

'Non-traditional' at an elite university: Exploring the lived experiences of mature part-time undergraduates using an online peer support community

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## **Abstract**

The first-year transition to university is acknowledged as being an emotive experience for undergraduates, a process of becoming a student whilst seeking membership of the learning community. If a marginalised student identity is self-perceived, a sense of difference and psychological sense of isolation can also arise. Furthermore, studying part-time with reduced physical presence on campus typically leads to less socialisation with peers. Focused on the affective domain, this study explores the lived experiences of eight mature part-time undergraduates using a Facebook online peer support community (OPSC) during their Foundation Year at a research-intensive university.

As a practitioner-researcher I used a transcendental phenomenological three-stage interview series, collecting descriptions of biographical and educational past life and present-life experiences, followed by a final meaning-making interview. Five months of contributions from the students' OPSC were captured as well as participant weekly diary entries. Data was analysed using an eight-stage method which raised six common themes:

1. Sense of difference due to not being a traditional undergraduate at an elite university.
2. Academic self-doubt impacted by past education.
3. Challenges of being part-time: life commitments and employment responsibilities.
4. OPSC connectedness and informality for relationship building and creating a sense of belonging
5. OPSC nurturing supportive community for peer support
6. OPSC private spaces for affective support.

This study draws attention to the benefits of understanding marginalised student cohorts by capturing the student experience holistically. The findings highlight the importance of an empathetic OPSC in reducing a sense of isolation, the impact a mere sense of belonging can have, and the motivation derived from knowing others are in the same boat. This research also emphasizes the importance of online spaces for peer-peer empathetic content, complementing the cognitive provision provided by higher education institutions.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Not being a traditional undergraduate at an elite university

The transition to university is a new experience for all undergraduate (UG) students. It involves the formation of a new student identity, which is built upon intersections of current and past selves. This process is influenced by a sense of place, and to the extent an individual feels they have a sense of belonging. It is a student journey that is emotive and if positioned as the 'other' in this new social setting then a psychological sense of isolation can arise. The United Kingdom (UK) Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government placed the 'student experience' (BIS, 2011) of fundamental importance and in respect of this, the Conservative Government later introduced the Teaching Excellent and Student Outcomes Framework (Office for students, 2019.b). It is therefore pertinent to consider the student populations who are marginalised, who do not dominate the higher education (HE) discourse and as such have little 'voice'.

During the last decade the UK has seen a sharp reduction in the number of part-time UGs, in 2009/10 there were 470,000 compared to figures below 240,000 in 2017/19 (Bolton, 2019). The mature student population has also declined: from 2011/12 to 2016/17 there was a 25% decrease in mature UGs aged 25-29, while numbers of mature UGs aged 30 or over reduced by 41% (MillionPlus, 2018). One reason for this reduction in the part-time mature student population is due to the cost of obtaining a degree. The funding of a university degree has moved from being viewed as a societal cost with substantial Government funding to a neoliberal model of individualism (Wilkins and Burke, 2013). The cost of a degree for 2019/20 in England can be up to £9,250 per annum (UCAS, 2019.b) and has led to the student being repositioned within the UK Government policies as a 'consumer' (BIS, 2011, p.68).

Alongside the increase in student fees, the financial support for students has reduced, with non-repayable maintenance grants for disadvantaged students being abolished and replaced by maintenance loans (UCAS, 2018). It is relevant to note that these changes occurred during a period of national austerity, including cuts to welfare funding and support (JRF Analysis Unit, 2018). In acknowledging the impact of these funding changes for disadvantaged students the recently published Augar Review (DfE, 2019, p.8) argues the current levels of student fees are 'unfair to those of limited means' and has made a recommendation that the maintenance grants are also re-established.

In terms of statistics relating to Widening Participation <sup>1</sup>(WP), there is a dominant focus on students who become an UG aged 19 (DfE, 2018.a) with mature students argued as being the 'forgotten learners' (MillionPlus, 2018, p.1) within the current HE discourse. Whilst the statistics evidence mature part-time students as the minority within the UG population, the HE terminology further labels this marginalised status, such as being 'other' (Bolton, 2019) or 'non-traditional' (HEPI, 2019). MillionPlus (2018) also highlights this issue by similarly drawing to attention how mature students are defined by difference, the focal point being they are not a traditional UG. In 2017/18 there were 87% of full-time students on a first UG degree (1,223,000) compared with 159,000 of part-time (Bolton, 2019).

A further significant factor is the UK higher education institution (HEI) hierarchy and within this universities that have a status of being elite. More advantaged students are 'ten times more likely' to attend an elite HEI in comparison to their disadvantaged peers (Reform, 2018, p. 9). A topical example having been very recently published article by Adeluwoye (2019) an UG student at an elite UK HEI and, in self-identifying as being working class, describes her experiences of being amongst 'economically privileged

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<sup>1</sup> Widening Participation is a UK educational policy which aims to address inequalities in 'access' to and 'participation' in higher education (House of Commons Library, 2018)

students' and how, due to her social class, she feels she does not have 'equal status'. Adeluwoye (2019) also went on to explain that her working-class peers also 'feel isolated' and 'alienated' at university due to differences arising from social class. Currently in the UK 'anxiety, loneliness or isolation' are key psychological wellbeing concerns (The Insight Network and Dig-In, 2019), as the HE sector is currently experiencing a 'student mental health crisis' (Shackle, 2019). A student who feels they are in a marginalised position can have an increased sense of psychological isolation, more so if studying part-time and having reduced time with peers, and feel they do not belong at university.

This focus on the student experience is having a crucial influence on the technological changes that are occurring within the UK HEI sector (UCISA, 2018). The 'student learning experience' is predominately experienced within institutional virtual learning environments (VLEs) which are still mainly being used as 'repositories' (PwC, 2018, p. 6) and commonly do not provide an efficient space to support informal affective discourse between student cohorts. VLEs do not have the same social functionality as social networking platforms, such as Facebook (UCISA, 2018). HEIs are growing increasingly concerned about the use of social networking tools with usage rates decreasing 'from 59% in 2016 to 42% in 2018' (UCISA, 2018, p. 38). The key reason for this is due to the lack of HEIs control over personally selected social media platforms, such as Facebook. In addition, academics themselves can also be cautious about using such "personal' social spaces' (PwC, 2018, p. 9).

Technology is argued as being an effective way to increase a sense of belonging for UGs (JISC, 2018). Whilst VLEs are primarily designed for learning and have a cognitive discourse dominance, social media platforms, such as Facebook, were specifically designed for student populations in order to increase socialisation. However, such social technologies are still being used to support the transition to HE for students, in particular marginalised cohorts, to create a sense of belonging being amongst similar others within an online community (Dorum et al., 2010; Lefever and Currant,

2010; Prescott et al., 2013). The literature demonstrates that there is a gap in our knowledge of the mature WP part-time UG student experience of navigating the first year at an elite HEI, and connecting with peers via social media to reduce feelings of isolation and gain a sense of belonging.

## **1.2 Research questions**

This is a practitioner-research transcendental phenomenological study focusing on understanding the lifeworld of students who are not traditional UGs at an elite university, and who connect with similar others via social media in an online peer support community (OPSC). As mature UGs are particularly vulnerable to not completing their study (McVitty and Morris, 2012; HEFCE, 2017). The following three research questions were developed in order to understand the essence of this lived experience:

- *What feelings are expressed relating to the challenges faced during the first year transition to becoming a mature Widening Participation part-time undergraduate?*
- *How can the biographical past life further impact this present lived experience?*
- *What impact does membership of an online peer support community have on the coping strategies of mature Widening Participation part-time undergraduates during their first year?*

## **1.3 Positionality**

I am an educator who is specialised in teaching mature and part-time UGs. My practice is in a centre which, for the purpose of this study will be referred to as the School of Ongoing Education (SoOE), is driven by the WP policy strategies and targets. I teach UG students and take part in outreach work, facilitating sessions for adults living in areas with low progression to HE. I therefore have experience from my professional practice which enables me to have knowledge about how adults who are considering a return to education perceive an elite university, and their perceptions relating to envisaging themselves as being an UG. My interest in this area has also been informed by my own lived experience of feeling marginalised in

education, having attended a grammar school as a working class pupil and having a sense of difference throughout my time there. I also have personal experience of being a mature part-time student and used a Facebook group to connect with peers during a Master's degree in order to reduce my own feelings of isolation. This positionality and how I reduced my bias is discussed in more detail in section 3.5 the 'epoche stage'.

## **1.4 Thesis outline**

This thesis is comprised of a further four chapters, a summary of these will now be presented:

### **1.4.1 Chapter two: literature review**

This chapter has two sections:

Part one is focused on the student experience of transition in the first year of becoming an UG. It is centred on the affective dimension of this journey and considers how having a marginalised student identity can reduce a sense of belonging to the university community and increase a psychological sense of isolation. The impact of HEI status, as well as past biographical experiences, are further explored to identify how these can impact the lived experience of being a (1) mature (2) WP and also (3) part-time UG.

Part two focuses on the role of social media, specifically Facebook, in reducing UG isolation by belonging to an online community. It explores how connectedness, a sense of belonging and emotional support are present within empathic online support communities. This chapter ends with a conceptual framework which clarifies the key concepts and boundaries of this study, being to understand the affordances of an OPSC for students who are not traditional UGs at an elite HEI.

### **1.4.2 Chapter three: methodology**

The rationale for having used a transcendental phenomenology methodology is explained. The context of the study and rationale for the

sample size is explained, along with the criteria for the purposive criterion sampling and recruitment methods. Due to being practitioner-research there is an epoche stage, being a self-reflective section which seeks to bring my inevitable bias to the surface. The pilot study and subsequent development of the three methods are then described. The stages of analysis (which included member and peer checking) are presented, as well as evidencing my steps to address the ethical issues which can arise when collecting psychological data from known participants and data from online social media communities.

### **1.4.3 Chapter four: findings**

A second conceptual framework summaries the findings from the eight co-researchers, and aims to represent the essence of their lived experience. It is again presented in two parts:

Part one draws predominately from the interview data with verbatim quotes from the eight co-researchers. The three main themes: *a sense of difference due to not being a traditional UG at an elite HEI*, including academic self-doubt, *having a marginalised student identity*, past biographical contextual data as well as the challenges faced due to *part-time study and life commitments and responsibilities*.

Part two also presents the interview data, however, does include reference to the online observation and diary methods. It describes how the OPSC comprised of a course Facebook group and private WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, were used for relationship building, affective nurturing exchanges and authentic and intimate peer support. To conclude, the chapter ends with third and final conceptual framework for this study. This draws together the findings of the study and situates them within the concepts from the first conceptual framework.

#### **1.4.4 Chapter five: discussion**

This chapter is structured by using the three research questions and follows from the final third conceptual framework to explain how the findings of this study sit within the wider literature of and considers to what extent the data was able to address each research question. The limitations of the study are presented as well as implications for research, future research and implications for practice.

#### **1.4.5 Chapter six: conclusion**

This concluding chapter demonstrates how the findings of the study have addressed the three research questions. It also clarifies the contribution and importance of this study in conducting similar research which aims to understand the student experience of marginalised cohorts.

