

# 50 narratives @ 50

*An exploration of if, when and how a short learning episode may lead to positive outcomes*

**Key Words:** PostGraduate study; Masters study; retention; narrative portraits; online learning; belonging.

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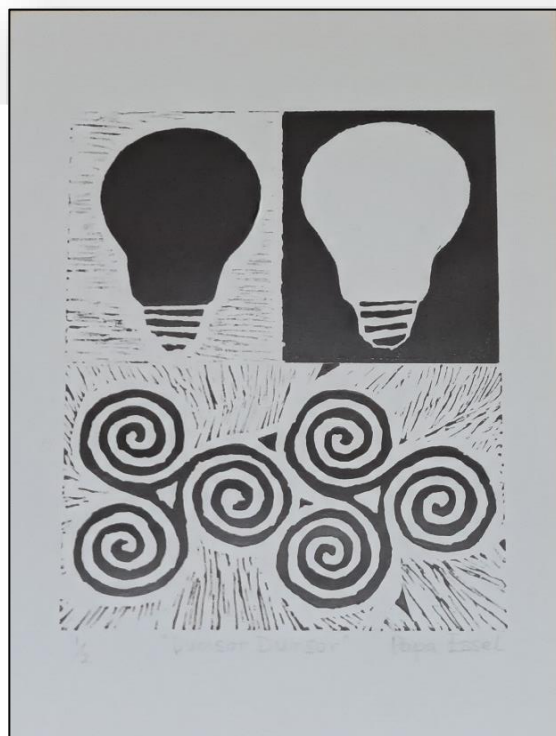
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With **Research Associates**

- Dr Clare Choak
- Dr Claire Edwards Evans
- Dr Claire Elhaggagi

## images of identity and belonging

Dennis and Clifton (under review) Adult postgraduate students' learning in online spaces: images of identity and belonging, [Journal of Research in Continuing Education](#)



Many thanks to Dr Gill Clifton and Dr Claire Saunders for peer reviewing of the first draft of this report.

### Aims and scope: what we aimed to do and why

The project emerged from a desire within the WELS PostGraduate Taught (WELS PGT) programme and module teams to adopt a research informed approach to understanding student recruitment, retention and achievement accompanied by a conviction that this is only possible when we have a detailed understanding of students' conception of their MA, its value and how it relates to personal, professional and academic trajectories.

The project was made possible through joint funding between PRAXIS and module development hours provided by WELS faculty. WELS faculty make funds available to any module which recruits above a certain threshold. Module chairs may use this resource to enhance any aspect of their module. Three Associate Lecturers - usually paid on contract to facilitate student learning on a specified module – were offered development hours to participate in the project. Thus, this was a jointly funded project in which WELS faculty paid for the interviews and creation of narrative portraits. The award from PRAXIS enabled the transcription of interviews and the Literature Review.

The 50 narratives @ 50 project aimed to:

- a) investigate students' lived experiences following a period of postgraduate study on F70 / F55
- b) understand the personal, professional and academic trajectories following their participation in F70 / F55
- c) consider the extent to which a detailed insight into students' lived experience adds nuance to the interpretation and analysis of programme and module data.

### Activities: Methodology and Method

- a) Undertake a Literature Review
- b) Undertaking 33 open unstructured interviews that included
  - research participants presenting and talking about an image that reflected their experience of postgraduate study
  - an open unstructured interview with suggested (rather than required) questions
- c) The creation of narrative portraits

The Research Team was led by Dr Carol Azumah Dennis, who – prior to taking up her current post as Programme Leader for the EdD was chair of EE813 the MA in Educational Leadership and Management dissertation module and contributing author to E822 to combined ECYS MA dissertation module. The project built on work previously undertaken by Dr Gill Clifton, Programme Leader for PostGraduate Taught programmes in ECYS in which explored students sense of belonging to the OU. The three ECYS Associate Lecturers contracted as Research Associates were Dr Claire Elhaggigi, Dr Clare Chock and Dr Claire Edwards. To ensure a degree of distance between student experience and project leaders Research Associates undertook 30 of the 33 interviews. One Research Associate, Claire Elhaggigi undertook the Literature Review.

