An Exploration into the Importance of a Sense of Belonging for Online Learners
Abstract

Online learning provides flexible learning opportunities but with it come notable issues. Fostering a sense of belonging and a personal connection is seen as fundamental by many educational researchers regardless of the learning environment. For online learners, nurturing a sense of belonging may present a way of improving their experiences and attainment as well as reducing attrition rates. Limited research has explored specifically sense of belonging and online learning. This article addresses that gap and reports a small-scale exploratory study using qualitative data collection and analysis methods to investigate its importance, or not, for postgraduates’ online education, by exploring the origins and nature of their lived experience of online learning and their sense of belonging therein. Our initial findings emphasise its importance for them as online learners and has identified three significant themes: interaction/engagement; the culture of the learning; and support. These early findings highlight the importance of their role in promoting a sense of belonging and in ensuring that there are opportunities for meaningful group and peer interactions and will be of interest to all engaged in online education.

Keywords: sense of belonging, online learning, online groupwork, online discussions, interaction, tutoring
Over the last two decades, there has been a continuing interest in online learning, with numbers expected to grow still further as institutions reach out to more diverse markets (Haggerty, 2017; Allen & Seaman, 2013). Nowadays it is common for students, especially those studying online, to be employed in a profession but seeking further development, possibly for accreditation. For that reason, the authors follow the practice of referring to “learners” rather than students, other than when quoting from cited sources, questionnaire returns or interview transcripts. Online learning can thus provide a flexible learning space, allowing learners access to educational opportunities whilst continuing to fulfil their various professional and familial responsibilities (O’Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015). If studying in a nurturing environment with like-minded peers, learners can broaden and deepen the skills and abilities that are required for their chosen career pathways. They gain instant access to up-to-date resources and to experts in their subject specialism (Laurillard, 2012). However, for many learners the online space may be alien, even threatening (Thomas, 2012), resulting in high attrition rates and lower than expected learner attainment compared with campus-based learners (Carr, 2000). This is particularly so when they are expected to post in online discussions and engage in online group work (Whittaker, 2015). Online learners often report feelings of being ‘out of their depth’ when studying online, as well as being under-confident about their academic skills and abilities (Baxter, 2012).

In face-to-face campus-based programmes, learners with a strong sense of belonging (SoB) report feelings of being comfortable in their learning environs and engaged with their studies. In
addition, they consider that their social and cultural values are aligned with those of their university. Such learners are usually more motivated and have a firm belief that they can achieve, and will achieve (Meehan & Howells, 2018; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018). Jarvis (2009) and Illeris (2014) both identify that how the learner mobilises the mental energy for learning through motivation, emotion and volition is critical in driving the character and durability of the learning. Thus, the absence of a sense of belonging for learners may lead to feelings of anxiety, frustration and boredom, impacting negatively on their academic life and performance. This is potentially the case in settings where their values and needs do not seem to be appreciated. Many of the issues that a sense of belonging seeks to address are applicable to online learners. Some can find online learning to be a lonely experience from the outset, with a need to cope effectively with a wealth of materials that focus more on the content and acquisition of knowledge rather than incentives (Illeris, 2014). However, little is known about a sense of belonging on the part of online learners who are engaging in collaborative, community-based learning and even less about how institutions and tutors can and do promote it.

This article reports the initial stages of exploratory on-going work investigating the origins, nature and importance, or not, of a sense of belonging in the lived experience of online learning for certain postgraduate online learners. This work was undertaken to address the limited research into these aspects of collaborative online learning. The chosen methodology enabled action-researching university teachers to obtain illuminative insights into aspects of the learning experiences they were creating, identifying findings which have already been of interest to managers and tutors in the sector. In what follows, we are taking “tutor” to describe a staff
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member appointed to both support the creative planning of a course before learning activities commence, and facilitate learning during the course (Peacock & Cowan, 2017).

We believe that it is highly desirable in any online programme for learners to develop a sense of belonging about their experience; and we agree with Thomas, Herbert, & Teras (2014) that strategies which foster online learners’ sense of belonging could enhance their educational experiences and improve retention. At this stage, we are seeking to broaden and deepen understandings about sense of belonging in online learning, whilst providing guidance for tutors, professional staff and institutions about promoting it in online learning locations or spaces. This paper and the action-research which it describes were both founded on the theory and findings contained in the report by Thomas et al (2012). This work will be of interest to those who are moving into online education such as tutors working in the online learning space, professional staff such as librarians and support staff in immediate contact with online learners, and senior management and policy makers, as they seek to address the learners’ needs identified above.