### **1.5 Boundaries of the study**

Due to the aim being to understand a complex social phenomena, there are several areas that were viewed as being beyond the scope of this study. This is not to suggest these additional aspects are less relevant. The boundaries were necessary due to this being a practitioner-researcher study and the need for an appropriately scaled research design. This study has not included reference to positive feelings that can be experienced. Data were collected during a five month period and therefore do not represent the whole first year experience. The online observations capture public engagement in the Facebook group, and therefore do not include the private discussions which took place in Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp. It was also beyond the scope of this study to discuss the wider issues relating to using social media, such as consideration of data protection.

## **1.6. Definition of key terms**

The following provides a summary of the definitions used within this study in reference to mature students, Widening Participation UGs, part-time UGs and elite HEIs.

### **A mature UG**

A student who is aged 21 or over at the point of registration (HESA, 2017).

### **Widening Participation UG <sup>2</sup>**

Identified by having met three of the following criteria:

- Being first generation
- Current address having low progression to HE
- Household income of £25,000 or less
- Attending a school with below national averages of 5 A\* to C GCSE pass grades
- Past disrupted study
- Having grown up in the care system.

### **Part-time UG**

A student who is at university for 'less than 24 weeks, on block release, or studying during the evenings only' (HESA, 2017).

### **Elite HEI**

Being a pre-1992' (research intensive) university (Brooks, 2015; Williamson, 1998; UK National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997).

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<sup>2</sup> Source of definition the SoOE. See Appendix A for further details

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter is presented in two sections. Part one focuses on the first-year experience of becoming an UG, acknowledged as being a critical transitional stage in the university lifeworld. In respect of the dominance of literature already focused on the cognitive domain, it concentrates instead on the affective dimensions. The first year of becoming an UG is typically, an emotional journey due to navigating the new academic culture whilst simultaneously adapting to a new student identity. The importance of cultivating a sense of belonging is highlighted, which can be of particular benefit for student cohorts who may feel marginalised due to being underrepresented within the university community. This stage of 'becoming' is considered from three key intersections of student identity that can lead to both a physical and psychological sense of isolation, being a part-time WP mature UG. The review then emphasises the impact of HEI status, as being a WP UG at an elite university can cause a heightened perception of difference. This ends by drawing to attention the need for a holistic understanding of this diverse student experience, as university life is affected by challenges that arise beyond it. This first year can be affected by personal life commitments such as being a student-worker and/or student-parent, in addition to wider political and societal issues.

Following this, part two considers to what extent social media, with a focus on Facebook specifically, can help to reduce a sense of psychological isolation. Focusing on current institutional VLEs, it highlights the often-lacking provision of online space for affective informal discourse between students and illustrates how social media can be used as a complementary connected environment. It considers the benefits of having a sense of belonging to a community and presents three perspectives of social support:

- (1) stress and coping
- (2) social constructionist
- (3) relationship

Each is considered from the context of being a student member of an OPSC facilitated by social media; Facebook being the focal platform. Finally, this chapter draws attention to a range of limitations that can arise in using an OPSC, having the potential to further increase anxiety and stress due to lack of access to/ excessive use of social media, as well as the performative element of online identities creating an idealised reality.

## PART ONE:

### 2.2 Transition and becoming

The first year at university is recognised as being a critical period (Scanlon et al. 2007; Ertl et al., 2010; Hussey and Smith, 2010; Thomas, 2012; Maunder et al., 2013) with situational challenges leading to early student 'drop-out' (Scanlon et al. 2007; Ertl et al. 2010; Hussey and Smith 2010). In response to this issue, there are a range of strategies that HEIs can use with an aim of increasing student 'retention' (Preece, 2009; Ertl et al. 2010; Lefever and Carrant, 2010; Hussey and Smith 2010; Thomas, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014). There are transitions occurring all the time for students (Hussey and Smith 2010) such as moving to an advanced level of study or joining an unfamiliar educational setting (Maunder et al., 2013). A pivotal educational transition is the period of adjustment involved in *becoming* an UG student, which is recognised as impacting all students (Maunder et al., 2013; Leese, 2010). Traditional UG students (Hussey and Smith 2010; Field, 2012) are 'under 21 years of age on entry' (HESA, 2019) and transition to HE direct from mainstream education. This first year is typically explored in the wider educational literature from their experience, such as samples that include the 'feeder' school and measurement of cognitive achievement (Hockings et al., 2010, p.123). Although less visible in the academic discourse, it is mature students who have a higher risk of dropping out during their first year (McVitty and Morris, 2012; HEFCE, 2017). A student experience evidenced as being 'more unpredictable' (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013) and often resulting in a 'particularly challenging' transition (David, 2010, p.11).

Transitional periods occur throughout our lives (Field, 2012), they tend to be 'complex' (Hussey and Smith 2010; Awang et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2014; Gale and Parker, 2014), and involve 'change' (Hussey and Smith 2010; Field, 2012; Scott et al., 2014). The 'journey' metaphor (Hussey and Smith, 2010; Gale and Parker, 2014) reflects the process of 'adjustment' (Maunder et al., 2013; Awang et al., 2014). Gennep's (1965) seminal anthropological

work focused on the 'rites of passage' acknowledging the geographical, social and cultural 'ceremonial patterns' that can be experienced throughout the life course, from birth to death in the 'social world' (p.10). However, life transitions are not always entered knowingly, ranging from anticipated events to the unforeseen (Hussey and Smith 2010), they are also experienced in unique ways, dependent on personal circumstances which can either support or hinder a person's coping abilities (Scott et al., 2014) such as financial worries or immediate family members health issues.

Within the field of education, Tinto (1988) extended Genep's (1965, p.184) three phases of 'separation, transition and incorporation' to contextualise these within the student experience. For traditional students 'separation' often involves moving away from the family home, although Tinto (1988) acknowledged students who stay at home also face challenges, typically being a reduced academic and social experience. The next in-between stage of 'transition' is when a student is no longer immersed in their old life or settled into their new university life. Tinto (1988, p.444) highlights the emotive aspect of this 'adjustment' which can involve 'stress and [a] sense of loss'. The final 'incorporation' stage reflects a student having positively adjusted to the cultural 'norms' and in respect of this experiencing 'membership' (Genep, 1965) of self in the wider university community. However, due to the uniqueness of this lived experience, Tinto (1988) stresses the varying degrees to which a student will have the capacity to be successful in achieving this final stage. If full membership is not achieved, it can result in the student feeling isolated and psychologically positioned as a 'stranger' (Genep, 1965). Therefore, the student experience of transition is not limited to solely adapting to new academic challenges, they also have 'social' and 'emotional' elements (Scott et al., 2014; Awang et al. 2014) which can impact one another.

Three distinct phases are also evident in the contemporary transition student experience literature, being 'induction', 'development' and 'becoming' (Gale and Parker, 2014) although these extend the focus that Tinto (1988) initially

presented. The induction stage places emphasis on the relationship between 'person-environment' (Awang et al., 2014, p.262), how a student navigates their way within the university culture (Field, 2012). Following this, 'development' involves the social element of university life encompassing 'identity' and 'transformation'(Gale and Parker, 2014, p.741) which, for students experiencing a sense of difference, can be faced with psychological barriers in achieving. Finally, 'becoming' takes into account the wider 'complexities of life' (Gale and Parker, 2014, p. 744) and non-linear elements, which Beach (1999) highlighted in his 'collateral transition' concept (p.115) with shopkeepers who attending evening classes having to go 'back and forth' between two contrasting life roles, potentially impacting their 'developmental progress' (p.116).

### **2.3 The affective**

Traditionally the student experience has been centred on understanding the 'cognitive' or 'rational' aspects of the learning process (Beard et al., 2007; Christie et al., 2008; Mallman and Lee, 2014; Brooks, 2015;) being commonly viewed as higher in ranking when considered in relation to other aspects of the student experience (Tinto, 1998; Beach, 1999). A lesser researched aspect of transition is the psychological (Reay, 2002; Christie et al., 2008; Howard and Davies, 2013; Stevenson and Clegg, 2013; Awang et al., 2014; Gale and Parker, 2014) and affective domain (Beard et al., 2007; Denovan and Macaskill, 2013; Mallman and Lee, 2014; Field, 2012; Brooks, 2015), even though there is recognition of the impact to mental health during this period (Christie et al., 2008; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Universities UK, 2015). Entering the culture of university, and becoming an UG for the first time, is a new experience for all students, and in differing degrees will commonly entail some degree of 'anxiety' (Mental Wellbeing in Higher Working Education Group 2015) and 'stress' (Denovan and Macaskill, 2013).

Mental health issues are also increasing generally within the UK HE sector (Christie et al., 2008; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Mental Wellbeing in Higher

Working Education Group, 2015) as identified in the Nation Union of Students (NUS) (2013) online survey with 1,336 students (traditional, non-traditional and international) 80% of whom reported experiencing 'stress' during their studies, 55% of having had anxiety and 13% 'suicidal thoughts'. Despite this there is still a sense that emotions are considered as better suited to being explored in the 'therapeutic' field as opposed to the 'pedagogic' (Beard et al., 2007, p. 237), which is referred to by Beard et al. (2007, p.237) as the 'rational-emotional' dilemma. It is from Genep's (1965) psychological positioning of feeling a stranger amongst university life that the affective concept of belonging will now be explored, followed by considering issues relating to a psychological sense of isolation.

### **2.3.1 A sense of belonging**

The literature on transition in HE acknowledges that the experience of 'becoming' an UG is affected by a student's own identity in relation to the academic 'social and cultural system' (Baumeister, 2011, p.48). The first year involves 'negotiating' (Mallman and Lee, 2014) a 'new student identity' (Scanlon et al., 2007, p. 237) a transitional stage which involves the 'transformation' (Scott et al., 2014; Gale and Parker, 2014) of seeing oneself as a university student. This new identity is layered upon our current 'personal identity' (Lin, 2008, p. 200), being psychological constructs, internal representations of 'who we are' (Jenkins, 2010, p. 5). This 'hierarchical' (Jenkins, 2010, p. 6) process of self-categorising inevitably leads a person to look for similarity or difference in personal identity markers to that perceived in 'others' (Lin, 2008). Becoming an UG includes intersections of identity from the 'individual' (Brooks, 2012; Scanlon et al., 2007) the 'student' (Butcher 2015; Swain and Hammond, 2011; Field, 2012) and the wider 'social identity' (Mäntymäki & Islam, 2016; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Howard & Davies, 2013). These multiple identities impact how one perceives the self in position to the 'wider university community' (Thomas, 2012, p. 28) including 'clubs and societies' (p. 51) and other 'social networks' (p. 64).

This social 'inclusion' or 'exclusion' often takes the form of 'imagined' communities, which membership of involves a process of knowing and understanding the group 'rituals', 'dialects' and day-to-day 'routines', as well as the shared 'values' and 'symbols' (Williamson, 1998, p.98). In their seminal paper, Baumeister and Leary (1995) focus on 'belongingness' theory, in which they emphasise our need to connect with others, arguing 'human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong' (p. 522). From a primeval perspective, the benefit of not being alone increased the chance of staying alive longer, such as hunting in groups for food or working together to fend off an attack by wild animals, as well as the social 'reproductive benefits' necessary for child bearing (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, p. 499); drawing from this innate survival perspective they argue a sense of belonging is a 'need', rather than a 'want' (p. 520).

