terms, such as the completion of a degree, or attainment of high grades. Zepke (2014) argues that in addition to generic ideas about student success that exclude the learning context, and the emphasis on pedagogy at the expense of curriculum, student engagement may have established such a high profile because it “aligns with and supports a neoliberal ideology that has an instrumental view of knowledge and emphasises performativity and accountability” (Zepke, 2014, p697). The “Zepke thesis” as Paul Trowler terms it, has been criticised because it focuses on particular areas of engagement at the expense of others (Trowler, 2015). Nonetheless, ideals about student success and ideas about what is considered ‘good’ do tend to be based on grades and completion.

The notion of teaching excellence is also measured in these terms (Gunn, 2018), rather than using other measures of success, such as learner attainment and persistence. For part-time students who may pause their studies or aspire to gain a certificate and not a degree, the implications of these ways of using student engagement as a measure are that students who may be successful in their own terms are not categorised as successful in the sectors expectations that HE should result in completion and attainment.

3.3.2 Models of student engagement

In the pursuit to identify ‘how’ to engage students and ‘who’ has engaged, there has been an emphasis on establishing models and typologies of engagement (for example, Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Coates, 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2005). More recently, and as a result of identifying some of the issues implicated in student success, the What Works report, *Supporting Student Success: Strategies for Institutional Change* (Thomas et al., 2017) presented case studies in which the focus has shifted to behavioural aspects of engagement, such as participating in aspects of governance and extra-curricular activities, which were conceptualised as high-impact factors (Kuh, 1995). Most research in this area has focused on traditional or normative groups of students: young adults studying full-time and living on campus (Trowler, 2010; Harper & Quaye, 2009). The established models of student engagement rely on face-to-face campus-based settings, and therefore little can be translated to the mature, part-time and distance-learning context.

3.3.3 Measuring student engagement

Most measurements of student engagement focus on tangible and categorical measures, such as a student attendance, on-time task completion, and measures of attainment (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). While these aspects continue to remain fundamental measures, it has been identified that there is something more to engagement than this: the phenomenological
relationship that a student has with their learning (Trowler, 2010). When looked at from these perspectives, engagement can be effective, a measurement of performance against agreed markers, or it can be authentic, and this may not be captured in the measurements that have been agreed as being important.

Coates (2005) and Kuh (2009), who are also involved with the development and evaluation of the National Student Surveys in Australia (Kahu, 2013), separately argued that the positive relationship between learning success and student engagement has implications for the institution in terms of quality and educational reputation. Kuh (2009) was also the first to argue that there should be an onus on the institution to facilitate student engagement and since then, it has been widely agreed that this should be the case (Thomas, 2012). While students can, to a certain extent, create and facilitate community among themselves in social terms, the sense of belonging to an institution requires some opportunity for students to interact with that institution. Therefore, it is important that there are activities and structures that allow students to participate (Thomas et al., 2017). It should be borne in mind that despite the various proposed models or interventions for enhancing engagement, much depends on the institution and its specific student population (Trowler, 2010); it is unlikely that there is a ‘one size fits all’ solution.

Changes to both HE regulation and the metrics by which UK Universities are ranked have impacted the way that HEIs in the UK engage with ideas about success and, therefore, student satisfaction (Gunn, 2018). Because of their influence on university rankings, the NSS and newer metrics in the UK have become implicated with quality assurance.

The NSS, launched in the UK in 2005, is a government-led initiative that uses standardised measures to capture levels of student satisfaction regarding their institution. The NSS was initially entirely based on final-year student feedback (in 2020, they are piloting feedback from all students). There are seven key areas in which satisfaction is measured, and institutions receive an overall satisfaction rating which can be published only if over 50% of eligible students respond. The NSS is important to HEIs because their ranking can play a part in student choice of institution and select NSS metrics are used in other measures. In an increasingly competitive market where students are consumers and have choice over which institution they enrol with, high ranking in the university scales is seen as an important factor in securing as many students as possible (Gunn, 2018).

In the NSS questionnaire, students are asked about satisfaction in the quality of teaching and resources, assessment, organisational management and academic support. They are also asked about the learning community, specifically whether they feel part of a community of staff and students, and whether they have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of their course (NSS questionnaire, 2019). The OU scores lower than other institutions on this measure, with 56% of students agreeing with this statement, which is 12 points below the sector average of 68% (NSS, 2020). The OU seeks to improve this score which is understood to be lower because there is a general perception that community is less achievable in distance-learning (OU Focus group research, 2020). While there are
possibilities for community at the OU, many students are not aware of these, and visibility of
community may impact on the NSS score. Another, related question in the NSS is about
working with others: 60% of OU students felt that they “have had the right opportunities to
work with other students as part of [their] course”, two points higher than in 2019 but 23
points lower than the sector as a whole.

These issues demonstrate the very different nature of part-time and mature students and the
problems with standardised views of students as a homogenous group.

**3.3.4 Implications of student engagement metrics in open and distance-
learning contexts**

The elements relating to learning communities that are measured in student satisfaction in the
NSS, are of importance because the way that these ideas translate to an online and distance-
learning environment can be problematic, and it is important to consider student success in
context. Retention and progression, when measured by enrolment on to further courses, for
instance, do not account for those students who may have paused their studies to deal with
changing circumstances, or who are taking a short break before resuming their studies, as is
the case for many part-time, mature students (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015; Baxter, 2001).

A related issue is the way that success is measured in traditional and non-traditional contexts
(Simpson, 2006), particularly in part-time settings where students may take substantially
longer to complete a qualification (Butcher, 2015). Thomas discusses the success measure
related to completion, which is defined by the National Audit Office, 2007 as: students
complete a qualification with less than one year’s break between start and completion
(Thomas, 2015). This definition makes it easy to understand why providers of flexible
education may achieve lower scores, and therefore lower measures of student success. These
key areas of student success, the measurement metrics that create external drivers, and the
concept of success to an individual student, may not always relate to attainment or obtaining
a degree in three years. For this reason, comparing typical and atypical HE institutions in
terms of measures of student engagement and community is problematic.

Belonging and community have been linked more generally with greater success and
satisfaction, and these links are typically seen in the student engagement field in addition to
the NSS. While ratings such as the NSS place pressure on HEIs to deliver on student
satisfaction and success, the relationship between retention, progression and satisfied students
has led institutions to focus on how they can facilitate these aspects to retain their students.
However, while theory has been developed in terms of models of engagement and metrics of
success (Trowler, 2010), many aspects relate to face-to-face, campus-based university
contexts. The challenge is different and, it could be argued, is even more important in
distance-learning environments.
The subjective element of engagement, which is much more difficult to measure than grades or behaviours, is also more challenging for a university to facilitate, although it has been argued that this is important to consider (Zepke, 2015). The relationship that a student has with their learning, the concept of belonging and community, and the broad area of emotional connection has been identified as an area worthy of investigation (Kahu, 2014; Kuh, 2009a). However, not much has emerged in terms of how this can be initiated, only that particular interventions (very often face-to-face) appear to be associated with a sense of belonging and community (Brown, 2001). In fact, it has been argued that while some aspects of what might be categorised as community are naturally emergent in traditional HE settings, one cannot assume that a group of students interacting in a given time and place are part of a community (Coates & McCormick, 2014). It is important to develop an understanding of community and how it takes shape in university settings.

3.4 Community in Higher Education environments

A sense of belonging has been identified as important in many contexts, not just in education. Maslow’s model of the hierarchy of needs (Maslow & Lewis, 1987), for example, places love and belonging as necessary before self-esteem and self-actualization, demonstrating how fundamental belonging is in terms of human needs (1987), and Glasser (1986) argued that belonging is one of five essential genetic needs for humans. Social constructivism emphasises that individuals cannot exist in a social vacuum (Gergen, 1999), and it is therefore important to consider the dynamic and context-bound society that is a backdrop to every situation.

A sense of belonging is intimately connected with community, and McMillan (1986) defines the psychological sense of community as:

“...a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that member’s needs will be met through their commitment to be together.”

(p. 9)

While this definition adds to the notion that there is a subjective feeling associated with community, it is not a helpful definition in terms of establishing whether a community exists.

3.4.1 Operationalising community

Community can include both the essence of something shared and some aspect of physical interaction, for example a body of people or things viewed collectively, or a body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity. The term community is not commonly defined or featured in discussions about belonging in the context of HE, other than in the context of learning communities, however there are notions
of a sense of community (e.g. Rovai, 2002) which is distinct from the notion of community as an object to which there may be a sense of belonging to. Kogan explained that as long ago as 1955 there were already 94 definitions of community and he argued: “If its use has always been loose, it has become so promiscuous as to deprive it of meaning” (Kogan, 2000, p. 209). Nonetheless, when discussing students and belonging, the notion of a group is important. While it would be feasible to define the parameters of an academic community as students who study at a specific institution, these parameters are not always valid or useful in an increasingly global and interconnected world. Community and belonging can be helpful to the student and, as we have seen, student identity which is intertwined with community can be more challenging when other identities are more easily performed, as is often the case for part-time and mature learners (Thomas, 2018; Kahu Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2015). Despite this, as Thomas argues (2012), there are many benefits in having engaged students who feel a sense of belonging.

The notion of community in more general terms can add to the discussion about belonging in an academic context. David Macmillan developed a theory, sense of community, in which he describes four distinguishing features of community. Macmillan describes sense of community as a:

“...spirit of belonging together, a feeling that there is an authority structure that can be trusted, an awareness that trade, and mutual benefit come from being together, and a spirit that comes from shared experiences that are preserved as art”

(McMillan, 1996, p315, italics in original)

As in Wenger’s work (2000), the issue of trade or intention is something that is important in McMillan’s (1996) ideas about community, but McMillan’s ideas regarding trust add another dimension. McMillan (1996) considers issues of belonging in terms of ‘them’ and ‘us’, concepts that are aligned with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) in which individuals form alliances with a group and value the group that they are in instead of the ‘out group’ of which they are not part. It may be that engaging with others could be considered ‘in-group’ behaviour, which in HE may facilitate developing an identity as a student.

McMillan (1996) considers the way in which groups generally establish boundaries in terms of trust, and the interplay between individual interactions and responses from the group. One of his substantial developments from the original theory is the role of friendship, that he argues becomes the spark of the spirit of community:

“Each of us needs connections to others so that we have a setting and an audience to express unique aspects of our personality. We need a setting where we can see ourselves mirrored in the eyes and responses of others.”

(McMillan, 1996, pp. 315-316)

An academic institution can be conceptualised in physical terms, and students can feel a sense of belonging to that community by participating in activities at the institution, but academic community does not always require physical parameters, and is based on collectively constructed practices and rules of engagement (Thomas, 2012). Despite the
difficulties of defining community alluded to above, a clear idea of community is required for this research. Most useful for this context is the following definition:

“… groups of people whose members share values and a way of life, identify with the group and its practices and acknowledge each other as members.”

(Mason, 2000, p. 4)

Mason (2000) also argues that in cases where there are political undercurrents based on power relationships, a moralised concept of community, based on restrictions is created.

Incorporating many of these ideas, community is defined in this thesis as a connected group of people who share the same purpose, have mutual respect and are subject to issues of power and hierarchy evident in an organized group of individuals.

While the term community has been loosely used as a framework from which to explore the student experience, academic and social engagement, and ultimately student support, it is more commonly used in the context of CoPs, a concept developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). A CoP is created through a communal repertoire of agreed ways of being that instil a sense of faith that the group’s needs can be met by the group coming together. See section 3.5.

### 3.4.2 Community and pedagogy

The notion that community matters is evidenced in education, in particular regarding interaction. Dewey argued as long ago as 1916 that internal interaction is a defining component of the educational process (Dewey, 1966). Proponents of sociocultural approaches to learning, such as Vygotsky (1978), argue that individuals exist in a social context, and the interplay between a person’s actions and reactions from others matters in terms of creating a space that is conducive for effective learning. This idea places emphasis on the physical nature of many HE settings and is based on an assumption that students require participation in dialogue to learn. Wenger (2000) also emphasises the importance of community to facilitate learning together and collaborative discussions, and this is discussed in detail in terms of CoPs in (3.5.1).

### 3.4.3 Community and belonging

It has been demonstrated that student engagement and levels of student satisfaction are greater if students feel a sense of belonging to academic community (Thomas, 2012, Trowler, 2010). Belonging and sense of community are seen as related to progression and attainment (Thomas 2012) and therefore they have implications financially for both students and institutions (Simpson, 2004).
Tinto’s (1975) influential work about the importance of community in HE, on which much of the student engagement and community work has been built, argued that HE providers have a responsibility in enabling students to be successful:

“Access without support is not opportunity. That institutions do not intentionally exclude students from college does not mean that they are including them as fully valued members of the institution and providing them with support that enables them to translate access into success. Too often our conversations about access ignore the fact that without support many students, especially those who are poor or academically underprepared, are unlikely to succeed.”

(Engstrom & Tinto, 2008, p50)

This requires education providers to facilitate or scaffold a sense of belonging through a community.

“At the heart of successful retention and success is a strong sense of belonging in HE for all students. This is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in … our definition of “belonging” is closely aligned with the concept of student engagement, encompassing both academic and social….”

(Thomas 2012, p. 6)

Thomas, (2012), uses the definition of belonging as;

“…a students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by teachers and peers, and feeling that they are an important part of the life and activity of the classroom.”

(Goodenow, 1993, p. 80)

This definition is commonly used, however in this research there is a subtle shift due to the nature of the ‘classroom’ and a definition for belonging is: A students sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged, feeling they are an important part of the life and activity of the learning environment. This emphasises the difference of learning environment but also recognising that support comes from other areas of the organisation in addition to teachers and peers.

Belonging is attached to community, and in the context of HE this is often associated with student engagement. The What Works report specifies various factors as barriers to engagement, including, for campus-based learners: living at home, combining study with employment, or entering HE later in life (Thomas, 2012). Developing bonds at university is conceptualised in terms of activities that are typical of campus-based students, and for those who are not able to participate in clubs, societies, student unions and the day-to-day events associated with shared living arrangements, it may be challenging to belong.

Belonging requires some sort of interaction, for example a welcome or sense of encouragement from educators, the institution, or even other students, and a consequential feeling of acceptance by the student. While the institution clearly has a role to play in this, the extent to which individuals feel a sense of belonging to groups, and the function of belonging vary by person, based on individual traits, attributes or values (Krause, 2005). In addition,
one of the consequences of institutions facilitating community is that the community is influenced, if not bound, by the rules and practices of the institution. It has been identified that the way that virtual communities originate can impact on the moderation, rules and practices of the group (Hercheui, 2011). Student’s behaviour is understandably shaped by audience. They are more likely to comply with certain rules in certain situations.

Thomas (2015) argues that the notion of belonging is not straightforward and tends to be most problematic to those who feel that they do not belong in the first place. In this regard, she quotes Probyn (1996): “If you have to think about belonging, perhaps you are already outside” (p. 8, cited in Thomas, 2015). The students who may not “belong” may be atypical students, or those from different cultural backgrounds from those of the homogenous student population in which they should feel this sense of belonging. Butcher (2015) established that this is common for many mature and part-time students, which would include those from the OU, who feel, as he suggests in the title of his paper, are “shoehorned and sidelined” into typical models of HE. Even if a person can be considered to ‘belong’ to a certain community, the sense in which they are a valid member of that group may be undermined by a lack of confidence or a sense of inadequacy, which focuses us once again on the idea of student identity. As Wenger argues, “because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity” (Wenger, 2021, p. 215).

3.4.4 Community, belonging and identity

Community and belonging are linked to identity, particularly in terms of developing a student identity. As presented above, Tinto’s (1975) ideas were influential in making this link, but they have been criticised because they imply homogenous and typical cohorts of students, and are specific to US HEIs (Thomas, 2012). In the context of a ‘traditional’ student population, student identities are established early in the student journey and are commonly based on shared practices, values, physical and social interactions. This has led to an emphasis on establishing a sense of belonging within the induction process and as part of student support.

It has been argued that it is important to have some sense of identity as a student when you are studying, certainly in the case of campus-based young students (Bowman & Felix, 2017). However, identities are complex. It has been argued that identities are multiple and are not fixed (Jenkins, 2014), and are ‘performed’ as an interaction, shaped by the environment and the audience (Goffman, 1978), and this is important in the context of HE because for many students, the formation of a student identity (in addition to other identities) supports the behaviours associated with being a student, such as attending lectures and learning. For part-time learners, their identity as a student may not be as prominent as it is for full-time students who spend most of their time engaged in student-related activities and behaviours (Thomas, 2015).

Identity as a student is important to this discussion because of the link to emotional engagement. The argument is that identifying as a student is a precursor to belonging to a
Identity is further complicated in online spaces where identities are performed through behaviour, typically Computer mediated communication (CMC). Hine (2003) highlights the variation in the importance given to online identities, citing Poster, (1995, in Hine, 2003) who argued that identity play may be used in online spaces to try new identities, or it could be a threat to the notion of a unified self – an idea that is contested by many (Wynn & Katz, 1997, cited in Hine, 2003). In this sense online identities can either be viewed as multiple, fragmented, playful, or on the other hand stable and sustained (Hine, 2003).

For student identity to provide resilience and motivation, it is argued that it is important to develop positive aspects such as authenticity, self-acceptance and the acceptance of others (Ramsey & Brown, 2018). This enables students not only to negotiate who they are but also their place in academia. An issue with distance-learning is that interaction is predominantly in written forms, so students are unable to pick up visual cues. This limited form of communication has been noted to present challenges to the development of a student identity (Hughes, 2007).

Another challenge to identity formation is imposter syndrome, when students question their validity in a learning environment (Ramsey & Brown, 2018), and this is particularly the case with mature students (Chapman, 2013). Imposter syndrome is described as believing that one is inferior to one’s peers, and that one has fooled others and will eventually be found out (Ramsey & Brown, 2018). Ramsey and Brown (2018) suggest ways to overcome imposter syndrome through mentoring which results in students feeling less alone, and they also suggest that central resources such as academic libraries are a key source of support. While this may work at a campus-based university, it can readily be seen that relying on the library is unlikely to have the same impact in distance-learning settings, particularly in a case such as the OU’s where many students may feel that they are marginalised or inadequate simply because they are not in contact with the rest of the student population and are therefore not easily able to benchmark their performance against their peers. In addition, for mature, part-time or otherwise non-traditional students, combining an identity as a student with other identities such as being a parent or employee may not take priority if time and resource are limited.

### 3.4.5 Community and power

Issues of power and the choice of aligning oneself with the values of a group are inherent in HE where it can be argued that, as suppliers of a service to fee-paying students, HEIs can never truly offer an equal power balance even when they involve students as partners (Thomas, 2012). Despite this, as Thomas points out, there are several ways students can...
interact with their institution, including student-initiated activities such as clubs and societies that operate within the university but without their involvement. There may also be opportunities for collaboration and feedback, and some opportunities for co-creation.

3.4.6 Community and sense of belonging in open and distance learning

In contrast with the community environment described by McMillan (1996), isolation can be experienced by students, and consistently more commonly by distance-learners than on-campus students (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014; Kwon et al., 2010). Feelings of isolation are exacerbated in distance-learning contexts because students cannot easily communicate with others in person, and it is difficult to share or compare progress (Owens et al., 2009). For OU students, this is compounded by the duration to complete a part-time qualification (it can take seven years to obtain a part-time degree) (Butcher, 2015). Since many OU students are balancing study with other commitments, they often focus predominantly on goals and assessment (Owens et al., 2009). This on-task focus may mean they neglect activities which are designed to develop key academic skills such as academic writing or critical thinking. It is unsurprising that part-time mature distance learning students tend to be goal-focused, seeking achievement of their qualification rather than the social interaction commonly valued by younger, full-time learners (Owens et al., 2009).

Colleagues at the OU carried out research on the relationship between student satisfaction and academic retention and found that there was no correlation (Nguyen Rienties, Toetenel, Ferguson & Whitelock, 2017; Rienties & Toetenel, 2016). Rienties and Toetenel argue that their research demonstrates that students are not always the best judges of their learning experiences or what makes them successful, and they claim that successful learning is not always a positive experience (Rienties & Toetenel, 2016).

Irrespective of the reasons for isolation or working alone, it is acknowledged that some students actively seek out others to assist in their learning while others do not (Lund Dean & Jolly, 2012). It is possible (unless there is a requirement to participate in groupwork) to achieve high grades and complete an OU qualification without interacting with a single individual, and many students choose distance-learning options because they want to study alone. The same logic would apply at a face-to-face, campus-based university, although instances may be less common and relate to personal preferences as opposed to time constraints.

A key distinction between distance-learning organizations like the OU and traditional HEIs is that the student voice can be more challenging to capture when there are limited face-to-face opportunities to do so. Furthermore, students may also feel disconnected from other students, particularly if they do not engage in optional communal activities, such as tutorials, forums etc. While the OU has introduced ways to facilitate and encourage student feedback, when asked on student surveys such as the NSS about student voice and student community, many OU students do not feel heard or experience a sense of belonging, as seen in 3.3.3.
Initially, this research considered how to compensate for the lack of organic opportunities to engage in the community behaviour available at campus-based universities, such as sharing experiences outside the lecture theatre, having a coffee in the canteen or a drink in the students’ union, and sharing experiences with others on campus. However, even before COVID-19, it was becoming increasingly apparent that open access and distance-learning offers potential for HE that may not otherwise be possible (Anderson & Garrison, 1998), as well as increasing the reach of traditional, campus-based universities. Blended learning has also become more widespread as technology offers new options and more flexibility (Dziuban, Graham, Moskal, Norberg & Sicilia, 2018). This shift to recognizing different experiences of space and place in the learning environment is reflected in the research, and researchers in student engagement who previously focused on face-to-face settings have broadened their research to consider aspects such as time and space barriers in distance-learning environments (Kahu et al., 2014). In addition, technology has created potential for diverse and widespread online communities as well as the ability to instantly share and access information (Rheingold, 1993).

Since the 2020 COVID-19 restrictions, this shift has become even more pressing with many HEIs forced to deliver what some have called emergency remote teaching (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020), making community and sense of belonging from a distance of even wider relevance. The COVID pandemic impacted not only on modes of delivery of education but also on access to virtual technologies or devices, and this was an issue when devices were limited, and priorities were changed (for example when children were required to do classwork at home).

Definitions of digital literacy “now range from simply being technology fluent to the ability to apply information literacy skills (e.g., locating, extracting organizing, managing, presenting and evaluating information) in digital environments to broader, more complex conceptual frameworks that encompass a wide variety of skills, understandings, norms and practices” (Bulger, Mayer, & Metzger, 2014, p356). Digital literacy became of increasing importance during the 2020 pandemic since the internet was one of the only ways to access information, services and connections with others. Navigating, evaluating information and developing new ways of behaving in social and professional contexts were necessary challenges that have had a long-lasting impact on both learning and our personal lives.

Some universities make a distinction between their face-to-face and distance offerings, with distance learning sometimes positioned as inferior in terms of achievement, attitude and retention, particularly when there are asynchronous aspects (Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, Wozney, Wallet, Fiset & Huang, 2004) However, distance learning can be seen as an alternative that has a lot of strengths, and the flexibility and inclusivity can provide opportunities that may not be possible in traditional contexts for some students (Butcher, 2015), and understanding how to create community and a sense of belonging within this new context is ever-more important.

For all the reasons above, the focus of the research shifted from a deficit-focused approach to focusing on the more positive outcomes of facilitating community.
3.5 Lessons from specific community types

Building on the definitions and discussion of community, it follows that despite traditional universities’ ability to make available spaces for interaction, for a community to exist other elements are required. There are lessons to be learned from specific, well-researched community structures, in particular CoPs.

3.5.1 Communities of practice

The concept of Communities of practice is commonly used when considering group learning, and as a theory is useful in considering how community and sense of belonging is established and developed in this research setting. The most well-known context in which community is used in education is Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of CoPs:

“…a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangible and overlapping communities of practice is an intrinsic condition of the existence of knowledge.”

(Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98)

Wenger developed the idea of CoPs further, later defining them as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2000 p. 1).

Wenger points out that not all communities are CoPs, and that what distinguishes a community from a CoP is intentionality – the reason for coming together and the outcome of the members’ interactions (Wenger, 2000). In establishing a CoP, Wenger argues that three characteristics are essential: the domain, or area of interest; the community which involves joint activities that promote sharing information and learning together; and practice, which is a shared repertoire of resources. In addition to these characteristics, Wenger (2000) proposed that there were three modes of belonging to social learning systems: Engagement (shared activities); imagination (constructing a representation of the community); and alignment (activities are aligned with processes and values of the group).

The concept of CoPs establishes a focus distinct from the organization or group to which the participants belong, that is the process of learning and the way in which a group facilitates learning through its members’ own experiences. In this context, features of CoPs have been widely used to help understand the student experience (Masika and Jones, 2016; Lai, Pratt, Anderson & Stigter, 2006). The features facilitating successful CoPs highlight aspects for scaffolding communities successfully in the wider learning environment.

While CoPs can emerge from constructed or organised groups of individuals, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue they cannot be established or formed as such by an organization. While an organization could establish a group, that group would then collectively develop (or not) into a CoP, which may also be described as dynamic, evolving over time and seeing members come and go.
One of the limitations raised by Lave and Wenger (1991) is the qualities that make the community an ideal structure for learning in the first place. These relate to power, trust and predispositions (Roberts, 2006). Roberts (2006) offers a critical account of CoPs, and writes that power, or the ability to achieve something, depends on various hierarchies that are intrinsic in any group where there are differences. These differences may relate to knowledge or experience, but also to personality, degree of involvement and authority within a group. On the other hand, Roberts (2006) also suggests that CoPs can provide a neutral space, free from the powers inherent in an organization, and offering a space for creativity and experimentation. Trust is argued as important in the transfer of information, with group members more likely to share experiences in a space where they feel secure and in which a mutual understanding and respect is coupled with familiarity. The final issue relates to predispositions in which meanings are negotiated in CoPs. Predispositions are preferences that are constructed in a group, and these influence the group’s ability to create knowledge (Roberts, 2006).

The notion of the spirit of community as described by MacMillan (1996) is also evident in the CoP concept, and it can be argued that MacMillan’s notion of community, and Wenger’s CoP approach to social learning focusing on the role of learners within their environment, have much in common.

In summary, the discussion above identifies the following features of successful CoPs:

- a shared concern or passion
- shared intentions
- regular interaction
- joint actions
- trust
- mutual respect
- time
- support, including institutional and technical support
- encouraging creativity and experimentation.

Online CoPs are seen as distinct from co-located or face-to-face CoPs because it is essential that the institution initiates the structures required for the group (Lai et al., 2006). Lai and colleagues also found that online CoPs take more time to develop and because of the reliance on CMC, and since technical support is essential.

### 3.5.2 Virtual and online communities

Online communities have increased in number and have been increasingly studied. Malinen’s (2015) literature review about online communities identified the focus of this research in HE to be on the forms of communication and the quantity of interaction. Teng and Taveras (2004) evaluated the difference between livestreaming techniques and other forms of blended tuition. In their study, however, the livestream was simply a way to broadcast the lecture from the lecture theatre, a technique that is common in HE nowadays and that enables
lectures to be accessed asynchronously. Data-mining techniques were used by He (2013) to identify a correlation between quantity of discussion and students’ final grades, leading him to conclude that engaged students are more successful. Although these studies have considered livestream approaches in terms of blended learning, they have not considered the community aspect that technology can afford, and the studies tend to focus on quantitative aspects of discussion rather than qualitative data.

Insights which may have relevance for education and the experience of virtual and online communities are found in literature outside of the education field. Two important points from anthropology that relate to community in this context are the ideas of comradeship among peers, and the ability to relate to an imagined group. Anderson (2006) conceptualises nations as communities that are fraternal, imagined, and limited. He argues that national community is imagined because, while individuals in remote areas may never meet others, “in their minds lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). Irrespective of whether the group have physical contact with each other, Anderson argues that it is the perception of the group that matters more than what they do together. He argues that it would not be possible or even desirable to have a national identity based on a physical connection with the group because there are many imagined identities (such as religious identities), in which it is rarely the goal for the entire group to be homogenous.

These ideas translate to distance-learning communities which often never meet and are not homogenous; it is helpful to include the notion of an imagined community since SHL events could be seen as a way for students to create a vision of a community through meeting and interacting with a large group of others.

Writing at a similar time to Anderson, in the context of the invention of the worldwide web and its rapid uptake, Rheingold (2000) argues that the categorization of community “in real life” cannot be assumed to translate in the same way in other contexts, such as online:

“It is quite another thing to assume that true human emotions can’t be transmitted through media, or that they don’t count as much as face-to-face emotion. For some who are rarely seen, a mediated life is a better life than the one they would have otherwise.”

(Rheingold, 2000, p. 329)

Virtual communities, which exist in a variety of forms and are often social as opposed to educational in nature, contribute many ideas relevant to the development of community in the context of HE. Rheingold defines virtual communities as:

“…social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”

(Rheingold, 2000, xx)

Rheingold (2000), who writes about his experiences in a range of virtual communities, argues that there are different criteria for different communities, and he uses Kollock and Smith’s (1996) idea about collective goods as evidence of the community’s capital, proposing that the
collective goods are what binds the individual to the community (Rheingold, 2000). This interpretation of collective goods is useful in that it reinforces the purpose of the community, and the value that members derive from it, rather like the domain of interest in the CoP, and forms an explanation for the sense of belonging being investigated in this research. This fits with the definition for community discussed in section 3.4.1 and draws in aspects from the CoP definition.