The Need for Belonging

Defining the concept.

The need and desire to feel in some way connected with and related to others, and to be positively regarded by them, is a universal human characteristic, influencing behaviours and perceptions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individual needs for a sense of belonging vary, but are particularly acute in times of flux, stress and transition (Strayhorn, 2012), as when studying in
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an unfamiliar environment like online education. The term itself - ‘sense of belonging’ - seems deceptively clear and explicit; but whilst many descriptions of it exist, there is a general lack of clarity and consistency amongst them. Sense of belonging seems to have both psychological and social dimensions for learners, with two defining attributes (Hagerty Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996). The first involves feelings of being accepted, needed, respected, mattering and valued in a class. The second pertains to feelings of fitting in, being connected with a group, class, department, subject, institution or all of these (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, & Newman, 2015).

In educational research, the most frequently cited and accessible definition of sense of belonging, to which we subscribe due to its emphasis on feelings, was proposed by Goodenow in her seminal work in 1993 where she describes it as comprising feelings of:

- being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual (p.25)

**Belonging in campus-based learning.**

It has been widely confirmed that campus-based learners value having a sense of belonging, with feelings of being cared and mattering to one or more people in a group who in turn matter to them, but perhaps for different reasons (Strayhorn, 2012). Generally, the concept is linked to Hurtado & Carter’s work in 1997 which offered a holistic approach to learner
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withdrawal, suggesting that learner persistence was a joint responsibility of learner and institution. Since then, educational researchers have linked a sense of belonging with improved learner attainment, increased learner satisfaction and persistence (Vaccaro et al., 2015; Hausmann et al., 2007; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008), with Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, (2002-2003) reporting that “the greater a student’s sense of belonging to the university, the greater is his or her commitment to that institution … and the more likely it is that he or she will remain” (p.228). Significant work in the United States has noted the particular importance of a sense of belonging for learners who perceive themselves to be marginal to campus life and non-traditional according to class, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, income and disability (Hausmann et al 2007; Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, Alvarez, Inkelsa, Rowan-Kenyon, & Longerbeam, 2007, Locks et al., 2008; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Strayhorn’s research concluded that, if a sense of belonging is not developed, this loss will impede such learners’ ability to attend to the task at hand (studying and fulfilling the goals of higher education) unless the omission is resolved (Strayhorn, 2012). In the United Kingdom, the lead author of an extensive research project involving 22 higher educational institutions concludes that “at the heart of student retention and success is a strong SoB in HE for all students” (Thomas, 2012). Thus the concept is recognised and widely valued for campus-based learning.

**Belonging in online learning.**

“The need for belonging is one of the most important needs for all students to function well in all types of learning environment” [emphasis added] (Jackson et al., 2010). Some research
has already been undertaken into sense of belonging in online learning. For instance, Garrison articulates the importance of belonging in online communities of inquiry, stating that we should “establish a feeling of belonging to the critical community that must develop over time” (Garrison 2011, p.32). In previous work, the authors (Peacock & Cowan, 2019) have used an adapted version of Community Inquiry Framework (CoIF) is used to frame specific suggestions for action to nurture learners’ sense of belonging. Elsewhere, Thomas et al. (2014) offer similar insights into the tutor and learner perspective of online learning and an associated sense of belonging, emphasising its importance in leading to greater satisfaction for all. Engagement and collaboration with peers fostered “a sense of camaraderie that diffused some of the isolation” associated with online learning. Such interactions reduce anxiety, help learners to develop their ideas and build a connection. Conversely, lack of community-building negatively inhibits the development of a sense of belonging and may impact upon retention. Thomas et al. (2014) acknowledged that fostering a sense of belonging was a challenging task for tutors, especially when trying to encourage learners to become part of the community and its interactions. It is with that general need that this study engaged.

**Research**

In this paper, we introduce our work into online sense of belonging and outline our findings to date. We are a small action-research team comprising three tutors, each engaging in the promotion and facilitation of online learning; and an experienced visiting researcher.