'Belongingness theory' was the central concept in the literature review by Osterman (2000), although considered within the context of secondary school education, her review has been much cited within HE studies as it focused on the psychological impact when a child does not feel part of the school community and considers how this then influences performance, behaviour and motivation. Osterman (2000, p.338) stressed a key issue is the need for 'acceptance or membership' identifying factors that lead to a physical/ psychological sense of 'social isolation' due to 'anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy and loneliness' (p.327). A 'sense of belonging' is also well established in the literature on transition to and in HE (Read et al., 2003; Quinn et al., 2005; Christie et al., 2008; Hussey and Smith, 2010; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Quinn, 2010; Jackson, 2012.b; ARC Network 2013; Howard and Davies, 2013; Awing et al., 2014) and was also a predominant concept in the literature review by ARC Network (2013) which focused specifically on WP to HE, the report findings informed both Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Office for Fair Access (OFFA) on how belonging can impact 'retention and success'.

More recently developing a 'sense of belonging' has been recognised as a key Government strategy for both 'retention and success' in English HEIs (BIS, 2014, p. 56), and is supported by Universities UK (2016, p. 70) who also stress the impact 'belonging' has on student engagement and 'retention'. The BIS (2014) and Universities UK (2016) focus on this area is in recognition of the UK 'What Works' Student Retention and Success programme (Thomas, 2012, p.12), in which it was argued developing 'a sense of belonging' should be a priority for 'all programmes, departments and institutions'. This three-year programme<sup>3</sup> involved 22 HEIs (including pre and post 1992 institutions) and seven research projects all focusing on the issue of 'drop out' and 'retention' with a total of 10,458 student participants. However, of these only projects 1 and 7 provided a student experience directly relevant to this current study, being a sample of 1,093 UGs which included mature and part-time, as well as those having family commitments.

Having a sense of belonging is relevant to any stage of the UG student experience, but is recognised as being of particular benefit to retention during pre-enrolment (Jackson, 2012.b; ARC Network, 2013) and the first year (ARC Network, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012). This is due to the increased likelihood of student 'drop out' during this transitional phase of becoming. Cohorts who are less likely to feel they belong in HE include, but are not limited to, students who are mature (ARC Network, 2013; Howard and Davies, 2013; Thomas, 2012; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Read et al., 2003), who identify as being working class and/or first in the family to attend university (Read et al., 2003), international (Thomas, 2012), studying part-time (ARC Network, 2013; Thomas, 2012), have caring commitments (Thomas, 2012; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Read et al., 2003), are lone parents (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010), black Asian and minority ethnic (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2010), live at home (Jackson, 2012.b; Thomas,

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<sup>3</sup> Funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Funding Council for England

2012) or have work commitments (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). This lack of belongingness commonly arises through comparing the self to perceptions of typical 'traditional' cohorts (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010) which Kasworm (2009, p.156) refers to as the 'positional and relational student identities' that are experienced during transition.

### **2.3.2 Loneliness**

If a sense of belonging is not achieved, students (even when physically spending time with peers), can psychologically feel isolated and lonely. The social neuroscientist John Cacioppo spent two decades conducting extensive research into the causes and implications of 'social isolation' and 'loneliness' (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008, p. viiii). This 'subjective experience' (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008 p.5) will differ in respect of individual preferences, such as having a high or low desire to be with others. However, issues of loneliness will arise if the social setting does not provide the level of 'social connection' (p. 23) that is sought after by the individual. Cacioppo and Patrick (2008, p.81) also argue that a sense of loneliness is not reduced by being in contact with large numbers of people either, it is about the 'quality' of these interpersonal exchanges as well as the extent we 'perceive' them as meeting our 'needs' (p. IV). By being in a state of loneliness a person is more likely to feel 'fragile, negative, and self-critical' (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008 p.174). They also argue, when perceiving oneself as an outsider, a person will be less likely to cope during challenging times, will typically have higher levels of 'stress' (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008 p. 141) as well as lower 'cognitive functioning' (p.11). Having social needs met can create a sense of feeling 'secure' (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008 p.15) and can be seen as a 'balm.... [which] can provide for the stresses of life... [being] almost medicinal' (p.29).

The significance of this is evident in the findings of the What Works? report (Thomas, 2012., p.12). Projects 1 and 7 (being most relevant to this study) identified four key issues which commonly influenced students to question whether or not they should continue their studies being 'academic... [and]

concern about achieving future aspirations', as well as 'feelings of isolation and/or not fitting in'. A sense of isolation is also evident within the wider HE literature with reference to students who are not 'traditional' UGs feeling 'alienated' (Quinn, 2010; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Quinn et al., 2005; Read et al., 2003), 'isolated' (Jackson, 2012.b; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; McGivney, 2003; Read et al., 2003), in the position of being 'outsiders' (Read et al., 2003) and having a marked sense of 'otherness' (Kasworm, 2009; Read et al., 2003).

## **2.4 Marginalised student identities: intersectionality**

This study is centred on three UG student identities which, as is the case in this study, can be represented in a single student as being (1) Widening Participation (2) mature and also (3) studying part-time. Each of these three student positions have the potential to create a sense of physical or psychological sense of isolation, due to feeling marginalised when comparing the self to traditional student cohorts. Crenshaw's (1991) seminal work highlighted, from a feminist perspective, the limitations of exploring the social world from a singular identity as 'oppression' (p.1246) and 'privilege' (p. 1250) can arise from an individual's multiple identities. Whilst this study does not include an intersectional framework specifically, it does aim to go beyond exploring this phenomena from a singular student identity (e.g. being mature) which is a common limitation in HE research (Museus and Griffin, 2011, p. 7) as does not provide a 'holistic' understanding. The importance of capturing intersections of identity in HEIs was recently highlighted in the report by the Equality Challenge Unit (2016) who specify this in relation to WP (p.2) cohorts. In respect of this the following section considers each of these three student identities in isolation, respecting their uniqueness, and aims to highlight how a student's own lived experience can be impacted if either or all of these three identities lead to a sense of feeling psychologically isolated, which can be further impacted by personal identities.

### 2.4.1 Being a mature UG

Williams (1998, p.125) referred to mature students as being the 'Cinderella's of the academy' in highlighting the difference of their experience, when compared to traditional learners, due to starting their first degree later in life. This sentiment is still relevant in the decades following, with acknowledgement that the mature student experience is different, and is often still an 'identity that is marginalised' (Mallman and Lee, 2014, p.4). The HE culture is lacking a universal agreement as to when a student belongs to this category of being an adult or mature student, as this can include being over the age of 24 (Forbus and Newbold, 2011) or above 30 (Kasworm, 2009). However, currently in the UK it is measured by age at registration, with 895,790 full-time UG students aged 20 and under who out number their 'mature'<sup>4</sup> aged full-time peers of which there were 539,620 in 2015/16 (HESA, 2017). The Never Too Late To Learn report by Million + and NUS (McVitty and Morris, 2012), which the Office for Fair Access (2017) have also used to inform their mature student definition, presented the following common 'characteristics of mature students':

- Broader in age range
- Female dominant
- Typically come from a disadvantaged background
- Often still live a life of disadvantage
- Higher number of mature BME students
- Qualifications from a non-traditional route (e.g. NVQ)
- Less likely to study full-time
- Normally chose to study close to home
- Less likely to apply to a pre-1992 HEI
- Often have caring and employment commitments
- Higher numbers of mature students have a known disability
- More likely than students aged under 21 to withdraw from their studies in the first two years

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<sup>4</sup> Mature student being the age of 21 or over at registration (HESA, 2017).

This highlights the diversity of the mature student body which is why the first year and trying to transition into university can be particularly significant for this cohort. This is more so when they are not a post graduate but an UG who was accepted by a university alternative entry system. In the UK this is currently the WP policy.

Mature students, particularly those who lack confidence in their academic ability, can benefit from peer support when they are able to share their concerns with peers who are in a similar situation (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). This positive impact of socialising with other mature students and sharing the educational experience together, including 'overcoming challenges' was identified as being a key factor in generating a sense of belonging by Howard and Davies (2013, p.780). However, students who live and study at home can perceive themselves as having their social needs already met by established friends and family (Thomas, 2012). This was evident in the study by Scanlon et al. (2007) with mature students prioritising academic work over the social. This is also reflected in social spaces or events on campus being typically targeted to traditional aged students who live in student accommodation (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010).

#### **2.4.2 Being a Widening Participation UG**

WP target populations are identified as being at a 'disadvantage' due to socioeconomic and geographical data, such as the current HESA (2019b) measure of 'state school marker' and 'participation of local areas' (POLAR) with POLAR1 being areas that have the lowest and POLAR5 the highest progression to HE (Office for Students, 2019). However, it is noted that these 'objective' measures are critiqued for their limitation in being truly effective at identifying disadvantage, with 'contextualised admissions' being

argued as more effective (e.g. Gorard et al., 2019) which go beyond geographical markers to consider historical data.

Terminologies referred to within the UK WP discourse are also critiqued, such as Leese (2010) who draws to attention the impact on identity formation for students who are referred to as being 'non-traditional' (Crossan et al., 2003). The 'non' prefix label bringing immediate attention to difference, creating a hierarchical second place position of not being in the 'normal' group (Read et al., 2003). This can lead to a sense of 'stigmatisation' (Mallman and Lee, 2014, p.4) due to not having taken the typical linear route of traditional cohorts, who transition direct from school on completion of A levels amongst a body of similar aged peers. Differences of age, not living in student accommodation, having caring responsibilities and/or cultural expectations were highlighted by the mature WP students in the study by Christie et al., (2008, p.577). This otherness and wider life commitments resulted in an UG student identity which felt 'partial and incomplete' during which they lacked or had limited opportunities for a typical 'student social life' (p.577). Being WP was one of four student identities that were found to present challenges during the masters level experience, which impacted successful completion of a programme of study due to early termination (Scott et al., 2014).

The challenges are evident within the WP discourse that brings to attention how 'non-traditional' students cope with 'fitting in' (Mallman and Lee, 2014; Wilkins & Burke, 2013; Jones, 2010; Reay, 2002; Miriam, 2008; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Reay et al., 2010; Leese, 2010) to the HE system primarily designed for traditional cohorts. This sense of 'otherness' (Kasworm 2009; Lawer, 2005; Read et al., 2003), has the potential to be understood as being in a position of 'deficit' (Lawler, 2005; Wilkins and Burke, 2013; Leese, 2010; Waller et al., 2011; Jones, 2010) by focusing directly on what the student does not have or why they did not enter university as an UG the 'traditional' way. Feeling positioned due to a sense of difference as the 'outsiders' (Read et al., 2003) can further 'alienate' (Read et al., 2003; Edirisingha, 2009;

Miriam, 2008) and at worse feel that one is considered to belong in a student body who are 'problematic' (Crozier and Reay, 2011; Lawler, 2005). As is the case with being mature, the WP student experience is marginalised within the HE literature (Crossan et al., 2003; Deggs, 2011).

Students who are the first in their immediate family to attend university are referred to as being 'first-generation' (ARC Network, 2013; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013; Rubin et al. 2014) often lack the privileged insider information (Scanlon et al., 2007,) which can aid this first year being pre-informed by parent/carers past experiences of navigating this academic world (Waller, 2011; Leese, 2010). However, this insider 'information, advice and guidance' could also come from friends or tutors who are also sources of social capital (UniversitiesUK, 2016, p. 5). Universities UK (2016, p. 4) highlight being at a 'socio-economic disadvantage' as still the main barrier to accessing and achieving in HE. This is evident within the WP literature as initial student experiences of starting university can be viewed by UGs who are disadvantaged as being literally a 'culture shock' (Crozier and Reay, 2011; Quinn et al., 2005), the campus environment and academic schools feeling 'alien' (Leese, 2010; Christie et al., 2008; Beard et al., 2007; Quinn et al., 2005; Read et al., 2003).