It is not only collective goods that are important in virtual community settings, but also the way in which information is communicated. In a study about virtual communities, the transfer of knowledge is identified as a motivating factor in participation, and emotional support is another motivator (Hercheui, 2011). This builds on Goodfellow (2005) who argues that virtual communities are characterised by a shared communal repertoire, with shared stories and jokes that demonstrate meaning and that also signify membership.

In similar fashion to the comparisons between face-to-face and distance education, everyday communities that have a physical aspect are often contrasted with virtual communities, a point made both by Harrison and Dourish (1996) in the context of collaborative environments and by Goodfellow (2005) in the context of educational settings. However, this comparison, initially proposed by Rheingold (2000) has lost traction, and Harrison and Dourish (1996) argue that space does not have to be the defining factor in contextualising community, and that the notion of place, “which derives from a tension between connectedness and distinction, rather than a three-dimensional structure” (p. 1), can be a more helpful construct. However, there could be aspects of community that transcend these different spaces; perceiving community in spatial terms may not be helpful, and it may be more useful to focus on what virtual settings add to the narrative.

Virtual communities present unique opportunities for participation and research. While there is benefit in establishing commonalities between virtual and non-virtual communities, it is also important to consider the unique aspects of each of these different settings. Hughes (2007) outlines these aspects in a discussion about identity in virtual settings and argues that identities can be acted out in particular ways; in some instances, individuals choose to portray very different online identities than they present in person (for example choosing to portray a different gender, age or trait). She goes on to say that in the absence of physical and, in some cases, visual cues, textual elements and language take on greater importance. In some online interactions, participants are anonymous, but where that is not the case, there may be a responsibility to behave in a way that is supportive and inclusive, even though it may not be explicitly stated. Finally, the individual has control over when they enter the online space and the extent to which they participate.

3.5.3 Online communities in education

It is increasingly common for universities, faculties and academics to use computer-mediated communication (CMC) platforms, such as social networking sites (SNSs) e.g. Facebook,
Twitter, Instagram, and Blogs in education, and indeed Callaghan and Friibbance (2016) argue that the academic literature indicates that SNSs should be considered by HEIs to supplement existing provision, and to engage and inspire students.

However, while over half the world uses social media, and 346 million people accessed the internet for the first time last year, taking the global percentage of internet users to 60% (Digital Global Statshot, 2020) there is a distinction between the way SNSs are used every day and in education. SNSs are used to mediate interpersonal relationships, identities are performed in different ways depending on the parameters of the group and there may be exchanges of information and opinion, which is why Rosen, Barnett, and Kim (2011) argue it is important to develop skills in mediating a range of personal identities in an online space. If a student has a strong sense of identity as a student it may be easier to interact in spaces as a student, whereas if there is no sense of student identity it could be more uncomfortable to perform those aspects of identity. Similarly, members of staff may want to retain professional relationships with students and may select what they choose to share in the public domain.

In a literature review on the use of social media for academic practice, Guy (2012) stated that while university staff and students regularly accessed SNSs, only a low percentage were doing so for academic purposes. In considering explanations for this, Veletsianos (2016) found that academics tend to avoid informal, non-peer-reviewed spaces or those that do not contribute to career progression, and that they were mistrustful of the open nature of social media and sceptical about the return on investment in terms of time. In addition, students appear to be dubious about the usage of SNSs in education: Manca and Ranieri (2013) found that while students claimed they wanted their HEI to use technology in education, they resisted the use of Facebook in this context. This may be a result of the way in which HEIs have communicated in these spaces. In a review Tess (2013) found that the majority of SNS communication was one-way from the HEI, although they do point out that in some cases SNSs are used more interactively with Q&As for example. Callaghan and Friibbance make an interesting point in their review of the literature, writing that “the distinction between formal and informal learning spaces is rarely made explicit. Rather studies talk about academic teaching space on one hand and social or personal space on the other” (Callaghan & Friibbance, 2016, p.86). So, while HEIs use SNSs, the trend is to convey information and facilitate community in an informal way.

There has been growing interest in how SNSs can enhance the learning experience in formal learning spaces. In a review of literature, Tess found very little evidence of SNSs stitching into formal learning which he claims is a result of integration being a choice made by the lecturer not the institution (Tess, 2013). However, there are individual case studies demonstrating how SNSs can support formal learning and build communities (Clough & Foley, 2019). Hung and Yuen (2010) found that social media improved communication between teachers and learners, however like many others who have considered the value of social media (for example Russo, Watkins & Groundwater-Smith 2009; Mason and Rennie, 2007), these are all considered as supplementary to already existing classroom communities. SNSs are also used in ODL, with the OU using a range of CMC spaces including SNSs and online forums to facilitate community (Baxter, Callaghan & McAvoy, 2018). Specifically,
OU case studies demonstrate that SNSs create informal spaces which can facilitate deep learning through CoPs (Callaghan & Fribbance 2018), and that livestreaming conferences can be used to support academic community (Foley & Fribbance, 2018).

3.6 Scaffolding community from within the organization

The lessons learned from student engagement and examples of community, show that the features which make for community may require organizational intervention if the communities are to succeed. The evolution of a widespread academic community is particularly relevant to HE, where peer-review and scholarship require exchanges of ideas in constructive settings. The development of computer-mediated communication derived from alternative ways to communicate with the development of technology (Riva, 2002) and in a similar way to Kuh’s (2009a) and Thomas’s (2017) arguments that there should be policy measures requiring institutions to scaffold community, Rheingold (2000) argues that it is our responsibility to consider how we want to shape these to support our needs in the future. This research aims to contribute to understanding how this can be done successfully in an ODL context.

3.7 Conclusions

The literature discussed in this chapter reveals important information informing the research undertaken in this study. It also points to some areas where more work is required, and this study is designed to contribute to filling those gaps.

It has been shown that belonging is important in both face-to-face and distance-learning contexts, although it needs to be conceptualised in a different way in distance-learning. It has also been demonstrated that identity is linked to the learning process, although in distance and part-time learning contexts, because of their other roles and responsibilities, learners may not experience a strong sense of identity as a “student”. While it is not essential for all students to feel that they belong, a sense of belonging correlates positively to retention and success. It has been argued that much of the measurement and rules of engagement are bound by institutional context and neoliberal notions of students’ success, resulting in the meaning of these studies being confounded.

While the literature survey in this chapter has shown that there are many studies dealing with student identity, educational CoPs, and a sense of belonging in traditional HE environments, studies which focus on a very diverse group of students in a non-conventional educational delivery environment are limited. Since experiences, solutions and initiatives in face-to-face contexts are not directly transferable to the heterogeneous student demographic at the OU and other ODL environments, insights from the virtual community outside of education can be valuable. Therefore, this research draws on ideas about online and virtual community and combines them with the narrative about belonging and community from the student
engagement area, to investigate what community means to part-time, distance-learning students, what value it has to those who regard it as important, and how it can be successfully facilitated.
Chapter 4. Methodological considerations

4.1 Introduction

This chapter covers the methodology and explains which choices were made and why. It begins with reiterating the research questions and considering their importance in terms of methodology and method. The assumptions underpinning the nature of knowledge and the essence of being are then explored in terms of the implications that these ontological and epistemological ideas had on the direction of research. The frameworks informing the research are then outlined, and the ethnographic theoretical paradigm and interpretative approach considered effective for the study are justified. Grounded theory is then covered and the iterative approach to analysis explained. The validities of the research are then discussed, and questions about the extent to which the research addresses the questions it seeks to answer, and the extent to which it can be generalised to a wider context are addressed.

4.2 Research questions in context of methodology

This research considered the value to students of attending SHL events in the context of other opportunities to engage in community or forms of interaction with others within the institution. It also considered the value of participation in the context of the student experience which relates to a sense of belonging and student identity, all of which are important to student success and satisfaction.

One of the challenges in researching something as abstract as ‘value’ is that it is subjective and may relate to many other factors including belonging and student identity. As explained earlier, belonging can be experienced in different ways by different people (Wenger, 1998), and the phenomenological nature of this makes it difficult to quantify, in individual terms, the extent to which it is experienced and the extent to which it matters. Researching the value of participating in SHL events is further complicated by the researcher’s involvement in the setting, and while this can be advantageous in terms of familiarity, researcher bias must be challenged.

This research is based in a context of impact evaluation. There was potential to evaluate SHL using both qualitative and quantitative measures and a range of sources of data available including volume of participants and the theoretical potential to consider the long-term success in terms of grades and progression for students who had attended. However, it was not possible to measure the causal relationship between attendance, participation and the student experience as many variables could be contributory factors to student success and satisfaction. While it was possible to measure attendance at SHL events in terms of the number of participants and the duration logged on, it was not possible to say anything about how participants experienced the event, or even whether they were engaged in it. In this sense, focusing on understanding the subjective value became more important than ascertaining any relationship between attendance and typical measures of success such as attainment or progression, and therefore qualitative methods were deemed more appropriate.
The notion of attendance warrants attention. Attendance is one of the measures of student engagement, however it is perceived in categorical terms with people either being present or absent. Attendance in online contexts is more nuanced, with the extent to which students engage being varied and subjective. Although one could measure attendance in terms of users, and it can be assumed that those who participate are more engaged than lurkers\(^2\) (Hine, 2003) it is recognised that attendance is not the same experience for everyone.

Each research question was considered methodologically.

RQ1 was about value of the events, and is based on the assumption that there may be value and that attending may have a positive impact on the student. In order to explore this issue, participants were asked about their experiences and were observed as they commented in the chat on positive aspects of the event.

RQ2 focused on SHL events in the context of the student experience, and since chat-based discussions occurred during an event it was necessary to explore the comparison to other elements of the student experience.

RQ3 centred on student identity, and there were assumptions that attendance at an event would facilitate students developing a student identity in addition to other identities.

RQ4 was about belonging and community, and here there was the assumption that there may be a sense of belonging, and that interaction was an important part of the process of feeling part of a community, and so a methodology that was constructivist was required, and methods that involved subjective accounts were important.

The distance-learning context and online nature of the communication at SHL events were other factors that were important in considering how this research was carried out. One of the issues commonly identified as specific to researching online spaces, is that much of the interaction is text-based which offers a one-dimensional way to communicate and therefore may potentially limit its ability to portray aspects of an identity (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014). The nature of text-based interactions between participants, and the extent to which contributions are involved in the live studio discussion, involves some sort of imagined construct between the person interacting and the response they receive or do not receive. This is where interviews supplement the text-based interactions since they provide an insight into the individual’s experience and the potential to make comparisons between what people do and what they say.

4.3 The nature of reality (ontology)

The way that the research population and within that, the participants at SHL events, were viewed in this study is a good place to commence the discussion about ontology. As Heidigger proposed in 1962 (cited in Given, 2008), knowledge is context bound, and as Given (2008) writes “The answer to the question, ‘What is being?’ differs depending on the

\(^2\) Lurkers are people who read, but do not participate in online discussions (Hine, 2003)
frames of meaning within which the question is asked” (p. 2). Ontology raises questions about whether it is possible to have reality that is not interpreted, whether reality can only be individual and therefore it is only possible to discover things in relation to the self, and whether there is such a thing as “truth” (Smith, 2004). This research favours the ontological position of social constructivism.

Social constructivism draws on everyday life, and the interpreted nature in which it is experienced. Broadly based on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of learning, social constructivism is distinct from the other main theory of individual or cognitive constructivism which is based on the work of Piaget (Kalina & Powell, 2009). The emphasis in social constructivism is on constructing models of the world based on experiences, and testing these in other situations in order to predict and make sense of the world (Schwandt, 2000). Language is seen as a tool through which to do this placing emphasis on methods that rely on communication. The researcher’s assumptions about the nature of reality (in terms of the extent to which the world is considered to be socially constructed) will have an impact on the theoretical paradigm as well as the perceived impact that both the researcher and participants have on the research setting (see 4.4).

The way that the research population, and within that the participants at SHL events, were viewed in this study is a good place to commence the discussion about ontology. The overall research population is OU Students, a heterogeneous group whose only observable commonality is that they are studying with the OU in a distance learning environment. The social constructionist approach facilitates the view that realities are individual, and that there may be multiple realities and interpretations. The methodology, (see 4.7) accounted for this in the ethnographic approach which emphasises subjective, individual and context-bound meanings. This was also supported through methods (Chapter 5) that were based on communication and therefore language, both in terms of text-based interactions and reflective accounts generated through interviews, to allow for the individual whilst also looking across the data as social data. A limitation of this approach, as discussed in 8.4.2, is that social constructivism is context bound, and there are therefore limitations in terms of generalisability to non-comparable populations.

Two fundamental assumptions relate to the way the participant population is perceived by the researcher, and the way that community is conceptualised. One of the classic ontological questions is “are individuals alone real, or are collectives independently real?” (Given, 2008, p2). The underlying notion here is the nature/nurture debate, the extent to which individuals are the product of their environment. In terms of community, it was argued in 3.4 that a community is greater than the sum of individuals, and therefore that a group of people create a collective that has shared values and meanings. In the research context, participants were OU students. It was also assumed that there were different ways of ‘being’ a student, and certain types of behaviour would be common and/or appropriate, for example listening when being ‘taught’, not asking questions, or asking questions with the view that those doing the educating were ‘right’. There were also assumptions made in the initial stages of research that related to SHL participants’ motivations; it was assumed that participants at SHL events were
experiencing some sense of community and that this connection with others enabled them to feel connected to an academic community.

Individuals create their own identities, one of which may be a student identity, and the student community is populated with people that have multiple, nuanced, socially different ‘student identities’. The extent to which participants may identify as students may vary and could relate to the many other roles and identities that are assumed by each person in addition to whether they were performing identity online (Hine, 2003). Whereas it has been discussed in chapter 3.4.4 that it is common for an 18-year-old at a traditional university to adopt a student identity based on the majority of student-associated behaviours, OU students, like many part-time or mature students may have other, often more pressing identities (Butcher, 2015; Chapman, 2013; Owens et al., 2009). These could include being a parent, carer, partner, worker or volunteer, or it may be that they could identify with other groupings such as people with disabilities. These other identities could vary in importance over time and in certain circumstances.

Identities can be formed online, as they can be in face-to-face context, but in an online environment, specifically those that rely heavily on text-based chat as the main form of communication, identities are seen as ‘discoursal’; the written text contains something of the person’s identity (Delahanty, 2014). In the research context, this identity performance could relate to an identity of a student or friend, or it may be that the presented identity does not relate to the real identity of the participant.

From this ontological viewpoint, questions arose about issues in distance-learning and the value of community, some of which required assumptions to be made, and others that were developed in the research questions. There are two key points: it is important to have another method in addition to chat to understand the lived experience, and the chatlog presents dialogues that are very specific, attached to an event, at a given time. Furthermore, the content of discussion upon which chatlogs are based does not prompt participants to consider the value of events. The chatlogs are artefacts of text-based discussion at an event, and to explore the experience these could be compared to interview data which are accounts as of the past. As Hine (2003) points out, the experience of participating is not preserved in the same way for everyone but is internalised and interpreted phenomenologically. Interviews provide a way to explore the experience of participation for each individual through retrospective discussion and reflection.

Hine raises important issues about virtual data regarding temporality, which relates to making inferences based on meaning and notions of community that are context specific. She argues that in online environments, participants can make the environment meaningful through textual means (Hine, 2003). Social psychological approaches to understanding computer mediated communication (CMC) focus on what groups achieve (external factors) and how they are structured (in-group processes) (Hine, 2003). Although social cues associated with face-to-face interactions cannot be substituted in online environments (which is the central tenet in the reduced social cues model of CMC), shared meaning can be developed through linguistic devices such as emoticons, in-jokes and shared practices (Goodfellow, 2005).
In addition to the aspects of identity that are presented, the intensity of online interactions differs from face-to-face settings. Online interactions are typically more self-absorbed than other types of communication, (Sproull and Keisler, 1986, 1991, cited in Hine, 2003), and this allows for more direct communication. A consequence of the direct self-absorbed discussions was that communications can be more aggressive. The social cues that could often soften conversations are not present, and it can be difficult to interpret intentions and tone. However, the lack of social cues can also increase the level of equality amongst group members (Hine, 2003), and aspects like levels of confidence, knowledge and diligence can be masked by a persona that is presented. People may not be who they seem.

4.4 The nature of knowledge (epistemology)

In terms of John Dewey’s quest for certainty, there are three basic epistemological questions: ‘what is knowing?’, ‘what is the known?’ and ‘what is knowledge?’ (Given, 2008 p.2). It is considered that empirical enquiry reveals knowledge about the subjective value of experience and the way in which communities are formed, albeit in a specific context. In developing this knowledge, the researcher has an influence on both the focus of the research and the aspects that are revealed since the research questions drive the focus and shape the knowledge presented. In terms of ultimate truth, the ontological position supports the notion that knowledge is socially constructed and that therefore there are no ultimate truths - only limited truths which are bound to the context in which they originate and are performed (Goffman, 1978).

In the context of this research, these positions translate to knowing about whether and how SHL facilitates community; the known focuses on how we conceptualise belonging and the role that this plays in the distance-learning student’s experience and knowledge is seen as the interpreted findings of this research.

Since this research uses a subjective interpretation of text and interviews (which are on some level an individual’s interpretation or construction), the main issue in terms of epistemology related to ensuring there was a solid methodological framework and rationale for making interpretations in the first place. The interpretations needed to be grounded in enough data to provide support for the emergent themes (Charmaz, 2006). This meant that sampling was important, and it was also appropriate to select a variety of events, so that the outcomes were not based on sampling biases such as specific cohorts of participants or particular types of events (Silverman, 2011). One of the issues with generating knowledge from a purposive sample (Given, 2008), is that context can have a huge impact: the students who choose to engage in the chat may not be representative of OU students more generally. The interviews also represent a very individual perspective (Given, 2008) and applying the combination of those views at scale has issues of generalisability because they may only represent students who value connections with others, for example. The population sample was those who choose to participate in SHL events and were also willing to be considered for an interview. This meant that it was only possible to draw tentative conclusions based on those who attended.
In this research context, it was important to ensure not only that what was said in an interview was an appropriate representation of the truth for the individual, but there was an assumption that it is plausible to take an individual’s representation of the truth as valid evidence about that experience. This is discussed in chapter 5, and the knowledge about what happened during events and what was later reported in interviews provided an opportunity to further explore discrepancies between reflections and behaviours.

Given that there is an assumption that there are different representations of the self (or different identities) and that these are expressed through written and verbal language in terms of methods, the epistemological aspect relates to assumptions about words being context bound.

The most important epistemological issue relates to what is known, and in this sense, it matters that meanings are interpreted. The dialogue therefore between participants at SHL events could create a sense of something that may not be intended or even conveyed, for example someone could give generic positive feedback that could be interpreted by an individual as specific validation for what they themselves have said, or someone could consider a lack of direct reply to an introduction as being ignored, when their comment could simply have been missed.

To summarise the key points relating to epistemology, the potential knowledge generated about the key themes in the research questions about value of attending SHL events (RQ1), the student experience (RQ2) student identity (RQ3) and belonging (RQ4) had limitations, and were based on the assumptions that:

- Text based data is context bound and was interpreted as an artefact of a lived experience.
- Interview data was subject to both researcher and participant bias and was retrospective.
- It was possible to generate knowledge about what participation meant for active participants by asking them about it in an interview.
- It was possible to generate knowledge about the value events had and the way they related to sense of belonging by making inferences based on what participants wrote in the chatlog.

### 4.5 Assumptions resulting from ontological and epistemological approaches

As a result of the perceptions of reality and knowledge that result from the assumptions above are:

- Participants’ representations of themselves in the chat may not be a true reflection of who they are, and their contribution may not be a meaningful representation about the value of their experience.
• On the other hand, participants may represent themselves accurately and convey accurate meanings in the chat.
• Representations of the self may or may not be consistent over time.
• There may be evidence of different communities with different functions and benefits and it may be possible for individuals to be members of many communities.
• There may be inconsistencies between what people do and what they say (in this case write in the chat), and this may be based on an unspoken belief that social experiences, traditions, habits, etc. influence us in ways which are not consciously recognised.
• Power may be demonstrated in different ways depending on the setting and who is involved in the discussion. This is particularly relevant to the interview component, where participants may present a certain view of themselves as learners to someone who is employed by the OU and who has roles as an AL and lecturer of SHL.

The way that participants were viewed had an impact on the way this research was carried out. In terms of the chatlogs, online participants were seen as performing identities that may be transient or hypothetical. In terms of the interviews, the discussion focused on identity and there was an assumption that what was said may not wholly represent the individual’s viewpoint.

4.6 Theoretical paradigm: Interpretivism

While a theoretical paradigm by definition is the “basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) it is argued that the interpretations that the qualitative researcher makes in terms of the nature of reality (which relates to ontology), and what is considered to count as knowledge (epistemology), fundamentally shape how the research is carried out (in terms of the methodology) (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). As a result of the assumptions that underlie the selection of qualitative methods, there will always be an element of interpretation within any theoretical paradigm, but the paradigm selected for this research was a particularly important consideration because of the role of the researcher in this research who was immersed in the setting.

This research used a “factual conception”, an idea which focuses on understanding what was happening in a context as opposed to what should be happening (Burgess, Sieminski & Arthur, 2006). The factual conception is important because the researcher held specific ideas about student identity based on an existing body of research. Trowler, (2010) has identified specific attributes and behaviours that are synonymous with being an engaged student, albeit in face-to-face settings. One such finding suggested that students who were successful in terms of attainment and progression attended extra-curricular events, and were more engaged with tuition touchpoints (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2007). Although there was heuristic evidence from the chatlogs used in this research that some conscientious students attend these events, it could also be seen that lots of students who were struggling gained a lot from the experience. It was important to be open to the idea that the gains may not be
comparative, again to avoid making interpretations about what should be going on. The factual conception, and constructivist and interpretative approaches, discussed below, are intrinsic aspects of ethnography as well as being paradigms in their own right.

Two theoretical paradigms, positivism and naturalism, the main and original paradigms associated with quantitative and qualitative research respectively (Burgess et al., 2006), relate directly to this research, namely due to their influence on the development of grounded theory and ethnography. There are aspects of positivism and naturalism that are seen in the situated and constructed nature of the research setting, and they also relate to naturally occurring and researcher-generated data (Silverman, 2011).

Positivism places high value on generating knowledge through observable and defined methods. In contrast, naturalism places emphasis on the idea that the world can only be understood by studying a phenomenon within its context. However, while diametrically opposed, it is generally understood that there is limited use in the extreme version of positivism unless a researcher is carrying out an experiment (Burgess et al., 2006). In terms of this research, context and naturalism are important aspects of understanding an individual in the world around them. Context is also an important aspect of constructivism, the idea that people are situated in a given context and that within that context they actively construct an understanding of and response to the world (Burgess et al., 2006).

While naturalism is relevant to this research, aspects of positivism also apply. Nonetheless, positivism was not seen as appropriate to address the research questions. This research was concerned with understanding the impact of attending events on the student experience, and in that sense the ideal way to measure impact of the events would be to establish some sort of cause and effect relationship, however, the metrics that could be used to do that would not address the research questions in this instance (see 3.3.4).

Student identity has been predominantly researched using talking methods such as interviews or focus groups, which aligns with naturalism. Naturalism places value on studying the social world in its natural state and is a commonly used paradigm in qualitative research (Silverman, 2011), since it is widely agreed that it is impossible to gain an understanding of the lived experience if the context is not included (Burgess et al., 2006). Despite the fundamental difference between these approaches in terms of the extent to which things are investigated in isolation or in context, positivism and naturalism have some things in common: they strive to document phenomena and explain its occurrence, and both approaches have similar perspectives on the role of the researcher in the research process (Burgess et al., 2006). Positivist and naturalist approaches both consider that researchers should be extraneous to the research setting. In the case of this research, the researcher was immersed in the setting and could not be considered extraneous. However, the extent to which true objectivity is possible in view of the elite position of the researcher is questionable (Given, 2008). Considering that both of these stances value objectivity, and accepting that the researcher is a necessary part of the research process, the increase in understanding because of the researcher’s position could indicate that some aspect of interpretation was happening even if that was limited to achieving an objective research design or documenting phenomena.
with great accuracy. In this instance, as a facilitator of the sessions and as a researcher, reflexivity was vital in terms of the collection and interpretation of data.

While having excluded positivism as the basis for this study, the main criticism of positivism and naturalism derives from realism, a perspective which argues that in truly representing the phenomenon, both documentation and explanation are required (Burgess et al., 2006). Although positivism and naturalism accept that the researcher will have an impact in some way on the findings, the impact of the researcher on the setting is seen in negative terms; an inevitable consequence which should ideally be factored out of the explanation. Approaches involving realism focus on establishing findings that are independent of a value stance when researching the social world, not only because the researcher is likely to have some effect on the data, but also since behaviours and their meanings are intrinsically embedded in time and place (Burgess et al., 2006). This approach was beneficial in this research since the researcher was immersed in the setting and was interacting with participants during events, thereby having some impact on what was captured in the chatlogs and experienced and discussed in the interviews.

Paradigms are distinguished based on the way in which knowledge and the nature of being are defined, and this influences the methodological choices that the researcher makes (Burgess et al., 2006). This impacts on the extent to which the researcher can interpret the data as opposed to objectively represent it. If a research design is at the naturalist end of the spectrum, like this one, there will be little if any manipulation of the setting, and this is particularly the case with ethnographic methods (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Broadly however, it is accepted that there is always some element of interpretation within any paradigm (Burgess et al., 2006), but in this study all three orientations to research lead to a particular focus on interpretation: the ontology views participants as students with different needs for community and recognises that there can be discrepancies between what is said and thought; the epistemology values what people say or do as a construct of exploration, even if there are inconsistencies or that feelings may be difficult to access and articulate, and the methodology is based on two sources of data and interpretations are made based on what participants write and what they say.

Whereas the scientific method of experimentation and behaviourism can be seen in the positivist and naturalist paradigms (Burgess et al., 2006), ideas from sociology and philosophy are used to create different approaches to the study and interpretation of the social world. In this research, interpretation is a central part of the research process, from establishing research questions, through selecting appropriate methods or sources of data, to making sense of meanings (Given, 2008).

Interpretivism, which influenced and can be linked to naturalism, is a group of philosophical and sociological ideas incorporating symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and hermeneutics (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Broadly, an interpretative approach involves considering data as interpreted and situational, since:

“…the social world cannot be understood in terms of simple causal relationships or be the subsumption of social events under universal laws. This is because human actions are based
upon, or infused by, social or cultural meanings: that is, by intentions, motives, beliefs, rules, discourses and values.”

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007. p. 7)

Any interpretation of data would, therefore, be based on understanding the context and shared meanings that are collectively generated (Burgess et al., 2006, p. 55).

The view that the world is socially constructed is intrinsic to both ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) and to constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), both of which are used in this research. In addition to the interpretative paradigm, and largely associated with it, a constructivist approach is used to interpret meanings. A constructivist approach embraces the idea that both researching and learning are dynamic, active processes, in which people shape their meanings based on collective understanding in a given time and space (Charmaz, 2006) and challenges the idea of geographical grouping and physical proximity resulting in similar experiences (Rheingold, 1993).

Overall, this study sets out to make interpretations about what participants contribute to the chat during SHL events, and how they claim to experience participation retrospectively in the context of their studies. Understanding these interactions, particularly the text-based interactions (chatlog) requires some understanding of the context in which they originated; the chatlog is an artefact that is produced in a specific moment in time.

So far, positions relating to the generation of knowledge and the nature of participants has been considered, and these underlie the interpretivist theoretical paradigm which places an emphasis on the interpretation by the researcher of meanings that were made in a particular time and space. The following discussion moves forward from these positions to consider the methodological approach.

4.7 Methodological approach: Ethnographic

The complex history of ethnography, which was developed in parallel by anthropologists and sociologists in the United States and Europe, has meant that ethnography does not have a clear, standard, well-defined meaning (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Instead, rather like the observational component that is central to ethnography, it is recognised by what ethnographers do when they are doing research.

The aim of an ethnographer is to:

“…understand social phenomena as objects existing independently of the researcher…. Therefore, they claim that research can provide knowledge of the social world that is superior in validity to that of the people being studied.”

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 10)

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) list the following features as common in ethnographic work:
• Actions and accounts are studied in everyday contexts, not artificial situations constructed by the researcher.
• The researcher is often immersed in the setting, either overtly when they are known to participants, or covertly when they are not.
• A range of data sources are used, and participant observation and informal conversations are common.
• Data collection is unstructured since there is not a fixed research design, and the process is iterative, generated out of the data instead of constructed beforehand.
• The study is in-depth, commonly focusing on one setting and a few cases.
• Data analysis involves interpretation by the researcher, and meanings, functions, and practices are considered in terms of how they may apply in the research setting.

This research includes the typical features of ethnographic research. It considered a specific case, and like many ethnographic studies, sampled within cases (as opposed to across them), considering a very particular cohort or group of people and understanding what makes that group function. Ethnographers do not typically consider the differences between the group that is the focus of research and other groups (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In this case the purpose of research was to find out more about the experiences of a group of people who opt into a scenario, not to understand why those who do not engage are absent. This meant that it was acceptable that the sample consisted entirely of students who had participated in at least one event.

The study was in-depth, since interviews were included as well as multiple perspectives from the chatlogs, and there was one, natural setting which was SHL events in the context of the distance-learning experience. The context included the researcher’s deep awareness of the setting, the chatlogs were artefacts from events, and the researcher did not create artificial situations. More than one source of data was used. Although the interviews had an element of structure, these were informed by unstructured data from the chatlogs. The main reason that ethnography was considered the best approach for this research was because the SHL setting is unique and the space is socially constructed. This aligned with the RQs in terms of studying student attendance and the value for students resulting from these socially constructed spaces.