*It may seem odd that a project which interviewed 33 students to be entitled 50 narratives. The project was originally conceived as a celebration of the OU at 50. There is currently with the WELS SST team an online questionnaire that is intended to generate quick answers to a series of questions, and this is the intended source of the 50 narratives. The in-depth interviews were originally planned as a follow up to these questionnaires. COVID-19 has meant that this on campus team have not been able to undertake the work. I have followed up progress towards this with them.*

## **Literature Review**

The literature review sought to understand students' experiences of postgraduate programmes and how these impacted on retention. The reviewer worked to a brief that ran counter to much of the research into retention which is primarily concerned with undergraduates. For the major part studies concerned with retention tend to explore factors that influence students' capacity to remain on course and complete their degree, frequently citing as highly significant things such as family background, being homesick and developing friendship groups.

- In 50 Narratives @ 50 we explored the experiences of post graduate students with an emphasis on those studying in the digital University.

PGT students are a distinct cohort.

They are:

- mostly adults
- often working in the field of their study – in the process of becoming professionals
- postgraduates who have succeeded in their studies and made progress

The particular cohort explored in this project had further distinct qualities.

They were:

- studying an online Masters offered by a Digital University
- interviewed during COVID-19 even though the experiences we were interested in pre-date the pandemic.

The literature search protocols involved:

- PostGraduate (or Masters) Retention (or progression, or graduation, or completion)
- PostGraduate Dropout (or attrition, or non-completion)
- PostGraduate Students career (or academic, or professional) trajectories

We worked with a three-stage review process

- The first section of the search involved screening of titles.
- The second section of the search involved screening abstracts of the titles included at stage 1, based on the criteria.
- Review of full articles

## **Open unstructured interviews**

After obtaining a favourable ethical opinion from HREC and the approval of SRPP, the Research Lead sent 600 email invites. We were keen to avoid interviews that mimicked PR publicity material which rightly focus only on the experiences of successful students. Inevitably, when students see an invitation to participate in a project that explores their PG experience, they assume we are looking for success stories. Hence, our decision to prioritise withdrawn students whose success was neither immediate or obvious and might in some instances be deferred.

These were sent directly rather than issued only to those who had responded to the questionnaire. Clearly, those who respond are a self-selecting group who are positively disposed towards the OU. Those who feel negatively about their experiences with the OU are unlikely to respond to our invitation to be interviewed. In

fact, there were a few responses from students who used the email as an opportunity to let me know how disappointed they were by their OU experience – and who made a point of saying they did not wish to speak with us. There was no discernible overall COVID-19 impact here. Some research participants responded to say that while in principle they were interested in the project, COVID-19 meant they were simply too busy to find time to participate. Others responded with the precise opposite statement. They were at home, on furlough or some other arrangement and had time on their hands. This doesn't mean that every response was a positive one. Some narrated experiences were troubling, and in the handful of instances where it was relevant and appropriate, we referred students for further advice.

There were two distinct parts of the interview.

- i) First students were invited to provide an image that represented their experiences of PG study. While we anticipated that students would generate their own images via photographs they had taken, the majority of images presented were found images. Nonetheless, the images allowed students to talk about their experiences in a way that language alone would have hidden. They generated intensely vivid, personal and unexpected metaphors which allowed us to view the PG study experience in novel ways. The images did not speak for themselves. Our first question was to invite research participants to discuss the image - to describe it and explain what they felt it conveyed.
- ii) The interviews then progressed to an open discussion. This was described by one of the RAs involved in the project:

*I really enjoyed the narrative aspect of the interviewing process, the fact that we had a clear set of things to discuss and that we were able to talk about them in any order, or in any way possible, in order to get our data. It was useful not having to follow the script for example, knowing if we discussed something already, we didn't have to ask the question again. I am used to conducting semi structured interviews, so it was an interesting experience to use the narrative approach.*

*Final Project Reflections: Choak, 2020*

### **The creation of narrative portraits**

Open interviews generate data as inchoate stories with a pre-narrative structure. To render this data into a form that might further our quest, we crafted narrative portraits. The constitutive material for each of the portraits is within the data generated by interviews. The portraits are themselves made up exclusively from words used by research participants but reworked, edited and crafted into a portrait. This involves a process of listening *for* rather than *to* a story. The data were scrutinised carefully searching for the story buried within, like diving for pearls. We read and read the interviews through the lens of a simplistic, linear narrative formula: initiating event, pivotal point and settlement. These three elements formed the core structure of the final narrative portraits. The inchoate stories only become intelligible when transformed into a narrative portrait. It is at this point that stories become indispensable in articulating the eloquence of human action.