Our primary research question has been:
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- What are our online learners’ accounts of their sense of belonging within their current postgraduate studies?

Supplementary questions include:

- How do they define sense of belonging? What does the term mean to them?
- Is having this sense relevant for these online learners, or not?
- According to these learners, what does, or does not, promote for them a sense of belonging at the course and institution level?
- How important are peers in promoting and sustaining a sense of belonging?
- What role does the tutor play in promoting a sense of belonging for these learners?

At the heart of our work is the desire to understand in what ways, if any, do online learners find it relevant to have a sense of belonging – and why? Also, as tutors, we want to know what helps to promote a learner’s sense of belonging and what role might tutors and peers play to develop and maintain it.

**Data collection.**

Our small-scale exploratory study was undertaken at a small, niche university in Scotland, whose 5,000 enrolled learners take predominantly professional programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in Health Sciences, Arts, Social Sciences and Management. The institution has a developing strategy promoting online provision that uses a collaborative approach for all modules. For the present study, learners from three online modules were asked
for their assistance. These online modules, as for many run by institutions, have been run online for several years to enable worldwide recruitment and engagement of employed learners; they have consistently received significantly positive learner feedback.

We approached learners (N =50) studying two compulsory modules part-time in the fully online MSc in Professional and Higher Education. One is typically the first programme experience, whilst the second module is usually followed in the second or third year of learners’ studies. Both take a strong collaborative, community-based approach, with learners being introduced to resource materials through a variety of online journals, videos and narrated PowerPoints. Online discussions are core to the modules, with learners being introduced at the beginning of their studies to their roles and responsibilities within the online community. Thus, learners are also expected to participate in structured individual and group activities on a weekly basis. Regular synchronous sessions are held in which learners have the opportunity to meet with others in small break-out rooms, and to develop questions to be posed to the community. Drop-in synchronous sessions also provide space for learners to discuss their studies with either the module tutors or the programme leaders.

A further group of learners (N = 10) in the online MSc in Dispute Resolution were approached; they were studying a compulsory module Fundamentals of Dispute Resolution. This is another part-time online programme, most of whose learners are busy professionals who work in complaint handling. This module tends to be the first option taken and includes a number of programme induction activities. It follows a structured collaborative approach to learning akin to that described above, and clustered around five core learning topics. Learners
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are expected to participate in discussion board activities on a weekly basis; in four of the five topics, these contributions contribute to the assessment. Learners are paired for two activities and expected to use Skype or phone to discussion the task in hand. Two synchronous sessions are held, with varying success. One-to-one sessions with the tutor via phone or Skype are offered at two points within the module.

With ethical approval from the University, volunteers from the three selected modules were recruited through a strategy of announcements and discussion postings in the university’s Virtual Learning Environment. They were initially invited to participate in an anonymous online survey consisting of eight open-ended questions. The arrangements for confidentiality in the survey and interviews precluded identification of the modules which individual volunteers were studying. The survey tool had been piloted with two learners who had previously completed modules in the MSc in Professional and Higher Education. Their feedback was valuable in fine-tuning the design of the tool which asked learners to concentrate upon their current module, to explain what sense of belonging meant to them, and to provide concrete examples of incidents that had had a positive or negative effect on this. Other questions explored the impact of peers as well as of the tutor and the family on sense of belonging. The data provided by 12 respondents to the survey (18.5% of the cohort) were collated by the visiting researcher. At the end of the survey, participants were invited to participate in a 45- minute telephone interview. Two learners volunteered. A further invitation was sent to all other respondents but without response. The small number of responses is something that should be considered in any follow-up study.
Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted by the visiting researcher, and concentrated upon the interviewees’ experiences in their current module. Files of the interview transcriptions were shared with each participant for editing, to ensure their agreement with the record. No changes ensued or were requested from this member checking.

In our research, we have striven for trustworthiness and authenticity. Contacts with volunteer participants were undertaken by a senior academic (the visiting researcher) who had little connection to our work. The analysis of the questionnaire returns and interviewing was also undertaken by an independent researcher. We acknowledge that our participant numbers were small and will probably have an interest in sense of belonging but some of the emerging data implied frankness and honesty.