The iterative approach of continuously sourcing literature as knowledge emerged meant that the most appropriate areas could be explored as they were identified. The iterative approach also lent itself well to researching new experiences and environments. One example was that, during initial stages of this research, the student engagement narrative appeared to have the most relevance to this area in terms of extracurricular activities and student success, but the ways of researching these areas of engagement were relevant to traditional HE contexts and did not apply well to a distance-learning environment. This led to the consideration of other narratives and models such as learning pedagogies from educational research, and data mining from computer mediated contexts.

Ethnographic approaches often involve participant observation, a term used to describe the inclusion of the researcher in the research setting (Given, 2008). It is acknowledged and
embraced that the researcher will have an influence on the setting on the basis that it is not possible to be immersed in an environment without having an impact of some kind on it (Given, 2008). Participant observation can either be covert, when the participants are not aware of the nature of the research or that the researcher is not who they may claim to be, or overt, when participants are aware of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). This research used participant observation since the setting was explored from an internal basis and the researcher was immersed in the setting. The value of this was that the context was known, running jokes and repertoires could be considered more widely than just through the data included, and the value could be linked to the student experience beyond the context of the setting.

Another ethnographic concept, reflexivity, was also central in this study (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Reflexivity is the critical approach to reflective practice which questions how knowledge is constructed and generated (D’cruz, Gillingham & Melendez. 2007). This has relevance to the previous discussions about power and the dual role of the researcher. It was previously noted that it is inevitable that the researcher will shape the focus of the research, and also that the researcher developed SHL. Because the researcher saw the aim of SHL as facilitating community prior to this research and contradictory findings would have negated the success of the initiative, there was potential for the researcher to try to influence the results positively. The emphasis in the research questions was therefore on how community and sense of belonging were facilitated, and what made these events valuable to students in the context of their student experience and in relation to their identity as students.

Behaviours observed in chatlog artefacts and interviews were interpreted in addition to the researcher’s own observations from the field which were used in the thematic network maps. Ethnographic research commonly uses more than one source of information, and one of these can be the reflections of the researcher to make sense of the different ways in which people present themselves. This was particularly important in an online setting because of the limitations to communication for participants, but also because the researcher’s perceptions and role affect the line of inquiry and interpretation of data. Initially, the research context was the student engagement arena, but due to reflection and a growing appreciation of the scope the research was expanded to include other concepts around community and belonging from other contexts. While the student engagement measures focused on attainment, it became evident that value was not related to grades but to community. The content generated through the chatlogs, interviews and observational notes were subject to interpretative evaluation, and this was potentially further compounded by researcher bias, again because the researcher viewed the experience in a positive frame. It was considered important to be reflexive and to identify where researcher bias could influence the generation and interpretation of knowledge (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) (see 4.6.1.).

While online settings have limitations on forms of communication, it has been argued that “despite their virtualness they are no less socially or emotionally ‘real’ than face-to-face interactions” (Heidigger, in Delahunty, Verenkina & Jones, 2014, p. 244), and branches of ethnography specifically deal with these areas through digital ethnography (Varis, 2016) or virtual ethnography (Hine, 2003). Delahunty, Verenkina and Jones (2014) go on to argue
that, in terms of community, pedagogy of learning is not neatly transferrable from face-to-face to distance contexts. Delahunty, Verenikina and Jones (2014) argue that while the interaction between participants in online communities is often based on dialogue in text form, the meaning of the interaction may be seen differently by different participants. There are those who lurk, those who engage in dialogue, and another category of those who contribute monologues (Hine, 2003). The complexity of online participation cannot be viewed in non-virtual terms. For example, “separate voices” or monologues could be considered as individual ruminations that were not necessarily conducive to community building, particularly not in face-to-face contexts, but these are considered useful contributions in online settings (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones (2014).

The next section introduces the theoretical approach which was developed based on the perspectives and approaches discussed in this section. It has been discussed that ontologically, there is the view that there are multiple realities. Epistemologically, knowledge is seen as constructed by individuals and interpretation by researchers can reveal some common facets of people’s experiences. Methodologically, therefore, a qualitative approach fits because experiences are rich and broad and not easily captured quantitively. Within an interpretivist paradigm, the theoretical approach is ethnographic, and the frameworks for exploring new and relatively unexplored experiences can be very particular to the situation.

4.8 Theoretical approach: Grounded theory

The theoretical approach used in this research was based on grounded theory, which provided a way to explore the experience of attending SHL events. The idea of emergent theory was useful in making links between knowledge that was developed from the research with recognizing related findings from the literature, even if they did not cover the new and relatively unresearched phenomenon being investigated. The form of grounded theory underpinning this research is constructivist grounded theory, an approach developed by Charmaz (2006) and which evolved from the original grounded theory proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This was a useful methodological approach because, practically it fitted with the data and research situation, and theoretically it aligned with the emergent, naturalistic, and constructivist environment that was a key part of the SHL setting, as well as aligning with the ontological assumptions previously discussed.

One of the benefits of constructivist grounded theory is that it emphasises social construction, and this mirrors the continuously evolving SHL setting that is developed by participants over time. The idea of social construction was an important aspect in the SHL online space, constructed by the SHL production team and reconstructed in line with the responses from the online audience.

Developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, grounded theory is an iterative approach to developing abstract concepts from qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Grounded theory is a framework that can be applied to both data collection and analysis in qualitative research which is flexible, yet structured. Although Charmaz argues that grounded theory
opposes the positivist stance, it embraces some ideas from quantitative methodologies and incorporates these into a qualitative approach (Charmaz, 2006), for example including tightly defined concepts and structured, logical approaches to data analysis. Charmaz argued that these add rigour to the process, resulting in greater reliability in terms of external validity, the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts, and generalizability, the extent to which the findings can apply to other populations (2006).

The key principles are approaching the research setting with an open mind and developing emergent themes utilising a ‘bottom up’ approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). It was important to explore the notions of value to students in relation to their attendance in this setting from their perspectives, however it was also important to focus on specific areas in data collection and analysis, and this was guided by the prior questions about whether community was developed through attendance. The iterative approach was useful to source relevant literature about student engagement prior to starting data collection and to review this to ensure that the findings built on an established knowledge base. It can be argued that one of the drawbacks in iterative approaches revolves around Glaser and Strauss’ (2017) original notion that it was possible to approach a setting without preconceived ideas, a widely contested idea (Charmaz, 2006). In this study, the student engagement narrative appeared to be initially the main source of literature, and this then developed into other remits, finally returning to models of student engagement which were then considered in different terms.

There are two main approaches within grounded theory: the objectivist approach, originating from Glaser and Strauss’ work (2017), and a constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2006). The constructivist approach appealed because it built on the emergent ideas of grounded theory and saw the researcher’s knowledge as both a starting point and an interpretative tool. A constructivist grounded theory approach was considered the best option because of the emergent nature of the research: SHL is a unique concept and although there has been research into belonging in traditional HE contexts, little has been carried out in ODL settings. Grounded theory (both constructivist and pure) also places a value on the researcher’s involvement, allowing them to be reflexive, and therefore undertake the kind of iterative process which leads to theory emerging from a mass of rich data, hence fitting in with the ethnographic approach. In this instance, the researcher is not only involved in the setting but created and continues to develop it.

The drawback of grounded theory approaches is that they are case specific, and therefore additional research is added and compared, not supporting or refuting theories that may emerge from more scientific approaches. The application of theory can therefore be somewhat limited to the setting in which it applies (Mjøset, 2005). However, despite the limitations, it was seen as important in gradually building a picture of a complex phenomenon, and there is scope for much additional research that can build on the emergent findings.

4.9 Triangulation
Triangulation, comparing data sources against each other and with other aspects such as the literature, is commonly used by qualitative researchers when interpreting data, critical to the iterative, multi-method ethnographic research design. Usher and Bryant call this interplay between theory, practice and research in a limited landscape a “captive triangle” (1989, cited in Burgess et al., 2006, p. 44).

Cross-checking meanings and behaviours (including what is said) is particularly important when using qualitative methods because what people say and do can be contradictory. However, it is also not always appropriate to compare different sources of data, especially when they are originated in different contexts.

Here, researcher reflexivity was also included in the triangulation process; having participated at the events it was possible to compare participants’ expression of the experience with the way they interacted with others at the time, and also to reflect on the impact of immersion in the setting, specifically coding and interpretation the data.

4.10 Credibility: reliability and validity

Reliability is a measure of how likely a research study is to reveal the same results if done in the same way multiple times, and is considered to be one measure of the rigour of research. Silverman (2011) expresses this concept as the extent to which findings are independent of their production. In this instance because the researcher is integrated in the research setting, particular care was required in the design and implementation of the study to ensure that unintended bias was not introduced. The analysis of the chatlogs and interviews could be carried out by someone other than the researcher because of the transparency and audit trail of methods and, by applying the same process as outlined in chapter 5, the same results could be found. While there was no evidence in the data that the researcher had an explicit impact on the findings, it is plausible that some people may have not responded to offers of participation because the interview was carried out by the presenter of SHL.

It can be, argued however, particularly in naturalist terms, the setting is the context, and that the issue is not whether the research could be repeated to achieve the same outcomes, but that the methods and instruments used in the first place are appropriate and robust to establish the findings which is where validity comes in. This is another measure of rigour in a study – i.e. validity. In terms of interview data, measures were taken to ensure that low-inference descriptors (Seale, 1991 in Silverman, 2011) were part of the study; this involved transcribing interviews verbatim, recording observations in factual terms and checking understandings in interviews so that any potential to misinterpret was diminished.

Despite these design elements, validity is more complex in this instance because the research has an ethnographic focus and method, and the constructivist approach negates the notion of universal truth. While ethnographic approaches facilitate a rich understanding of a specific area, they can also be subject to anecdotalism (Silverman, 2011). Mehan (1979, in Silverman, 2011) identifies issues that are particular to ethnographic approaches, including that reports tend to have an anecdotal quality and include exemplary data extracts, so that it can be
difficult to determine the representativeness of the findings. Data is often presented in isolation, meaning that the original context may be at risk of being lost. To counteract some of these issues, Lützhöft, Nyce and Petersen (2010) propose a range of techniques, two of which are appropriate to the qualitative nature of this research – refutability and constant comparison.

The refutability principle, in which qualitative researchers refute their initial assumptions in order to achieve validity in their findings can be overcome using Popper’s concept of critical rationalism (Silverman, 2011) in which the initial assumptions are refuted and can only be accepted if they cannot be refuted, at which point they are considered objective knowledge. However, in this instance, knowledge is seen as socially constructed and provisional and so this is not an appropriate concept to apply. Other appropriate methods to ensure rigour is constant comparison, which involves comparing different groups at different times, however due to the design of this study it was only possible to compare the interviews against each other and experiences in the chatlogs across different events.

While it may be considered more difficult to ensure rigour in qualitative research (Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings & De Eyto, 2018), as discussed above, there are ways to do this, and this research process has been designed to ensure the trustworthiness of the results.

4.11 Summary

There are multiple ways to investigate the meaning of participation at online events, the extent to which interacting with others or feeling a sense of belonging and community impacts on the student experience, and how both of these might have a positive impact on student progression and satisfaction.

In terms of ontology, a social constructivist view of reality is coupled with the epistemological viewpoint that is interpretative. This led to qualitative methodology, specifically ethnography and grounded theory.

The next chapter explains the selection, design and application of data collection and analysis methods.
Chapter 5. Methods

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methods used to obtain and analyze the data. The research questions are revisited in the context of the methodological approach. The reasons behind combining sources of data to explore the comparative meaning of attending SHL events are explained, and each source of data is justified in terms of the theoretical arguments for methods of data collection and generation. Explanations are provided for why semi-structured interviews were considered the most appropriate choice to expand on the findings of the chatlogs, and the design of the interviews is outlined. The process of analysis for each source of data is presented, and the use of thematic network maps as a tool to assist in moving from theme-generation to theory creation is then justified and explained. Finally, ethical considerations are discussed.

5.2 Research questions in context of method

The aim of the research was to understand the value of attending SHL events in the context of other learning opportunities for distance-learning students.

RQ1 asks “what is the value or perceived benefit to students”? In the context of methods, it was useful to see how students engaged at events based on the main communication they had with each other which was in text-based chat. The chatlogs facilitated exploration of spontaneous reactions regarding the value of events, while the interviews facilitated exploration of the comparisons between events and other interactions.

RQ2 investigates the relationship between SHL and the wider student experience. Chatlogs and interview analysis produced relevant findings. In some cases, the chatlogs represented very early interactions in terms of the students’ learning journey, and the interviews were conducted later when students had had more opportunity to engage with aspects of study.

RQ3 explores the role SHL plays in student identity. While student related behaviours were evident in the chatlog, interviews offered an opportunity to discuss how they felt about their identity as a student.

RQ4 explores the role SHL plays in sense of belonging. While chat-based interactions could indicate behaviours synonymous with feeling a sense of belonging and community, interviews were the only way to explore subjective feelings and the perceived value of the events in this regard.

In order to address these research questions, it was considered important to combine both observational and discussion-based measures, to consider communication at events and how participants felt.
5.3 Data sources: naturally occurring and researcher-generated

Two sources of data were used in this research: naturally occurring and researcher-generated (Silverman, 2011; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). Christine Hine’s ideas about virtual ethnography, discussed in chapter 3, were influential here because Hine argues that the medium of internet-based communication takes social interactions out of spatial and temporal contexts (Hine, 2003). Because one form of available data was internet-based communication, i.e. chatlogs which were a naturally occurring outcome of participation at an event and were not prompted by the researcher or influenced in any way, to gain a deeper, more contextually nuanced interpretation of event participation, another form of data was desirable. Therefore, chatlog data was combined with researcher-generated interview data.

The purpose of the chatlog analysis was twofold: firstly, to gain a greater understanding about the way that participants experienced events in real time and secondly to observe how participants interacted with each other. The chatlogs also highlighted logistical aspects of attending live online events. The purpose of this initial research phase was to identify common topics and ways of communicating between students. It was not whether participants felt that they belonged, but how they belonged that was important.

From the beginning of the project, it was decided that the chatlogs alone were not enough to explain the perceived value of participation at events. It was important also to ask participants how they experienced them and discuss how they compared to other opportunities to interact with others in an academic community. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were selected as a method to combine with chatlog analysis. The interviews, being individual and requiring introspection, enabled a specific focus on the research questions. The research project was, therefore, designed over three phases: identification of appropriate chatlog input and analysis of this data; design, delivery and analysis of semi-structured interviews based on chatlog analysis; and finally combining analysis of the full data set to facilitate the identification and consideration of emerging themes.

5.3.1 Naturally occurring data

Naturally occurring data is generated naturally without intervention from the researcher (Silverman, 2011). In a discussion about the benefits of naturally occurring data, Stephen Potter humorously proposes that data can be categorized as naturally occurring using the ‘Dead Social Scientist Test’;

“The test is whether the interaction would have taken place in the form that it did had the researcher not been born or if the researcher had got run over on the way to the university that morning.”


David Silverman emphasises the importance of using naturally occurring data which is “hyphenated” or attached to something, claiming that it offers greater insight into what may be happening as opposed to what people say may be happening (Silverman, 2011). In the
context of this research, the chatlog data is attached to the setting, and therefore offers insight into the way community develops during events.

Although naturally occurring data is used in the study, based on Potter’s definition, because in this case, the entire setting (SHL) has been constructed by the researcher, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher is involved in all events and cannot be separated entirely from the research data.

Nonetheless, if we accept the idea of naturally occurring data as an artefact that was evident without manipulation by the researcher, then chatlogs are an excellent example of the way people choose to interact with each other or express themselves during events. Since the data was used post-hoc, it could be argued that using the same methods, another researcher could arrive at the same themes.

5.3.2 Chatlogs

Chatlogs are .txt files containing text-based contributions from a text box that is open during SHL events. To contribute, participants log on to the event using their Open University computer username (OUCU). The chatlogs include the following information from students who contribute: OUCU, real name and chosen name (the chosen name can be edited for on-screen appearance), the text-based contribution, and the time the contribution was made. An example extracted from a chatlog is featured below.

Within a chatlog, it is common to find multiple conversations, both between participants and from the same participants who were discussing different things with different people. The order of discussions is based on when people press return to submit the chat, typing speed and their internet speed. This means that while there can be variations (of seconds) in the livestream transmission, the chat is registered in real time. The result of this is that some participants see the livestream video seconds before others, and when things happen quickly this discrepancy can be more evident in the chat.

The multiple conversations that happen within the chat can be difficult to follow, both for synchronous participants, and in asynchronous .txt files. During events, it can be easy for the Hotdesk team who moderate the chat and relay information between the online audience and the studio discussion, to miss contributions, especially from new participants who may initially make only minor contributions (for example, just saying hello).

While the chat can be messy because of the time lag and its transient and moving nature, it is also useful in resolving issues and clarifying points. While some use it to share information or experiences, others use it to articulate their thoughts and responses.

Chatlog examples

To demonstrate chat nature, this is an example of one minute of chat, midway through the 12th September 2016 Bootcamp:
12:56:13 Participant 1 Does Panelist 1 study at the OU or teach there?

12:56:18 Participant 2 @Participant 3 I’ve got one and am finding it fantastic for notetaking while watching YouTube or being on the module site. It’s brilliant! :)

12:56:26 Participant 3 ah I have to go to a meeting now, look forward to seeing the rest on catch up :)

12:56:32 Participant 4 Cats are better than dogs :)

12:56:34 Participant 5 I’ve used Mendeley for references (for journal articles etc)

12:56:37 Participant 2 Yaaay thanks @Hotdesk 1 :

12:56:38 Participant 6 some choices would be good

12:56:40 Participant 7 as for device set up I am a bit extreme, dual monitors and 3 tablets

12:56:50 Participant 8 Thanks for the iPad Pro replies, I think they do a small one too so might have a look at that one.

12:56:54 Participant 9 Best thing is that it’s the size of an A4 page so less eye strain!

12:56:55 Participant 2 Ohh that’s so pretty!!! :D

12:56:58 Participant 5 Stationery is addictive. :(

12:57:02 Participant 2 Participant 12 I need that in my life!!!! :D

12:57:02 Participant 10 Ohhhh! I love it!!

12:57:02 Participant 11 Ooooooooodddoo

12:57:08 Participant 1 Did Panelist 1 actually graduate at 3am in the morning?

12:57:09 Participant 11 Where from?

12:57:10 Participant 12 STATIONARY &lt;3

12:57:11 Participant 13 Where did that planner come from?

12:57:11 Participant 10 Daddddd.... ;)

12:57:11 Participant 4 I need to get some CAKE!

This example shows how lines of communication are interrupted by other lines. It also demonstrates some text-based ways in which students simulate real conversational expressions.

**Chatlogs selected for analysis**

Chatlogs from four days of events were selected. These were:

- Referendum (26.7.16), a two-hour discussion. Total livestream views: 706, total lines of chat: 803

- Bootcamp skills session 2 (12.9.16), a two-hour event. Total livestream views: 1,949, total lines of chat: 2,225
Two-day (re)Freshers’ event (31.1.17 and 1.2.17). On 31.1.17: 8.5 hours, total livestream views: 7,839, total lines of chat: 2,480. On 1.2.17: 9 hours, total livestream views: 1,747, total lines of chat: 1,775.

These were selected because they represented different types of events with slightly different emphases in terms of content and participants. They were the first options after ethical approval was granted and related to the two main start dates of the academic year. These also included a mixture of generic events for all students, and a topical faculty event to consider whether there may be a difference in engagement.

The Referendum event was put on for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and was held days after the UK voted to leave the European Union in 2016. The discussion during the SHL event was largely theoretical, applying perspectives from the various social science disciplines in interdisciplinary discussions about aspects of the referendum such as citizenship, belonging, geography and politics. Belonging was discussed in terms of identities and boundaries.

The Bootcamp was one of a series of four skills-based events, held weekly in advance of the main student intake in September 2016. This particular event (the second) was selected due to its clear focus on teaching skills, and potential for returning participants.

Finally, chatlogs from the two-day (re)Freshers event (titled to appeal to those who may have experienced a freshers’ event but were new to the OU) held after the bootcamp just prior to the module start date, were included. (re)Freshers was a lot longer in duration (the other two events were two hours in total), spanning the day and evening, and this produced much more transition in terms of participants, although some did stay for the entire programme. The focus of this event was to explain OU processes and systems, and to share advice and have fun. There were quizzes, maths puzzles, science experiments, demonstrations about the virtual learning environment, and information about tutorials.

Chatlog participants

From the chatlog perspective, participants were people who logged onto the events that were included in the study and made contributions to the chat.

Categories for participant types were created based on roles they played in the process, so that they became participant 1, panelist 1, etc. These were the main categories:

- **Participants**: Participants are people who accessed the event synchronously online and had signed in using their OU Computer username.
- **Panelists**: Panelists are guests in the studio and therefore appeared on the video stream. Panelists interacted with the presenter and the Hotdesk team.
- **Hotdesk**: Also in the studio and therefore on the livestream video, up to two people are on the Hotdesk at any one time. The role of the Hotdesk is to participate in the...
chat and most importantly to relay the points made by participants to the panelists and presenter.

- **Presenter:** There is one presenter (who is also the researcher in this study) who facilitates the discussion between panelists and the Hotdesk in the studio.

### 5.3.3 Researcher-generated data

Researcher-generated data is generated by the researcher specifically for the purpose of the research. While naturally occurring data can be seen to reflect an aspect of the lived experience, unshaped by any research agendas, researcher-generated data has the advantage of focusing the content, exploring specific areas, and doing so using the most appropriate method (Silverman, 2011). Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) describe interviews as oral accounts of events, and make the important point that interviews are researcher-generated accounts (in contrast to unsolicited accounts which can also be oral). The benefits of focused, research-specific exploration of issues outweigh possible problems of influencing outcome and enables a deep understanding of the cultural foundations of the group. The use of different ways of observing and communicating with participants provides triangulation (Hine, 2003, p. 21).

### 5.3.4 Interviews as a research method

Researchers have favoured qualitative methods such as interviews and case studies to explore areas of a subjective nature (Silverman, 2011) such as engagement, while quantitative metrics apply to other aspects of student engagement such as attendance or on-time task-completion (Trowler, 2010). Interviews are a common method of exploring experiences, allowing introspection, reflection, and space for individuals to articulate their perceptions (Silverman, 2011) and were important to this research to understand subjective accounts. While interviews can give insight into thoughts and feelings of a person, they are not always able to reveal cognitive or emotional truths. This is partly because of the involvement of the interviewer, the questions that are asked, and the responses between interviewer and interviewee. However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that this does not mean that these emotional truths should be dismissed because they are displays of perspective or discourse strategies. This was important in this research in terms of the way participants discussed student identity.

Focus groups were considered, but because it was important to capture the individual experience it was decided that group discussions would have less value. Instead, interviews were selected to align the focus of the discussion with the research questions. Interviews were considered the most effective way to explore the participants’ personal experiences because they provided an opportunity for one-to-one discussion about how events were experienced and how they compared with other opportunities for interaction. The individual nature of one-to-one interviews meant participants could have space to express their subjective views.
without worrying about how those may be perceived. Interviews also facilitated retrospective accounts, which are helpful in understanding the value of participation. This contrasted with the chat which was generated at the time of the event and was based largely, but not exclusively, on interactions between participants.

Interviews as a method align with the methodological approach in this research discussed in Chapter 4, and as has been discussed, they have been used to explore specific experiences of participants. While the approach is compatible with ethnographic research, interviews are constructed and as Silverman (2011) argues, this will have some bearing on the data. The nature of the interview was considered in terms of expectations, for example that the interviewer would ask questions and the interviewee would respond, and it was important to set the tone in the initial stages of the interview. Although participants knew the interviewer from SHL, this was the first time that there had been a one-to-one dialogue, and in a sense that could be seen to change the nature of the relationship. Interviews in this study were non-contact telephone-based, and hence there were non-verbal element which was important to align with the focus on language in communication.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that interviews should never by completely unstructured, although the level of structure will determine the fluidity and scope of the discussion. Therefore, it was decided to use semi-structured interviews. This approach ensured that similar areas were raised for all participants, although a drawback is that semi-structured interviews do not always allow for naturally emerging aspects to be conveyed by the participant (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Having made the decision to use a semi-structured approach, the next task was to design the interview guide.

5.3.5 Interview structure

Based on the emergent themes from the chatlog analysis (see section 6.2), semi-structured interviews were carried out with six participants who had attended SHL events (see later section for discussion on how these participants were recruited). The chatlogs had identified some of the behaviours that could be seen to represent community and shared understandings, and interviews were used to explore these in more detail. The findings from the chatlog were considered in conjunction with the research questions and developed into a semi-structured interview guide.

The introduction to the interviews explained the purpose of the study and reminded students about the ethical considerations which included anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time (see Appendix 4). The semi-structured interview had three main themes. However, if participants began discussing other areas of focus unprompted, the interview questions were reordered to accommodate the participants’ narrative. This was important because links may be created by participants between areas, and to understand the relationship between content areas more clearly, it was necessary to encourage the flow of discussion (Fontana & Frey, 2000 in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).
The three themes which focused on the experience of attending SHL events were:

- the extent to which belonging mattered in terms of the student experience,
- student identity,
- the value of online interactive events including SHL.

Within the first section of the interview, students were asked about the events they had attended, why they had attended them, and how they had felt during the time. They were also asked about student identity and the extent to which they felt more like a student when surrounded by other students. They were then asked about community and belonging and how they had experienced these in their learning journey so far. They were asked about academic community specifically as opposed to social community. Within this section of the interview, they were also asked about SHL and the extent to which that may or may not contribute to a feeling of belonging. Participants were asked about how SHL compared with other similar experiences, specifically live online events that they had attended. The similarities and differences were explored and the perceived value of all these events was discussed. Finally, participants were asked about any feedback or areas of improvement for SHL events (See Appendix 5).

5.3.6 Interview participant selection and recruitment

Participants were selected from a list of attendees at SHL workshops in Adobe Connect (they were not selected from the events that had yielded chatlogs). This was because it was possible to obtain the username (OUCU) more easily than for the live events. In small numbers, to ensure that willing participants were not disappointed, participants were sent a personalised email offering them the opportunity to participate in the research (see Appendix 4). This was initially done in order of participants on the list, which was based on the time they entered the workshop. All participants who replied were offered an interview, but several, despite initial interest, did not progress further. Participants were approached in small numbers over time because the researcher did not want to overcommit and wanted to offer each person who wanted the opportunity to have an interview. Despite the small sample, it was important to ensure that there was potential for a varied perspective, and while factors such as age and gender were not always known before the interview, it was possible to be somewhat selective when approaching further participants so that there was a relatively representative group in terms of gender, age and location.

Six participants were interviewed. The intention was to interview a small number of participants and to continue with the process until saturation was reached (Given, 2008).

A purposive approach to sampling (Given, 2008) was important because after the initial four interviews it became apparent that working only with participants who had attended workshops in Adobe Connect had created a bias in the data towards those who attended extracurricular events in Adobe Connect (the Library for example also run events), so more participants were sought on the basis that they had attended both formats of SHL. This meant
that the sample population represented a range of students from those who had attended just one workshop to those who had attended most of the events in either adobe connect or the livestream format.

Detailed demographic information about participants was not sought, and demographics are available only in as much as it was evident, for example gender and information disclosed in the interview, but contextual information about each participant’s situation and involvement in SHL events was available.

**Interview participant details**

‘Andrew’ was a male, level 1 international student who wanted to study Greek and Latin language. He had attended the Adobe Connect time management session prior to his module start.

‘Darius’ was a male who could not leave his home because of anxiety. He had attended and contributed to many SHL events, particularly the broadcast ones, but had been to only a few Adobe Connect sessions. He has now left the OU and is doing a masters with another university.

‘Claire’ was a level 1 female international student doing a psychology degree for pleasure after having a career break. Her first degree was in law. She had attended one SHL Adobe Connect event on essay-writing.

‘Laura’ was a mother of two young children and had only been to one Adobe Connect event (essay-writing).

‘Sally’ was a female who had been studying with the OU for a long time. She experiences agoraphobia and does not leave her home. She is studying creative writing and has participated in broadcast events, and the writing retreat workshops on Adobe Connect.

‘Anita’ was an international student who had not yet begun studying with the OU at the time of the research. She attended events before her studies began and used these to make a decision about studying at the OU. She then also used events to support her induction and skill development. Anita attended approximately five events over both formats.

**5.3.7 Semi-structured interviews in practice**

The question guide was the framework for the interview; because the interviews were semi-structured it was not essential that the questions followed in chronological order, they were more a guide for the topics that should be covered (Silverman, 2011). To keep the flow of the discussion and not compartmentalise experiences based on the interview guide, participants were encouraged to talk about those areas if they emerged. Questions could then be reordered to facilitate a natural flow. As an experienced interviewer, the researcher was familiar with
facilitating a conducive dialogue and in working with the flow of individual narratives, bringing them back to the question if they diverted.

Even if aspects had been naturally and inexplicitly covered, the broad areas were also addressed, and the participant was reminded that they had already raised certain points and were asked if they had anything else to add about that area.

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and were one-to-one telephone interviews carried out between June and August 2018 which were recorded and then transcribed.