Two images best describe the relationship between open interview and narrative portrait.

Fig 1 – illustrates the data derived from the open-ended interview. It is densely detailed, following several not entirely coherent line of development to present a thick description of the research participant.



Fig 1 - Pablo Picasso, *La Taureau 1st state*, 1945

In Fig 2 - the narrative portraits, strip out the detail, discern the essential features and represent them in their least ambiguous almost abstract form. What emerges is a '(re)presentation of the research participant through the subjective, empathetic, and critical lens of the researcher' (Dixon, Chapman, and Hill 2005, 10).

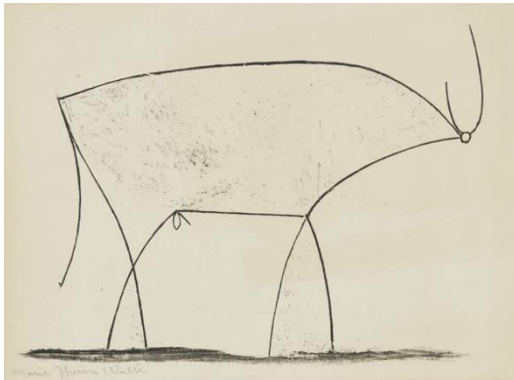


Fig 2 - Pablo Picasso, *La Taureau 11<sup>th</sup> state*, 1946

In its final reworked and recrafted form, the narrative portrait is painting with words – using the limited colour palette provided by the open interview. It reveals its subject and gives the reader a powerful sense of having met and spent time with someone. It is a creative and illuminating way to portray the multifaceted complexity of students' lives, their experiences and the social entanglements that impinge upon or inspire their PG engagement.

The point is that through a creative, imaginative process the researcher strips out the distracting detail to reveal not so much an inner truth but at least a plausible truth that was not otherwise obvious. The same process of reduction to the point of abstraction to reveal something that would otherwise remain unseen is caught in the by now well-rehearsed quote from Michelangelo *'I saw an angel in the marble and carved until I set him free'*.

### **Findings**

We are still in the process of analysing data and cannot speak of 'findings' in any conclusive sense. These 'findings' are thus presented in a broad thematic way to indicate the focus of the research papers that are currently in progress. Rather than being presented here as 'findings' with its positivist echoes, what is presented here are a series of narrative fragments. That is, our response to the data has been to articulate emerging conclusions as representing a series of multidirectional dialogues between members of the research team, the literature and the data.

- **Belonging: feeling part of something bigger**

Students experience a strong sense of belonging to the Open University; even those who have withdrawn from their studies speak highly of their learning experience and long to return. There is a literature surrounding this (Schroeder, 2019; Yorke 2004) that suggests persistence as a more useful analytical concept than retention. One focusses on institutional arrangement, the other on the fulfilment or otherwise of student aspirations.

There are arguably three dimensions to student learning engagement. Behavioural – referring to compliance with expected behavioural norms such as attendance, attention and involvement; cognitive – where students invest in their learning, embrace challenge, are interested and enjoy what they are doing. The third dimension is emotional, in this dimension students who engage emotionally experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, *and a sense of belonging* (Trowler, 2020). Belonging emerged as of most interest to the project because since it seemed to be threaded throughout the emergent themes and identifiable in the most unexpected places.

We were not expecting to find evidence of students who had withdrawn from their studies harbouring a sense of belonging to the OU. These were after all students who had withdrawn and presumably disengaged from their modules and learning. It is worth emphasising that we contacted withdrawn students to ensure that interviews did not give voice only to smiling student success stories. To find that there was nonetheless a strong sense of belonging amongst many students was quite unexpected.