As an influencing factor of the transition to becoming an UG is the 'expectations' and 'preparedness' (Ertl et al. 2010, p.84) lacking this mental picture of the university culture can further add to a WP student's 'anxiety' (Lefever and Carrant, 2010; Christie et al., 2008) as they attempt to navigate what can be viewed from a working class student perspective as being a 'middle-class' space (Wilkins & Burke, 2013; Lehman, 2014; Byrom, 2009; Reay et al., 2009; Read et al., 2003). Not understanding the cultural middle class 'norms' (Wilkins & Burke, 2013; Preece, 2009, p.3) relating to the 'beliefs, rules, values and expectations' (Scanlon et al., 2007, p.227) of being an UG can result in WP students feeling unprepared (Howard and Davies, 2013; David et al., 2010; Christie et al., 2008) leading them to create their own 'internal images' (Maunder et al., 2013).

It is this 'unfamiliarity' (Wilkins and Burke, 2013; Maunder et al., 2013; McVitty and Morris, 2012; Preece, 2009; Reay et al. 2009) with the academic world which can impact the student having a sense of 'connectedness' to their place of learning (Thomas, 2012; Scanlon et al. 2007) resulting in a feeling of being 'marginalised' (Munro, 2011), adding further to the sense that HE is 'not really my sort of place' (Reay, 2003, p.310). As evident in the reflections of a working-class law student in the research by Crozier and Reay (2011, p. 148) who stated 'throughout that period I was on shaky ground compared to a lot of the other students who knew what it was all about.' This is an example of psychologically locating the self as a 'stranger' (Schutz, 1970; Reay et al., 2009) amongst the 'others' that may outwardly appear to have a stronger sense of the university culture being familiar, leading to a sense of feeling 'isolated' (McGivney, 2003; Read et al., 2003).

#### **2.4.2.1 Biographical past life**

As with traditional-aged students, this new student identity is layered upon past (Read et al., 2003; Awang et al., 2014) present (Ayres and Guilfoyle, 2008) and developing (Read et al., 2003) identities. However, WP students are considered as being more 'vulnerable' during this period of re-engagement with education, particularly when based upon challenging past educational experiences (Deggs, 2011, p.1541). Gale and Parker (2014) also stress the importance of capturing the biographical past life, which Maunder et al. (2013, p. 140) reference to being the 'idiosyncratic' element, which also benefits from an appreciation of the 'individual' perspective which they argue for the use of methods which allow this to be explained using the 'student voice'. Although the anxieties involved in the process of becoming a student are also felt by traditional learners (Denovan and Macaskill, 2013) the McVitty and Morris (2012, p. 22) report highlights the 'deep anxieties' which mature students can have, in particular due to doubts relating to being 'the least intelligent' due to their past learning and concerns with how they will 'cope'. Specifically in terms of an academic self-concept, which is known

to be impacted by past educational experiences (Reay, 2002; Stevenson and Clegg, 2013). Therefore a sense of not belonging can also arise from a lack of confidence in one's academic potential (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010), although a sense of belonging can be affected more by the culture of the educational setting itself than the pedagogical activities (Osterman, 2000).

### **2.4.3 Attending an elite university**

The English education system has hierarchy in its provision of institutions and access to these also evidences societal inequalities (e.g. Robbins Report, 1963; Dearing Report, National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997; Christie et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2009; Gorard et al. 2019). There are currently 110 HE institutions in England awarded the title of 'university' due to their 'teaching degree awarding powers' (HEFCE, 2017) and includes 'ancient (established pre 1800), Red Brick (1800-1960), Plate Glass (1960- 1992), or post-92 (established post 1992)' (DfE, 2016, p.18). In the HE literature these are commonly distinguished by the dichotomy of being: 'pre-1992' (research intensive) or 'post 1992' (modern institute) (Brooks, 2015; Williamson, 1998; UK National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). Additionally, ranking tools including the Research Excellence Framework (REF, 2018), university league tables (e.g. The Complete University Guide, 2018) and the recently created Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (Office for Students, 2019.b.) further separates and adds to this academic elitism with universities voluntarily being placed into one of four categories being Gold, Silver, Bronze and Provisional, this TEF award reflecting difference of 'teaching quality' (DfE, 2018b) and allows such HEIs to charge higher rate tuition fees, in the academic year 2018/19 being £9,250 per year (UCAS, 2019).

Williamson (1998) highlights the status of a HEI as reflecting the social class of its students, with disadvantaged students typically attending the non-elite, lower ranking universities. This is more recently evidenced by BIS (2016), UniversitiesUK (2016), Stevenson and Clegg (2013) and Reay et al. (2009)

who all draw to attention the lack of 'disadvantaged' students at research intensive institutions, such as the 24 universities within the Russell Groups (Russell Group, 2018) which typically have high numbers of students who have been privately educated (ARC Network, 2013; Holmwood et al., 2016; HESA, 2018). While recent statistics evidence growing numbers of traditional aged WP students to 'the most selective HEIs' (DfE, 2018) those studying part-time modes (as discussed in the next section) are decreasing.

The impact of university status is well-acknowledged in the WP HE literature, although this necessary contextual and structural information is not always presented (e.g. Beard et al., 2007). One example is presented in the longitudinal design by Christie et al. (2008) who drew initially from interview data involving 28 'non-traditional' UGs transitioning directly from FE to study at an 'elite' pre-1992 HEI. The findings predominantly highlighted the emotional aspect of this 'huge culture change and a huge shock' (p. 570) which was a 'bewildering and dislocating experience' (p. 570). Although there was a sense of 'pride' in attending an elite HEI, a sense of belonging was not strongly felt, with students who identified as being working class feeling 'intimidated' by the 'middle class' (p. 576) students, who dominated the campus. Quinn (2010, p.29) refers to the need to find a 'safe harbour' within the elite campus to reduce feelings of 'alienation', supporting the earlier mentioned findings of Thomas (2012) and importance of 'place'.

This working class 'alienation' however, can still be felt in post-1992 HEIs (Read et al, 2003) which attract and register more diverse cohorts (Croxford and Raffe, 2015) due solely to the earlier discussed issues of exposure in this unknown culture of 'academia'. In contrast to this typical narrative of the working class experience, Reay et al. (2009) present an alternative picture from their elite HEI case study involving nine working-class UGs. During secondary school the students had felt 'like a fish out of water' (Reay et al., 2009 p. 1115) being academically more advanced than their peers, had actually found an increased sense of belonging being amongst similar academically able peers, even though they evidenced 'resilience and coping

with adversity' in the 'strange and unfamiliar' (p. 1107) of their 'elite middle-class bubble' (p. 1111).

#### **2.4.4 Being a part-time UG**

Being a WP mature UG can cause a sense of not belonging to the student community due to feeling marginalised by identity, however, this can be further exasperated when also studying part-time and having limited time on campus physically with peers. The UK HESA (2017) define part-time study as being 'less than 24 weeks, on block release, or studying during the evenings only'. However, it can also include courses delivered during the day, at the weekend as well as condensed time periods of study. While 'flexible provision' (BIS, 2012; Pollard et al., 2012) which offers students 'choices in how, what, when and where they learn: the pace, place and mode of delivery' (HEA, 2015, no page) has changed the student experience of full-time on campus provision (Butcher, 2015) there is further diversity evident in part-time study (BIS, 2012). Although the part-time population is diverse the Butcher (2015) report found commonality in:

- higher ratio of female students
  - 50% having caring commitments (including children or elderly family members)
  - 'significant proportion' identified as being 1<sup>st</sup> in the family to go to university
  - 'most' had between 5-10 years of absence from being in an educational setting
  - the 'majority' were employed
  - 'most' lived in close proximity to their university
  - 22% had 'persistent health issues'
- (Butcher, 2015, p. 36)

Mature part-time UGs are under researched in the academic literature (Swain and Hammond, 2011; Deggs, 2011; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010) as well as being 'invisible' and 'poorly understood' (Universities UK, 2013,

p.1) in the Government discourse, which focuses predominately on traditional aged WP students. The last decade has witnessed a dramatic fall in part-time and mature student numbers (Holmwood et al., 2016; Butcher, 2015; Higher Education Policy Institute, 2015) with a significant 45% drop from 2004/5 to 2015/16 in contrast to full-time study which has had increasing numbers (London Economics, 2017). In 2015/16 there were 525,490 undergraduates in their first year of full-time study<sup>5</sup> in comparison to 148,570 studying part-time<sup>6</sup> (HEFCE, 2017).

The 1,567 part-time students who took part in a study focused on England, Northern Ireland and Scotland HEIs reported feeling they had 'an outlier status' and were 'a forgotten cohort' (Butcher, 2015 p. 37), they felt marginalised due to commitments that can impact learning such as childcare and employment. In addition to the earlier discussed WP position, being a part-time student was also included in the four university transitions which lead to challenges in progress and higher numbers of non-completion (Scott et al., 2014). Additionally, their 'multiple identities' impacted their sense of 'student identity' and left them feeling outside the 'student community' and added to a sense of 'imposter syndrome' (Butcher, 2015 p. 37). The report highlights the benefits of 'informal study' which can help generate a 'student identity and group culture' (Butcher, 2015, p.39). Scanlon et al. (2007) also stress the importance of spending time with other students, as those who either chose not to, or are simply not able to, socialise with their peers are more likely to not complete their course of study. This is supported by the seminal work of Baumeister and Leary (1995, p.497) who highlight that a lack of 'interpersonal relationships' can impact on a person's own 'motivation' to succeed.

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<sup>5</sup> Defined by at least 24 weeks of study per year (HESA, 2017)

<sup>6</sup> Not meeting the full-time definition (HESA, 2017)

#### **2.4.4.1 Biographical present life**

Students current personal lives beyond campus are also a factor which can directly influence and impact the present lived reality of the student experience. Field (2012, p.10) in recognising the importance of the 'biographical' refers to these as 'private troubles' due to the hidden nature of non-university related anxieties or commitments which can further add to a psychological sense of isolation due to time or impact on mental health and levels of energy. This is supported by Gale and Parker (2014, p. 745) who stress the importance of universities having an awareness of the 'realities of students lives'. Within the literature students who are 'mature' (Shepherd and Nelson, 2012), 'part-time' (HEPI, 2015; Shaw 2013) and 'Widening Participation' (Jones, 2010, p.23) are acknowledged as being more likely to have 'complex lives'.

#### **2.4.4.2 Political and societal considerations**

In aiming to have a holistic understanding of the student experience (Awang et al., 2014) there is also considerations to be made of the 'societal and cultural forces' (Beach, 1999, p. 123), such as considering how students current lives have been impacted by 'political' (Swain and Hammond, 2011b; Williamson, 1998) and financial issues (Universities UK, 2013; Jackson, 2012; NUS, 2012; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Cree et al., 2009). The report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (Thorley, 2017) highlights financial issues being a key contributing factor for the current rise in student mental health issues. An example of such financial concern being the impact of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition Government 'austerity' programme (Cameron, 2009) which has led to growing levels of UK poverty, evidenced by the rapid increase in the demand for food banks (Trussell Trust, 2018) and homelessness (Crisis, 2017). It has reduced disability allowances and financial support for children, leaving the most disadvantaged having a 10% reduction in received funds, and 'lone parents' in particular receiving 15% less income (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2017).