**Data Analysis.**

Thematic analysis (Cresswell, 2014) was used to analyse both the qualitative responses received from the survey and the telephone semi-structured interviews (which added depth to the results of the survey). Firstly, the questionnaire responses were grouped by using meaningful sub-headings under each question in the survey. The process of analysis of questionnaire returns was achieved using the following approach:

- Assemble quotations under the questionnaire questions as main headings
- Sub-divide under headings which describe a word or concept in the quotes
- Re-arrange quotations under sub-headings to relate to something of a story line
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- Use all the submitted text except the odd conjunction; otherwise omit nothing
- Add nothing other than in the descriptions of what sub-headings entail; and refrain from editing
- Omit all identification numbers, even from the survey’s scheme to ensure confidentiality.

For example, when asked if a sense of belonging is important to them as online learners, all respondents replied “Yes” and gave short rationales which were then themed into the sub-headings: Benefit, Motivation, Connections, Supportive interactions, and Need (which was about isolation and socialisation).

The telephone interviews were structured around questions based upon significant questionnaire responses. Responses were transcribed by the visiting researcher, eliminating any repetitions, pauses and terms such as ‘umm’. Sections that might cause identification of the interviewee were redacted and the materials then re-ordered in relation to the survey themes. Otherwise the content was retained without editing or selection. The re-ordered transcripts were reviewed by the research team of seeking deeper meaning from the ideas raised in the questionnaire.

The semi-structured interview transcripts were then thematically analysed using a concept mapping approach (Kane and Trochim, 2007) to identify the main and sub-concepts. Following this mapping, the sub-headings from the survey were also concept mapped, and each set of initial concepts was reviewed in terms of the content elicited from the participant group. A
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member of the programme team independent of the researching undertook an independent
mapping exercise to ensure the veracity of the concepts.

The three main initial concepts were:

- Engagement
- Culture of learning
- Support

Findings

The research aimed to establish the origins, nature and importance (or not) of a sense of
belonging in the lived experience of online learning for certain postgraduate learners, what a
sense of belonging meant to them, and which facets of the online learning experience were
important to them in relation to this.

Three main concepts emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires and semi-
structured interviews and are explored in the following sections throughout which we include
quotations from the survey responses and the interviews to ensure that learners’ voices are
heard. Crucially, all 12 respondents identified sense of belonging as important to them as online
learners, as it could prevent isolation. One opined that it is essential for all learners, but more so
for online learners as they are remote and lack the regular meeting and socialization of face-to-
face delivery of learning. Respondents variously believed that a sense of belonging was a
“feeling”; of being part of a community, of belonging to a group of learners with a common
goal, a sense of engagement with learning materials and other learners and tutors.
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Engagement.

This concept emerged through all responses within the survey and related to tutors and learners. Tutors were identified by some as being pivotal to the development of learners’ sense of belonging, with comments such as “tutors are the glue that bring it together.” Specifically respondents identified that the attitude and approach of the tutor set the tone of the learning and the development of a sense of belonging by safeguarding the way learners behave, through their friendliness, helpfulness and enthusiasm, and by maintaining contact via discussions and announcements and posts - all of which assisted in reinforcing a sense of belonging, with learners noting that tutors:

“had an impact on my sense of belonging by their openness and honesty.”
“by having a continual presence during on-line discussions and through the short videos which brings the tutors right into my dining room!”

One respondent specifically identified “the glue” as the quality of the learning materials put together, the guided reading and many references, the encouragement and feedback. These are all intrinsic to feeling valued and supported and key in sustaining that overall sense of belonging.

Learner involvement and interaction was also highlighted as critical in maintaining a sense of belonging during the modules. This related mostly to the nature and depth of posts in the discussions, along with engagement with group work and activities. The introductory element of getting to know each other was indicated as crucial, as well as and prior to the developing interactions
the encouragement to share information about ourselves and our histories made me feel a sense of belonging and connectedness with other students.

through the discussion boards I get to know my peers and therefore feel a sense of belonging.

This idea was followed up in the interviews, wherein one respondent noted that “although you have never met them physically face to face….. it’s amazing how you do get glimpses of people’s personality from the sort of on-line interactions going on”.

Following up this idea in the interviews, an interviewee suggested that some of the sense of belonging might be related to personal situation or context. This learner had been in a new job, was very isolated and felt something had been ‘lost’; thus “that’s when I really had the sense of belonging to a community on line because I was physically so far away from everyone.”