5.4 Analysis of data

5.4.1 Chatlog analysis

First, the chatlogs were transformed from .txt files into Word documents to be more user-friendly. Data was anonymized, and each participant was allocated to a category and given a unique number to replace their name, for example Participant 1. This was used either to link the chat to a name or when participants referred to each other in the discussion. Any defining features were also removed, for example location, so that all participants were anonymous. While some participants attended multiple events, they were allocated specific numbers for each event to reduce complexity. See Appendix 9 for an example of the chatlog transcript and coding.

In line with Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory (2006) approach, chatlogs were skim-read and an overall sense of the direction of the dialogue was established. Charmaz suggests that the researcher should focus primarily on identifying actions from discourse, so instead of making interpretations, initially the focus is on naming dynamic behaviours, actions and interactions. This is usually done by identifying key questions which are front of mind during the initial coding stage. These key questions are linked to the research questions but do not use them as a focus because the aim is to understand the entirety of the data from the bottom up, and to establish the constructed nature of the experience in terms of the meanings that interactions have for individual participants. Research questions were not used as guides to avoid selecting relevant material only or making inferences at face value.

The questions that were used to focus attention on actions were:

- What is happening in this time and space?
- What is the function of that dialogue?
- Is there anything distinctive about what is emerging from this group?
- Is there anything they have in common with other groups?
- How is a sense of community being developed?
- What can this tell us about the meaning of participating in SHL events?
Initial coding focused on labelling actions using words to clarify and identify the activities that could be seen in the discussion between participants. This involved a fast read-through of the script, making annotations where relevant.

More detailed line-by-line coding was then undertaken, paying particular attention to the actions that had been identified in the text. The initial stage of coding had raised many actions, for example introductions and clarifications, and it was important in this second stage to identify which were relevant in terms of the research questions (rather than the questions above, which were important in establishing actions).

The chatlog was then analysed for a third time, and emergent themes based on commonalities in the data were annotated. These included things like shared jokes, technical support and recognition that had been identified in the second stage of coding. Tags were created next to each action and these were then collapsed (see Appendix 6), for example:

- sharing what is going to be eaten – perhaps asking others to comment?
- joined in joke
- relating to another
- joining in the group, communal sense of sharing
- joining in the joke, suggesting this is an ongoing food item of comment

Incidents or similar themes were compared, both within the interview and between participants. Supporting quotations were then extracted and collated to produce a range of raw data within each theme. This was useful to consider the data in isolation, and explore the extent to which the text supported the themes attributed to them. When dialogue was taken out of context, it was important to include contextual notes, and these were added when required. The quotations from the dialogue were then considered as a whole, to establish interpretations based on the meaning of the interaction (See Appendix 6).

Once each chatlog had been analysed, quotes for each of the themes were collated and then read together, and similarities and differences between the individual quotes were considered. This part of the process was important in establishing themes that were then used in the development of theory, particularly around the way in which community and sense of belonging are established. These became attached to the theme collective repertoire: joking around and having fun.

Once the basic analysis work had been done on the chatlogs, the focus turned to the interviews.

5.4.2 Interview analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The verbal content was included (but tone, intonation and pauses were not). The interviews were analysed using the same process as the chatlogs. See Appendix 10 for an example of the interview transcript and coding.
Coding was a three-stage process. Initial coding focused on the actions and reported experiences of participants (such as attending tutorials) with a quick first-read, in which the main topics were identified. Then, detailed line-by-line coding was undertaken, and attention was paid to actions that were evident in the text. When considering student identity, it was noted how this was expressed and the extent to which behaviours or cognitions were front of mind for the student. For example, some participants said that they had not given this consideration before. The transcript was then analysed for a third time, and emergent themes were annotated. These were based on themes from the actions (such as collective ideas) that were identified from the second stage of coding (see appendix 7).

Supporting quotations were then extracted and collated to produce a range of raw data within each theme. This enabled consideration of data in isolation, and the extent to which the text supported the themes attributed to them. When dialogue was taken out of context it was important to include contextual notes, and these were added when required. The quotations were then considered holistically with a view to establishing interpretations based on the function of the interaction, for example introductions, jokes, clarification.

The findings were then further analysed using thematic network analysis techniques.

5.5 Thematic network maps

Following the grounded theory analysis, thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) was carried out on the combined interview and chatlog data. While grounded theory and thematic network analysis are distinct qualitative analytic tools, they were used in this research to complement each other at different stages of the analysis and for different reasons (in a similar, but manual way to Brailas, 2014). The constructivist grounded theory presented a way to code, interpret, and generate themes from the data to develop theory using both data sources, whereas the thematic network maps provided an opportunity to represent the themes holistically and visually. The thematic network analysis was carried out after the coding was complete, using the outcomes from the grounded theoretical analysis as the source from which to organize and further refine the emergent themes.

Attride-Stirling (2001) describes thematic networks as “web-like illustrations that summarize the main themes constituting a piece of text” (p. 385), and that they are tools for both the systematization and presentation of data in going from a text to the interpretation of that text. Each stage of analysis involves a level of interpretation that is progressively more abstract. Three types of theme are used (basic, organizing and global themes), and each is developed from the previous. These are represented visually in a diagram and accompanied by a written interpretation. Below is an example of a thematic network map, although they vary depending on the number of themes at each level.
The process, like grounded theory, is emergent. Basic themes are the lowest order, and are established first. The material is coded using a coding framework, which may be the research questions, or salient issues. These are pre-established, and this differs from the initial approach used in grounded theory, in particular, the constructivist grounded theory approach that focuses on dynamic aspects of communication such as actions that are seen in the text with no preconceived ideas. In this research, the preconceived ideas were the emergent themes from the constructivist grounded theory analysis. Basic themes are then organized by organizing themes, which are identified from clusters of similar issues identified in the basic themes. The organizing themes lead to Global themes, which are described as the “superordinate themes that encompass the principal metaphors in the data as a whole” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p389).

Some of the themes were evident in both sources of data, others emerged from one source and not the other, and the helicopter view facilitated a broad consideration of the student experience. In terms of the research paradigm, it was important not to prejudge the students” experience, and to allow their voices to come through. This also fits with the constructivist approach and the diverse context of OU students which meant it was important to explore their experience from the ground up, rather than simply making comparisons to face-to-face institutions.

The advantage of using this form of analysis in addition to the initial analysis, is that it provides a way of combining the emergent themes from both the chatlogs and interviews into a structure that considers parts of the whole. The basic themes, organizing themes and global
themes were not obvious from the findings of the chatlogs and interviews and the process of thematic network analysis allowed a greater level of interpretation of what the themes may mean in terms of the value of SHL as part of the student experience.

5.6 Ethics

Ethical approval was required for all stages of the research and was granted from the OU’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (see Appendix 8).

In addition, due to the researcher’s psychological research background, the BPS code of ethics was used as a code of conduct (Code of Ethics and Conduct, 2018). The BPS code of ethics emphasizes the importance of briefing and debriefing participants, ensuring they understand that they have a right to withdraw at any time with no questions asked, maintaining anonymity for participants, and ensuring that the questions and assumptions in the interview guide would facilitate a positive experience without any harm to participants. This last point was especially relevant to some of the underlying research ideas, particularly that some students want to feel part of a community and that this can have benefits. It was very important that students who wished to study individually and did not necessarily seek to feel part of a community were not made to feel that their choices were less valid when they participated in group events.

The main ethical consideration in terms of the chatlog analysis was about informed consent. While the interview process included information about participation in the invitation, the original purpose of the chatlog was for participants to talk to each other, make points or ask questions. Since they were not created with the intention of being a data source, participants did not explicitly consent to their contributions being used in this context. However, under the OU policy for ethical use of student data for learning analytics, given participants logged in using their OU computer username and the analysis was being used to enhance learning, chatlogs were deemed valid data sources.

All participants in this study were anonymized, and this was particularly important in the chatlog. Anonymity included numbering participants instead of naming them and removing identifying features from the chat, for example some participants could have been identified by a range of personal information that was included, such as where they lived and relationships they had with other participants (for example, parents and children attended the same sessions). This was all done manually, and a separate list of names and numbers were stored separately, encrypted.

While anonymity is important for both online and person-to-person settings (i.e. interviews), Hine (2003) raises the issue that online interactions have additional considerations in terms of identity. She argues that in online settings, it is questionable about the extent to which participants may view their interactions as real. Furthermore, she argues that identities may be unstable, and this relates to the notion about performances of behavior discussed in the context of student identity in chapter 3. These aspects apply to active participants, but in many online interactions there are lurkers who may not actively be involved in any
interactive aspects. Since the chatlog involves only active participants, this concern can be excluded; Correll, (1995 cited in Hine, 2003) argues that lurkers are important in community only if they become active in the group.

Regarding the interview, participants were told about what participation involved in the invitation and email discussion prior to the interview. They were also reminded at the interview, and were told about their right to withdraw, that the data would be anonymized and collated, and that there were no right or wrong answers (BPS code of conduct). They were also told that they could clarify questions and were given the opportunity at the end of the interview to raise any additional points. Interview participants were offered the opportunity to be kept up to date with the overall outcomes of the research, and all of them accepted this opportunity.

Other ethical considerations relate to the dual role of the researcher as the presenter of the SHL. The research was overt, and it was clear that there would be interaction between participants and the SHL host. The researcher was the accountable executive for SHL events and although not always able to directly protect participants from harm from each other, had put measures in place to ensure that this was considered during events. In terms of moderating the chat synchronously, it is important to ensure that personal information is not shared and that participants are respectful of each other and act in accordance with the student charter which is the code of conduct for all OU interactions. There was always someone moderating the chat and removing and dealing with any breaches of conduct and in this sense, there were no issues that any harm to participants would be evident in the chatlogs.

There is the obvious issue of researcher bias (Silverman, 2000), in particular regarding a community. This is partly because the researcher hopes that the key objective of nourishing a community is in the process of being achieved but also because the researcher is privy to other data that indicates that there is real value in these events. Positive biases could also affect participants, for example assuming that the researcher will favour positive discussions about the value of these events. While this may be more of a limitation than an ethical issue, a consideration was that participants could feel that they needed to answer in a particular way although there was no evidence for this.

Ethical issues that are common in ethnography, such as representation, participation and perspective (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) require consideration. Students may present the positive aspects of their study or avoid talking about aspects they are less proud of. This can skew the representation of the community, for example students may feel that if expressing that they do not value community they are rejecting or letting down the students who do value community. Another explanation could be that, in line with research about engaged students (Trowler, 2010), participants at the SHL are engaged anyway and are demonstrating this through their involvement in extra-curricular activities. Making inferences about participants and the meanings of their interaction should be made cautiously.
5.7 Conclusion

The interviews and chatlogs were used to understand what was happening in terms of connections, belonging and the value of participation, whereas interviews provided a personal account of the experience for different participants. These were then considered together as part of the student experience and thematic network analysis was used to create thematic network maps. Surfacing themes in this way was helpful in allowing relationships between emergent themes to be identified, thus facilitating the development of theory relating to creating a sense of belonging and community in the particular context of the SHL at the OU.
Chapter 6. Findings

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the chatlogs, then the findings from the interviews, and finally the thematic network analysis.

As discussed in 5.3.2, the chatlogs provided insight into how participants behaved at events and how they made connections and developed a sense of community. The chatlogs were able to address the research questions partially and were used to develop the semi-structured interview guide in conjunction with the research questions (see 5.3.5). The interviews provided a reflective window into the participants’ views on participating in SHL events. The thematic network analysis merges both the reflections and observed behaviours of participants to address the research questions more comprehensively, and offer insight into how SHL fits in with the challenges of distance-learning, how community and participation at events impacts on identity, and the importance of community initiated at events on sense of belonging.

6.2 Chatlogs: Overview of emergent themes

The chatlogs were the first stage of research, and the findings were used to explore the value of interaction at SHL events and to scope areas for discussion for the interviews in line with the research questions. The chatlogs provided an opportunity to explore whether there was any evidence of community and a sense of belonging, and if so, how community was manifested, created or developed. As an artefact from the event, the chatlogs provided an opportunity to identify descriptors of commonalities observed within the chat which in some cases related to interactions that indicated community and a sense of belonging, and in other cases highlighted the function of the chat as a way to participate in online interactive events.

Four themes relating to the research questions emerged from the analysis of the chatlogs. These are discussed in detail in the sections which follow, with supporting quotes from the chatlogs. A further six sub-themes were identified that are important in terms of the nature of the events, and of these four were linked to main themes and the other two were functionalities of participation that implicitly supported communication but were less directly linked to addressing the research questions.

The four emergent themes all include aspects of community, which is defined (3.4.1) in this thesis as a connected group of people who share the same purpose, have mutual respect and are subject to issues of power and hierarchy evident in an organized group of individuals.
A more comprehensive discussion about the extent to which the themes addressed the research questions follows in 6.2.5.

### 6.2.1 Chatlog theme 1: Don’t I know you?

There appeared to be a sense of community based on students recognizing each other from previous interactions, including previous SHL sessions, Facebook groups/other social media groups, or from non-OU contexts, for example being friends on Facebook. Many of the acknowledgements of recognitions appeared to be deliberately tentative.

These are some of the ways that recognitions were included in the chat.

- Participant 23: @ [Participant 29], I think I remember you answering last week and then I had to finish my lunch at work so couldn't reply
- Participant 24: I think [Participant 28] and I are doing the same degree,
- Participant 25: [Participant 12] I think we're friends on facebook haha
- Participant 12: Oh hello [Participant 25] :) Nice to see a familiar name watching too
- Participant 12: Hi [Participant 25], you're in the E102 group aren’t you?
- Participant 27: Ah! [Participant 1], this is [Participant 74] that I was telling you about.
- Participant 27: [Participant 74], [Participant 1] had a similar question to yours about
Some participants appeared to recognize each other from other events and recalled previous conversations, for example:

Participant 7  [Participant 1] how’s your MA going? Seem to recall from previous events you’re were doing one

Participant 27  Hi, [Participant 7]. How’s that treadmill working?

One participant explained that they felt accepted after an exchange of this kind:

Participant 16  @[Participant 27] looks like I’ve been accepted into the group :)

Recognizing others appeared to create a common bond; when a student ‘knew’ another student from a social media group or found out that they were on the same module or qualification, there appeared to be a sense of connection to the group based on having something in common.

Sub-themes were identified, and these were specific to each function and as such were identified as themes within their own right. Although these themes are behaviours associated with attending an online event like SHL, they still support the main theme of getting to know each other, either as a precursor to further discussions or a way to initiate conversations.

**Why am I here? Purpose of participation**

It was common for participants to say why they were attending, for instance to find out new things or to meet others.

**Online events: Welcome and say hello**

It was common for participants to say hello and specify where they lived and which module they were studying. There appeared to be a desire to establish these commonalities, although there was no evidence that these were meaningful apart from for students who were doing the same module who could potentially benefit from being connected.

**Thematic implications**

- There appeared to be a sense of an OU student community based on recognition.
- There appeared to be a community of regular SHL participants.

**6.2.2 Chatlog theme 2: Social networks: SHL and others**

In a similar way to other social media platforms, SHL appeared to connect participants with each other through shared group membership. These connections were social in nature and
were also based on having something in common, whether that was doing the same module or simply being an OU student.

Social media platforms provide virtual spaces where groups and communities connect, and SHL appeared to be viewed by some participants as having a similar function to OU social media groups: it is a friendly place where people can chat and share common experiences.

The value in these online exchanges appeared to be based on connections and reducing the feelings of isolation that can be experienced in distance learning.

Participant 37: It's nice to be active online, especially the Facebook groups because it can get lonely studying alone. And it's helpful to bounce ideas so you're not feeling like you're a mile out of where you're meant to be.

[Bootcamp 12.9.16]

The glimpses of the importance of social media spaces emerging from the chatlogs was a prompt for further exploration in the interviews. SHL was a space that was visited instead of other social spaces:

Participant 28: WhatsApp is very distracting, isn't it?

Participant 60: Yes, Participant 28, lol.

Participant 28: It's quiet now.

Participant 60: Ha ha coz we are here.

Participant 28: True.

Participant 60: *eyes roll *

[Bootcamp 12.9.16]

While the similarity between student-initiated Facebook or WhatsApp groups and the institutionally generated platform of SHL was not explicitly commented on by participants, there appeared to be a similar function in terms of community and emotional support. The social nature of SHL was compared by participants to non-OU-moderated social media platforms associated with the OU (for example module Facebook groups which are set up and moderated by students), although SHL is moderated. The experience of moderated and unmoderated spaces was further explored in the interviews.

One of the possible reasons that participants 28 and 60 found the SHL space to be less ‘busy’ than other spaces, is because it is moderated by the OU. This did not, however, seem to affect participants’ ability to use SHL for community and social support. These ideas were also explored further in the interviews.

**Thematic implications**

- Social media platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, appeared to be a valued way for participants to connect with others and feel less isolated.
• SHL could be another version of this kind of social networking space where group membership is based on a basic commonality, such as being an OU student.

6.2.3 Chatlog theme 3: Interactive participation establishes community

This theme focused on the value of interaction and how it created community. Some SHL events were designed to be more interactive than others, meaning that the volume and focus of discussion may vary, and opportunities to interact could differ. At some events (the Bootcamp was one of these) selfies and pictures of study buddies were submitted by participants and included on the studio notice board. This physical nature of bringing the participants’ contributions into the studio appeared to enhance the interactive element of the event, practically and physically including participants in the event itself. In the chat, participants commented:

Participant 48 there my dragon lol
Participant 61 my photo is on the board. Yuhu :))
Participant 24 They like my hat :-P

[Bootcamp 12.9.16]

Participants spoke about the value of interacting with others as one of the main reasons for attending SHL events. Motivations for attending events were occasionally spontaneously expressed, and these appeared to focus on meeting others, having fun and having questions answered:

Participant 32 came here for some inspiration
Participant 23 That is really good, just lovely to meet others.
Participant 33 Hi all this is my first-time using student hub live :-) hoping someone can explain more about blogs as I have never done one
Participant 34 this is really cool as I never tried this type of thing before anywhere else
Participant 36 I wish I could meet other students.....SHL is like the only thing I do with the rest of you guys

[(re)Freshers 31.1.17, 1.2.17]

At the end of some of the sessions within a programme, there were spontaneous comments about how useful the sessions had been, and these gave an insight into motivation for attendance. Confidence and reassurance from others were two common topics that came up in many of the events. Other common topics included the enjoyment of chatting to other OU students, the usefulness of the material covered, and feeling more positive as a result of participating:

Participant 38 Finding this boot camp so useful, feeling much more confident

99
Participant 39  I think this chat alongside the tutorial has been of great help, giving and receiving tips

Participant 12  got three pages of s on note-taking :)

The interactive nature of the SHL format, reinforced the idea of sharing experiences in real time.

**Thematic implications**

- Including virtual content physically through chat or images sent into the studio created a tangible link between the livestream discussion and the remote participants.
- The motivations for attending SHL events appeared to focus on meeting others, having fun and having questions answered.
- At the end of the session there were comments about how useful the sessions had been which gave an insight into possible motivations for attendance, such as confidence-building and meeting others.

**6.2.4 Chatlog theme 4: Collective repertoire: joking around and having fun**

A sense of belonging was facilitated by ‘in jokes’ and a collective repertoire of discussion points that anyone could access. Various collective practices were included in discussion, for example activities that were unique to the OU like TMAs (Tutor Marked Assignments), or activities commonly associated with being a student, such as highlighting textbooks and writing notes. Other activities, like eating (which was something that many participants were doing during the event), also played a part in this collective repertoire.

In one of the Bootcamp sessions (12.9.16), there were ‘in jokes’ about cake, developed from the previous week’s student-led discussion: the students had positioned themselves as hard workers who were motivated by treats, using cakes and biscuits both as sustenance for study and also rewards for completing tasks.

Ultimately, collective jokes and shared knowledge provided evidence of collective practices that were both performed by those in the group and also were used to become part of the group. It appeared to be a good entry point for new contributors to the chat as one participant explains:

Participant 12  food is a very good bonding topic xD

The discussion about food was frequent during the series of bootcamp sessions. When the chat room opened before the live broadcast there was lots of discussion about food, particularly from participants who had attended the previous week’s session.

Participant 10  Has everyone got their lunch boxes?! Haha
Participant 64  Guys I have a problem, think I made my Sticky toffee pudding a bit early and I might have eaten the portion I had earmarked for this session, Do I risk another portion

Participant 2  [Participant 64] ALWAYS! ;)

[Bootcamp 12.9.16]

But interestingly, food was initially seen as the remote audience’s territory, as something that belonged to those participating at home. When food was introduced to the studio one participant commented:

Participant 13  I’m glad the hub guys are as foodie as us!

[Bootcamp 12.9.16]

This collective repertoire is of interest because the food-based discussion was in fact introduced and encouraged by the SHL production team as a topic of conversation in the chat, but it was claimed as the audience’s remit.

During the bootcamp session, Presenter 1, announced that after last week where everyone had cake apart from her, she had acquired cake, and got out a tiered cake stand, laden with cakes. The audience appeared to enjoy this act, and there were many comments in the chat when this happened.

Participant 10  time for cake talk!
Participant 3  :O all the cake!
Participant 65  Posh CAKE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Participant 48  whenever I log in here cakes are always up for discussion

[Bootcamp 12.9.16]

What happened next in the chatlog in terms of group membership was very interesting. The audience dared Hotdesk 1 to steal some of Presenter 1’s cake. Some of the participants’ comments display a high level of awareness of the physical studio (i.e. that Hotdesk 1 needs to crawl across the room), the volume of the audience, and the different cameras. There was also peer pressure for Hotdesk 1, a member of the chat group, to actualize the request of the remote audience to steal the cake.

This was some of the discussion:

Participant 65  @ [Hotdesk 1] just commando crawl across the floor and get one now
Participant 42  [Hotdesk 1], do it or we won't come back next week lol
Participant 48  Anyone watching the screen to see if [Hotdesk 1] dives for a cake now lol
Participant 66  cake bullies : -)
Participant 65  210 people waiting for him to make his move
Participant 24  Is there any Battenberg? And yes, [Hotdesk 1] needs to go on a covert mission to retrieve cake :-P
Participant 44  @[Hotdesk 1] pretending the cake mission isn't happening, lol
Hotdesk 1   *que mission impossible type soundtrack*
Participant 13  I keep expecting to see [Hotdesk 1] pop out the side of the screen!
Participant 42  Every time it goes to the wide shot, I keep thinking [Hotdesk 1] will come down on a zip wire
Participant 68  there he goes!!!
Participant 13  LEGEND!!!!  Y
Participant 12  did [Hotdesk 1] pinch a cake?! i missed it..writing notes!
Participant 48  I'm so proud of you right now [Hotdesk 1]
Hotdesk 1  I think I got a death stare from [Presenter 1] though! hahaha
Participant 44  @[Hotdesk 1] blame us!!

[Bootcamp 12.9.16]

When Hotdesk 1 is reprimanded for stealing the cake by Presenter 1, the audience feel on-side with him – he is one of them:

Participant 69  don't shout at [Hotdesk 1] and [Hotdesk 2], we like them, they are fun.

[Bootcamp 12.9.16]

When something temporally specific like this happened that was integral to the chat, the time lag between the livestream video and the real-time chat was more apparent than in general discussions;

Participant 70  Haha I think I'm on a delay. [Hotdesk 1] just made his move
Participant 24  I'm really behind in my feed, I've only just seen [Hotdesk 1]'s marvellous moment.

[Bootcamp 12.9.16]

This series of interactions was interesting because it demonstrated a bonding moment where the audience became a collective in-group through achieving a common purpose.

While those in the studio could enjoy cake, the way that cake was positioned by the audience was that this was their domain, but it was not exclusive: while anyone could eat cake, the discussion about it was a way that the audience established connections with each other. In a similar way that there was a lack of hierarchy in terms of presenters or those in the studio, this is another example of group membership that focuses on something in common and that is inclusive. Food based discussions were not only a collective repertoire; they could also be seen as an interaction between the remote audience and the studio which links this to chatlog theme 3.
Collective practices were also seen in discussions about study skills, as the audience identified with the panellists’ recommendations, in this example the usefulness of colour coding:

Participant 25  colour coding is something I think I want to try using

Participant 71  I like different colours to separate Primary Sources from Secondary (History)

[Bootcamp 12.9.16]

These suggestions were applied or tested on individuals and expressed in the chat, demonstrating activities that were or may be performed in the future or past.

Two sub-themes were identified here and in a similar way to the function of the other sub-themes, were functional but linked to fulfilling the communal repertoire. The sub-themes were;

The Hotdesk: A pivotal role between the online audience and studio

The Hotdesk members had a dual role, relating the audience’s questions to the studio in addition to their legitimate membership of the community.

Event themes influence tone of chat

There was less opportunity for jokes when big issues were being discussed, and the nature of the studio discussion was seen to influence the focus of the chat.

Thematic implications

- Fun and ‘in jokes’ were evident in all the events that were analysed but to varying degrees depending on the nature of the event.
- There were several functions to these ‘in jokes’: they presented an accessible discussion point that everyone could contribute to and demonstrated embodiment in a virtual space.
- Food was not only a collective repertoire but is an example of a cross over between the remote audience and the studio.
- Community was also demonstrated in discussions about personal preferences as the audience identified with the panellists’ recommendations, e.g. the usefulness of colour coding.

6.2.5 Chatlogs, research questions and influence on interview focus

As has been previously explained, using the chatlogs was the first stage of the research; their intention was to establish whether there was evidence of community and if so, to consider how this was developed. In terms of the definition of community, it was evident that there was a group of people who shared some of the same purpose. Mutual respect was evident in the way that participants conversed in the chat, appreciating diversity of opinion and individual differences. Power and hierarchy were interesting concepts since they appeared to
be less evident; the Hotdesk team appeared to be viewed on the same level as the online audience. This could, however, be evidence of mutual respect.

The analysis from the chatlogs indicated emergent themes, and these were used to develop areas of focus for the semi-structured interviews in conjunction with the research questions, since the chatlogs were not of a nature that could fully address all the research questions since some introspection was necessary. However, the immediacy of the conversation in response to the real time event meant that these artefacts of the discussion added value to other methods.

The chatlog analysis demonstrated that participants at the SHL gained something of value by attending events and participating in the chat (RQ1). This related to the emotional support participants gave and received from others, and the unique opportunity to hear and see others in the academic community.

RQ2, about the student experience, was covered in part, specifically in the ways that SHL encourages similar behaviours to those on other social media platforms, and the discussions about some of those other platforms and the role they played in connecting students.

Identity, the crux of RQ3 was seen in themes 1 and 4 in terms of students recognizing others, predominantly from other student spaces, and also in the way that certain student identity behaviours were discussed and performed (such as note-taking).

The chatlogs showed evidence of community (RQ4), which was spontaneously discussed by participants at events, for example they recognized other participants they had met at other events (SHL or elsewhere) and appeared to enjoy meeting new fellow students. The interactive nature of the event also facilitated a sense of community, particularly when the remote audience were included in the live studio discussion. This was done in a variety of ways including comments raised in the chat, and by showing pictures, questions or stories at the Hotdesk that were sent in by email. There was also evidence of common practices and shared narratives, and these enhanced the cohesion of the group. This was initially seen in discussions about food and cake, which were a way that participants could talk about something of collective interest. When these topics were introduced, they facilitated discussion which could lead to meaningful dialogues.

6.2.6 Chatlog sub-themes less directly relevant to research questions

The function of the chat varied depending on the motivations of the individual participants and the nature of the discussions and was used for a range of additional reasons other than discussion-based communication, for example to resolve technical issues.

Of the ten themes there were four main themes (6.2.1-6.2.4) and six subthemes, of which four were linked to the main themes. The final two sub-themes that also facilitated community implicitly and were a necessity in terms of engaging with this kind of event were about sharing information and using chat functionally.
These themes were:

**Sharing through chat**

Some specific information was shared through chat, such as experiences of disability. These forms of sharing were distinct from community-based interactions because they tended to be very specific and individual. While it could be argued that this was a way to establish community, this theme was excluded because it may have been possible to identify the individual based on the disclosures.

**Using chat for functional reasons**

Chat was also used to announce departure, ask technical questions or seek clarification. This was a functional form of communication.

These sub-themes, in addition to the other subthemes demonstrate how the chat was used to facilitate participation at events. While there are some common conventions (for example, greetings), the functions and behaviours varied depending on the user, the purpose of the event, and the extent to which it was necessary for a user to resolve technical issues.

The overall findings from the chat highlighted activities and behaviours that students seemed to undertake to make themselves feel they belonged. However, it was unclear at this point whether participants were conscious of these. It was also unclear about what meanings could be interpreted from the responses of others. It was therefore important to explore these areas that were unknown to the researcher through discussion in interviews.

### 6.3 Findings: Interviews

The design of the semi-structured interviews was outlined in section 5.5.3, and the aim was to obtain a reflective personal account from people about how they viewed the events and their value, and to undertake a deeper exploration of the themes which had emerged from the chatlog analysis.

The interviews developed findings from the chatlogs which indicated that community was present by providing insight into how community was scaffolded and how behaviours such as shared repertoires provided opportunities for interaction. The interviews also explored the notion of student identity, and while participants in the chat may say that they feel like students when they are involved in SHL events, the student identity appears to be very transient for this population of learners. Overall, the interviews highlighted the comparative value of SHL in terms of the overall student experience and it was found that the extracurricular space which was moderated by the institution provided a safe space to perform behaviours associated with being a student, and that the space was conducive to learning. It was seen that the live interactions created a sense of community and support, and the shared purpose enabled individuals to feel part of a powerful and collaborative collective.
The semi-structured interviews focused on three key areas: the experience of attending SHL events, community belonging and student identity, and the value of SHL events compared to other events. All of these themes link with RQ1 which is about the value of SHL and they address this through the other research questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Corresponding RQ</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The challenges of distance learning</td>
<td>The theme provides a window to understanding RQ2 relating to the student experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>This theme addresses the notion of belonging to a community and the extent to which SHL facilitates this is the crux of RQ4. This also links to student identity RQ3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Within or beyond institutional parameters</td>
<td>This theme invites comparison between other opportunities within the institution RQ4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Table 2: Interview themes and research questions*

The first theme that emerged from the interviews was about how students navigated the distance-learning environment and the role that SHL had to play in that.