During this period of austerity, the UK HE system has also experienced a significant period of change (Universities UK, 2016; Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2012). The creation of the Office for Students, a 'consumer focused market regulator (p.16), reflects the shift of HE provision and funding being no longer provided by the public sector (Robbins report, 1963) but predominately generated by student fees (Barr and Crawford, 2005; Holmwood et al. 2016; Universities UK, 2014; BIS, 2016b). At the same time there are reductions in additional sources of student finance, such as maintenance grants which were changed in 2016 to repayable loans (UCAS, 2018). Financial worry can impact student relationships (Waller et al., 2011) this rising cost of UG study can be viewed as adding a 'burden' to the family (Shaw, 2013) adding further psychological worry due to an increased perception of 'risk' (Waller et al. 2011). Mature and part-time UGs are highlighted as having higher levels of 'risk aversion' (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Murphy et al., 2015) compared to traditional students in relation to the financial implications of their return to study. There are also the 'hidden costs' such as financing childcare (NUS, 2009), in particular for 'lone parents' who can often already be facing issues relating to debt (Hinton-Smith, 2016; Reay, 2003).

#### **2.4.4.3 Employment & caring commitments**

Adult learners are more likely to have reduced time to spend on campus when compared to traditional aged students, due to having multiple life commitments beyond their studies (ARC Network, 2013; Shepherd and Nelson, 2012; Forbus and Newbold, 2011), with the mature and part-time student experience often being represented as 'juggling' (London Economics, 2017; Butcher, 2015; UniversitiesUK, 2013; King, 2013). Within the literature two predominate responsibilities are employment and caring commitments (Economics, 2017) which can impact a sense of being an 'authentic' (Munro, 2011; Read et al., 2003) UG.

Although Denovan & Macaskill (2013) highlight traditional students are increasingly working part-time, full-time cohorts are normally more in a

position to make their degree work a priority (Universities UK, 2013). Being a 'student-worker' (Munro, 2011) can lead to additional sources of 'stress' (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013; Forbus and Newbold, 2011) and is a common occurrence for part-time UGs in the UK with around 80% having work commitments (The Higher Education Academy, 2013) varying from part-time to full-time (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). Furthermore, students who are in a position of disadvantage often commit to longer employment hours when compared to their traditional aged peers (Forbus and Newbold, 2011, p.117) further reducing time on campus as a student. Additionally, 'non-traditional' students are more likely to be employed in more pressurised daytime Monday to Friday 'career work' positions (Forbus and Newbold, 2011); 'traditional' students typically taking on less responsible roles, working evenings and weekends (Munro, 2011). This is further exacerbated for cohorts who also have caring commitments as an added source of responsibility, as expressed by the 'non traditional' working student-parents in the study by (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010) who due to limited time to spend with peers reported feelings of 'isolation' which impacted their student 'sense of belonging'.

There is limited available data on the student-parent population having been marginalised within educational policy (NUS, 2009; Brooks, 2012; Wainwright, 2010). In particular there is gap in the literature focusing on 'lone student-parents' (Hinton-Smith, 2016). However, available data highlights the prominence of student-parents being typically female, mature, studying part-time and attending a university where they currently live (Moreau and Kerner, 2012). Studying with children can have benefits, such as being a positive 'role model' (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; UniversitiesUK, 2013; Butcher, 2015;) however, student parents often report feeling 'guilty' (Brooks, 2015; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; NUS 2009), finding life as an UG as 'hectic' (Hinton-Smith, 2012, p. 160) and stressful (Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012; NUS, 2009). 10% of the student-parents in the NUS study (2009, p.3) reported feeling 'isolated' from the 'student community'. Feeling 'isolated' from peers which impacted a 'sense

of belonging' was also perceived by 18 out of 71<sup>7</sup> student-parents (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010, p. 791) and isolation is also a key theme in Hinton-Smith's (2012) work highlighting the experiences of lone parents in HE settings.

To conclude part one of the literature review, becoming an UG and the first-year transition is acknowledged as being an emotional time for all students, due to adapting to a new educational context. However, when a student perceives themselves positioned as an outsider, marginalised by identity such as being 'non-traditional', a mature UG and first generation to HE, anxiety and worries related to fitting into this middle-class life-world can be intensified. In addition, intersections of student and personal identities as well as studying part-time and being physically distanced from university peers as well as having other life commitments, has the potential to further increase a psychological sense of being isolated and not belonging to the student community.

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<sup>7</sup> This included traditional aged, full-time and post graduate students.

## **PART TWO:**

The second part of this chapter will now consider how social media, specifically Facebook, can be used to benefit part-time students by connecting them with their peers. It will start by drawing attention to the current lack of provision by many VLEs in providing a suitable online space for informal student-student interactions beyond the cognitive discourse. In respect of the affective focus of this study into the transitional first year, it will consider examples of online support communities (OSCs) and consider the benefits perceived by their group members, in particular for groups who have shared specific needs. This chapter will conclude by highlighting the limitations of an OPSC, including considerations of social media procrastination, barriers that the permeance of text can give for students who are not confident writing in public as well as the potential for Facebook groups to capture a fake reality due to performance of self.

### **2.5 Blended learning**

Teaching methods in HE settings have traditionally used a “chalk and talk’ pedagogy”(Venema and Lodge, 2013, p.20). This refers to the dominate positionality of the lecturer, having sole use of the learning ‘tools’ (chalk and blackboard) and delivering information in a ‘linear manner’ (Mason and Rennie, 2008, p. 11) resulting in low levels of interaction between themselves and their students. The introduction of online learning has created new modes of communication, enabling increased collaboration between the educator and students, as well as student to student, shifting the position of a lecturer to that of facilitator. Garrison and Anderson (2003, p. 3) refer to this as being a ‘learning ecology’, reflecting the transformation of practice to a networked interactive experience.

The UK HE discourse commonly refer to this contemporary online supported pedagogy as ‘blended learning’, although Smith and Hill (2019) highlight the lack of clarity and common understanding of what this actually entails. An example being Garrison and Vaughan’s (2008, p.5) definition of being a

'thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences' which Smith and Hill (2019, p.384) critique for being too 'broad'. This vagueness is also supported by Alammery et al. (2014), as they argue the lack of clarity can result in some educators feeling they have achieved blended learning by incorporating minimal elements of online learning into their teaching practice.

A common aim of blended learning is to increase engagement and interaction between the educator and students. This is based upon social theories of learning, such as Bandura (1977) who argued learning takes place from being informed and influenced by observing the behaviour of others in our social world. Additionally, Vygotsky's (1978, p. 84) 'Zone of Proximal Development' argues for the importance of social interaction, allowing a student to be stretched from their current knowledge and understanding with 'more capable peers' (p.86).

Blended learning also includes 'constructivist' pedagogies (Garrison and Anderson, 2003, p. 37) in which online tools can facilitate students to work together in a collaborative way. However, Siemens (2004) critiqued these aforementioned theories for their over emphasis on the 'process of learning' and lack of relevance in reflecting contemporary online learning with digital tools. He presented the theory of connectivism which involves a 'cycle of knowledge development (personal to network to organisation)' (Siemens, 2004) and includes 'diversity of opinions... continual learning... connections between fields, ideas, and concepts... currency [of knowledge] and decision-making' (Siemens, 2004) within the learning process.

### **2.5.1 Institutional online learning environments**

Contemporary globalised universities provide online spaces for blended learning, a current example being VLEs; during the last two decades the two leading platforms of choice in the UK HE sector have been Blackboard (Blackboard, 2019a) and Moodle (Moodle, 2019) which is the current main UK provider (UCISA, 2018), and more recently Canvas (Instructure, 2019).

VLEs such as these are specifically designed for educational purposes, providing a range of communication channels which support both the administration processes as well as learning and teaching activities. They support asynchronous and synchronous communication as well as formative and summative e-assessment, with collaborative tools such as blogs, webinars and wikis (UCISA, 2018).

However, despite this shift away from the historical 'chalk and talk pedagogy', VLEs are still being critiqued for having design and functions within them that replicate the formal offline structures and processes of the university (Cousin, 2005). An example being the positionality of the educator within these online spaces who (as in traditional face-to-face teaching) still has the role of selecting the tools for learning and is also responsible for creating 'exams, assignments, course descriptions, lesson plans, messages, syllabi, and basic course materials' (LeNoue et al., 2011) which are presented to the 'student audience' (Cousin, 2005, p.123). This continued hierarchical positioning of the educator in the institutional online space inevitably creates an atmosphere which has an element of formality (Madge et al., 2009; Deng and Tavares, 2013; Dogoriti et al., 2014; Johannesen et al., 2016) and 'cognitive presence' (Garrison and Anderson, 2003, p.83). Supporting this academic centric focus, Johannesen et al., (2016) argue online contributions from students have a 'formality' in tone, and Deng and Tavares (2013, p.173) agree students can feel 'obliged to post long, serious and structured messages'.

In addition to the online learning environment (OLE) atmosphere, another factor to consider is the affordance in providing different forms of communication. This can range from non-time dependant asynchronous tools such as 'discussion board' or 'wikis' (Dogoriti et al., 2014) to real-time synchronous as experienced with Blackboard Collaborate via 'virtual meetings' and 'web conferencing' (Blackboard, 2019b). Whilst synchronous tools with users being 'co-present in the same digital space' (Humphreys, 2016, p.27) are increasingly more commonplace in VLEs, the predominate

method of communication within these institutional OLE is, at present, still asynchronous (LeNoue et al., 2011; Dogoriti et al., 2014; Johannesen et al., 2016). However, this asynchronous communication results in a student experience which is typically one of receiving interactions from others with a time delayed response, which argued as being less effective in supporting 'social integration' (Dorum et al., 2010; Jackson, 2012), 'interpersonal relationships' (Clerkin et al., 2013; Delahunty et al., 2013; Grieve and Kemp, 2015) and creating a sense of community (Rheingold, 1995; Lefever and Carrant, 2010; Delahunty et al., 2013). Despite synchronous and asynchronous communication tools, VLEs are often still found to be used foremost as a 'repository' of online learning resources (LeNoue et al., 2011; Firat, 2017; Deodhar and Mathur, 2019).

### **2.5.2 Informal online spaces**

It is in response to such limitations in institutional VLEs that educators and students may choose to access alternative online platforms and software tools which can help to facilitate an increased socialised student experience, extending the OLE beyond the cognitive discourse (Camus et al., 2016), this being particularly beneficial for students who are studying at distance (Johannesen et al., 2016) or part-time (Gordon, 2014) having reduced time on campus to connect with peers. Camus et al., (2016) highlight the 'uniqueness' of having two different OLEs, with informal online spaces, such as those provided by social media, complementing the academic formal cognitive presence of institutional VLEs which can allow students to experience different styles and tone of communication with peers. Informal learning is 'undertaken on the learner or learners' own terms without either prescribed curricular requirements or a designated instructor' (Livingstone, 2001, p. 3). Whilst initially having more emphasis on learning that takes beyond recognised formal contexts of learning (Tough, 1971), this term is also relevant and is used in relation to learning at university, to include 'student-to-student interactions' (Madge et al., 2009) that take place beyond formal assessment work directed by the lecturer.