The use of group-work and other paired activities was seen as a strong method of developing a sense of belonging, as learners were actively expected to collaborate with their co-learners to achieve an end goal by a certain allocated time:

- in group tasks we have been able to help each other out by taking on a bit extra here and there at various times.
- it’s good to have someone to help and make you feel like you are together in a class.

The online discussions were also identified by learners as a strength in developing a sense of belonging, with the importance of engaging with the discussion highlighted. This was
seen a positive way of supporting and encouraging each other by offering feedback and other views to the discussions.

I think the discussion boards were helpful in this respect (peer impact on sense of belonging) as it meant getting to know other students and acted as an on-going conversation albeit not in real time.

A complimentary perspective was presented by one respondent who identified that missing online discussions had a negative impact on their sense of belonging.

If I feel disconnected it is invariably because my own work commitments have taken over and I have missed out on on-line discussion or distanced myself from the learning materials.

Interview responses concurred with these views, with more detail in depth being gained from interviewees who noted that interactions associated with group activities were mainly initiated by the learners - because they had a shared purpose of wishing to do well and supporting each other in achieving that. Most discussion interactions were triggered by a tutor-designed thread for discussion, which was usually based on the activities in the module; however, learner engagement with these was individually driven.

**Culture of learning.**

This concept emerged from commentary around incidents that had impact either positively or negatively on learners’ sense of belonging. The culture within the learning group of the modules affected learners’ sense of belonging through the module structure, the tutor behaviours and the materials - along with consequent learner behaviours.
Issues that emerged that relate to positive development of a sense of belonging were the notion of sharing and also the aspect of online learning materials being accessible over time. Responses suggest that sharing of challenges and anxieties as learners in discussion groups had a powerful impact on the development of sense of belonging, for this particular set of learners - as illustrated in this quotation:

when I first started the module, I was very stressed and anxious with the platform and the material and everything else. Despite the tutor’s reassurance, it was only when I saw similar concerns being posted on the discussion hub that I felt slightly at ease that I was not alone in trying to figure out how everything works. it was quite a relief!!

Furthermore, in offering their advice to other learners regarding developing a sense of belonging, learners identified the online discussions as valuable, promoting flexibility of thinking that was seen as intrinsic to transformative learning. Similarly, they stated that they had encouraged their peers to be unafraid to challenge/question/disagree with peers as this enhances the quality of the discussions.

The use of the discussion board by tutors was also seen as assisting a sense of belonging, with learners suggesting that when tutors posted their own views of things relating to the subject matter, learners knew tutors a little more as humans. Learners also valued feedback and the feeling that the tutor was ‘present’ regularly online:

Be visible, be present and offer as much @live’ feedback as possible…. It makes the connection more obvious
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Put up your own views on things relating to the subject matter, so they can get to know you a bit more.

A further strength of the online modules was the continued availability of materials and discussions as the modules progressed, with one learner commenting:

Due to illness I was unable to complete unit 3 of work for the module in year xxxx. I have only been able to reconnect with this after everyone else has completed and submitted their assessment. Despite this, being able to access the on-line discussions/thoughts still makes me feel part of this learning community.

Conversely, some aspects of the culture of their online learning were found to detract from their sense of belonging. Specifically, some aspects of feedback or lack thereof, seemed to resonate with the learners as having a negative impact. The notion of off-putting behaviour emerged; specific behaviours such as people not posting any comment on discussion threads, cancelling an arranged session to do some group work, and then not responding to efforts to rearrange the time; and misunderstandings of feedback during group work activities or in discussions were all seen as detrimental to a sense of belonging:

providing feedback on a peers’ work is therefore a minefield in terms of how it will be interpreted. This occurred once when a student wrote that another student’s work “suffered from spelling errors”. Cue a really long thread about hurt, support, female solidarity etc etc

The whole aspect of groupwork online seems to offer pitfalls in terms of maintaining a sense of belonging:
if people write back and/or offer feedback in a derogatory manner that lessens your sense of belonging.

However, the sense of achievement of a common overall goal by the group seemed to outweigh any negative aspects of feedback:

during the group tasks things got a bit fraught where there were some occasional misunderstandings of the on-line feedback – but these queries were swiftly cleared up as the overall goal of completing the task took over and by the end the sense of achievement had obliterated any temporary individual ‘difference of opinion.