### 6.3.1 Theme 1: The challenges of distance learning

The theme provides a window to understanding the student experience in particular the way that SHL fits within the overall experience. The first aspect of the theme is that distance learning is self-regulated, and it appears that SHL relieves some of the isolation of learning alone and that it provides opportunity to receive motivation from others.

#### 6.3.1.1 Distance-learning is self-regulated

There appeared to be a fundamental difference in the student experience when learning at a distance compared to on-campus and this resulted in different priorities and behaviours in terms of attendance. One participant with experiences of both said the majority of distance-learning work was done by the student on their own with the module material, supplemented by tutorials. Instead of attending a lecture, or watching a presentation, distance-learning students need to be both active and proactive in their learning, and this had implications in terms of how the content was absorbed and digested.

Another participant expressed that distance-learning students needed to be comparatively more proactive and self-regulated in their learning compared to students at a face-to-face institution; they needed to read and understand content, complete activities, and engage overall in learning in an active way;
“Sometimes I felt I was learning much more and better [at the OU] than at another university because I was much more active. But at the same time, I was reading by myself, and if I wasn’t, it wasn’t going to happen. You can go into a room [attending a lecture] and you can be sleeping or doing something else, but as an OU student I was a lot more active. And it was my way – starting to study or not today.”

[Anita]

Another participant echoed this in a discussion about distance learning, saying;

“A lot of it is doing it on your own. A lot of effort to put into it.”

[Laura]

The necessity of self-regulated learning and self-driven motivation appeared to be associated with feeling isolated or alone, and it was also expressed that the solitude of distance learning meant that it could be difficult to compare performance and development with other students.

Some interviewees identified similarities between distance and face-to-face learning in behavioural terms. They expressed the idea that participating in an activity can give the impression that engagement is deeper than perhaps it really is. These participants had displayed participatory learning behaviour by attending an online workshop, and in doing so appeared to have experienced similar outcomes: in a similar way that students at a brick university may attended a lecture without paying attention, similar behaviour was evident in reflections of those attending a SHL event:

“I’m sure I asked some questions and I’m sure that whatever I asked was answered.” [Laura]

When asked, whether they had learnt anything at an online workshop, one participant responded, “Yes but I’m not sure what it was.” [Laura]

Another participant said:

“I remember sending an email at the time saying that I had found it useful. So I must have.” [Claire]

These insights from the interviews produced findings not possible from the chatlogs. They demonstrate that while content is a driver for attendance, there may be other benefits in attending which are forgotten after the event, perhaps because they were not preconceived or perhaps because they had fulfilled a need that was therefore satiated.

Another participant recognized that just listening and receiving information did not always translate to understanding:

“If you just give people the info they don’t get as much out of it because they don’t put as much time into understanding it.” [Darius]

6.3.1.2 Motivation to attend SHL events
While the exact detail of what was learned or useful from an online workshop was not front of mind for all participants, some participants were clear on reasons for attendance. When asked about what specifically was useful, one participant had a clear answer “The planning of the time of study” [Claire]. This may be based on motivation for attending since Claire explained she was motivated to attend the workshop because she felt a need to focus on time management.

Other motivations for attending Adobe Connect workshops were also discussed in the interviews. Some participants attended SHL events because they were timely and appealing to that student’s needs:

“I was looking for a logical approach to the study which I hadn’t done for so many years. That session helped me formulate a plan for the way I had approached studying.”

[Claire]

“Found one [email invitation to a SHL event] and thought ‘I should have been invited to this’ ‘just at the right time’. Perfect for me at the time and I found it helpful.”

[Laura]

While skills deficits and timings were cited as common motivators for attendance, they did not fully explain the reason that students came to a SHL workshop when they could access the material in other ways, for example revisiting the material they already had or look at other general material available to OU students. Some participants were aware that they had choices and options about how they could access similar information. When asked whether the information at the workshop could have been obtained elsewhere one participant responded;

“I may have done but I had the option and took that option. Had it [the SHL workshop] not existed I would have looked elsewhere.”

[Claire]

Another participant explained that they struggled with the OU’s online search function, which was why they chose to attend a workshop.

**6.3.1.3 Assessment/goal-orientated learning**

Some interviewees viewed learning in didactic terms, emphasising the importance of a transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, and they valued the voice and wisdom of the teacher. This view of learning as an information exchange was also evident at some of the skills-based workshops which were discussed by some participants in their interviews. Some students explained that they attended events to receive information;

“The majority [of student interactions] were useful and like me – they wanted to get information from you.”

[Claire]
Acquiring subject specific knowledge, often directly relating to the module being studied, was commonly raised as a general learning priority. Interview participants spoke about the need to prioritise their focus on assessment-related activity and their subject/discipline area. This meant that for some students, engaging in anything other than content that addressed a specific module requirement or a skill deficit that was linked explicitly to marks (such as referencing) was secondary.

All participants who were interviewed appeared to be diligent students, attending online tutorials for their modules and having a clear focus on what they wanted to achieve from their OU study. One participant explained their priorities;

“Priority is interactions with tutor, TMAs and engaging with feedback. I’m trying to do well so feedback is invaluable. Feedback with other students, is guided by what is on the module, so if there is a project we need to do, but I don’t go beyond that – some people form groups of meet up. I just stick to what is required for the degree. Time is the main issue when you are balancing it against other commitments.”

[Andrew]

It appeared that there were two different types of groups emerging: The first were students who attended, and did not remember content, but did remember the opportunity was of value in terms of community and support. The second were students who attend with focused needs which could be met through SHL activities, and even though these are not the only purpose of the events, these students may benefit tangentially from the sense of community and the experience of others. These students take away more than they came looking for, and it could therefore be argued that SHL is offering extra value even to those who are very goal-focused.

6.3.1.4 Confidence in navigating new terrains

The other aspect that appeared to be important to new students was the collection of information. Induction events, such as (re)Freshers, highlighted some of the areas that students needed to know about. Some participants who attended these events explained that when they were new, they didn’t really know what to search for or what was important, and these events gave them a sense of what mattered. So, the selection of material mattered but the presentation also appeared important. Most information could be sourced through other platforms, but for some students seeing how it all worked first-hand was important.

“Before I decided to enter study, …I discovered about SHL… because I found lots of information about the organisation and how it all works. It gave me a lot more confidence.”

[Anita]

Information about the OUs model of tuition, support systems and the learning experience was particularly important to this student because it demonstrated the support networks that connected the student to other students and university services. It appeared that the value of attendance for this student was in physically viewing the OU through a window, seeing the people who would be there to support her and hearing other students. This appeared to make
the support network tangible and reliable, and an emergent theory is that when there is support there is an increase in confidence.

“I felt confident enough and secure to start because I knew I would get a lot of support”

[Anita]

Having the opportunity to converse with other students also appeared to give some students a confidence boost, particularly if they are unsure about how well they are doing, and if they had the impression that everyone else was doing well and they were not.

“Communal bit was what I needed to give me more confidence – not even confidence, but awareness that other people were in the same boat. If they can have a go and give it a try then so can I.”

[Laura]

Knowing that others had the same questions appeared to be reassuring, and this could also be an indication that there were like-minded others;

“a few people had exactly the same questions and problems I had, and it was reassuring to know that I wasn’t alone.

[Claire]

It was also important for some participants to have exposure to students who had progressed in their studies because it demonstrated that it could be done. This may be particularly important to distance-learning students who do not usually have the opportunity to connect with students beyond the module.

“Hearing people in their final year and saying they have done it. Need to hear from people who have got there, don’t need to hear from people like me. That’s when you feel you can achieve it.”

[Claire]

Knowing that there was a network of friendly people who were experts in their field and who were also connected to support students appeared to be important. There appeared to be an element of enthusiasm from the studio participants and tutors that rubbed off on the students, perhaps due to the informal tone of SHL and the ability to see and hear people talking about their research and passions.

“It was connection, and I didn’t feel like I was studying alone at home, without anyone around me just my books, because I really feel I could count on a lot of people who were there on the other side.”

[Anita]

One interview participant spoke about how newcomers may experience the shared practices at events, and feedback was that when newcomers to an event asked what was going on, other participants often reassured them, explaining that they needed to take a moment to settle in and observe what was happening, which indicates a spirit of community. However, this was
not always the case; one interview participant expressed frustration with this: they felt that late entry was disrespectful, saying that you wouldn’t come into a lecture theatre late with no pencil and expect people to accommodate your disorganisation.

6.3.1.5 Summary

Attending SHL events is one of several ways to gain basic knowledge about the OU, some of which can be clearly identified and measured (i.e. a student may want to know about support and be satisfied that they know this when they have a list of contacts). The benefit of seeing and interacting with OU staff and experiencing their enthusiasm first-hand differentiates SHL from other sources of information. The interviews provided insight into the motivations and benefits of attending and demonstrate the importance of other people: both peers and members of staff who offered institutional and peer support.

6.3.2 Theme 2: Belonging

This theme is the most meaningful in terms of understanding how students may experience community. Belonging was often compared by participants as being the opposite of feeling isolated or alone, and the notion of belonging was explored in the interviews.

It was seen that identifying as an OU student could be unifying in itself, the only aspect that mattered in terms of group membership despite the heterogeneity of the student population, as participants explain;

“I think we are all the same – we rave about it [the OU], because no other university could give us this opportunity.”

[Sally]

“With the OU we are similar because we are all so different. Many at home with children, some working, some out of school. There is no norm.”

[Andrew]

One commonality is that OU students have all made a choice about their studies.

“Yes, [the label of] student, when you are young you have to go to school, studying, when you are older it is something you have chosen to do.”

[Andrew]

Another participant talked about the value of sharing experiences and doing things together.

“I’m sharing what I’ve learned I’m sharing – some of the stuff I wished someone had told me, and I know how it helped me and it will help other people so that they don’t need to struggle. It’s good for me because I feel that I’ve learned something and can pass it on.”

[Andrew]
One participant explained that they “feel this empathy of doing things with other students. At this date and time you are doing things with other students in this room.”

[Anita]

Having fun appears to help promote active learning and could make participation memorable.

“But when we can play together and do experiments and play together. Something that makes the memory to be more activated with something else.”

[Anita]

Part of community and belonging appears to relate to familiarization, and this was evident in the chatlog findings also.

“There were some people whose names were familiar, they were not always friends, but you know already how that person is going to react.”

[Anita]

“But in the writing retreat you are really enthusiastic. At the time, it was like oh I know I’ll be chatting to you next week, some of them might come along and there were some familiar names, and we know each other.”

[Sally]

This familiarity also appeared to be associated with expectations of support:

“When you are deep in study, deeply lonely, I thought, I’m going to switch on SHL and I’ll see [sic] your voice because I’ve got to know your name, and you might have people on saying yeah we are struggling, there is a rapport going on. I will be able to look there for some connection when it isn’t available on the tutor group forum.”

[Sally]

Sally also talked about the benefit of seeing both the OU setting, and the people from the OU at a SHL event linking back to the notion of the importance of seeing inside the institution;

“…more interested in looking at you and guests – these are human beings – they are OU people.”

[Sally]

For these participants, the OU is an institution with a mission; it is more than the modules and people, and this is where the importance of belonging is evident, and it can be seen that there is not only a sense of belonging but a pride in belonging. The mission of the university and its role in areas such as broadcasting, research, international development as well as the learning students participate in, means that students can feel part of something meaningful at an institutional level. Some of these aspects are conveyed at SHL events, and since the events have the benefit of not being focused on curriculum, the wider remit of the university can be showcased. Pride in the organisation also creates a connection to community;
“When people sign up and don’t attend the events, they just do their work, they don’t understand what the OU does, like SHL, the BBC events the research and all that too, students should experience this because if you understand more the whole project and what is going on I think it would be a little less lonesome for people.”

[Darius]

6.3.2.1 Loneliness

Loneliness and isolation were mentioned by all participants to varying degrees as something associated with distance-learning. Very often this was not just a feeling; it was a reality for those who are not able to connect with other people or students for a range of reasons including disability and location and also that studying at a distance often meant studying alone.

Comparing studying and attending a SHL event, Anita answered a question about the way she experienced studying along and learning with others.

I feel that I am not so alone as you would feel just being with a computer there, because you see there are lots of other people answering and answering that and giving opinion and you start changing opinion. And then you start also making friends because you share something that is interesting

[Anita]

On the other hand, Darius found SHL in an attempt to get more involved:

I was looking for how to get involved more – and I thought it was a good way to feel part of the university because at a distance because you are on your own.

[Darius]

He later explained when discussing other opportunities to connect with others that these did not happen within the parameters of the module.

I don’t talk to anyone on my current course. I don’t connect with anyone.

[Darius]

Some students choose to study with the OU because of disabilities or other confinements, and their isolation may translate into other areas of life, for example one participant disclosed that they do not leave the house, and another became a mother and was not working. These kinds of life circumstances may exacerbate a sense of loneliness, and for some students the OU community was one of their only lifelines to the external world.

“I am one of those people who feel really isolated. There are other people who don’t feel isolated, and who meet other students. But I do and they [SHL events] help me.”

[Sally]
There was also a sense expressed by several participants that many other OU students were not experiencing the concerns they did. Isolated students may feel so alone they imagine everyone else is happier than they are. This is evident in the explanation that follows a question about the antithesis of isolation.

“What might be the opposite of the isolation? Too hard a question… other students don’t feel isolated because they go to tutorials. Well yes, they are young, working full time. There are people who never express that because their lives are full.”

[Sally]

This can be seen in other contexts, for example the way that social media can be used to portray a limited or ideal representation of the self. OU Students also use social media, for example Facebook, to connect with other OU students, but it appears that while this can be a quick gain in terms of access to others, it is not for everyone: connection with others needs to be appropriate for the person.

“No matter how lonely I was, I actually stopped looking at Facebook for about 6 months, because I can’t cope with the negativity, even if it means being alone.”

[Sally]

6.3.2.2 A place for many to be together

At an institution like the OU, where a campus is not accessible to all students, a platform like SHL provides an online space where they congregate. In addition to combatting isolation, there was something about the volume and diversity of the population that appeared to matter. Students describe the space as different from other opportunities, which were often modular.

“[SHL is] very helpful because it’s lonely [being an OU student]. It is helpful – to have a communal feel. Doing different subjects. All shuffle along together.”

[Laura]

“I was bouncing off the walls with the writing retreat because I had more contact with OU students during that time than on my modules.”

[Sally]

However, like any form of group interaction, not everyone gets along.

“When I went to face-to-face tutorials about 5 years ago – when you are in that room, there were a table of really aggravating, irritating OU students… You are going to meet people who rub you up the wrong way.”

[Sally]

The common feature of belonging (being an OU student) appeared to transcend a view that people should all be the same, and it has been previously seen that diversity is valued.
It may be easier to direct attention and ignore sources of irritation at an online event, but another aspect could be the volume of participants, and the diversity that this created.

“It’s more difficult when there were a few of you, but the hub were packed out there was lots going on. There were lots of questions that you might have asked, or loads you could ask as you were going along.”

[Laura]

Participants spoke positively about the high volume of people, and they ignored aspects such as peripheral conversations if they did not like them. This appeared to contrast with the low numbers of participants that attended module tutorials. Since SHL was for all students and a greater number of students attended, the feeling of community appeared to be enhanced.

“Yeah, there was one [tutorial] when I was the only one. Be nice if you went along and there were lots. Better with lots of participants. Awkward with only a few.”

[Laura]

6.3.2.3 The potential for comparison

Distance-learning students appeared to be discerning about when and why they might want to compare themselves with others, and a moderated, slightly more structured environment (compared to SNSs) like SHL had the benefit of providing this opportunity, but in a less potentially difficult way than might happen in the completely open face-to-face environment.

“At a brick university, I would be with these people. They would be discussing marks which I hate, over coffee.

[Sally]

However, while face-to-face interactions may involve small groups and very specific, perhaps uncomfortable comparisons, one of the benefits of a lot of students is that it allows broad comparison.

“Gives you a base.”

[Andrew]

This was important to some students because without a base it was reasonable to imagine that everyone else was doing well. When asked about the source of evidence for the belief that everyone was doing better, one participant said;

“It’s probably the not knowing. Going away doing your studying and it’s all completely in your head. Just telling yourself to work harder, do better. Bit of a negative view on things probably. Need a little bit of it to keep pushing yourself, not drop behind or stop doing it all together.”

[Laura]
Support was important to students in terms of facilitating community. This support could be other students who became friends, a space to meet other students who may either be friends or transient acquaintances, official support networks, or a solid educational infrastructure that accommodated the student population.

Sharing the negative aspects of study was also important; externalizing things like doubts were rewarded with a sense of confidence.

“So this contact having someone, having the same doubts. It’s good for the self-confidence knowing people have these doubts”.

[Anita]

Confidence was also generated from successfully negotiating some of these online places. Having an opportunity to see the tutorial space or see screen shots of the VLE and know where to click meant that the unfamiliar became less unknown.

Belonging and community can therefore include knowledge about practices and behaviours and the security that understanding those procedures brings, and it can also be about interaction with others and the shared learning experience. Knowing how to do things was seen as important if you were going to be doing them at some point.

“So if you have some experience and confidence because you had experience. It prepared me – I was not so anxious because I was familiar with Adobe so it helped.”

[Anita]

6.3.2.4 Summary

A recurring theme for students was loneliness and isolation, and the data provided indications of how SHL had helped to mitigate this through building confidence by enabling students to navigate new terrains with knowledge, advice and the shared experience with peers.

6.3.3 Theme 3: Within or beyond institutional parameters

This theme emerged from students discussing their experiences of the range of spaces where they can connect. The idea of exploring this topic in some detail in the interviews stemmed from the chatlog analysis findings about the other spaces where OU students experience a connection with others. It was also important to make comparisons between SHL and other virtual spaces to address the question about what made these spaces effective in facilitating academic community.

There are several aspects that appeared to be important to participants in terms of these online spaces: timeliness, volume of people participating, and moderation of the space. In comparing SHL with these other platforms, it is important to recognise that other spaces have different purposes. The volume of students raised in the previous section, and the openness to
learn as distinct from acquiring specific information explored in theme one, link to how students communicate in virtual environments.

6.3.3.1 The importance for community of goal orientation in synchronous events

Participants were invited to compare SHL with other OU spaces that offered them the opportunity to engage with other students. This subtheme focuses on activities that were prioritized in line with students’ overall goals, and these mainly related to tutorials which often focused on the module, assessment, and were synchronous.

The most common activity mentioned was Adobe Connect, the online tutorial rooms for module tuition. This platform is used both for SHL workshops and for module tutorials.

Unlike face-to-face, campus-based universities, at the OU tutorials are supplementary and optional, and they vary in frequency and delivery depending on the module and tutor. All participants raised the point that module tutorials tended to involve only a few students, and that they were often delivered in a lecture-style format which was met with mixed responses.

“Some of the tutorials have been really hard work. … I remember feeling quite stressed during the online tutorials…. Tutors run them in completely different ways – he probably thought this was great. He did a PowerPoint of 26 pages. I was shocked and it was diabolical, whereas another tutor just said – this and that and said well I’m not waffling on, and then said what do you want to ask me?”

[Sally]

While students could meet other students at tutorials, the relationship could be short-lived and focused on the module or qualification, for example in her interview Sally talks about students attending tutorials and then not engaging in other spaces, and the time limited contact of the SHL writing retreat.

“But did I come away [from the tutorial] and have any contact with anyone after? No, they didn’t come on the forum.”

[Sally]

When asked to compare SHL to other opportunities the most common one mentioned by interview participants were OU tutorials. However, these were different in terms of content and also tone, with one participant saying that tutorials were:

“Better with lots of participants. Awkward with only a few”

[Laura]

One participant explained that tutorials could be related to a sense of stress because they focused on the module and assessment:

“Did they make me feel part of an OU community? I hesitate. It didn’t. Because when you are studying you are very wired up and stressed....”

[Sally]
It was not only the tone and focus that differentiated tutorials from SHL events. There was a sense that where others were seen to be doing well, it could be difficult for students to admit that they didn’t understand. This not only meant that the students who needed help were unlikely to get it, but that the perception that everyone understood prevailed.

“In tutor ones – it was anonymized – you could do a tick – have you started a task… only problem was that they didn’t go into detail and help the people who needed it.”

[Laura]

Being able to articulate that you needed help or that things were not going well was very important for participants in the chat at SHL events:

“A few people had exactly the same questions and problems I had, and it was reassuring to know that I wasn’t alone.”

[Claire]

Interview participants commented on the human element of SHL; the personalities whom they had seen on Facebook or as names in module materials were brought to life:

“I’m seeing students, and your title is lecturer and I’m seeing OU staff. You’re in a screen, I can’t touch you, but I can listen to you”

[Sally]

Despite some students knowing each other from tutorials or other OU settings, the basis of the relationship tended to be on the area of study. Although there were other opportunities for students to engage with each other in a variety of ways such as forums and Facebook, the module tutorials did not engender the same sense of connection or community as SHL because they were aligned with goals, often related to assessment. This could be down to the social nature of communication at SHL events which was not as evident in module tutorials, and even less evident on forums (although perhaps not Facebook).

With tutorials the main purpose was the information. I didn’t have friendly chats like at SHL. I was there to focus on the material.

[Darius]

Bearing in mind the earlier discussion about the distinction between acquiring knowledge and learning, tutorials appeared to focus on acquiring knowledge from a tutor. There was limited interaction with others to discuss or think through ideas, and interaction could be limited.

In the tutorials it was not so much talking to others, we listened to the tutor and then in the end we could ask questions. The contact between students and tutors was really rare.

[Anita]

SHL, as an OU brand, appears to be a safe space as this student explains, but the online nature of participation adds a more important element in terms of security.

“this feels like a decent safe space. It sounds naïve, but I assume it was safe because it is the OU and we have all paid to be there. But that is a naïve thought. I feel safe being on a
computer. I’d feel more unsafe in a classroom if there were people I didn’t like than being tucked away in your own home”.

[Laura]

In terms of online spaces, SHL study skills workshops and module tutorials both happen on the same platform, but the learning outcomes and motivations for attendance seem to be very different. In terms of community and belonging, the social nature of communication at SHL events appears to differentiate them from tutorials, and it may also be that the extra-curricular content at SHL events creates more opportunity for commonality between the many students from different backgrounds. This was discussed in the theme of belonging where the role that community played in building confidence, making comparisons, and learning was explored.

6.3.3.2 Social media – socializing on the margins

Research question 2 focuses on the comparison between SHL and other elements of the student experience, and in addition to the OU-based online spaces discussed above, this was explored in terms of online spaces outside of the institution. SNSs, mainly Facebook and WhatsApp groups are commonly set up by students for other students, and these are based on modules, qualifications or societies. Apart from the official OU Facebook groups, these student-initiated groups are not moderated by the OU. Many students engage with them because they offer a known and accessible way to connect with other students, and in this sense are based on a shared purpose and the notion of peer support. While the social side of these connections can be useful, the lack of moderation and structure means that they can become unwieldy, as one participant explained:

“I find that people get distracted and pull away from the subject. That’s why I tend to stay away from Facebook.”

[Claire]

Some students said that they used Facebook because it was the only space where other students were:

“Do I use Facebook, yes, why? Because that will be the only place I can actually see these people that I can see on the screen. That’s where people are. That’s why they aren’t on the tutor group forum. The negative side of Facebook there are student groups and running down tutors, discussing marks, does my head in.”

[Sally]

However, the extent to which what came across in these online spaces, and the way in which they reflected on the students using them was accurate, was questioned:

“The reality is when you have been on the internet, people are coming across as dreadful on social media, they may be really nice people. In an interview with you they do come across more nicely.”

[Sally]
“Facebook can create ‘false impressions’ of people”.

[Claire]

A common complaint about Facebook is that people boast about or share their grades “tell[ing] people how well they are doing” [Laura]. This participant explained that she felt this could be off-putting to students. While it is ok to ask for help in some contexts, particularly ones that promote informal discussion, there was some sense of self-moderation, particularly in terms of sharing marks:

“I got a good mark for that. But I didn’t rub it in. You’ve got to be careful with people.”

[Claire]

However, SNSs can be useful to generate connections that are then taken into a more private space and there appears to be a distinction between Facebook groups and WhatsApp groups;

“I knew people through FB who were near me and if they have something in common you can add them to WhatsApp and you can talk there because it’s more private and the forums, you can read there, and there were lists and you could read and see what people were talking about.”

[Anita]

While there were some WhatsApp groups for the entire module, the structure of these networks was overwhelming in a large group because of the way messages were presented, whereas Facebook offered a way to structure threads and conversations. Not much was discussed in terms of how these communities operated other than that they tended to offer community without delivering community, and so despite the desire for students to connect they were not for everyone. For most interview participants, at a surface level SNSs had the appeal of offering community. However, the downsides experienced were that information could be incorrect or inappropriate since the groups were not moderated. The volume of students and communication could be overwhelming, and there were concerns about performances of identity (such as the ‘perfect’ student) and the potential to forget that there was a real recipient at the receiving end of an abrupt message.

The next section covers another form of online communication that is specific to the OU – forums.

6.3.3.3 Tasks and notices (asynchronous)

OU students have access to a range of OU forums which have different functions: spaces to communicate, to relay information, or to perform tasks related to assessment. In most cases, students are encouraged to view their module forums (for the whole group of students on a module) and their tutor forums (which includes the tutor and a small group of typically 15-25 students). Tutor group forums can be used to transfer information but are not commonly a thriving space for discussion.
“In the last 2 modules there has been no one on the tutor group forum.”

[Sally]

However, they are an important space, particularly if students want reliable information.

“I try and give more priority to the forums because there is a monitor and someone monitoring from the university, so if someone writes something that isn’t so accurate then the person will immediately say well it’s more like this, so you feel safe that the information is more accurate there.”

[Anita]

Laura talks about attending “only useful forums” by which she means the module café which is an online threaded forum.

However, the downside of these spaces is that, unlike Facebook, there can be a delay between posting and receiving a response;

“On the main forums you have to wait”

[Darius]

Despite the lack of immediacy, there are other uses of forums whereby students collaborate in meaningful activities, based on a shared goal and purpose.

“You had to do activities. You could see how other people were progressing – you had to find an article and post on the forum about others’ work. You could see what others were doing and that they were going ahead of you. A bit painful at times. But it was good because it was interesting reading their work. It was useful typing to each other.”

[Laura]

Another student conceptualises this kind of activity whereby students gave feedback to each other as sharing:

“[On a level one psychology module], we have a mini project where we have to go away and do our results and we had a collaborative forum and give some feedback on our results and others’ results. They aren’t marked or graded but once you join in and share ideas it’s really useful. You share points with people.”

[Andrew]

For these online spaces to be supportive to students, it appears that there needs to be an appropriate volume of students who reply to each other and a timely way in which responses are posted. These themes are individually necessary, but not sufficient, to create community, but when they come together as they do in SHL, they work together to create community. The concept of moderation of the space is an important aspect; moderation shapes the rules of engagement and therefore the shared values and respect necessary in a community.
6.3.3.4 Summary

There are a variety of reasons that online spaces feel secure, and while moderation is part of it, timeliness, the purpose of the space and the tone and perceived safety of the space are also key factors.

6.3.4 Chat logs and interviews: Addressing the research questions

Interviews developed the findings from the chatlogs and allowed comparison between these what happened at live events with reflections from the interviews. Interview data also provided a window through which to consider the relationship between community and student identity (RQ3).

The chatlogs addressed RQ1 and demonstrated the way in which community was established in SHL through shared repertoires and interactions, and the interviews added further demonstrating the value that peer and institutional support offered.

In response to RQ2 about the student experience, the interview data highlighted the importance of volume of people and the friendly tone that facilitated opportunities to interact. While some aspect of SHL were compared with non OU-moderated spaces, the content of sessions appeared to be a key driver in attendance.

Exploring student identity, the focus of RQ3, produced some interesting findings. The data revealed behaviours synonymous with being a student, but students appeared to consider these in more functional than relational terms. Aspects that could be seen as part of identity formation such as sharing concerns about study or offering advice, were presented by interviewees in terms of achieving their end goal, rather than as mechanisms creating a student identity.

Finally, in terms of RQ4, SHL and a sense of belonging, it was evident from the data that community and belonging were of value, since having something in common with others, even at a minimal level, enabled students to connect with each other. Connections and exchanges could be more social at events that were fun, had shared practices and where there were a lot of people.

These themes and sub-themes are related and intertwined and are explored further through thematic network analysis.

6.5 Findings: Thematic network maps

The final stage of analysis, thematic network analysis holistically incorporated both sets of data, and other surfaced aspects that did not specifically relate to any one theme but were important in answering the research questions. Although the chat-log findings influenced the
semi-structured interview, there were similarities between the emergent themes but some of the boundaries were blurred as outcomes crossed lines between the themes. For this reason, it was important to carry out a final analysis that included both sources and that recognised the different contributions they made.