## 2.6 Social media and the student experience

Social media is defined by Miller (2013) as a 'communication media that goes beyond the dyadic, being open to a group of persons...' it is somewhere 'between traditionally dyadic forms... and public broadcasting' it is suited to 'larger group[s]' but essentially 'helps create and maintain relationships'. In terms of online tools social media can facilitate microblogging (e.g. Twitter), image sharing (e.g. Instagram), video sharing (YouTube) and professional networking (e.g. LinkedIn) (Humphreys, 2016). Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat, Twitter and WhatsApp are the predominant social media platforms currently used in the UK (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2016; Ofcom, 2017), with Facebook being the preferred platform of the general population (Ofcom, 2018) and the focus for this study. Although popular, Facebook usage rates are now starting to decline (Ofcom, 2018) with the mobile app 'WhatsApp' increasingly gaining mainstream popularity. WhatsApp provides synchronous and asynchronous text and video communication (WhatsApp, 2019) has the facility to create group chats and is viewed as being 'central to maintaining relationships with friends and family' (Ofcom, 2018, p.2). Facebook, however, is a social networking platform created by Harvard University students in 2004 who specifically designed it to with the goal of being a communication tool for the student community to socialise online (Miller, 2013).

Social media platforms in HE contexts can be used for cognitive learning activities (Manca and Ranieri, 2016; Davies et al. 2017) with examples of Facebook supporting a 'community of inquiry' (Nazir and Brouwer, 2019), increasing 'student engagement and understanding' (Dyson et al., 2015) and providing online 'formative assessment feedback' (McCarthy, 2017). However, in contrast to the academic atmosphere of VLEs, social media is also a way for students to experience a more 'informal' learning environment (Madge et al., 2009; DeAndrea et al., 2012 McGuckin and Sealey, 2013; Prescott et al., 2013; Dogoriti et al., 2014; Deng and Tavares, 2015; Camus et al., 2016), beyond institutional platforms it is viewed as more 'private and intimate' (Johannesen et al., 2016, p.45) and due to increased real-time

interaction communication can be perceived as 'instant, spontaneous and organic' (Deng and Tavares, 2013, p.174).

Social media has been used within HE settings to support social integration (Dorum et al., 2010; Lefever and Currant, 2010; Prescott et al., 2013) 'social support' (Chen and Popiel, 2015), 'peer support' (Brouns and Hsiao, 2012; Prescott et al., 2013) and the affective dimensions of learning (Grieve et al., 2013; Uusiautti and Maatta 2014; Wohn and Larose 2014; Hidalgo et al., 2015; Grieve and Kemp, 2015). It is in acknowledgement of social media having the facility to increase social interaction this it is has been used to specifically aid 'transition' to university/ college (Madge et al., 2009; DeAndrea et al., 2011; Jackson, 2012; Mazzoni and Iannone, 2014; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2015) with a focus on how it can help to foster a sense of community.

### **2.6.1 Online peer support communities**

As presented in part one of this literature review, belonging to a community is recognised as being a need for most students as they find their place within the university life-world, and is particularly important during the early transitional phase of becoming an UG. Cohen (1985) highlights the complexity of defining community, as it encompasses physical world indicators such as having social activity within a university school as well as more ambiguous 'boundary marks' (Cohen, 1985 p.12) resulting from one's ethnicity, spoken language or belief systems. In respect of this, community is often a subjective experience resulting from one's inner perception of the outer world, transpiring in 'a consciousness of community' (Cohen, 1985 p.13). However, Cohen (1985, p.13) emphasizes the role of 'interaction' between community members as well as comparative judgements that are made in terms of 'similarity' or 'difference' (p.21), in terms of deciding who has group membership, as discussed earlier in relation to belongingness theory in part one of this literature review. Similarly, this judgement can be sensed in Quinn's (2010, p.45) definition of community, bringing 'together a number of unified selves to form a coherent whole, with its own unified

identity' although this suggests a commonality of experience which is often not the lived reality (Oztok et al., 2013). Humans by nature are complex and there are various intersections of other identities within all communities (Mitchell et al., 2014).

For a community to be effective Rovai (2002, p.4) argues it requires several factors being 'mutual interdependence among members, sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals, and overlapping histories among its members'.

Considering communities in educational contexts Rovai (2002) acknowledges these typically have shared a focus on the goal of learning, however, as evident in part one of this review 'exclusion' in terms of perceived membership within these unfortunately still prevails (Quinn, 2010). A concept of community which dominates the education literature is Wenger's (1998) seminal Communities of Practice (CoP), which is critiqued in its applicability to learning communities by Henri and Pudelko (2003) due to the focus being primarily aimed at membership at a professional level, involving a sustained membership over time as well as an assumed high level of insider knowledge for the majority of members. Although Wenger (1998, p.167) does acknowledge a CoP can also include 'non-participation' and 'marginality'.

Social media provides a constant networked online space in order for groups of people to connect with one another at any time of the day for a specific purpose (Berki and Jakala, 2009). Building on the work of Wenger (1998), Henri and Pudelko (2003) categorise a hierarchy of four online communities, all of which exhibit both 'activity and 'learning'. The lowest level or 'weak' group being a *community of interest* followed by a *goal-oriented community of interest*, then a *learners' community* and finally ending with the *community of practice*. The latter CoP they present as being the strongest of the four due to such groups typically exhibiting both strong 'social bonds' to other group members as well as having the highest active member participation levels. However, in this third group the *community of learners* has both a

cognitive goal and a strong educator presence and fails to include reference to the affective domain and consideration of empathy, which Preece (2001, p.7) argues is evident in 'patient support communities' who in comparison to cognitive online discussions are 'strongly empathic'.

Examples from the field of healthcare in which Facebook was used to effectively create an OSC for service users include Bliuc et al.'s (2017, p.112) 'recovery-supportive online community' for challenging and changing addictive behaviours (Bliuc et al., 2017, p.112) which generated a sense of belonging as well as 'a sense of pride and hope' (p21); Dhar et al.'s. (2018 p.569) 'patient support community' in which members faced with having a liver transplant shared 'common stressors' (p. 568) including how to cope with 'depression and anxiety' (p. 568) and sought or gave support with a group of similar others in terms of life experience. While the context of these Facebook OSCs may differ to the end goal of *becoming an UG* in this study, there is commonality of the desire to seek support from similar others, and in turn give back.

Lakey and Cohen (2000, p.29) in the context of well-being and health, identified three social support perspectives being 'stress and coping', 'social constructionist' and 'relationship'. Pfeil (2010, p.127) drew links to these three perspectives and considered them in relation to OSCs which she compares to offline 'self-support groups'. Both typically exhibit a 'high level of emotional support and understanding' of members who share a similar lived experience, which differs to online learning communities dominated by cognitive discourse and limited affective interactions. Drawing examples from educational contexts the following three elements of an OPSC will be discussed: (1) *emotional support* (stress and coping) (2) *safe spaces* (social constructionist) (3) *connectedness and sense of belonging* (relationship).

### **2.6.1.1 OPSC: emotional support**

This first perspective is centred on affective exchanges with social support argued as having the capacity to provide 'a buffer between stressful life

events and health' (Pfeil, 2010, p.124), however, for this to occur within an OSC there also needs to be a commonality of life experiences and 'collective identities' (Berki and Jakala, 2009 p. 32). Drawing from Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory, Putnam (2000, p22) in considering the connections between people and the benefits this can provide in the context of contemporary American society, refers to groups of similar others as creating 'bonding social capital'. He likens this to a 'sociological superglue' (p.23) in which there is 'reciprocity' and 'solidarity' arguing this can provide a 'psychological support' (p.22) which is relevant to an OSC. Receiving support from others who have shared life experiences can be motivating (Deng and Tavares, 2013) and reassuring (Rodríguez et al. 2015), although it involves empathy, being 'the ability to detect accurately the emotional information being transmitted by another person' (Levenson and Ruef, 1992 p.234).

Drawing from Levenson and Ruef (1999), Preece (1999) presents a 'taxonomy of communication types' (p.76) being five categories for the analysis of empathetic content within online communities: '*empathetic content*' with members seeking and giving support; '*hostile*' being the absence of empathetic content; '*factual*' enquired or provided information; '*personal narrative*' sharing of own life experiences; '*other*' information relating to none of the aforementioned. Preece (1999, p.79) also identified the influence of gender within online communities, with female messages evidencing more empathetic content, and the importance of an 'effective moderator' in relation to averting 'hostile' content, as well as highlighting the role a moderator plays in increasing the volume of empathetic content in an OSC. Other factors that influenced empathetic content was 'timely responses' (Preece, 1999 p.79) as delayed replies were often found to make a person feel disheartened, while the '24/7' affordance of online communication was a benefit, in allowing a person to post as and when they need to. The use of 'emoticons' (Preece, 1999 p.81) to explain feelings due to the lack of social cues were also common in OSCs. Empathetic OSCs will often have a sense of 'equality' amongst group members, knowing someone

else has 'been there', having similarity of life experiences (Preece, 1999 p.75).

In educational contexts, social media has been used to improve 'social integration' and reduce levels of anxiety with university peers during their transition to university (Madge et al., 2009; Dorum et al., 2010; Lefever and Carrant, 2010; Jackson, 2012; Wohn and LaRose, 2014). Connecting with peers via social media can encourage 'reassurance seeking' (Clerkin et al. 2013) and enable emotional support (Grieve et al., 2013; Uusiautti and Maata, 2014; Mazzoni and Ionnone, 2014; Hidalgo et al. 2015) in particular when connecting with others who have 'similar backgrounds' (Oztok et al., 2013, p.205) and can also provide a sense of belonging (Dorum et al., 2010; Jackson, 2012; Delahunty et al., 2013; McGuckin and Sealey, 2013).

A pre-registration Facebook page was set up to aid the social integration for 160 WP business students during their first transition to a North West English HEI (Jackson, 2012). Of this cohort 36 answered the '21 item questionnaire' which confirmed many had found 'reassurance' to be in contact with others 'in the same position' respondents clarifying it '*...helped me feel calmer*' and gave the ability to '*realise everyone's in the same boat*' (p.34) this sharing of similar worries and pre-uni experiences helped reduce feelings of 'isolation and nervousness' relating to starting university and allowed them to feel they 'fitted in', however this was most benefiting to the students who were living off-campus. Similar findings are presented by

Dorum et al. (2010) who used a nine statement questionnaire to measure first year perceptions relating to 'coping with life' at the university of Leicester by comparing their social media usage and to what extent the students reported having 'made friends' with university peers. The 370 full time students were aged 18-52 (mean 20.16) lived either 'on-campus' or 'off-campus' and were active or non-active users of social media. Making university friends online particularly benefited the students who were living

off-campus, this provided them with a strong 'sense of belonging' to the university which is argued by Dorum et al. (2010) as helping to reduce their 'social and informational disadvantage', this having less significance for on-campus UGs who typically have more social engagement with peers. However, Madge et al. (2009) found the 'support and socialisation' derived from a Facebook network comprised of '10,000 members' being 'current and past students and staff' created a 'social glue' for 213 first year predominately traditional aged UGs who were all transitioning to 'university life' (p.148) at an East Midlands English HEI. Whilst it does not stipulate any details it is clear from the wording of the survey and provided verbatim quotes that these students were predominately on-campus students.