Support.

The final concept from the research was that of support. The notion of support which was interwoven throughout the responses to the questionnaire. Aspects of support that were highlighted were the sharing of issues, offering advice and views on aspects of the module, module design and family support.

The idea of support and constructive connections was specifically described as peer group interaction assisting in resolving learning difficulties. When learners felt stressed, help and feedback from peers and tutors through the discussion groups proved valuable as it helped to construct and develop the learning, offering the opportunity to ‘check things out’. Informal connection with learners in the module also seemed distinctly supportive, with the feeling that the learner was not alone in their struggles.
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I was happy to see that other people were having similar difficulties which in turn significantly reduced my anxiety over the summative submission.

In forum discussion, peers provide much needed guidance when there is some issue that needs to be further explored or revisited but also to bounce ideas off.

Clear results from the survey showed that the module design and tutor/peer engagement was critical in the development of a sense of belonging. The provision of engagement activities from the very start seems important in developing a connection between tutor and learners, and also learners and learners. Use of multiple-media aspects rather than a full text base, also featured positively as a way of maintaining a sense of belonging. Short videos to be viewed, activities of differing sorts – not always groupwork - and all forms of interaction beyond the Virtual Learning Environment, were seen as important. Groupwork and (conversely) non-engagement feature in the findings, with differing views of mandatory assessed work to promote engagement (“the stick approach”) versus engagement in work for learning (“the carrot approach”). Similar views were expressed in respect of discussion board contributions.

assessed discussion boards means everyone contributes and the conversation continues

try to apply peer pressure in group projects, by having some sort of (recorded) tele-meetings (or log books or other) in order for all members of the group to equally participate and contribute.

Online Collaborate sessions were valued highly for their ‘live’ interaction and immediacy of discussion and commentary. Tutor posts via email or the Virtual Learning
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Environment, with updates, interesting articles and similar inputs, were also valued as supportive, as learners felt the tutor was always there for them.

Equally valued was the creation and use by learners of private locations or spaces within which they could engage in discussions and provide assistance in elucidating content and requirements of which formative activity they did not wish their tutors to be aware.

This significance of interactive and engaging activities in the online module was summed up by an interviewee who compared their current learning experience online with a previous one:

I had started an on-line TEFL course but this simply consisted of reading text online and completing activities related to it. There were no audio-visual materials, no interaction with other people on the course.........I found it hard to motivate myself to complete the course and gave up.

Discussions

In our pilot study, our learners believed a strong sense of belonging was of importance for them and particularly so being online learners, who were not physically present in the institution. Such findings concur with those of Thomas et al. (2014). It also appeared that sense of belonging did indeed increase the likelihood of learners remaining and provided them with an extra level of resilience, especially in times of stress or anxiety or simply when there were issues such as limited access to expected resources like journals or inaccurate, limited or late feedback.
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Our work also identifies the complexity of the ‘SoB feeling’ - being multi-faceted, fluctuating and ephemeral in nature and differing for learners according to their context of studies, individual need and self-efficacy. As Carruthers Thomas suggests, sense of belonging is “negotiated in the momentary, the imaginary and the private” (2019, p.76). Nowhere was this more evident to the researchers than when one interview featured two experiences of lack of support and direction in the initial enrolment, and academic mismanagement of assessment. Yet the overall tenor of that interview was of a distinctly positive course experience and a strong overall sense of belonging.

Throughout the study, it emerged that interactions with tutors and peers and professional services is critical in the development and maintenance of sense of belonging. Learners want to be known by their tutors “as individuals rather than reference numbers” and to have a relationship with them. The tutor guides them through their studies, signposting potential routes forward for their learners; this helps them to feel that they matter, that their presence would be missed and that they are valued. Furthermore, learners with a strong sense of belonging were forgiving of problems if they had formed the impression of a well set-up course generating a strong inherent sense of belonging. This reiterates O’Keeffe’s (2013) work with campus-based learners that “the creation of a caring, supportive and welcoming environment within the university is critical in creating a sense of belonging.” (p.605)

Whilst the importance of tutors in planning for and facilitating structured activities contributing inter alia to the development of a strong sense of belonging was expected within our study, more surprising was the substantial influence of peers. Comments such as “If I do not
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feel I know the other learners I do not feel I belong” were common. There was a belief that having relationships with others following the same programme, being part of a community, would help understandings about the programme and provide a better learning experience. As one of our learners explained, “peers are the community that I am working within and therefore all interaction with them provides the belonging”. Whilst this finding links with Koole & Parchoma’s (2013) description of belonging in online learning communities as an iterative process of dialogue and exchange with other members, it is contrary to the work of researchers in Australia who found that many of their online learners were expecting to be ‘lone wolves’ working individually and in isolation from their peers (Brown et al., 2015).