The aim of this research was to explore the value of SHL in the context of ODL, and while one RQ focused on this value specifically, the other three focused on aspects of the student experience, namely The overall student experience, SHL in facilitating student identity and belonging to a community. It was seen that identity was perceived in a different way and that there was something unique in terms of the moderation of the online space, and so three thematic network maps were created that represented the emergent themes from both the interview and chat-log analysis. While the first two thematic maps are clearly aligned with two RQ’s the third map which is about the impact of moderation in online spaces was an important aspect emerging from both sets of data, and it therefore warranted a map. Identity on the other hand was perceived in a distinct way and therefore was incorporated in other maps. The thematic maps included all of the emergent findings even though these may have had different basic or organising themes, but there were three clear areas that were central, and so three maps were created:

1. How does SHL fit in with OU student challenges?
2. Belonging
3. Facilitating community in online spaces

6.5.1 Thematic network map 1: How does SHL fit in with OU student challenges
Figure 15. Thematic network map: How does SHL fit in with OU student challenges?

This network map brings together the four organising themes which relate to the challenges of learning that emerged from the data as important for part-time and distance-learning students.

The first organising theme refers to the goal-focused nature of part-time and distance-learning students. It was evident from both sources of data that due to other commitments and restrictions on time, it was common for students to prioritise their individual work and modules, and within these boundaries, they focused on assessment (6.3.3.1).

The second theme relates to the safe space in which learning can happen and the common practices that ultimately facilitate community. The chat-logs demonstrated that when students felt comfortable, they were able to discuss serious issues in addition to the trivial. The interviews highlighted that the value of community was to give and receive advice from people who were similar. This may elevate the status of peer information, since fellow students were dealing with similar challenges and could therefore be seen as speaking with some sense of authority, particularly if they were further along in their qualification. This theme is about learning in a safe environment, a subjective idea, but in this context, denotes a place with clear boundaries, an inclusive and friendly environment, and where participants are encouraged to connect with others at an appropriate level.

The third organising theme relates to common practices and values. Students at SHL events bonded when talking about the common practices which related to shared behaviours. Some of these were unique aspects of study at the OU, such as having to complete TMAs, or just
having to manage time and stay motivated because they were studying in addition to other commitments. This aspect had the most explicit link with community, and the behaviours, the collective repertoires, informed this theme.

The fourth organising theme is about proactive learning which includes the notion that in distance learning, students need to be motivated, persistent with have regular approach to study. When they are studying, learning has to be active in terms of comprehending the information that is presented in a variety of formats. If the interaction with the material is passive, little can be understood or retained.

6.5.2 Themtic network map 2: Belonging

![Thematic network map: Belonging vs isolation.](image)

When belonging is not fostered, isolation can be experienced. The first organising theme includes various aspects of belonging and there are some key questions: What do we belong to, who are ‘we’, and how are we all the same?

These questions were significant to students who are learning in a virtual space where the parameters of the group and basis of inclusion were nebulous. Interview participants
discussed feeling reassured when others had the same concerns, and this was also evident in the chatlogs.

The diversity and volume of students participating in an online space was seen to be reassuring for participants. Most interview participants disclosed that they felt a sense of comparative isolation, associated with the idea that others were more connected than they were. This sense, that others have more opportunity or that they are succeeding to a greater effect appears to lead to feelings of inferiority. It was therefore seen as helpful to be able to discuss issues and challenges with others at events to feel that this was a normal and acceptable part of the distance-learning journey. Findings from interviews (6.3.1.4) and evidence from the chat logs (6.2.3) showed that when problems were shared and identified with by others it appeared that they were reduced; group offered empathy and problem solving within the community.

6.5.3 Thematic network map 3: Facilitating community in online spaces

![Thematic Network Map](image-url)

This thematic network map brings together the different components of community in moderated and unmoderated spaces, student identity and the volume of participants and
timeliness of interaction. Spaces that are moderated and unmoderated by the OU revealed different aspects in terms of each of these organising themes.

This links with the concept of safe spaces in map 1, and moderation is one way to establish a sense of safety. In network map 3 the focus is on moderation, either in terms of moderators determining and maintaining appropriate boundaries, but in network map 1 it is about the way that a safe space enables students to feel able to learn.

6.5.4 Summary: Thematic network maps

The thematic network analysis resulted in thematic network maps based on the chatlogs and interviews to make further interpretations about the value of SHL events, the role that identity played in the process, the comparison between events as part of the student experience and the way in which community could be scaffolded. Map 1 demonstrated that since students were proactive in their learning and were goal-focused, extracurricular activities were prioritised only if they supported these aspects. At events, it was important that there was a safe and supportive space in which to learn, and where others had a common purpose, which also contributed to the sense of community.

Map 2 was about belonging, and this was predominantly expressed in terms of identity. Belonging was contrasted with isolation. In considering individual and collective identity, the data showed that for students ‘who we are’ and ‘what we belong to’ are useful notions in imagining the collective community, and also in considering the integration of the individual in a group.

The third map focused on the nature of the learning space, and aspects which are important in terms of creating a welcoming place such as synchronicity, large numbers of people and student identity. SHL combined positive aspects of other online spaces in the institution; students valued moderation in this space, which would not have been as appropriate in other informal spaces.

6.6 Findings in relation to research questions

Before entering into detailed discussions of these findings in terms of the literature and the research aims, it is worth taking an overview of how the findings relate to the research questions.

RQ1 focuses on the value of participating at SHL events. It was seen from the chatlogs that value related to community and receiving information, whereas the interviews demonstrated that being able to communicate in spaces that were moderated offered a safe environment to promote learning. The goal-focused approach meant that students found value in the SHL approach of reinforcing skills and allowing them to apply knowledge to be more successful in their studies.
RQ2 about the student experience was mainly addressed through the interview data. It was evident that students have different experiences of learning opportunities, and that SHL differed from other opportunities to connect in terms of the volume of participants, the tone, and the focus of learning.

RQ3 focuses on student identity. While it appeared from the data that OU students did not view being a student as a primary identity, they none the less performed the behaviours that would typically be associated with being a student.

Community and sense of belonging are the focus of RQ4, and in responding to this question, the data indicated that collective repertoire, interactivity and recognising others facilitated a sense of community. This sense of community appeared to be important, since many students disclosed in interviews that they felt isolated. Belonging was seen as the antithesis to feeling isolated, and since much distance learning happens on an individual basis, community offered a way for individual students to make sense of how they may be doing in terms of motivation and success.

In the next chapter, the findings are discussed and developed in the context of the literature that was introduced in chapter 3.
Chapter 7. Discussion

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter the findings from the previous chapter are discussed in the context of the RQs and literature. Initially, there is a discussion about community and sense of belonging, and the extent to which this exists in the OU’s distance-learning environment (RQ4). The findings related to creating a student identity are explored (RQ3), aspects of creating identity that distance-learning students share with more traditional students are discussed in light of the specific nature of distance learning (RQ2) and the ways in which students signal their attendance to virtual learning experiences.

The word ‘attendance’ takes on a dual meaning in these settings, and is seen as both a noun and a verb (Krause, 2005). Furthermore, in online settings, attendance has various degrees of engagement, from those actively engaging and participating to those lurking, observing the scene from the background (Hine, 2003). Issues relating to the OU’s open access policy and student confidence are raised as a result of the findings relating to imposter syndrome. Finally, the value SHL has in enabling a sense of belonging and community is discussed (RQ1).

7.2 Community and sense of belonging

This section addresses whether interaction with/attendance at SHL events relates to a sense of belonging to the academic institution (the OU). In this thesis, as discussed in section 3.4.1, community is seen as the object of belonging, and is defined a connected group of people who share the same purpose, have mutual respect and are subject to issues of power and hierarchy evident in an organized group of individuals. The findings indicate that community was present at SHL events, which was seen in both the first theme in the chatlog analysis (6.2.1) and in one of the subthemes of the interviews, as a place to be together (6.3.2).

7.2.1 The individual and the community – making belonging happen

Coates and McCormick (2014) had argued that a community was more than a collective of people interacting in a given time and place, and while it was evident that there were many participants at SHL events, it was important to differentiate interactions as a result of a large volume of people interacting from a sense of community between the members of the group. The CoP framework (Wenger, 2000) was useful in identifying aspects of effective communities, and it was discussed that CoPs required interaction between members to establish a sense of shared values, respect and acceptance. The question about what people belong ‘to’ and how they identify as part of a community was explored in thematic network map 2 (6.5.2). There were several organising themes including ‘what do we belong to’, ‘who are we’, ‘how are we all the same’, and ‘isolation’. These organising themes relate to aspects
of identity performance (Goffman, 1978) and group behaviours, such as interaction and validation by the group.

In terms of introductions at events (chatlog theme 6, 6.2.6), the chatlogs demonstrated the initial stages of community as interaction led to connections. There also appeared to be a familiarity at SHL events in terms of recognition (6.2.1), and this appeared to create a safe and familiar space where known behaviours and discourses were expected, allowing new members to join and to reinforce the group’s identity. While there were differences between students (different modules, studying from different places, for example), the commonality of being an OU student was clear. This links with McMillan’s (1996) idea of a spirit of belonging and a spirit of shared experience which binds a group together through shared purpose and transcends the need for group participants to like each other. However, while there was one broad community whose membership included everyone studying with the OU, the evidence of chatlogs also shows that there were smaller communities based on more specific commonalities.

It was discussed in the interviews that students may belong to several groups, and the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging to those groups was also seen to vary between groups and over time. It was also identified, through interviews, that there were differences in terms of a sense of community within groups depending on the group’s function (6.3.1.1.). In the interviews, some students said they found module-wide WhatsApp groups very distracting and unhelpful, and so some students selected individuals from those groups who had a similar agenda, creating a subgroup/different group (6.3.3.2). The notion of shifting groups and membership was also seen in the chatlogs.

It is evident different groups formed and shifted within the broad grouping of OU students. This echoes the concepts of “them” and “us”, or in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986). The interactions allowing people to form subgroups and choose to join or not join them, coupled with commonalities, create ties that bind individuals into the broad community.

The data demonstrates that in creating this community, both good and bad experiences can create bonds. Therefore, an emerging conclusion is that where both sides of the experience are present, the bonds created lead more readily to a sense of community. It would be interesting to explore further whether this is because having both positive and negative experiences simply creates more shared experiences, or there is something more to it than that.

7.2.2 Community through shared repertoires

In-groups were not the only way community was established; shared repertoires, discussed in 3.5.1, are a central tenet of both CoPs (Wenger, 2000) and online communities (Goodfellow, 2005). Interaction (6.2.3) was important in facilitating community, and shared repertoires were one way to do this. In the findings, shared jokes and an appreciation of common student possessions like stationery and cake were mentioned by some participants to facilitate their
inclusion in discussion or to include others. These were performances of behaviours that signalled attendance, not only through being a participatory voice within the group as the shared experience was constructed and purpose of attending was fulfilled, but also in terms of behaving like a student, discussed further in 7.3.

The notion of trust was also recognized as an important factor in establishing community and is related to shared repertoires because trust is implicated in rules of engagement (Rovai, 2002a; Wenger, 2000; McMillan, 1996). Creating a supportive environment was seen to happen in the chatlogs through the inclusion of all students and the celebration of diversity. It appears that shared practices are inclusive behaviours to encourage people to feel relaxed, at ease, and able to contribute, as noted by Goodfellow (2005). Being able to express diverse opinions about something minor like food, meant that students felt they could then ask questions about their important concerns, and this facilitated learning. This shows how setting a scene for conversation, capitalising on repertoires, and developing them for discussion can provide a tangible discussion entry point for every participant. Combining the findings here, that shared repertoires provide an opening to engage, and the views in the literature cited above about engagement and trust helping to form community, it emerges that using shared repertoires to offer an entry point for interaction not only aids in developing community, but also aids individual learning.

7.2.3 Community is about support

Support is central to the notion of community (Tinto, 1997) and is also featured in the CoP model as instrumental in community (Wenger, 2000).

This research revealed two important sources of support: from the institution and from other students. In terms of institutional support, aside from scaffolding events to facilitate community, interview participants explained that the experience of seeing people and knowing about available support alleviated anxieties. Information was also part of events that helped students negotiate new terrains (6.3.1.4). In terms of support from other students, participants in the chatlog expressed that they were pleased to meet others, to feel supported and to feel part of a group. Some said that SHL was the only place to meet this group of people. Thus, a second emergent conclusion is that volume of participation and diversity are important in support, and that through supporting others, a sense of value in a community can be established.

7.2.4 Community happens in real time

The opportunity to interact with others at SHL events enhanced a sense of belonging because of the synchronous nature of the events. The findings show that connections with others in real-time appears to be very valuable. In the chatlogs, interaction facilitated a sense of inclusion and belonging (6.2.3), and in the interviews, participants stated that the
synchronous chat enabled a sense of place (6.3.2.2), even when students were physically distanced.

Belonging is not just the inclusion within a categorised group, it involves activity on behalf of the individual, and that activity is what links the individual to the group through the acceptance of the exchange. This notion is expressed in Goodenow’s definition of belonging which includes the idea that acceptance is important (Goodenow, 1993). This is another reason why real-time interaction was so important, and in this study, it was reinforced that interacting using communal repertoires enabled people to feel a sense of inclusion and acceptance in the group.

However, interactions appeared to be limited to the space in which they occurred, bringing into question the longevity of communities that are placeless. While much has been considered about online communities in comparison to place-based communities (Rhiengold, 1993), little is known about the extent to which community lingers in virtual settings. Goodfellow (2005) argues that the word community implies a sense of longevity and therefore recognition, but in this study, the interaction at live events appears to create a time-limited community, although the bonds did not dissipate entirely, since there was a sense of familiarity in the chatlogs where participants recognised each other from previous events. In the case of SHL, an important behaviour to re-establish community is to refer to previous interactions when students connect again at the start of a session. There is an emergent theory, then, that collective memories and repertoires not only enable new members to join the community, but also reawaken bonds and reconnect previous participants with the community.

7.2.5 Measuring community and belonging

This research points to some of the reasons for the OU receiving below average responses to the NSS questions about belonging. For face-to-face students, belonging seems a simple case of ‘being present in the same group’. For distance-learning students, belonging may be a more nuanced and, in their more goal-oriented focus, a less relevant concept, which the NSS questions do not capture.

As discussed earlier, the literature proposes links between a sense of belonging and student engagement (Trowler, 2010) and student success (Thomas, 2012). The relationship between student engagement and attainment includes the idea that measures of behaviour such as attendance, on time task completion and engagement with other aspects of university life correlate with higher levels of engagement. However, while a sense of belonging can foster engagement, engagement does not always foster belonging. It was discussed in the literature review that the most satisfied students are not always the highest achievers (Rienties and Totenel, 2016). Models of student engagement were seen in dimensional terms (Trowler, 2010), emotional, behavioural and cognitive, and the behaviours associated with student engagement differed from the behaviours associated with belonging. At SHL, relevant behaviours were not as simple as the physical attendance in face-to-face settings (e.g.
attending lectures), but a different kind of attendance was important, more to do with interaction, sharing experiences and empathising with peers. The evidence indicated that the performance of behaviours such as shared repertoires that facilitated belonging were the mediator between feeling emotionally engaged and cognitively engaged with learning.

It could therefore be argued that in the distance-learning environment the dimensions Trowler (2010) proposes are not distinct. Behaviours combine aspects of engagement and belonging which has a positive impact on cognitive aspects of study, because students feel supported and a valued part of a collective.

### 7.2.6 Summary

OU students are individuals who often feel isolated, but the opportunity to share, even bad experiences, can create a sense of community. Shared repertoires, even simple and non-academic ones, have an important role to play because not only do they allow entry into the community, they facilitate individual questions and thus individual learning. Attendance in virtual environments is a behaviour that can be experienced in different ways, and whereas attendance at a face-to-face event may not always signal engagement, attendance virtually necessitates engagement through participation and interaction and hence facilitates a sense of belonging to the community in which students feel supported.

### 7.3 Student identity

This section explores whether interaction in/attendance at SHL events relates to a sense of identity as a student. It explores the questions:

a. How important is student identity to students who attend SHL events?
b. To what extent is it important to interact with other students in terms of perceiving a ‘student community’?

#### 7.3.1 The notion of student identity for distance-learning students

Wenger (2000) argued that the experience of learning was transformative, and as such it is explicitly linked to identity. It was previously discussed that the performance of typical student behaviours, such as attending lectures, submitting work or being involved in institutionally related activities or societies, are measurements of student success in the student engagement narrative (Thomas, 2017, Trowler, 2010). Yet, as Butcher (2015) established, many OU students felt excluded from typical notions of HE, and, although distance-learners may exhibit similar behaviours to campus-based students, they do this on their own. The findings of this research show that this is a distinguishing factor in terms of identity. It may be that, as McMillan (1996) argues in the context of a psychological sense of
belonging, the need to see oneself in the eyes and responses of others is fundamental to the development of a student identity. Goodenow, in his definition of community also focuses on “the important part of life and activity of the classroom” (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80), emphasising the physical and relational aspects of educational community.

An underlying assumption in this research was that there would be a relationship between student identity, belonging and community. This was based on the established link between transformative learning and identity, and on the behaviours that were evident in literature from face-to-face, campus-based institutions. In these institutions, it was seen that community was related largely to students’ shared activities and practices that facilitated a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). These were all identified as motivating factors in terms of student success. These practices included living arrangements, attendance at lectures, and other activities that were typical of full-time students in a campus university. Many students interviewed in this research study identified with other roles to a greater extent than they identified as a student. Yet Baxter and Britton (2001) argued that mature students did in fact develop a sense of student identity because studying shifted the focus from other roles in the household (Baxter & Britton, 2001).

Identities are performed, and while in the case of distance-learning students, a student identity may not be long-lasting, in being provided with the space to behave like a student, learners had the opportunity to enact a student identity. From this study, it emerges that even while student identity may be temporary and perhaps even fleeting, for non-traditional learners, the performance of behaviours associated with a student identity may be enough to motivate them.

None of the participants who were interviewed for this study had a strong sense of student identity. Instead, they saw themselves as learners or someone who was studying, reinforcing the idea that the behaviour superseded the identity. None the less, while a student identity may not be a core identity for mature, part-time or distance-learners, this study shows that feeling like a student and performing those behaviours associated with a student identity created a sense of belonging. This appeared to have value and was associated with being part of something, of being accepted, and validated in a group. This may be important to a part-time student who tends not to experience a strong, stand-alone identity (Kahu, 2013) whereas for traditional students, student identity can be argued to be all-embracing. The chatlog analysis supported this idea, showing that through participation, individuals who contributed appeared to feel they belonged to a group. It was seen that anxieties about new activities, such as distance learning, were alleviated by talking to others and acquiring information about how study at the OU works at the same time.

Since it is moderated by the OU but has a social setting, SHL is positioned somewhere between the social and formal platforms in which student community operates. A finding of this research is that operating between these two systems has an impact on the identity that participating students develop, as discussed in the third thematic network map (6.5.3). In behaving like a student, for example taking notes, talking about highlighting textbooks, and engaging in other communal repertoires, participants had an opportunity to perform that identity (6.3.3.2) and have this validated in the eyes of others. This could explain why the
chatlog was filled with messages about feeling like a student when they were performing these behaviours.

In line with the literature, the findings show less evidence of student identity in part-time, mature and distance-learning populations compared with their younger, campus-based counterparts. Despite this, behaving like a student was seen to facilitate a sense of inclusion within an academic community, and being included offered a sense of support and strength in the group which could motivate students to persist.

7.3.2 Facilitating student identity through shared purpose

The purpose and content of events also played a part in the performance of identity. The chat was shaped by the programme, and the nature of the event determined the parameters of discussion (chatlog theme 9; 6.2.6). This has relevance in terms of the distinction made between moderated and unmoderated spaces. Students engaging in OU-moderated spaces attended with a purpose and were often acting out a student identity through what were considered appropriate behaviours in that context, for example asking questions or seeking clarification. Spaces such as forums (6.3.3.3) or tutorials (6.3.3.1) were primarily for module-related issues, and therefore there was less scope to interact socially because of the purpose and because membership was confined to the module. These focused activities did not allow for socialising, which was the opposite experience to unmoderated spaces. Interview participants said that social media groups organised by students for a module had social discussions which overwhelmed the module-based focus that was the premise of the group (6.3.3.2). This suggests that it is important to provide supportive and moderated spaces for the performance of identity within or beyond the module.

Chapman (2013) found that mature students developed what she termed a “novice” academic identity, and that despite feeling different from younger students, their otherness was dissipated when there was a shared purpose. She wrote: “for the mature students, any sense of belonging and validity to participate in higher education needs to come from a level of engagement within the subject discipline and integration with the community of practice” (Chapman, 2013 p. 55).

The findings of this research demonstrate that purpose was involved in the cohesion of a CoP and was also a focal point for discussion, facilitated by communal repertoires. Purpose was also related to the type of communication, and in formal spaces there is understandably less opportunity to engage in community. Therefore, it is important that mature, part-time and distance-learning students have informal but moderated spaces that focus on a common purpose for participants to enact student behaviours.

7.3.3 Conquering imposter syndrome

A sense of being accepted in the group of students was expressed as important by interview participants and by those who contributed sentiments about feeling accepted and feeling like
a student in the chatlogs. This acceptance relates to the value of community as described by both McMillan (1996) and Wenger (2000). Negotiating different identities was important in Chapman’s (2013) study, in which she argued that participants could conceivably have had doubts about whether their place in the student community was legitimate. Similarly, in a diverse and unseen population of learners, OU students may question their place in the community. This echoes Chapman’s (2013) findings that mature students felt a sense of imposter syndrome which “can lead to, at best, a feeling of lack of entitlement but at worst a fear of exposure” (p. 48). The open access policy of the OU means that many students may embark on qualifications with a lack of confidence. In fact, confidence was a word many students used in the chat when discussing what they had gained from attending events (6.2.3), as well as in interviews about the value of attending SHL events (6.3.2.2). The entry requirements at other HEIs may enable students to feel that in achieving these they have a legitimate base from which to start, whereas in an open-access setting, this may not always be the case.

Feelings of inferiority, described in 6.3.2.3 as a basis for comparison, included the notion that everyone else was doing well. This study shows that it is, in fact, important for students to be able to make comparisons with others in order to feel part of a group, and in establishing similar issues of confidence, and understanding that others had similar questions, they were able to participate in the group and thereby feel a sense of inclusion and belonging.

In contrast to feelings of inferiority or being an imposter, validation is about normalising aspects of the student experience that are common but unseen, for example feeling uncertain. Validation can be obtained through extracurricular networks which offer support to students unattached to curriculum and assessment (Ramsey & Brown, 2018). For distance-learning students, validation comes from recognising that despite feeling isolated, they are supported by belonging to a like-minded community with a shared purpose. Establishing that other students had similar questions, concerns or challenges was reassuring for participants who consequently felt less isolated and less alone (6.3.2.2.). It appears that SHL is such a space where it is possible and indeed acceptable to discuss concerns and anxieties, partly because the space is supportive but also because many of these issues are included in the discussions which in turn influences audience participation. This space was considered different from tutorials where interviewees felt it was not acceptable to raise questions or voice concerns because there was a belief that everyone else understood the content (6.3.3.1).

7.3.4 Summary

For mature, part-time and distance-learning students, student identity is transient (Butcher, 2015) and bound to behaviours or performances of identity. The performance of more primary identity roles may impact on student identity formations, but the opportunity to behave like a student appears to be valuable. Behaving like a student can involve formal or informal activities, but formal ones have been shown to create a sense of shared purpose and equitable participation for students who may feel ‘othered’ (Chapman, 2013). Regarding validation, in virtual environments it was particularly important for students to have the
opportunity to interact and therefore establish a bond with the community through shared cognitions and experiences which may be positive or negative.

7.4 Student Hub Live as part of the student experience

This section addresses interaction at SHL events, and the way that this fits within the student experience overall (including forums, tutorials, course content and assessment, and distance-learning)?

7.4.1 In their goal-orientated approach, distance learners need to be proactive

Irrespective of mode of delivery, whether it be face to face, at a distance or online, in order to learn, this research demonstrates that distance-learning students believe they need to be proactive in their learning, viewing it as self-regulated and goal-orientated (6.3.1). This viewpoint was based on interview participants experiences and assumptions that students in traditional universities were scheduled to attend learning opportunities such as lectures, seminars and tutorials (6.3.1.1), whereas distance-learners needed to be self-motivated in order to attend to the material in order to progress.

The findings from interviews revealed that while there were surface reasons for attending the sessions related to content, these did not hold up in terms of the resources made available at events. It is reasonable to posit that there was more going on than simply accessing information, and that for students the value of the SHL sessions lies more in the opportunity to explore their information needs in a supportive group environment. These findings align with Vygotsky’s socio-cultural approach (1978) in which it is argued that learning is more effective in a group environment.

Many interview participants claimed to prioritise course-related content over study and academic skills (6.3.1.3), reinforcing Owens et al., (2009) findings around goal orientation, and for this reason they found it challenging to identify and deal with deficits in skills. However, even if students did work through skills at source (i.e. within the module), the findings indicate that there may still be value in attending SHL events aside from learning about the content because they could rehearse or practice skills and behaviours.

Distinctions were made between informal spaces and formal spaces such as tutorials and forums which were also goal-focused but were narrower since they focused on the module. Interview participants experienced tutorials in a different way, particularly when they were delivered like a lecture and consequently the format was not conducive to engagement. This links with the distinction between moderated and non-moderated spaces discussed in 7.4.4. Thus, an emergent conclusion is that goal-oriented students may not always identify the factors contributing to their success, and could therefore benefit from hybrid learning environments which combine activities which complement their direct goals.
7.4.2 Despite isolation in distance learning, there is solidarity

Many students may feel isolated or alone because the reality of studying with the OU is that they are learning alone, which requires that they engage with the material and understand it, while having to motivate themselves to continue with a choice they have voluntarily made. The isolation associated with distance learning, and the sense of belonging when part of a group were topics that were initiated by most participants in the interviews (6.3.2.1), and are topics widely discussed in the literature (Butcher, 2015; Thomas, 2015; Delahunty Verenikina & Jones, 2014). These issues were described by interview participants as relating to motivation; isolation and the need to self-motivate were sometimes seen as drivers of success but on the other hand they were also barriers when life got in the way of learning. Many participants expressed challenges with fitting study into the other commitments of life, and this meant that socialising with other students was less important than study-related tasks, particularly those linked to assessment.

In line with Butcher’s (2015) research, all interview participants expressed varying feelings of isolation as a result of studying alone, and this may be why students appeared to value learning not only with each other, but from each other. SHL events facilitated this interchange with scaffolded discussions that steered the conversation between taught theoretical content and the opportunity to share and receive ideas from others. Isolation was more than just feeling alone in one’s studies. The lack of contact with other students also meant that some students felt excluded from imagined interactions (for example the international students who imagined a thriving UK community), unable to compare their progress with others, and convinced that the majority of students were succeeding and that they were alone in their challenges. Imagining community is even more important in virtual terms than in other contexts, but the findings suggest that the imagined community that Anderson (2006) proposes is not always a support, particularly in distance learning.

Belonging is important for some students, but it is conceptualised in a different way from belonging to a face-to-face university where the community is physically evident, and some activities are compulsory. The extent to which belonging is important varies, but for those that do find it important, talking to other students and gaining strength from their support appears to be the most important component of belonging.

While there were differences in the challenges that individual students faced, one thing unified them as part of what Tajfel and Turner (1986) would term an in-group, that is their choice to study with the OU. They were ‘OU people’ (6.3.2). The fact that there were many of them, and that they were progressing with their studies, helped to build confidence (6.2.3), especially when they heard from other students who were ahead of them on the qualification pathway.

It could therefore be argued that community matters more to mature or distance-learning students than a sense of student identity. Participants spoke about behaviours and experiences, not student identity. Evidence indicates these students found access to a student community beneficial and that it offered strength and solidarity.
7.4.3 A space to process ideas together

As part of the student experience, SHL was aligned with ideas around proactive learning, as a solution to specific requirements to supplement the student experience (2.3.1). Whereas forums or tutorials were generally seen as quiet spaces, SHL had many participants and the volume of chat and the more socially focused environment meant that students felt that they could meet other like-minded people. Some aspects of SHL also aligned with the goal-orientated approach common in part-time and distance-learning where the focus was on assessment and time was limited (Owens et al., 2009). In the first and third interview themes in 6.3.3 which considered the spaces for connection both inside and outside the institution, SHL was compared with other elements of the OU student experience in detail in terms of accessing information about the institution when navigating new terrains (6.3.1.4).

One way to maximize potential interaction, an important aspect of community (Goodfellow, 2005), and to facilitate a space that feels safe, is to include topics that everyone can address in one way or another. These entry points were factored into all SHL events and the discussions about cake and food were examples of the use of the collective repertoires that were initiated by the community. The shared experience with shared practices and meanings creates an environment where people can talk, play and act out identities (Hine, 2003). Chatlog participants spoke about some of the activities they did while participating in events, such as taking notes (some of these were in notebooks specifically for SHL events) and recording sources of information from events (6.2.3).

Since SHL events are extracurricular, and often cover content that is available in other forms, it is useful to understand the reasons that students feel they benefit from this kind of learning experience. There are assumptions made of students and the education system where students are seen as receptors of knowledge. In some cases, the scope of required knowledge may be unclear, particularly when students are starting out, and this was evident at the (re)Freshers event where students didn’t know what they needed to know and therefore appreciated direction. This study shows that an important aspect of belonging to a community is knowing which things carry credibility, and being able to impart useful information to other, possibly newer members of the group. When feeling overwhelmed or inferior, the ability to impart knowledge can be confidence-building and reassuring, validating membership to the group. In addition, there is an altruistic benefit from sharing information.