#### **2.6.1.2 OPSC: perceived trust**

This perspective acknowledges that individuals will have different 'perceptions' (Pfeil, 2010, p.125) of social support in an OSC, this is reflected in the 'social psychological' studies into social media (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997; Junco, 2013; Mäntymäki and Islam, 2016) considering how interactions with others online are perceived mentally by the individual. This is impacted by how one views the self, others and the OSC atmosphere. Text is currently the predominate method of communication in Facebook and due to lacking the 'media richness' and 'social cues' of face-to-face discussions, being the 'richest medium' (Humphreys, 2016, p. 26), can lead to uncertainty and misunderstandings by the reader in the interpretation of tone and meaning (Hope, 2016). As emotional forms of communication can be more efficient than spoken language, such as Christakis and Fowler's (2011) example of mood and how a partners' anger can be understood before any other verbal information is received in the physical world, so too can 'emoticons (icons that express emotion)' can be used to improve clarity of intended expression of tone in a text based Facebook message (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997, p.10) and aid presenting the message in the intended tone, such as expression of humour/ positive statement by a smiley face.

An OSC can be impacted by awareness of who is reading the interactions, one example being the presence of an educator. This was identified in the study by Deng and Tavares (2015, p.174) in which the Hong Kong student teachers in their final year created a private Facebook group in which they reported feeling 'more at ease posting in conversational and casual styles and on any topics of interest' knowing their tutor was not reading the content and the sharing of emotions lead to a 'nurturing' environment and they felt comfortable to seek 'help and support' (p.173). Another frequently discussed consideration in the online community literature is that of perceived 'trust' (Garrison, 2000; Rovai, 2002; Mason and Rennie, 2008; Berki and Jakala, 2009; Preil, 2010; Plante and Asselin, 2014; Humphreys, 2016) which can impact the extent that members will feel comfortable to disclose personal information (Humphreys, 2016). Trust can be perceived through 'self-disclosure' (Garrison, 2000; Plante and Asselin 2014) of own 'feelings, attitudes, experiences, and interests' (Garrison, 2000, p.100), it can be impacted by being amongst known or unknown others (Mason and Rennie, 2008) and will uniquely affect a person, with some appreciating the 'anonymity' as Li et al. (2015) argues can provide for some a sense of safety when talking about issues related to own health. However, anonymity can also impact perceptions of trust, as online interactions can turn negative when identities are hidden (Gordon, 2014), such as the creation of a fake Facebook profile (Gehl, 2018) in order to vent against others online.

Levels of perceived trust in the OSC will also impact to what extent the members feel a sense of 'intimacy' in the online discussions (Argyle and Dean, 1965; Johannesen et al., 2016), which can be generated by use of 'emoticons' and quick replies (Johannesen et al., 2016), 'topic' of discussion (Argyle and Dean, 1965, p.293), authentic exchanges (Berki and Jakala, 2009) and cultural norms (Lee-Won et al., 2014). Facebook has the facility to create private groups where only those accepted into that online space have access to the content and are commonly used for online communities in education (Manca and Ranieri, 2013) in order to create an environment that is both focused and provides a sense of privacy in that only group members

are being presumed as reading the content (Trottier, 2018). Although there are concerns in educational contexts about social media and the 'blurring' of private personal lives with academic (Prescott, 2013).

Another factor that affects the shared online community is to what extent is the content posted by members reflecting their lived reality? Goffman (1956, p.10) in explaining the multiple versions of self uses a theatre metaphor, with the self being an 'actor' (p.17) who is either outwardly 'performing' (p.21) by presenting oneself in a more positive light to the 'audience' or sharing the 'backstage' (p.69) reality with those who are trusted in respect of revealing more elements of one's flaws or imperfections. Drawing direct reference to the work of Goffman, to present this in a Facebook context Bareket-Bojmel et al. (2016, p.788) explored the 'social feedback' provided by Facebook 'likes' and 'comments' received from the 'audience', arguing that Facebook is an effective tool for 'self-presentation', although this is typically through the more polished 'performance of self' (Aleman and Wartman, 2009, p.52) in an aim to increase this received social feedback, being a form of social validation. Although Clerkin et al. (2013, p.1) highlight the impact a person's 'self-esteem' has in this online self-presentation, given that Facebook 'reassurance seeking' by those who have high levels of anxiety or depression can result in a mis-interpretation of social feedback, when read through a negative lens it can lead to a 'negative feedback loop' by reconfirming their original worries and feelings that they don't 'belong' or are 'a burden'. In addition, Lee-Won et al. (2014) discuss the cultural influences arguing that American students were more likely to be presenting a positive Facebook self-image in online communities, compared to South Korean students due to cultural norms relating to individual expression.

### **2.6.1.3 OPSC: connectedness & a sense of belonging**

This last perspective focuses on the extent a person feels they are receiving 'intimacy, trust, perceived acceptance, empathy and attachment' from another (Lakey and Cohen, 2000, p.142). The reduction of 'facial expression, direction of gaze [and] posture' in 'text-based' online spaces can

make social interactions more challenging (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997, p. 9). Short et al.'s (1976, p.65) theory of social presence focuses on 'interpersonal relationships' from a context of telecommunication conversations having analysed to what extent the medium was able to generate 'intimacy' and 'immediacy', resulting in a socio-psychological sense that this physically distanced 'person is perceived as 'real'' (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997, p.8). This concept of intimacy was extended from the work of Argyle and Dean, 1965 (p.293) who define this as being generated by the physical presence of 'eye-contact, physical proximity, intimacy of topic, amount of smiling', with 'immediacy' having been developed by Wiener and Mehrabian (1968, p.3) who placed emphasis on the meaning behind spoken language, in the sense that what is verbally presented to others might not represent what a person is genuinely feeling internally or 'backstage' and is considered as the 'different degrees of separation of the speaker from the content of his communication'.

Social media platforms are designed with a specific focus on building and fostering relationships. Facebook supports social presence by the facility to have instant messaging (Lefever and Currant 2010) which, due to the conversational nature, is also suited to emotional discussions (Humphreys, 2016). Receiving responses to posted comments from 'likes' and comments (Deng and Tavares, 2013; Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Zell and Moeller, 2018), private groups, emoticons and 'being on Facebook' can generate 'intimacy' and 'psychological "immediacy"' (Johannesen et al., 2016). Social presence formed by Facebook can also support the creation of a 'social identity' (Shen et al., 2010) and result in a sense of belonging (Gao et al., 2017) and in providing social support Facebook can be a form of 'social lubricant' (Ellison et al., 2010).

Perceived social presence in the social media literature is also linked to a psychological sense of 'connectedness' (Rovai, 2002; Tazghini and Siedlecki, 2013; Uusiautti and Maata, 2014; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2015; Grieve and Kemp, 2015; Thai et al., 2019) a concept which has routes

in a sense of belonging (Grieve et al., 2013). Lee and Lee (2001, p. 310) define this as 'an attribute of self that reflects cognitions of enduring interpersonal closeness with the social world *in toto*' and is focused on the 'independent self in relation to others', which Grieve and Kemp (2015, p.239) clarify as involving a sense of 'belongingness and affiliation' and situate this within the online context of Facebook.

Uusiautti and Määttä (2014) explored the role social media had for 90 educational psychology students in northern Finland (mean age 25.8) and their day to day lives. The students found this gave them a space for increasing 'social interaction' in order to share their 'communal experiences' (Uusiautti and Määttä 2014, p.299) 'giving and receiving support' (p.300) as well as exhibited bonding behaviours which resulted in a 'sense of togetherness'. Connecting with others via social media can increase students sense of 'bonding' (Deng and Tavares, 2013; Grieve et al. 2013; Uusiautti and Maata, 2014) and 'communality' (Uusiautti and Maata, 2014) although this can be impacted by the extent a person is using social media to connect with already established friends beyond university (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2015), as social media is more suited on 'maintaining' already established offline friendships, rather than forming new friendships, which is relevant for students meeting face-to-face but connecting online. A key consideration of this perspective is the extent that online social support can reduce psychological feelings of 'isolation' (Rovai, 2002; Pfeil, 2010; Dorum et al. 2010; Delahunty et al., 2013; Lim and Richardson 2016) via 'on-going conversations'

The aforementioned three perspectives of social support are also represented in the work of Rovai (2002 p.4) who argues a community requires: 'mutual interdependence among members, sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals' but extends this to also highlight the 'overlapping histories among members' (p.4). Brake (2014, p. 102) refers to this as 'social media memory' as content shared is typically perceived as having a 'permanence' (Humphreys, 2016, p.28) which in the context of a support Facebook group

public posts can add to a sense of belonging by the archive of member conversations (Pfeil, 2010). The benefits of sharing worries, anxieties and stresses with peers, and receiving peer support through relationships that can lead to 'a sense of togetherness' (Uusiautti and Maata, 2014 p.298) is argued to reduce psychological isolation (Jackson, 2012; Uusiautti and Maata, 2014; Lim and Richardson 2016) and knowing others are in similar circumstances can be reassuring (Preece, 1999; Lefever and Carrant, 2010; Jackson, 2012; Hidalgo et al. 2015) as well as facilitating the formation of 'collective identities' (Berki and Jakala, 2009 p. 32). These elements if experienced by a student in an OSC can have a positive impact on mental health, providing a sense of belonging during key transitional phases (Dorum et al., 2010; Lefever and Carrant, 2010; Jackson, 2012). Although students connecting via social media will have different levels of engagement, often the majority of community members are 'lurking' (Scheider et al., 2012) watching the content rather than engaging, however, Walton et al. (2012 p.513) highlight the benefit of a 'mere belonging' being 'a minimal social connection to another person or group' in which viewing the online content can still provide benefits.

#### **2.6.1.4 Limitations of an OPSC**

Whilst there are many potential benefits from being a member of an OSC there are also a range of factors that can have a negative effect on the student experience, including the use of social media creating more anxiety and stress. These will be discussed now from three perspectives, the technological, the group dynamics and the individual. Technology can create further barriers to the student experience due to inequality of access, such as having to share technology devices with the family (Bass and Movahed, 2018), to lack of broadband connection to the internet at home (OfNS, 2019) or low levels of confidence in using social media (Bancroft, 2016). In contrast, there can also be challenges due to excessive use, such as social media addiction (Humphreys, 2016; Gao et al., 2017) and social media 'procrastination' (Meier et al., 2016) in which students spend too much time

socialising online to the extent it affects their academic work. Junco (2013) highlights students' self-perceptions of online social media usage can differ to their actual behaviour, presenting an example of 45 students who self-reported spending more hours using Facebook than their actual use.

As discussed earlier written contributions to a OSC can often involve public sharing of text, such as a post to a Facebook group, and this has a perception of having permanence, in the sense that once written the words are captured asynchronously for other group members to read either in the similar time period or, if not deleted, years into the future. This assumes a level of confidence, not just with sharing personal stories, but also with writing online so publicly. In particular, this public permanent capturing of text can be a barrier for students who are not writing in their first language (Delahunty et al., 2013) or have a learning disability such as dyslexia for whom public writing can be an additional cause of anxiety, to the extent such students can refrain from contributing at all (Reynolds and Wu, 2018).