In reflecting on her experience of conducting interviews, one Research Associate wrote:

*I was really buoyed by the positive experiences that students had despite the fact that we were looking at students who had completed the modules. The enthusiasm and love for the OU was clear in a lot of interviews and how much they felt that the OU and the module they studied had really helped and benefited them.*

*Final Project Reflections: Choak, 2020*

Some student quotes that illustrate this sense of commitment:

*I was going to [complete the module] but then I got ill. I was ill for about two years and then I'm where I am just now. When I go back to the OU, and I think I will go back to the OU, I'm going to go back to do something that is probably not academic in that sense and it'll be about literature or it'll be about writing*

Student Interview  
CC#3

*I think one of the other benefits of OU study is the lifeline it can give you to feel connected to an academic community and an academic process, [...] OU offers, this space to remain in touch with academia and academic ways of thinking and writing. And, to engage with abstract ideas that are so accessible and that you can tap into this world with relatively low barriers.*

Student Interview CE#2

*It is in my mind, and it feels a bit like unfinished business and I am quite annoyed in a way that I didn't finish the masters at the time, and I did enjoy the process of doing the studies that I did and it did make me wet my appetite in some ways, like oh yeah actually I really do enjoy this stuff!*

Student Interview CE#2

*I loved all of it and I feel quite, I don't know what the word is, loyal or proud? I don't know what the word is to describe how I feel towards it. I don't have a huge feeling about my school or my university I did my degree at. I don't have huge allegiance to those but I do with the OU, [...] I feel quite loyal to it [...] Yes, I certainly felt like I was part of something bigger than my Master's and my degree [...] I just did feel like I was part of something bigger*

Student Interview CEL#5

The experiences of 'belonging' is of particular interest for the OU cohort because it is broadly accepted that while belonging is implicated in student retention, it is accomplished through social presence which is much harder to accomplish in online spaces. Despite having left a module, students seemed to maintain a sense of belonging to the OU.

There are implications here for the PG Programme Teams and perhaps the OU in general: to examine how this sense of belonging is fostered and ways in which it may be enhanced; to ensure this sense of belonging is drawn upon to encourage progression, reregistration and persistence.

This assertion is also borne out through the data on withdrawals. Of 600 students who had withdrawn from a module, 200 went on to complete their PG qualification at a later stage. It is also noteworthy that the belonging expressed by these students is a belonging to the wider OU community rather than a particular group of peers.

Retention is a 'supply-side' concept. As a concept it is important for institutional managers (not least because of the implications for income streams) and for government and its agencies (which are concerned with matters relating to the return on the investment of public monies in higher education). Student success may be indexed in terms of the successful completion of a programme of study or, from the student's perspective, as the successful completion of the programme components that they wanted to complete in order to satisfy personal ambitions (Yorke, 2004). The more that students have to fund themselves through a higher education programme and the less the funding that is provided by government, the weaker is the rationale for making retention a performance indicator against which institutions are 'measured'. The importance of 'belonging' suggests time frame for student success that exceeds the registration and certification period of a single course or module. None of the students we interviewed articulated this critical analysis explicitly. Retention is not framed in this way and so there is no immediately available discourse for them to mobilise. The evidence of it was frequently echoed in terms of students expressing their desire to continue with their studies if and when their circumstances allowed. Or of them celebrating their success having withdrawn from a module, changed direction and completed study in a direction that had not initially anticipated.

These tentative ideas will be explored more fully in a paper currently being developed by project leads.

- **Uncanny spaces: a completely different world**

**Learning (in a digital space) can give rise to feelings of discomfort and disconnection, causing a sense of ontological crisis as students and lecturers experience the ontological insecurity of no longer knowing for sure what constitutes a classroom or lecture hall or even who the other students on their course or lecturers are.**

Having generated our images and portraits, we were keen to avoid a quasi-positivistic hankering that often betrays the interpretivist's treatment of data: coding, abstracting and categorizing into visual and narrative themes. We remained faithful to the artistry involved in what are after all acts of interpretation. Instead, therefore, of subjecting the data to continual rounds of computation, parsing, subsumption and analysis – we adopted a process reminiscent of an analytical daydream. We read and re-read the data, meeting on a bi-weekly basis to discuss our different interpretations of what we found, reverberations within and between what we had generated, what we were reading and our wider experiences of postgraduate (masters) study. We equivocated between theory and data, sometimes reading up from data to theme, other times reading down, recalling what others have written (MacLure, 2008), listening for echoes and resonances.