Aligned with the literature (Owens et al., 2009; Goodfellow, 2005; Hine, 2003) findings demonstrate that SHL spaces are chosen by some students as places to explore ideas and to do so with others who may offer different insights, and in the exchange of experiences, membership of the community is validated. Looked at from a theoretical perspective (Wenger, 2000), this indicates that spaces in which to process ideas together need to be based on a CoP where there is a shared purpose, mutual respect and trust.
7.4.4 Moderated spaces and unmoderated spaces

The findings indicate that there is a difference in student perception and activity in online spaces initiated by students, from the perception of those set up and moderated by the institution. The distinction between moderated and unmoderated spaces was covered in the third thematic map (6.5.3), and included various factors such as identity, volume of people and time. The literature review revealed that while many HEIs use SNSs, students resist their use in education (Manca & Ranieri, 2013), perhaps indicating that some relationships should be social and others formal.

The benefits of moderated spaces were identified by interview participants as having information that was correct, and that there were clear parameters for discussion and that the group membership is limited, whether the numbers are small or large. Linking the idea of a moderated space with identity, students said that they felt that there was a clear purpose and their role in forums was understood, and that role was to receive information, ask questions, or contribute to a discussion or activity. This idea about appropriate roles and the teacher and student relationship aligns with the way that HEIs commonly disseminate information on SNSs, from the institution to the students without typically inviting a discussion (Tess, 2013). One of the distinctions students drew about non-formal forums (WhatsApp, etc.) is that it was possible to get distracted. This would imply that in the case of module forums, they were much more content-focused.

Students explained that they find some OU spaces, particularly online, intimidating and unhelpful because of slow response times and little traffic (6.3.3.3). Spaces that were considered ‘safe’ by students are those moderated by the OU, in part because students feel they can trust the information. However, not all spaces have ‘enough’ students, and there was trade-off between these safe spaces and the spaces that students occupy (such as social media) that offered volume, unbounded parameters and rapid responses. SHL appears to offer both, positioning it somewhere between these ends of the spectrum. The evidence shows that in addition to bringing together similar people, a critical mass in an OU space means that questions can be answered there and then, and by a range of people. The findings of this study, therefore, show that Rheingold’s features of successful online spaces apply in the education environment as much as they do in more general virtual communities (Rheingold, 2000).

Participants did not discuss practices that are known to happen in social spaces like Facebook, such as sharing information, discussing answers and asking for information that students should ideally be able to access themselves. This may be due to the nature of the interviews, and there may well be a limit of honesty about revealing certain activities to someone employed by the OU.

It emerges from this discussion, that students appreciate moderated spaces for features that are not common in unmoderated spaces (structure, security and credible information to name a few), but if these spaces are to move beyond fulfilling very functional purposes towards facilitating community, they also need to reach a critical mass of participants and enable real-time, rapid interaction.
7.4.5 Summary

To succeed at distance learning, students need to be proactive, stay motivated and make the choice to persist in their studies (Owens, Hardcastle & Richardson, 2009). SHL is a distinct part of the student experience, complementing formal curriculum in a social space. SHL is a space to perform behaviours associated with, but not fundamental to retaining, a student identity. These interactions are essential in developing a CoP and in binding individuals to the group (Goodfellow, 2005). Moderated spaces are one way for institutions to facilitate safe spaces. In encouraging focused discussions and promoting the notion of shared experiences, students are able to give and receive, but this is dependent on a critical mass and real-time interaction. While the value of peer interaction is understood in retrospective terms, time-poor and goal-orientated students are more likely to attend events that align with their goals. Although distance-learning students may be isolated, there is solidarity because they identify with each other’s challenges (Butcher, 2015). The evidence about SHL shows that it is possible and beneficial to provide a space to process ideas together that caters for the time-poor, focused learner in which they can also feel happy, connected and confident.

7.5 Value of Student Hub Live

This section considers the value or perceived benefit to students of SHL as an online interactive event. If there is value in these interactive online events, how does this compare with other online or face-to-face opportunities to interact with students/academics at the OU?

7.5.1 Community scaffolded by the institution

Thomas (2012) and Kuh (2009), argue that it is important that the potential for community is initiated by the institution. This assertion supports the findings of Lai et al., (2006), who found that institutional facilitation of community is particularly imperative in virtual contexts. SHL provides an opportunity for connection which, just by virtue of being there, can be reassuring for students, irrespective of whether they have the time and inclination to make use of the opportunity or maintain those connections. When community is scaffolded by the institution, it is important that students are aware that these spaces exist, who they are for, and the extent to which the institution is involved. This enables students to choose whether to participate in these spaces and the extent to which they do so.

Marketing extra-curricular events has been a challenge at the OU because while there are noticeboard spaces, students tend to focus on their module (see 1.4). Although widely advertised, because it was not part of the curriculum, many students were not aware of SHL. The problem that SHL has had in terms of visibility may exacerbate feelings of non-belonging or not being invited for some students. This is an issue discussed by O’Shea, Stone and Delahunty (2015) as a barrier to non-traditional students who struggle with sense of belonging generally.
Many interview participants spoke about a lack of awareness of SHL both in terms of their own experience and for others, and conveyed a resultant sense of having missed out. Several participants said that they wished they had experienced SHL when they started. In some cases, they had started before SHL existed and were speaking about this in terms of it being a useful resource, and in other cases they did not know about it even when it was running.

“How I didn’t know… I look back and think I wish I had known… Then I had to look up [from a visit to the library on campus] and I saw, something, some event [which was SHL Open day]. I had to go and look, somehow and find… who are these people and what’s going on? Why didn’t I know about this?”

[Sally]

SHL is an example of a way in which an institution may scaffold community, but in order for an initiative like SHL to achieve the final purpose of creating community, students also need to be aware of it, be invited to and take up opportunities to participate.

7.5.2 Student Hub Live as a community of practice

In this section, the attributes of SHL, shared intentions, trust and mutual respect, are considered in terms of the findings, and are assessed in the context of Wenger’s (2000) concept of the CoP.

Shared intentions were relevant, since the students recognized that they made a choice to study at this time in their lives; it was not part of the natural progression from school to work. They were also all in it together, and there was a sense that if one person could do it, so could another. Joint actions were seen in the way students participated, with shared jokes or communal repertoires identified in the chatlog analysis, and in activities related to learning in the same space.

Trust was evident in the space, with online environments described by one participant as safer than a face-to-face setting. The chatlogs also demonstrated a level of trust in the space not only in terms of the interactions which established a sense of community and the content that was sent to the studio, but also from the types of comments that were made to welcome and recognize each other. This issue of trust links to the sub-theme in the thematic network maps which highlights that safe spaces are conducive to learning (6.5.1).

Mutual respect was seen in the tone of the chat, particularly in the extent to which diverse views were welcomed in the referendum discussion chatlog, and when participants sought clarification from others. One interview participant spoke about self-moderation during live events. They explained that since events were recorded and names were attached to chat, a supportive space was created where people were accountable, which meant that they were more respectful and not aggressive compared to other unmoderated or anonymous spaces.

While participants claimed to learn from the presenters at SHL, many also claim to learn from other students, and believe acquiring, transferring and storing information is an important part of their SHL experience. Some participants enjoyed supporting others, which
appeared to provide an altruistic benefit for them. This fits with Hercheui’s (2011) findings that transfer of knowledge is a motivating factor in interacting in virtual communities, in addition to emotional support.

While some participants claim that they would join any event in order to connect with others, most students wanted to learn something from the person delivering the learning and were goal-focused in that sense. Given that the literature on distance-learning students and data in this research indicates that they are goal-orientated (Owens et al., 2009) and time-poor (Kahu et al., 2014), it is unlikely that learners will attend events just to chat with others, and the focused learning of SHL offers a valid reason to invest the time in joining sessions. During the events, when students feel comfortable enough to participate, and even if they participated in only the learning-related activities, they become active participants. It is this interaction that is so important in establishing a sense of community because it leads to inclusion within the group (Wenger, 2000; Goodfellow, 2005). It is, therefore, proposed that since SHL meets these criteria, it is a CoP, and the elements of this CoP create a space conducive to learning.

7.5.3 Student Hub Live as a moderated space

As noted in 7.4.6, interview participants highlighted the distinction between moderated spaces and social spaces outside the institution. In the context of the OU, SHL was viewed as a space that could be social and where there were commonalities, but because the space was moderated, certain things like grades were less commonly discussed. SHL appeared to include a social element in addition to the more serious text-based dialogues between students. Analysis of the chatlog shows that the tone was generally more light-hearted than interview participants said was experienced at online tutorials. Students compared SHL to social media platforms and forums. SHL appears to sit somewhere in the middle of these as an OU space with a social element.

From the interviews, it emerged that a reasonable volume of people and immediacy of response is important to students in establishing a sense of community and belonging. Conversations in SHL, which are not thread-based as they are in forums, can include repetition of information and instant responses, which is less acceptable in a space that has an architecture of structured conversations.

As such, SHL can be seen to include aspects of both moderated and unmoderated spaces, with moderation supplying a safe environment for community creation. The establishment of acceptable behaviours set up by the moderator but developed by the group enabled some social interaction and the creation of shared practices. Students clearly valued this aspect of the SHL.
7.5.4 Student Hub Live, student engagement and student skills

Despite being time-poor, many students attended SHL events because they recognised that some under-developed skills limited their ability to gain high marks. When students were negotiating new terrains as discussed in interview theme 1, they may not know what it is that they need to know, and hence searching for information directly was not always possible. It was important that information was selected for new students, and that experienced students were on hand to share advice.

Some skills-based knowledge such as how to plan and write an essay, can appear to be quite simple at the outset. Many students are familiar with the way that essays should be structured and are told about the importance of planning their work. However, knowing what to do is not the same as applying that knowledge. This is an important issue in distance learning and more broadly in the current HE environment, since there is a wealth of free and easily accessible information. Through the development of skills, the SHL may enhance achievement of learning outcomes. It may also help students to optimise their learning experience and hence, by Trowler’s definition (2010), the SHL is a facilitator of student engagement.

7.5.5 Student Hub Live as a supportive environment

Many participants pointed out that to be receptive to learning, it was helpful to have a mindset amenable to learning, described by one participant as feeling relaxed, happy and confident in asking questions. Many interview participants spoke about the positive emotions that they experienced during SHL events.

Many students may not have an explicit intention to learn from peers, but feedback at the end of these sessions demonstrates that they appear to appreciate the value in sharing experiences and learning what may or may not have worked for others. This supports the notion that while drivers for attendance are about the content and the teaching, there is an unanticipated value in learning from other students.

SHL is an offer of support from the institution, and it also showcases the support available from the institution. The support also comes from students, and the collective and diverse participation offers students the sense that there is strength, determination and willing from the group who share a common purpose despite their differences.

7.5.6 Summary

An outcome of this research is confirmation that for goal-orientated, time-poor, part-time distance learners, SHL has value in offering timely information and skills development that are not linked directly with curriculum. The value of SHL is borne out of its role as a community space. Initiated and scaffolded by the institution, SHL enables a community of distance learners to focus on developing specific skills that will optimize their success, as
well as offering a supportive environment where learners can give and receive advice from like-minded others which also helps to combat feelings of isolation.

7.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have seen that the findings of the study align with much of the research discussed in chapter 3. In particular, SHL fulfils the criteria for a community of practice as described by Wenger (2000). Students value the SHL space and offering because it facilitates a collaborative online space which allows students to learn from each other. When students’ viewpoints are included and there is an opportunity to answer questions in real time, a sense of community is established that is fun, vibrant and engaging.

Beyond aligning with the literature, the findings of this study reveal some emerging information about SHL which adds to our understanding of the way that belonging and community support ODL students in their learning journey.

A summary of the emerging conclusions is:

Community and CoPs

- SHL is a CoP, and the elements of this CoP create a space conducive to learning: there is a shared purpose, mutual respect and trust. The volume of participation and diversity are important in support, and through supporting others a sense of value in a community can be established.
- Where good and bad sides of the learning experience are present, the bonds created lead more readily to a sense of community. Shared repertoires offer an entry point for interaction and aids in developing community and individual learning. Collective memories and repertoires not only enable new members to join the community, but also reawaken bonds and reconnect previous participants with the community.

Student identity

- In the distance-learning environment, the dimensions of student engagement that Trowler (2010) proposes are not distinct as they are in face-to-face settings. Behaving like a student facilitates a sense of inclusion within an academic community, and being included in this offers a sense of support and strength in the group which could motivate students to persist. Behaviours combine aspects of engagement and belonging, such that interactions with others facilitate belonging to a community.

Moderated and unmoderated spaces

- It is important that mature, part-time and distance-learning students have informal but moderated spaces that focus on a common purpose to enact student behaviours. Students appreciate moderated spaces, but if these spaces are to move beyond fulfilling very functional purposes towards facilitating community, they also need to reach a critical mass of participants and enable real-time, rapid interaction.
- SHL includes aspects of both moderated and unmoderated spaces, with moderation supplying a safe environment for community creation. The establishment of
acceptable behaviours set up by the moderator but developed by the group enabled some social interaction and the creation of shared practices.

**Distinct aspects of ODL**

- Community matters more to mature or distance-learning students than a sense of student identity. Validation comes from recognising that despite feeling isolated, belonging to a like-minded community is supportive in achieving a shared purpose.
- ODL students tend to be goal-oriented, and goal orientated students may not always identify what factors contribute to achieving their success. They could therefore benefit from hybrid learning environments which combine activities which complement their direct goals.

**Impact of SHL**

- SHL is an example of a way in which an institution may scaffold community, but in order to achieve the final purpose of creating community, students also need to be aware of it, be invited to and take up opportunities to participate. SHL also showcases the support available from the institution, however support also comes from students, and the collective and diverse participation offers students the sense that there is strength, determination and willing from the group who share a common purpose despite their differences.
- SHL optimises the student experience and, the point above implies that through the development of skills, the SHL may also enhance achievement of learning outcomes.

The emerging conclusions demonstrate how SHL as a CoP and as a facilitator of student engagement uses timeliness, scale and moderation to facilitate community that is so important to part-time ODL students. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of their application in the following chapter.
Chapter 8. Conclusion

In this chapter the main contributions of the research are gathered, and a statement of theory is presented. The implications for policy and practice and limitations of the study are discussed, areas for further research are suggested, and finally there is a personal reflection on the research journey.

8.1 Contribution of the research study

This research demonstrates the value of belonging to a community as a pivotal role in student engagement, creating a sense of feeling valued in a safe space which enables students to translate studying behaviours into success. While SHL is a platform unique to this particular institution, the components of SHL, livestreaming, online tutorials and webinars are used in other contexts. Many universities record lectures by choice (and more recently as a result of Covid-19 restrictions). Some lectures are streamed live using platforms like Zoom, and it is also common to stream open lectures or events with some interactive format, often via apps such as twitter, which enables audience feedback and questions. The insights from the research are outlined and examined in the following section.

8.1.1 Gathering insights

The first important insight is the value SHL provides to students. Findings show that students valued focused workshops and an opportunity to engage in spaces outside their module. These features helped them apply skills and develop confidence without feeling inferior to their peers. SHL bridges the social and formal spaces, and moderation offers security in terms of accuracy and expectation.

The second insight relates to the student experience and while extracurricular activities can be seen as advantageous, tempting as it is to make them compulsory, they should be optional. Students experience large events in different ways to ones with few participants, and extracurricular activities present an opportunity to focus on learning skills in their own right, and to engage with a wider community and therefore feel supported beyond the scope of the module.

The third insight relates to identity, and while it was found, in line with other studies (Butcher, 2015, Thomas, 2015) that student identity was not pre-eminent for this population, performing aspects of student identity could be achieved through attendance at events. Thus, interactions can be seen as validations of inclusion within a learning community, albeit temporarily. However, this may be sufficient to motivate students who gain security knowing that supportive communities exist, irrespective of whether they are accessed.

The fourth insight is that shared repertoires and interaction lead to a sense of belonging and community within an academic institution. These are distinct concepts, but they are related
and intertwined because shared repertoires enable interaction, and interaction creates shared repertoires. In extra-curricular contexts, findings show that it is important to have examples that are accessible to any student at any level. These examples can be (and perhaps should be) drawn from outside of the educational environment, for example the process of baking a cake by following a recipe. The analogous approach of applying the principles drawn from these examples to academic skills enabled students to relate concepts to a source they were familiar with in everyday life and also created a sense of connection among students. Furthermore, it appeared that after recognising their ability to apply a skill in a general context, students’ confidence in their ability to translate this into education-related activities increased.

Shared repertoires were also important to the collective and imagined identity of the group, perhaps based on the notion that since they did not exhibit a strong sense of student identity individually, there was a sense of motivation, comfort and strength that emerged from the collective identity of the group. While activities were designed to foster this sense of community, it tended to be cemented and grown when the ideas originated from the group. Like the stories that bind communities in anthropological terms, these shared repertoires create a sense of community. While the activities offered by an extra-curricular offering such as the SHL clearly need to be carefully planned to build community, this study shows that the way in which the space is designed is equally important. Its structure, tone and character are all contributors to the success or not of the endeavour.

For this reason, since the research began there has been work on developing the brand identity of SHL to ensure that irrespective of platform, presenters or type of event, there is a consistent approach and the rules of engagement are constant. These are communicated through the event description and the material. The huge range of topics and activities identified as facilitating shared repertoires and thus a sense of collective identity demonstrates the value of allowing wide-ranging discussion and informal communication in a safe space.

Another contribution relates to the conceptualisation of community, the definition of which does not appear to be something that has been holistically defined or unanimously agreed in educational literature relating to scaffolding student engagement, although it has been widely agreed that sense of belonging is hugely important in terms of engagement (Trowler, 2010).

This study, therefore, in identifying the value of SHL, its contribution to student experience and the role it plays in developing identity and sense of belonging is particularly salient in the Covid-19 environment.

### 8.1.2 Contributions to practice

This study contributes to practice in two ways: in terms of method and virtual ethnographic research, and in terms of the creation of virtual spaces which facilitate community for distance learners.
In terms of method, this research highlighted that there were discrepancies between what people said and did, and the two sources of data provided an opportunity to consider some of these differences, particularly around student identity. While Hine (2003) uses predominantly virtual forms of data in her virtual ethnography, this study explores a virtual environment using virtual and non-virtual sources, an approach advocated by digital ethnographers such as Pink (2016). The thematic network maps combined the findings from these sources, and this approach may be useful to others researching virtual environments since there is often the potential to include artefacts from the virtual environment with more subjective accounts about the experience of participating in those environments. The thematic network maps provided a way to establish insights through combining the findings from the two data sources that could not have been established through each method alone. The goal focused approach identified in the literature and which was key in thematic map 1 identified that students wrote in the chat that they prioritised assessment, although it was also evident through their participation that they allowed time for less goal focused priorities such as making friends with other students. Although interview participants said that the value related to what they had learned from presenters, there appeared to be a value in the contributions from other students in terms of different approaches. This may explain why, when information is available in text-based formats, students chose to attend online events. The thematic maps also enabled an exploration about ideas which were converse, for instance in map 2 the notion of not belonging was considered in opposition to belonging. While students had written in the chat that they felt part of the group, not belonging was only discussed in the interviews. The chat-log however demonstrated how students felt validated when they did feel part of the group.

Gathering all the above insights into an overarching view of community and belonging in an ODL environment, the following theoretical contribution to practice is proposed. Traditional universities put together various formal and informal opportunities for students to create a sense of community and belonging, for example brick and mortar spaces, study spaces and virtual spaces. Some support study skills, others facilitate student behaviours and some fulfil social roles to foster community, but they all come together in the students' journey to create a successful learning experience. Some distance-learning institutions try to reproduce these spaces virtually to create the same effect. However, as this research has found, OU students have multiple different competing identities, and the nature of their studies is time-poor and goal-driven at a level of intensity beyond that of many face-to-face students, and therefore the reproduction of the breadth of these spaces is necessary but not sufficient to create the same sense of belonging and community. It is not enough to assume that ODL students will be able to fuse, or fashion these together themselves with the same result as face-to-face students. Therefore, what is needed, is additional hybrid spaces, which harness both the goal-driven focus of ODL students, and their somewhat different need for social contact. SHL is an example of one such successful space.
8.2 Implications for policy and practice

The insights outlined above have important implications for the design and development of online learning spaces which benefit from careful consideration and planning. This research highlights areas in delivering a successful blended or remote learning experience which require careful design, and could be addressed through changed policy and practice. In policy and practice terms, there are some broad issues around the perceived deficit model of distance learning and traditional HE environments that could be addressed through the findings of this research.

8.2.1 Institutional policy areas

The restrictions placed on social interaction during Covid-19 highlighted the importance of belonging and community, and it is likely that this will increase in importance to both students and the institution as face-to-face methods of communication are less possible and the value of connection increases. The student experience is now widely limited by physical restrictions, and many students at face-to-face campuses are learning from a distance, in a quick-fix fashion rather than through courses designed specifically to be delivered in a distance-learning model. While there is some literature (Motteram, 2005) indicating that institutions have considered online inductions and social events, much of the focus in digitally delivered HE has been on curriculum, not the student experience. Based on the student engagement literature (e.g. Trowler, 2010), and the literature on interventions to facilitate community (e.g. Thomas et al., 2017), this approach may have the effect of decreasing student success and satisfaction.

This research highlights that distance-learning students are doing the same things as their campus-based counterparts, worrying about the same problems - but doing it alone. Institutions must consider this as they move to blended and distance learning, and must consider the value of remote extracurricular activities. While SHL is specific and requires resource and expertise not possible in all HE settings, other institutions may benefit from giving their staff time to consider the nature of the spaces in which online learning happens. There is also an argument that extracurricular events are useful between scheduled learning events.

The findings from this study show that at a policy level, irrespective of whether learning is designed to be or needs to fit into a distance-learning model, considerations should be made to make it possible for all students to interact in the academic community should they desire. The SHL community developed certain collective repertoires, and this study has evidenced the value of these repertoires in creating group identity and a sense of belonging. It is recommended that these repertoires are observed, reflected on and facilitated in other contexts and encouraged where appropriate. The spirit of community seems to be more significant now than ever, and should be considered in online contexts, particularly as more traditional learning contexts move towards online and remote delivery.
8.2.2 Practice areas

Since this research began, SHL has developed, largely based on the findings of this research but also in terms of the demands of Covid-19 restrictions. The research shows that at the practical, delivery level, anonymity, repetition, the application of academic concepts in other contexts, for example using everyday objects as a source, not specific curriculum, and the freedom to share anxieties created a learning environment that may have seemed somewhat unconventional and messy because it was constantly developing. Despite this (or even because of this), it was perceived by students as challenging and rewarding.

The unique aspect of SHL is that it is a moderated space that offers a shared experience for participants to experience community in a learning environment that is not curriculum or assessment related. While some of the questions and observations are fed into the discussion, the space is unique because it is only there during the live discussion and although recordings of the video stream can be watched later, the chat in the broadcast sessions is not. This study demonstrates the value of inclusion of the audience in terms of belonging.

The study skills workshops in Adobe Connect are recorded and can be watched by OU students. The recording includes all the live elements of the workshop including the polls and chat, however the breakout sessions (small group activities of 10-20 participants in small and separate rooms) are not recorded. It appeared from the student input to this study that students appreciated this benefit of attending in real time. While catch-up can provide an indication of what happens in the space and the recorded assets are useful to many students, polls about previous engagement at the beginning of the session and feedback at the end, show that it is common for people to want to attend live sessions after watching recordings because of the opportunity to interact. Therefore, it is important for providers to consider ways of providing not only asynchronous and archived resources, but also live, real-time events in addition to offering students the potential to experience the event before participating, particularly if they are anxious about entering unfamiliar spaces.

While it is common that teaching activities are designed to encourage participation, it may be that the more confident and knowledgeable students are the main participants. Facilitating interaction in a ODL context should involve not just providing opportunities for giving the right or expected answer to a question, but creating the potential for participants to seek clarification, the space to ask questions, and the space to try things out and make mistakes. SHL uses anonymous spaces to do this, and other institutions may benefit from considering the extent to which names are linked to communications and participation.
8.3 Limitations

This section considers reflections and limitations on the method, and the extent to which the findings of this study can be generalized.

8.3.1 Limitations arising from the research context

While this research provides insightful recommendations for institutions designing online learning environments for their students, the conclusions should be considered in light of possible limitations of the study.

This research included only those participants who had attended SHL events, and the sample meant that it was possible to find out about the value of attending events only from those who had attended. Participants are likely to have attended and participated in events and this research if they found the experience positive and wanted to be involved. However, the two sources of data involved a mixture of participants, which provided the opportunity to ameliorate this potential limitation by triangulating the chatlog data with the interview data.

None the less, the results should be treated with care. Over time a group of core students have attended SHL events, and the extent to which people attend multiple times may be an indicator that there is a community in terms of the familiarity that is evident in discussions. However the research tells us nothing about those who do not attend.

It was not possible or desirable to draw correlations between participation and success. The extent to which students who participate in extracurricular activities are more likely to succeed is complex, and it has been noted in the literature and indicated in this study that there are too many factors to establish a causal relationship.

8.3.2 Limitations arising from the methodology and methods

In terms of methodology, as noted in chapter 4, it is expected that in a socially constructivist study, findings should be generalized with caution, and more importantly should be examined for rigour from the point of view of process and trustworthiness (Charmaz, 2006). However, as this study is well grounded in the literature and was coherently designed and carried out within the chosen methodology, it provides insights that have the potential to be locally adapted.

To supplement and deepen the data provided by chatlogs, interviews were used to explore the subjective experience of attending events, and the range of participants offered a range of perspectives based on their different individual situations. It was clear in the interviews that while some aspects of the discussion had been considered in advance, other areas such as student identity had not. While it was explained that all experiences, positive or negative, were of interest, it may be that participants felt obligated to focus on the positives, or to
demonstrate participant bias. The semi-structured interview schedule may have constrained the depth of data gathered, and it can be argued that just because something was not mentioned during the interview, does not mean that it was not a consideration.

It would have added a level of dependability if the research had involved a comparison of chatlog and interview data for each participant, but this was not possible within the time and design constraints of the study. Accounts were, however, largely congruent in terms of what was said in the interviews and the chat, with disparities in only a few cases. One participant said in an interview that the chat was annoying and that they wanted to listen to the person delivering the teaching. However, that participant had engaged in the chat, particularly in the more social discussions. When asked about the experience of chat, the participants saw those chatting as ‘time wasters’. Yet, based on the students’ interactions, this appeared incongruous, and when these statements were probed, the comments were revealing:

“All I remember is that a few people had the exactly same questions and problems I had, and it was reassuring to know that I wasn’t alone. You do need people to participate, you can’t do it one to one”.

[Andrew]

This is an example of how interviews can generate information that may not fully represent an experience. The immersive approach of the researcher in the setting was an advantage here, because it provided insights which indicated when particular points and different situations would benefit from expansion. This also demonstrates the value of a semi-structured, flexible interview structure in generating information that may more accurately account for an experience.

There are some specific points worth noting in terms of generalizability. The interview participants discussed their unique experiences, and therefore these experiences cannot be said to be representative of all students. However, the chatlogs did offer an insight into the reactions of a range of participants with diverse backgrounds and challenges.

The other aspect worthy of consideration is the role of the researcher within the research setting. As discussed in 1.4, the researcher both developed SHL and is also the presenter and academic lead. It was discussed that it was important to understand the value of events (1.4) however there is an underlying assumption that these events do have value and are positive. The interview guide (Appendix 5) included the point that participants were welcome to discuss positive as well as negative aspects. While a semi-structured interview approach may limit negative aspects of discussion, it was discussed in 5.3.3 that the focus of a semi-structured interview approach enabled a focused discussion of topics of concern.

While SHL continues to develop, and additional data opportunities increase, it is important to note that this study has already helped in shaping the development of SHL events, particularly in the language used and the shared repertoires encouraged.

8.4 Areas for further research
Future research could be undertaken on macro and micro levels. Future research may look at the factors identified here such as shared repertoires as significant in creating community and belonging in different educational contexts and with different groups of students. The current expansion of remote learning as a result of Covid-19 provides particularly fertile ground for this. In the traditional setting, areas to explore are whether face-to-face students feel that the opportunities they have available really create the sense of community and belonging we assume. In terms of similar virtual spaces within education and beyond, are there other hybrid spaces which have the same effect in facilitating a sense of belonging to a community? If so, are there any common characteristics? Conversely, research could investigate DL (Distance Learning) institutions where there are no such spaces, and yet students still have a sense of community there.

At the more specific level, further research could focus on SHL itself. In the last couple of years, additional methods of data capture have been introduced; there are now polls and short answer questions that have been designed to evaluate the impact of events in subjective terms. It would be interesting to run a focus group with SHL participants, presenting them with the work that the team has completed in terms of brand personality, and exploring whether that represents the experience for students. This would allow for further understanding of the impact that brand personality, tone, and the structure of sessions has in supporting mutual respect and a safe space for discussion.

8.5 Personal reflection

As someone who is involved in almost every session of SHL, and who is passionate about the positive aspects of research, I found it very easy to focus on what students say is beneficial. It is difficult to consider the voices of those who do not communicate openly. It was also important to reflect and ensure that negative points were not ignored, and one example of this was the issue of student identity which had been assumed would be present.