The ethos of the online space clearly impacted on learners’ sense of belonging. For instance, synchronous meetings, as identified by participants in Thomas et al.’s study in 2014, were particularly popular, fostering connections with others. Online interactions were also seen as a means of levelling the playing field as they appeared to minimise differences in culture/gender/discipline which may otherwise inhibit some of the group activities and inhibit their sense of belonging. As one learner noted:

it was possible to feel a sense of belonging and community in both the larger and smaller group, regardless of culture, professional status or professional backgrounds.

Support level, timeliness and quality were considered to be important in promoting sense of belonging. Brief interactions, guidance from tutors and peers, helped learners feel more comfortable in the online and more confident in their abilities. Learners talked about tutors
being “a continual presence during online discussions and through short videos” which helped make the alien environment less impersonal and more a place to go for help and guidance.

**Recommendations for tutors**

Our final supplementary research question addressed the role of the tutor in promoting an online learner’s sense of belonging. We learned that a supportive, facilitative tutor may help learners to develop and maintain a sense of belonging throughout their studies. Others have noted the importance of a caring, enthusiastic tutor who can be trusted (Hoffman et al. 2002-2003, Strayhorn, 2012) but this was emphasised particularly by our learners - at a distance and without the traditional face-to-face reassurance of tutors. Early introductions to the programme team through short videos and on synchronous sessions would seem of great importance in helping build bridges and develop trusting, nurturing relationships.

The role of the community and peers in developing sense of belonging was also a key feature for our participants. Early opportunities in online discussions for learners to introduce themselves and share experiences, such as reasons for undertaking studies, and long-term goals, assisted in group formation and the development of peer support networks. Collaborative activities in which learners work together, for example in the development of an artefact, linked closely to the assessment, can develop peer relationships and promote feelings of being accepted, mattering and being valued.
**Limitations of the Study**

This paper reports the first stages of an on-going action-research study into sense of belonging for online learners. We accept that our work involved a small sample in particular circumstances who had an interest in sense of belonging. However, such early findings have already helped us to gain and provide sufficient insights into sense of belonging in the online educational space to inform our further research studies which are now in progress, including the current work of a Project Group set up by the UK Quality Assurance Agency in Scotland to produce a toolkit for online tutors on promoting sense of belonging. The combined data-collection tools of a survey followed by interviews have worked well in terms of the quality of the data generated and have assisted in the identification of our three themes. The visiting researcher noted the extent and quality of the additional evidence that was gathered during the 45-minute interviews, providing a depth of insight of some of the matters already identified as emerging in more general terms in the questionnaire responses. For the future, we will refine our tools to ensure that more space is available for learners to articulate their understandings of sense of belonging.

Our findings have shown the importance of context, and that all data generated must be linked to the module the learner is studying. Hence, we are taking this work forward to research comparisons between learners in contrasting subjects in different educational cultures and at differing levels, to ascertain if there are aspects of the sense of belonging in these settings which...
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share common features, and also if there are significant and hence thought-provoking differences.

Conclusions

Some publications have emphasised the importance of sense of belonging for online learners and especially those who are considered to be at risk of non-completion (O’Keefe, 2013). However little seems known in detail about a sense of belonging on the part of online learners who are engaging in collaborative, community-based learning, and even less about how institutions and tutors promote it. Online learners in a new and potentially alienating environment, remote from the physical campus and separated physically from their peers, would seem to be especially in need of a sense of belonging. Our learners’ testimony valued tutors who attempted to create a sense of belonging in their studies and it would seem that for some online learners, this effort may create more resilience, more connection to their studies, their peers and their tutors and could assist online learners staying and indeed flourishing.
SENSE OF BELONGING FOR ONLINE LEARNERS

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