The other area of interest is the notion and nature of the OU learning environment, variously framed as distance, online or digital. What was more important than conceptualising the space as such was a careful consideration of the significance of the space, the extent to which and in what particular ways digitally mediated learning had an impact on students. We wanted to theorise the online space as other than the

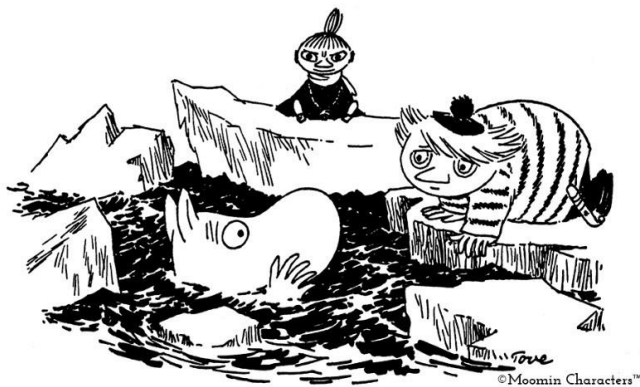
neutral ground upon which learning in the digital university unfolds. This implied exploring and thinking about the digital in a way that recognised the agential impact it has on education and learning. The uncanny seemed to enable an appreciation of the online space and its impact on student learning without giving into the enthused breathless utopianism that sometimes surrounds the discourse of technology enhanced learning.

*There is something uncanny about the Internet. The strange, the unexpected, the disturbing, the unaccountable, the familiar found in the midst of the alien, the alien that penetrates the home; the shocking, the obscene, the eerily beautiful; the sense that nothing is fixed, stable, certain or ultimately knowable, be that personal identity, the online environment itself, or the others with whom one's online self-communes – all these classic elements of the uncanny are (un)familiar territory to any regular Internet user.*

Thomas, 2011

The shift from analogue - stable, fixed and knowable, to the digital - shifting, unstable and ambiguous – gives rise to radical uncertainty. The disaggregation of voice, presence and body – renders the taken for granted familiarity of the pedagogic exchange strange and exotic. This resulting lack of ethnographic detail (taken for granted in face-to-face encounters) reshapes the pedagogic encounter. In the digital university the ontological security of a lecture hall and everything that accompanies it, is thrown into doubt. What it means to be a lecturer or student becomes tenuous. This is not precisely a 'finding' as such. It is a heuristic with which to read the data.

It offers a lens through which to read the data. It found several echoes.



*Teachers and learners are making sense of a whole lot of different kinds of information all the time and trying to find a coherence to them and sometimes in those situations you are the learner, sometimes you're the teacher, sometimes you're the teacher who thinks, "Been there, done that, not doing that anymore," which is absolutely what the female character in that image represents, sometimes you're a Moomin, helping pull somebody out... you know, struggling in the water and somebody's trying to help you out, and sometimes your roles change. And sometimes you can be all those things in the space of about three minutes as a practising teacher or as an ITE lecturer and actually as a learner.*

Student Interview CC#4





*“[It’s a] linear display of how my study journey has gone so far. [...] so it really shows, I think, right at the start of everything being handed to me, and on the right-hand side of the image, you know, having journals, and the size of the textbooks are increased, and they’re all independently sourced, reading other people’s research and really understanding the academic world [...].”*

Student Interview CC#5

This student makes reference to her ‘learning journey’. She narrates the 6 years from her bachelor’s degree to her MA in terms of her growing independence. Her sense of belong to the OU is an important part of her desired future self as she talks about progressing toward preparing a proposal for doctoral study.

*“When you start your journey [...] your first tasks are just trying to understand the assignments. I’m now in a position where I’m questioning what my actual doctoral question will be, which is a completely different world.”*

Student Interview CC#5

While the learning journey may be considered in terms of independence, more specifically, from being given references through critique and questioning to authoring your own ideas; the same experience may be talked about using terms that allow the instability, the unexpected and the disturbing to predominate.

*“... thinking about my own journey as an educator - and I’m just about to leave the formal bit of that because I’m going to retire in the summer - it is a true reflection of something that is necessarily chaotic. I think learning is necessarily chaotic and sometimes the things that we don’t teach learners are the things they need to know, which is to do with not everything makes sense immediately but sometimes something you’ve done makes sense later on.”*

Student Interview CC#4

This discussion is currently being explored and elaborated upon in a paper currently being drafted in response to an invited call for papers for a special edition of the Journal for Research on Adult Education edited by Professor John Field.