The fact that I had an understanding of the setting added to my ability to carry out the interviews in an informed way. After the research was carried out, the process of triangulation revealed consistency in the data in terms of tone of what was analysed as well as important themes, and I felt that participants were very open and honest and that some of the negatives were discussed. Having some knowledge about some of the participants was useful, particularly in terms of the interview data, however that knowledge may have impacted on the interpretation of what was said by participants, as well as what was interpreted. It has been shown how in some cases, it was useful in exploring issues which, on the surface, did not seem congruent with the individual’s experience. Knowledge from other SHL events, other sources of SHL data, and experiences in my own teaching have also been useful in analysing the data.

In terms of my academic career, this process has supplied me with evidence to explain the value to colleagues of the spirit of community and the necessity truly to involve students, not just teach ‘at’ them. It has also enabled me to support other initiatives at the university to
understand and develop community and sense of belonging. I have developed my skills as a researcher and have developed resilience and determination from completing this study part-time over several years.

The ‘penny-dropping’ moment in this doctoral process is that I feel that this research can enhance the way we teach because it demonstrates how community can be scaffolded. Many colleagues focus on content above delivery and relatability, and this research demonstrates why it is important to integrate, even to a small extent, with the community one is trying to teach. My physics teacher once said that anyone can understand anything, it is just that some people may take longer, and other people may learn in different ways. In my experience, those penny-dropping moments happen for students when they not only experience how something fits together, but when they know that they have been instrumental in the thought process; they have been included on the journey, which makes the learning truly transformative.
References


O’Shea, S., Stone, C. and Delahunty, J., (2015). “I ‘feel’ like I am at university even though I am online.” Exploring how students narrate their engagement with higher education institutions in an online learning environment. Distance Education, 36(1), pp.41-58.


Appendix 1 Video Transcript What is the Student Hub Live

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: We're now going to be talking about A111 Discovering the Arts and Humanities.

And I'm joined by Richard Jones, Jessica Hughes.

Student Hub Live is the Open University's live interactive online platform for building academic community.

Our team produce a range of events to support all OU students in their studies.

From our induction events, to study skills workshops, there's something for everyone who wants to develop their study skills and meet other students and members of staff.

All our events are live online and interactive, but we have a couple of different formats.

Firstly, we have events that are live-streamed from our campus studio in Milton Keynes.

Video is a great way to show and tell, and at these events, we cover a broad range of topics from essential information for new students, to nice to know facts about the university's involvements and other areas like research, policy and broadcasting.

To access these events, you just need to log in using your OU computer username.

You'll be able to chat with others online, put your questions to our guests, and tell us what you think using our interactive polls.

The other format is structured skills workshops, and these are quite different because we use the OU’s tutorial platform and work with slides, not video.

Each session is focused on developing one key skill.

They're designed to be interactive, and we encourage you to join in as much as possible so that you can apply the learning to your own study.

Not only are these workshops a space to develop specific skills, but they're a chance to chat with others in the OU academic community and share ideas, ask questions and support each other in the student experience.

Students find these sessions really useful, and there is something for everyone, whatever stage you're at.

Studying at a distance doesn't need to be lonely.

Student Hub Live gives you a chance to connect with others, and it can be so encouraging to find out that you're not the only one struggling with a particular issue.

And it's great to inspire each other with ideas and share tips that have helped you overcome challenges.

You can find out more about how it all works and what we've got coming up on our website.

There's plenty lined up, so all you need to do to take part live is log on at the right time.
I hope to see you at one of our events soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]
Appendix 2 SHL Broadcast

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: so we've got Jonathan Gibson, Franchesca Benatti and Shafquat Towheed.

Most of our student hub live video broadcasts are from our studio on the Milton Keynes campus at the OU but the audience who log on participate from the comfort of wherever they like be it a mobile phone on the bus their laptop at home or in a coffee shop both in the UK and abroad.

Our events which are all about academic community and supporting you in your studies cover a huge range of topics.

We may showcase new modules tell you about research our academics are involved with and we host a very important induction program that allows you to find out about some of our systems and methods of assessment.

And they're also a space to meet other students.

You'll need to sign in with your new computer username to watch and participate in our live sessions and once logged on you can chat to others take part in anonymous cold and tell us where you're based and what you think about the issues were discussing.

And you can also ask questions and share your observations and personal experiences which are fed into the studio discussion by our hot desk team.

And that's what makes these events so unique.

It's also why they're worth putting your diary and making time to attend when they're live it can be so wonderful to get together with others who are doing the same kind of things as you are.

But don't worry if you can't make the live event you can also catch up on our YouTube channel. Find out what we've got coming up on our website and we hope you can join us as soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]
Appendix 3 Explainer Adobe Connect study skills sessions

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Our Student Hub Live Skills Workshops are held in the same online rooms as OU tutorials.

These extracurricular, non-modular workshops offer an hour of structured skill development, and we focus on a different aspect of study in each session.

We begin with some information about the subject, and then we invite you to apply that to your own learning, through anonymous polls, text boxes, and also in the chat box.

We work through some prepared examples as a group.

And you can chat to each other and ask questions while we go through those.

And then you'll break into smaller groups to give you an opportunity to share your ideas with other students and hear about the different ways people plan to apply their new skills to their study.

You can find our workshop outlines on our website.

And you can catch up on recordings of the previous sessions there too.

Coming along in person is ideal though, so let me fill you in on how the sessions work and what to expect.

The Adobe Connect room opens 15 minutes before the session starts, to allow you to log in and familiarise yourself with the setup.

It's also a good opportunity to adjust your audio levels.

And we begin sessions promptly.

And there's a lot to cover, often with a lot of people attending.

You don't need any special equipment, and you can access the room from any device, including a mobile phone.

You can take part as little or as fully as you'd like to.

But I will say that the more you put in, the more you'll get out.

Some people just prefer to listen, and others like to chat.

But there's no pressure to interact if you don't want to.

You don't need to prepare anything in advance, and it's handy to have a pen and paper there with you too.

Student Hub Live is for all students, at any level, and we offer generic, not module specific advice.
And many students say that, as well as the skills we teach, mixing with other students and academics from different disciplines is valuable, because they get a chance to experience new perspectives and different ways of looking at things.

It can be so reassuring to find out that you aren't the only one with a question about something, and that others are experiencing things in the same way you are.

Space is limited in the Skills Workshops, so you'll need to reserve your spot via Eventbrite.

If you can't make it, please cancel your ticket though, so that we can offer it to someone else on our waiting list.

Visit our website to find out more.

And I hope you can join me!

[MUSIC PLAYING]
Appendix 4 Invitation to participate in research

Participants were sent an email inviting them to participate in an interview about SHL

Dear X,

Thank you for attending one of the Student Hub Live events in Adobe connect. You may or may not know that I developed the Student Hub Live about 4 years ago, and I produce and present the events. I also do other things at the Open University including tutoring, lecturing and also studying, but connecting with students at SHL events is by far my favourite activity.

The reason for my email is that I’m carrying out some research about people’s experiences at these SHL events with a view to improving them and also to understand more about which aspects are most helpful. To do that I’m doing some one to one interviews on the phone, and I was really hoping that you would take part. I’ve randomly selected a sample of students who have been to an event and am only approaching a small handful of people.

My plan is to arrange some time for a phone interview over the next few weeks. It would take between 30 and 45 minutes and would involve talking about your experiences at events like SHL, and how they benefit your personal learning journey. It would be a very informal discussion, and whilst there are some areas that I’d like to ask about such as how you connect with other students and how this helps, this is about your experience and for that reason there are no right or wrong answers. The interview would be recorded. Interviews would then be transcribed and anonymised, so that no piece of data is attributable to one person. I would then identify some common themes that come up for several people.

All research at the OU conforms to ethical codes so that participants have a positive experience as a result of participating, and this has all been approved by the ethics councils. You would have the right to withdraw from the research at any time, without giving a reason.

In addition to knowing that I was incredibly grateful for your time, participating in research can be really interesting. You’d have the chance to talk to someone about parts of your studies you may not have considered and participating in other’s research can be very useful to reflect on when you do your own. I would also keep you informed about the findings both in the short and long term if you wanted to be involved.

Please can you email me back to let me know if participating is something that you would consider?

Best wishes for now,

Karen
Appendix 5 Interview guide

Introduction

Thanks for taking part in this research. I’m interested in your own experiences as an OU student who has attended a SHL event. I’m researching how this might add value to students with a view to understanding what we need to do more or less of. As you know I’m recording the interview and I’ll anonymise and transcribe it. I will then collate this with the other interviews to identify common themes. Your experience will be unique to you, and there are no ‘right or wrong; answers. You have the right to withdraw from this research at any time and with no explanation. If there is something you don’t want to answer or you want to clarify, please just ask. We have 30-45 minutes for this interview, but if there is something that you reflect on later that you would like you share then I’d welcome your thoughts.

My goal with SHL was to develop a space for academic community. I’m really interested in how that is experienced for students and what value it adds for the individuals who choose to attend. While it is nice to hear good things, we are particularly interested in hearing any criticisms or negative experiences of study or of SHL. These can be very useful for us so please don’t feel the need to be polite.

About SHL:

- So firstly, can you tell me about your involvement – how many SHL events have you been to?
- Which types of events have you attended?
- How useful did you find them/what has been the most useful event and why? Could you describe their experience of that event?
- What led you to attend your first SHL event?
- Can you think of another event, not SHL, that helped you feel part of a community and why?

How does interaction/attendance of SHL events relate to sense of identity as a student?

- What does being a student mean to you? and what does being a student at the OU in particular mean to you?
  - Is there anything about interacting with other students that reinforces that identify? Are there any times where you have felt different to other students? What caused this?

Student experience – belonging, connection and identity

You are studying on your own.

- Is it important to you to connect with other students?
- Who and with what do you connect with the make your studies better? (forums, Facebook etc).
- How do these experiences compare – what is best for you and why? Have those changed over time?
• What does community in the academic senses mean to you, and is it important? Why?
  o If it is important, how does SHL fit into your sense of being part of a community?

**What is the value or perceived benefit to students of SHL as an online interactive event?**

• If there is a value in interactive online events, and how does this compare to other online or face-to-face opportunities to interact with students/academics?
• Do you take part in other types of events with OU students? For example, tutorials? How would you describe the differences between these and SHL?
• How does interaction at SHL events fit within the student experience overall (including forums, tutorials, interaction with other students, and distance learning).
• Do you have any suggestions for improving SHL or for other types of events?
• Do you have any suggestions or comments about other ways in which the student experience is lacking?

Thank participant.

Remind about right to withdraw and ask if they have additional thoughts or contributions to add.
Appendix 6 Example of chatlog quotes to support themes

This shows combined quotes from the chatlog from the Bootcamp 12.9.16. Here individual quotes are taken from the discussion and positioned in a theme to be read together.

**Community and previous participation**

Participant 20  [Hotdesk 1] there’s my dragon lol (talking to Hotdesk individually, claiming the dragon as a previous contribution thereby displaying previous participation)

Participant 21  my photo is on the board. Yuhu :)) (claiming participation at a previous event. Unclear what Yuhu means, perhaps the name of a study buddy?, emoticons used to indicate big smiles)

Participant 22  They like my hat :-P (referring to studio panels comments on previous contribution, perhaps indicating that despite criticism from the chatroom, the studio participants disagree. Emoticon to indicate tongue out)

Participant 23  When photo of my lunchbox was shown I was referred to as [last name removed] but my first name is [first name removed]....gentle slap on the wrist! (referring to contribution in terms of how this was presented, playful take on the inaccuracy of name, expression of previous participation)

Participant 24  Thank you for addressing my issues with face to face tutorials Hotdesk1 (naming Hotdesk, expressing thanks, acknowledging there had been an issue or question, locating appreciation to the Hotdesk, not the person who had answered the question)

Participant 27  Hey [Participant 22]..... Good to (see) you (recognising others, expressing positive emotions in terms of seeing another person)

Participant 25  Looking for a study partner in [city name]? (expressing a desire for a local study partner, naming location is a way to demonstrate where you live)

Participant 26  I would love to get to know my peers and have study buddies (expressing a desire for further meaningful connections that may or may not appear possible. Conditions such as location are not included)

Participant 28  Same [Participant 26], that’s why I love Facebook ! (social media is a place to meet others and is perhaps where community happens?, Exclamation mark expressing feelings)

Participant 22  Hi everyone :-) I’m full-time, doing this in lieu of a brick uni. [Participant 23], are you doing [module name] or [module name]? Your name looks familiar so I was wondering if you had made a typo (there are a lot of questions in this response that are both generic and specific. Initially
everyone is addressed and an emoticon is used to indicate friendliness. The students study intensity is mentioned, and a comparison made to a brick uni. An individual participant is addressed and their name is familiar, perhaps recognised from a module space since the module name and code are offered. However perhaps as a result of a module code typo or the issue that this participant had with their name being incorrect, there was a question seeking clarification.

Participant 29  @ [Participant 22], I think I remember you answering last week and then I had to finish my lunch at work so couldn’t reply (recognising someone from the previous week, explaining why they had not replied, but equally not thanking them now)

Participant 30  the Microwave has gone (demonstrating knowledge of the previous event and an awareness of props in the studio)

Participant 22  I think [Participant 33] and I are doing the same degree, iirc. (claiming a relationship to another participant, albeit tentatively. Comment about the degree indicating anticipation, excitement, fear perhaps?)

Participant 28  Its nice to be active online, especially the Facebook groups because it can get lonely studying alone and it’s helpful to bounce ideas so you’re not feeling like you’re a mile out of where your meant to be (something here about being active online, perhaps chatting to others, exchanging information, not feeling alone because others are there, finding out where you should be/normalising progress)

Participant 24  this was much better than watching on catch up. i was made up when [Hotdesk1] mentioned what I’d said :’D (had participated but not live, pleased to have been mentioned, emoticon to express pleasure, recognising Hotdesk by name, comparison of experience)

**Benefits of participating**

Participant 28  Feeling more confident with note taking now :) (specific skill developed, confidence increased)

Participant 40  Finding this boot camp so useful, feeling much more confident (not a specific benefit, more general, but increase in confidence)

Participant 41  I think this chat alongside the tutorial has been of great help, giving and receiving tips (exchanging information between peers is useful)

Participant 24  It's really nice feeling part of a wider community :) (feeling part of a community is positive, community called wider community, perhaps some experience of community already exists for this participant and this is expanding it beyond previous parameters?)
Participant 20  This advice is really helpful thank you, essay writing makes me really anxious (possibly having alleviated anxiety?, appreciating advice

Participant 47  The sessions are great. They are more informative. Thanks a million (general positive benefit, something about information, appreciated)

Participant 48  Been another great 2 hours again well done (something here about the time and perhaps investment or return of time spent. Congratulating participants, but unclear which)

Participant 33  Another great time. Fun and awesome tips (Enjoyed the experience, fun and good tips)

Participant 52  Thank You everyone, the best advice ever! (thanks others, value is in the advice)

Participant 53  This was great fun, watched last week on catchup but live is way more fun!! (Comparison between live and catch up, more fun live)

Participant 54  This has been a really useful quick refresher to writing essays in particular. Thanks All. (specific mention of essay writing, demonstrates purpose, something here about the quickness/time of the session)

Participant 56  Thanks for another comprehensive support session! (identified as a support session, benefit is in support. Use of word comprehensive indicates more than one source of support, perhaps both peer and institutional?)

Participant 24  got three pages of notes on note taking :) (displaying learning of the content of the session).
Appendix 7 Example of interview grouped themes

This is a grouping of quotes from interviewees about theme 2, Belonging which included loneliness, a place to be together, and a potential for comparison.

A factor that unites OU students is that they are voluntarily studying at the OU

“Yes, [the label of] student, when you are young you have to go to school, studying, when you are older it is something you have chosen to do. [Andrew]

In addition to information, participants commented on the human element of SHL; the personalities that were brought to life who they had seen on Facebook or as names in module materials.

“I’m seeing students, and your title is lecturer and I’m seeing OU staff. You’re in a screen, I cant touch you but I can listen to you”. [Sally]

There also appeared to be a shared understanding about how people would behave at SHL events, and this appeared to create a safe space. Familiarity was also important here.

“There were some people whose names were familiar, they were not always friends, but you know already how that person is going to react”. [Anita]

“But in the writing retreat you are really enthusiastic. At the time it was like oh I know I’ll be chatting to you next week, some of them might come along and there were some familiar names, and we know each other”. [Sally]

“When you are deep in study, deeply lonely, I thought, I’m going to switch on SHL and I’ll see your voice because I’ve got to know your name, and you might have people on saying yeah we are struggling, there is a rapport going on. I will be able to look there for some connection when it isn’t available on the tutor group forum. [Sally]

Another participant talked about sharing experiences and doing things together. Having fun appears to help promote active learning and could make participation memorable.

“But when we can play together and do experiments and play together. Something that makes the memory to be more activated with something else”. [Anita]

While participants learn from the presenters at SHL, they also claim to learn a lot from other students, and acquiring, transferring and storing information can be an important part of the experience. Participants spoke about some of the activities they did while participating in events such as taking notes (some of these were in notebooks specifically for SHL events) and recording sources of information from events.

“I’m sharing what I’ve learned I’m sharing – some of the stuff I wished someone had told me, and I know how it helped me and it will help other people so that they don’t need to struggle. It’s good for me because I feel that I’ve learned something and can pass it on”. [Darius]
Appendix 8 Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)  
Project Registration and Risk Checklist

If you are planning a research project that involves human participants (including data and/or biological samples), you need to complete and submit this checklist so that the HREC Chair can decide the level of ethics review required. If you have not already done so, please refer to the OU Ethics Principles for Research involving Human Participants.

Once you have completed the checklist, save it for your records and email a copy to Research-REC-Review@open.ac.uk, with any relevant documents e.g. a questionnaire, consent form, participant information sheet, publicity leaflet and/or a draft bid. FAQs offering advice and guidance are available on the Research Ethics website. Once your checklist is submitted, you should receive a response within 7 working days as to whether your research will need full HREC review, but please indicate if you require a more urgent decision. It is essential that no potential participants should be approached to take part in any research until you have submitted your checklist and, where required, obtained a full HREC review and HREC supporting memorandum.

To meet internal governance and highlight OU research, the titles of all projects considered by the HREC (whether by HREC checklist or proforma), will be added to the Research Ethics website - http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human-research. If you would prefer for your title not to be made public, or have any queries, please email the HREC Secretary on Research-REC-Review@open.ac.uk.

### Section I: Project Details

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<th>Project title</th>
<th>Student engagement in a part time distance learning environment: Identity and community</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description (100 words maximum)</td>
<td>Exploring how the Student Hub live, and online interactive event facilitates belonging and community for distance learners. This project will include an analysis of the chat logs (text based discussions that happen during live events) and later interviews with participants who engage in these events.</td>
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<td>Is your research part of a previous or current application for external funding?</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research project intended start and end date</td>
<td>From: 16.2.17 To: 13.2.18</td>
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If your research involves using OU student or staff data you may also need to contact either the Student Research Project Panel or Staff Survey Project Panel. This can be done at the same time as your HREC application.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Primary Investigator (or research student)</th>
<th>Karen Foley</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email address</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Karen.foley@open.ac.uk">Karen.foley@open.ac.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone number</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>16.2.17</td>
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### Section II: Applicant Details

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<th>Karen Foley</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>16.2.17</td>
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</table>

### Section III: For students only:
Section IV: Risk Checklist

Please assess your research using the following questions and click yes or no as appropriate. If there is any possibility of risk please tick yes. Even if your list contains all “no”s you should still return your completed checklist to ensure your proposed research can be assessed and recorded by the HREC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Does the study involve children (under 16 years old), or those aged 16 and over who are unable to give informed consent. E.g. participants who are potentially vulnerable, such as people with learning disabilities, those with cognitive impairment, or those in unequal relationships, e.g. your own students?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited? (e.g. students at school, members of a self-help group, residents of a nursing home)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? (e.g. covert observation of people in non-public places)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use, or politics)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Are drugs, placebos or other substances (e.g. food substances, vitamins) to be administered to the study participants or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Will the research involve the sharing of data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given?</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Is pain or more than mild discomfort likely to result from the study?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Will the research involve administrative or secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Will the study involve prolonged or repetitive testing?</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Will the research take place outside the UK?</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Does the research involve members of the public in a research capacity (participant research)?</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Is there a possibility that the safety of the researcher may be in question? (e.g. in international research: locally employed research assistants)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Will financial recompense (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Will the research involve participants responding via the internet or other visual/vocal methods where participants may be identified?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Will the study involve recruitment of patients or staff through the NHS or the use of NHS data?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Will tissue samples (including blood) or other human biological samples be obtained from participants?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Does your research include consideration of terrorism or extremism-related issues?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
If you answered ‘yes’ to questions 16 or 17, you may have to submit an application to the Health Research Authority (HRA) Research Ethics Service.

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University’s Code of Practice for Research and the Ethics Principles for Research involving Human Participants, and any relevant academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study. Also, to provide appropriate participant information sheets and consent forms, and ensure secure storage and use of data. FAQs offering advice and guidance on these are available on the Research Ethics website.
Appendix 9 Example of chatlog transcript and coding

This is part of a complete chatlog from the Bootcamp event [2.9.16]. This section was just before the event began.

Participant 1 It's updating my name but not my photo, never mind! Short and sweet ha  
(technical comment, personalising, performance of identity – embellishing what is known)

Participant 2 [Participant 18]: ALWAYS! ;) (relating to another student who had asked  
about whether they should eat another portion of cake, emoji winking displaying feeling  
in addition to text)

Participant 3 Okay food sorted - Bacon and brie (Sharing food choice, engaging in  
collective repertoire - food)

Participant 4 @[Participant 14], indeed! This is my first degree so thought I’d ease into it.  
Really looking forward to it all now though. Do you work in this area already?  
(Communicating study intentions, excitement about starting, asking others about their situations)

Participant 5 [Participant 18], that’s a yes!! (relating to another, expressing opinion and  
also now agreeing with others who agree)

Participant 1 Always risk another Participant 18! (expressing opinion, agreeing with  
others, sharing same name)

Participant 6 ha ha [Participant 18] now I want some x (not expressing an opinion but  
adding to the discussion, wanting another’s food, kiss indicates affection)

Participant 5 and share! (Joining in joke. Implying that sharing should happen in the  
group, making fun of the virtual space and impossibility of sharing)

Participant 7 save the second portion for halfway through I would say (Joining in and then  
developing on the joke)

Participant 9 should I be able to see any widgets yet? (Technical question, using language  
commonly used at SHL (widget))

Participant 10 save it for me lol (Joining in the joke and interacting with the group,  
developing the notion of sharing in virtual terms)

Participant 2 [Participant 2], I’ve got my mini quiche and red velvet cupcake in the kitchen  
so I don’t eat it too soon. ;) (Sharing what is going to be eaten – perhaps  
inviting others to comment?, including spatial position of food)

Participant 6 [Participant 18] (relating to another using first name)

Participant 11 can we all have some (Joining in the group, communal sense of sharing in  
the virtual environment)

Participant 2 [Participant 2], [Participant 9], I don’t think so ! (Either joining in the joke or  
being literal about the impossibility of sharing cake in a virtual environment)
Participant 5 Did someone say Red Velvet...! (joining in the joke, suggesting this is an ongoing food item of comment or alternatively a personal favourite)

Participant 5 Now I'm hungry (engaging in the collective repertoire of food but from a different perspective – acknowledging own feeling of hunger but not developing beyond that)

Hotdesk 1 @ Participant 9, we haven't got any widgets up yet, will do soon though :) (responding to earlier technical question, emoji indicating smile)

Participant 12 mmmm (joining in the joke about food, perhaps referring to the red velvet?)

Participant 13 no play button only chat no widgets either (technical issue, reflecting what is seen on the screen, perhaps seeking clarification that others experienced the same interface?)

Participant 14 [Participant 18], as a future nutritionist, I'd have to say no BUT as a girl who loves cake YES YES YES HAHA (Sharing information about oneself, referring to future, joining in joke, capital letters used to emphasise how much she loves cake and the tension between future intentions and desire for cake)

Participant 6 lol yes [Participant 11] (relating to others, using first name)

Participant 15 will there be any microwaving this week? (asking a question to refer to a joke at the previous event, but not necessarily seeking an answer. Showcasing involvement in previous events through in ‘in-joke’)

Participant 2 Yes!! my local bakery makes the best ones [Participant 18]! :) Sorry! :) (referring to physical and also local shops suggesting a situatedness, joining in the discussion about food and refers to participant 18 by name, thereby continuing the discussion despite other discussions having emerged. The discussion initiated by participant 18 appears to have the most traction, perhaps as s result of being introduced first?)

Participant 16 I will be having cheese and tomato sandwiches (another food suggestion, perhaps inviting comment? This is another savoury choice, and the savoury choices do not appear to result in as many comments as cakes do)

Participant 17 hi everyone, just about to start [module name], second to last module for my psych degree, how is everyone today? (introducing, validating entry, perhaps inviting others to respond with module choices, indicates where they are in the qualification, and perhaps since they are near completion this student is asserting their potential knowledge? Asking how people are is a way to invite a new direction of conversation. Lots of questions offer the opportunity for partial responses to the most relevant aspect for individuals, perhaps thereby increasing the chance that this student would get a response they appear to desire from the group)

Participant 12 It's just finished [Participant 13] (technical answer to a previous question, refers to participant by name)
Appendix 10 Example of interview transcript and coding

K – Researcher, D - Interviewee.

K Firstly, can you tell me about your involvement and how many events you have been to.

D I think I have been to all but one of the events. Even the studio ones, and the tutorial class ones as well (offers additional information, knowledge of the types of events but calls them different things)

K and could you describe your experiences at those events – perhaps one of the first ones or one that stuck out in your mind. Can you tell me what it felt like for you?

D It was enjoyable and it is nice, as in more senior student, to others to meet newer students and to see the energy coming off them, and it’s good to hear about what is going on in the university in other subjects so you start to feel more part of the university with it. (for experienced students there is something around connecting with new starters, perhaps reigniting the enthusiasm initially experienced. Perhaps also something about being able to offer advice to those students. Second thing here is the knowledge gained about the institution, perhaps something around a wider community or the mission of the institution. Here, knowledge is seen as being something that connects and individual to the institution)

K: So are there events that you look at and think – oh that is interesting I’ll go to that, or do you go to an event meet other students and find out things. How much is driven for you by subject

D – most of the subjects haven’t really touched in the field that I am studying in which is my interest, but I like to,…(something about attending because of the community and potential to talk to students being more important than the topic – perhaps also reflected in the volume of events attended) the interaction with the students is good but it’s also nice to see (something about seeing, perhaps the video aspect) the tutors as well, because you have so little contact with everyone (little contact, isolation from other students, what might little contact look like – this is subjective) and I like to see the tutors talking about the subject and how they see it and its good because you get a chance to bounce things back off each other (the real time interaction here is important, exchanging ideas, perhaps having the self or submissions reflected in the eyes of others as they are bounced back?), and you might suggest something and they say well that is an interesting idea, and then you can say if you like this then you may like that (capitalising on suggestions). And its nice (something here about the emotional experience being positive in some way)

K Can you tell me then a bit more about that interaction with the students because this is something that you do a lot. What’s in it for you? What do you get out of it?

D - For me when I’m in the chat and I’m sharing what I’ve learned (as an experienced student it is possible to share things that matter, there is a sense of knowing what has value here and sharing from experienced) I’m sharing – some of the stuff I wished
someone had told me (this student didn’t have anyone to do this for them, indicating a sense of sadness perhaps? Helping others out despite not having had this experience, or just that there is a sense of what is important and therefore there is an ability to know what will matter most), and I know how it helped me and it will help other people (credence in knowing what is important, perhaps important in the purpose of the group?) so that they don’t need to struggle (the alternative to getting information is seen as negative, a struggle). It’s good for me because I feel that I’ve learned something and can pass it on. One of the best things about learning a subject is that you can pass it on (perhaps something here about the altruism in sharing from experience. Also, the benefit in learning is seen as exchanging knowledge).

K - Do you get anything back?

D - A lot of the time when you mention something you get a lot of discussion (discussion is the first thing mentioned in terms of getting something back, so in this sense it is the literal interaction in terms of chat). Being a distance-learning university you don’t get to chat to other students (the second return relates to the potential to talk to other students, perhaps something here about the lack of potential to do that. The word chat is also used, indicating an informalità to the conversation), and its good because you get live feedback (something here about the real time interaction, but also feedback in terms of exchanges). On the main forums you have to wait (have to indicates an inconvenience and potentially issues to do with power and the institutional ways of operating, waiting is seen in negative terms here). Even though you aren’t in the same area as them you get a lot more out of things (location or perhaps even subject discipline may be a drawback, or it may be an acknowledgement that this is the way things are often structured. The benefit is that you get a lot more, indicating a comparison to something – perhaps forums – that is better). Immediacy. (importance of real time interaction is reiterated)

K - You do gaming also don’t you? Thinking about the experiences where you interact. It appears that SHL is a friendly space. Most people who come to events want to connect and feel less alone. A lot feel daunted by their studies because they don’t have this closeness with other students and they like the feedback because they are not alone. And the instant feedback supports that also.

D - Gaming – compares – (similarity in terms of interactive games) you need immediate feedback in gaming and its good because you have to think about other things and how people respond (something here about anticipating others responses, seeing things from a different perspective, perhaps considering multiple responses, thinking beyond one specific thing?). Same thing at conferences – you have the main subject and the side thing – where people are explaining it in more depth to you and you are keeping up with it (aside from the topic or purpose there is something about interaction and communication that happens in addition to the main event. This participant is aware of this and sees it as complementary to the main event.