Two further concepts will be explored and developed with the emerging data: identity and social presence.

- **Social Presence**

Through social presence an individual is able to establish their state of being in a virtual environment signalling availability for interpersonal connections. Online participants – whether lecturers or students - inhabiting virtual spaces, indicate not only their presence but more importantly, their availability and willingness to engage in the constitutive exchanges of digital pedagogies.

*“I think there’s a connection when you can see somebody, yeah. I think it does make a difference. It can seem very remote when you’re just listening to somebody... maybe it’s not just the seeing, it’s the actual one to one time to start off with...–it’s been nice to have that support from people who really are interested in what you’re doing. It’s having a bit of –finding out the personality of people and just knowing that you can talk to them about things.”*

Student Interview CEI#3

*“There was about an 18-month-2-year gap between the modules, just because of the children and work and obviously the bad experience. And, it felt like the second time round, maybe the format of things had changed and the way it looked on the screen and the meetings, and the availability of him being around and the choice of he would say you can Skype me or do this –there seemed to be more ways to contact him [...] And, it just made it feel actually there is a human being there, whereas with the first module it was just a name and an email.”*

Student Interview CEI#10

The online pedagogic space has made a substantial shift from its earliest inception to what it is now, what was at one stage a repository of learning materials has become a multi-platformed interactive environment. However, historical echoes of digital learning as a repository remain and online students are less likely to experience a sense of identity and personal engagement with their learning, their peers and their instructor (Rose 2017).

- **Identity**

The four key concepts of belonging, uncanny, social presence and identity – were worked through the data. Each are closely related and mutually implicated. It is through social presence that an identity emerges, and feelings of belonging can be engendered. Yet the uncanny gives rise to ontological insecurity around identities – students and lecturers may experience anxiety when what should be familiar feels exotic or strange. The disembodied presence (Hook 2005) of their fellow learning journey travellers makes establishing identity something that has to be carefully considered. Yet it is only through a sense of identity made possible by social presence, that these feelings of disconnection and disconcertment may be assuaged. The central point being made here is that for digital pedagogies it is social, emotional or intellectual intimacy that matters, physical distance is neither a necessary nor inevitable precursor to these exchanges.

This research participant provided no image for her interview. She did however discuss the image she would have presented if only she could locate one. The imagined image inspired her to question herself in quite fundamental ways.

*“I would have given you another image but I just thought how come I’m the way I am?”*

Student Interview CC#9

A potential advantage of the digital pedagogic space is that laser like focus of communications. Which just sound or the choice of a camera which may be switched on or off, the actual words spoken and their connection to a person – a personality and identify is more focussed.

*“I really enjoyed going to the tutorials. I loved meeting other people even though I was very shy but I would force myself in and it was – I think I gained a lot of confidence from going to those sessions because I’d sit – I think I used to sit there for a lot of time and not really dare say anything because I never thought what I’d say would be worth listening to. But, then I got used to listening to other people and that gave me more confidence to then say something and it was just so lovely to have it accepted because when I was at school and at university, I was so cripplingly shy that I don’t remember speaking much and always being really worried about the response you’d get.”*

Student Interview CE#7

*“It gave me the confidence to continue to be a bit angry about things but also to be able to justify why I felt the way I did about those things in education”*

*“So I suppose I did feel a bit isolated really...you couldn't see who was talking, you know. It wasn't like this. Doing this is great, and it feels more informal, and that's what I quite like about doing this...even just talking on the phone.....when I spoke to my tutor in the summer, that was nice, because it was just the two of us and we had a proper chat, and that was really supportive and that really helped me a lot with what I was doing.”*

*“I actually personally feel that I am much, much, much more informed about my cohort, even more so than some of the very experienced teachers [...] I know I've been in [...] end-of-day meetings [...] I have thrown in there, the term that I've just used to you, 'adverse childhood experiences', people like the deputy head and the head chairing the meetings, they sit back, and they listen.”*

Perceptions of identity are formed, often unconsciously, when we draw clues about others not only from the information presented, but also from what is left 'unspoken' (Hughes, 2007). Learning and identity are intrinsically linked, a connection highlighted by as 'all learning eventually gains its significance in the kind of person we become' (Wenger, 2008 p. 226). The narrative portraits are replete with students talking about gains in confidence, being able to speak from a place of assurance because they know the research. A self is necessary to engage with learning but a distinct and different self emerges for learning. This seemed to be true of all the students we interviewed. And was not restricted to those who had successfully completed their course.

*“You know, I love learning so much...I really want to study again, I really, really want to do a masters, and I'm really fed up because I shelved it. In my mind I shelved it. And I've come out of it with a... You know, I owe USFA(?) money for it, you know, and I've got this debt for this module that is incomplete.”*

### Some Initial Tentative conclusions

- Specific work that traces students' movement throughout their OU experience might be valuable in terms of understanding retention / persistence in a more evidenced way. A substantial number of students return to study and many more articulate a desire to return to study after withdrawal. It is not evident to the project lead that the PGT programme fully harnesses the continued enthusiasm and energy of withdrawn students. Drawing on research about the professionalism of part-time staff in further education ( Jameson & Hillier 2008), it would seem that an institutional move that views ALs as salaried rather than contracted staff and draws them more fully into Module Teams is a positive one that will enable a more holistic cohesive approach to supporting students.

One RA involved with the project expressed it well:

*Some student journeys feel unfinished. They talk a lot of not knowing what to do next or where to go. They speak in positive terms about tutors helping them to keep studying and the momentous confidence gained even in difficult personal circumstances to keep that studying going. However, a very negative*

*tutor relationship is powerful enough to sweep all of that confidence away. One student uses a certificate at the start of her studies to capture her feelings to the OU: Positive, accomplished, success despite tragedy. Her memories of her last MA module though are of knowledge not certificates and how certificates are no longer something she feels confident she can attain to. She feels unsure where to go next: the sense of belonging to the OU has temporarily gone. She is open to repairing this though.*

Final Project Reflections: Elhaggigi, 2020

- The process of learning fuses cognitive, emotional and social dimension into a whole. It combines direct or mediated interaction between the individual, her material and social environment with an internal psychological process of acquisition (Illeris, 2003) p 227

The PGT team enables this fusing. But it is valuable to ensure there is a continued focus on and appreciation of the importance of encouraging students to feel as if they belong, that a person can emerge through the pedagogic encounter and that the academic team / other students are present and available to them. It may be worth reviewing and developing occasions when activities are promoted for no other purpose than encouraging social contact.

- Although these were narratives drawn primarily (not exclusively) from withdrawn students none replicated the bleak narratives of failure we might have expected. This may have been connected to the approach to interviews – premised as they were on the assumption that even a short episode of learning may lead to positive outcomes and that ‘retention’ is a supply-side institutional concept. The most worrying interview featured a student who withdrew because she did not understand the module and couldn’t seem to get the support she wanted or saw herself as needing. Having withdrawn with a damaged learner identity, feeling unsure of her capacity to study at PG level, she had at the time of the interview returned to study at a lower level in a different subject and so she presents an ambiguous future, one laden with possibility, rather than a bleak learning cul-de-sac.
- The importance of establishing close relationship was replicated like a refrain through several interviews and one RA in her reflection noted. *‘Within this institution there is a big emphasis on phoning your first-year students at undergrad level to build a relationship early on and find out more about their motivations studying. However, there isn’t so much of this Master’s level and because there are no face-to-face tutorials, this can really impact on how well a relationship is developed if at all. So, my advice would be in terms of retention is that there are hours built into the module contract of ALs to have a phone call or an Adobe session with every student at the start of every masters module.’* Final Project Reflections: Choak, 2020

### Deliverables

The learning from this scholarship project has been presented to the PGT Preprogramme Lead. We have held an Adobe Connect seminar which is recorded and available to the PGT team.

A PGT Scholarship festival event has been organised for February 2021 in which the outcome of the project will be presented.

Dennis and Clifton (under review) Adult postgraduate students' learning in online spaces: images of identity and belonging, *Journal of Research in Continuing Education*

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### **University approval processes**

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

- *SRPP/SSPP – Approval from the Student Research Project Panel/Staff Survey Project Panel was obtained according to the Open University's code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Application number 2019/148*
- *Ethical review – An ethical review was obtained according to the Open University's code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Reference number HREC/3443/*
- *Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check – A Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Check was obtained according to the Open University's code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project. Data Protection registration was requested by not required.*