For an OSC to be effective it needs the aforementioned social presence, a fundamental source of this being the activity of the group. If there are low levels of engagement and slow responses to posts, there is going to be a limited or lack of connectedness to the group members (Chugh and Ruhi, 2018). In addition, the group atmosphere of a OSC can be impacted if a negative spiral of discussion occurs, in which members can actually increase levels of anxiety and stress which Humphreys (2016 p. 96) highlights as 'negatively reinforcing existing issues'.

Social media creates an online representation of self, and we as individuals decide which aspects of ourselves we chose to place online. Just as we can have multiple selves in offline contexts, our online self will inevitably be only providing a partial reality, a 'performance' of self (Humphreys, 2016, p. 86). This can be in the form of either an 'ideal' or 'therapeutic' self (Humphreys, 2016, p. 86) presenting a more positive self-image online, or choosing to reveal weaknesses if perceiving a compassionately receptive audience.

Appel et al. (2016, p.44) refer to 'Facebook depression' in which read content can cause 'envy' and lower 'mood' as well as 'self-esteem' (p.45) in comparing self to others, and this is not helped by the public non-representative reality. Bazarova et al. (2015, p.160) highlighted the difference of emotive content in Facebook public and private spaces, drawing from a sample of 141 UG and graduate students (mean age 21.16 years) with private messages containing 'more intense and less positive emotional content' in comparison to public spaces having 'less intimate and less private information'.

The sharing of positive posts about the self is highlighted by Bareket-Bojmel et al. (2016) by analysis of the three most recent Facebook status updates of 156 UGs (mean age 24.5). Of these 434 statuses nearly half at 47% were identified as having 'self-presentation' content, with 36% being 'self-enhancing' (presenting the self in a positive light) in contrast to 11% being 'self-derogating' (negative reference to self); both receiving 'likes and comments' in response, argued as representing 'affective positive social feedback' (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016), although the content of response comments was not captured. However, younger students in their 20's appeared to be more comfortable with sharing negative 'self-presentation' content, in comparison to their peers aged in their 30's. The impact of overly positive public content can have a negative impact on individuals in particular with already low self-esteem when comparing self to others (Jang et al., 2016). In contrast to selecting to keep certain elements of self to limited individuals shared in private spaces, there are others who chose to 'overshare' being 'unnecessary, or undesired, disclosure of details, usually personal' (Kennedy, p. 266), this could be in order to gain a reaction or due to mental health reasons, which can lead also impact the group atmosphere, due to negative 'affective sharing practices' (Kennedy, p. 266).

## **2.7 Conceptual framework no.1**

In respect of trying to understand a complex social phenomenon (Shipman, 1988) the following conceptual framework is not intended to present a clearly

defined focus of study. Instead, it clarifies the boundaries of the research and highlights the significant key concepts and theory which have guided the research (Miles et al., 2014). Being a phenomenological study I am required to acknowledge my preconceived ideas, therefore, this framework also serves as a method to highlight such biases supporting the process of 'bracketing' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). This includes my current understanding at this stage of the project being informed by the wider literature, my practitioner knowledge and relevant lived experience as a mature part-time student. Due to research on student transition often focusing on traditional cohorts, student experience limited to campus life (Hockings et al., 2010), and singular student identities, this conceptual framework intends to study the mature student experience holistically (Museus and Griffin, 2011). This includes the inclusion of elements such as the multiple intersections of identity (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016), the student experience of offline and online social spaces and subjective perceptions of reality (Moustakas, 1994).

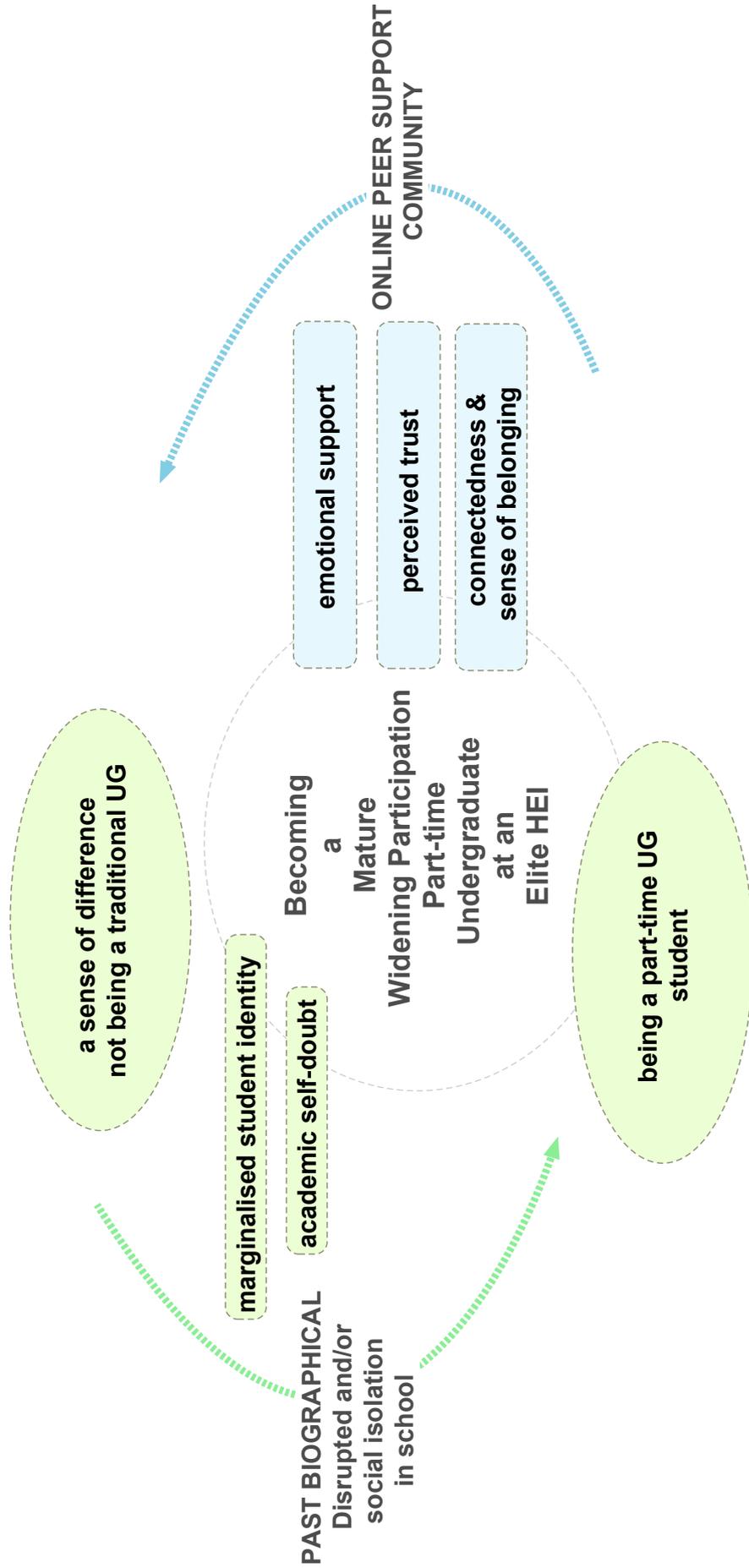


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

My professional experience and the wider literature confirm the transition of becoming a mature UG (Maunder et al., 2013; Leese, 2010) as being an emotive experience, which is why the under-researched affective domain (Beard et al., 2007; Denovan and Macaskill, 2013; Mallman and Lee, 2014; Field, 2012; Brooks, 2015) is the central focus, capturing anxieties and worries that emerge whilst navigating the first year of a foundation degree. Emotional responses are not rational being psychological constructs (Shipman, 1988), I therefore recognize and accept that what is being 'measured' and understood within this study is the perception from an individual at that moment in time and in recalling past memories. The present lived experience is also affected by the biographical present (Ayres and Guilfoyle, 2008; Field, 2012) such as an increased sense of risk returning to education (e.g. financial/ time/ impact on partners and family) and past life (Read et al., 2003; Awang et al., 2014) which can include a disrupted education and/or homelife (Deggs, 2011). Mature students often begin their university life with very low academic self-concept which typically manifests in self-doubt.

The *university status* can either be a source of comfort or result in further alienation (Christie et al., 2008), in this case there is a vastness of an elite research-intensive university campus to be faced, which can be overwhelming due to its ornate and imposing architecture. Academic cultural norms (Gennep, 1965) for first generation students can further add to a sense that one does not belong. This transition of *becoming* involves a process of comparing and contrasting the self to others in the academic community and wider university environment; to what extent the individual feels they have a sense of similarity or difference to those inhabiting this social space. A *marginalised student identity* (Mallman and Lee, 2014) can come from a multitude of sources, however, in this conceptual framework it is focused on the shared identities within the group being *mature* and *Widening Participation*; not having progressed to university in the 'normal' manner, represented in the label of being 'non-traditional'. Each additional perception of difference beyond these identities can further heighten a sense of otherness, leading to psychological

isolation (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008). Whilst adapting to their *part-time mode of study* many mature students also have other *life commitments and responsibilities* (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Field, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014) that can impact and affect their student experience, resulting in reduced time on campus, being physically distanced from peers and thus sensing a part-time student identity.

In respect of psychological and physical isolation during the student experience, the essential consideration of this conceptual framework is to ascertain the affordances of an *OPSC* (Lakey and Cohen, 2002; Pfeil, 2010), in a private *Facebook group*. The conceptual framework also takes into account *peer support via social media (beyond Facebook OPSC)* in order to understand where and how other social media spaces may be providing peer support beyond the OPSC, as well as recognition that *public and private spaces* (Bazarova et al., 2015) differ. Influenced by the work of Lakey and Cohen (2000) and Pfeil (2010) the conceptual framework highlights the study's focus of considering where and to what extent students feel there is *perceived trust* (Garrison, 2000; Rovai, 2002; Mason and Rennie, 2008; Berki and Jakala, 2009; Preil, 2010; Plante and Asselin, 2014; Humphreys, 2016), *connectedness* (Rovai, 2002; Tazghini and Siedlecki, 2013; Uusiautti and Maata, 2014; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2015; Grieve and Kemp, 2015; Thai et al., 2019), *sense of belonging* (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) as well as *emotional support* (Grieve et al., 2013; Uusiautti and Maata, 2014; Mazzoni and Ionnone, 2014; Hidalgo et al. 2015) from these online interactions. and how this informal interaction with peers impacts the transition of becoming a part-time WP mature UG.

The conceptual framework informed the development of the research questions: What is the lived experience of becoming an undergraduate with a marginalised student identity at an elite university and being in an OPSC?

With the following three sub-questions to guide data collection:

- *What feelings are expressed relating to the challenges faced during the first year transition to becoming a mature Widening Participation part-time undergraduate?*
- *How can the biographical past life further impact this present lived experience?*
- *What impact does membership of an online peer support community have on the coping strategies of mature Widening Participation part-time undergraduates during their first year?*

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The following chapter presents the rationale for the methodology and sampling criteria. It evidences how, as a practitioner researcher, I worked towards reducing my bias throughout this study. It explains how the pilot study informed the development of the three methods. The eight stages of data analysis are explained, the steps taken to ensure quality of research and finally ending with the ethical considerations.

### **3.2 Methodologies**

As presented in the literature review and conceptual framework there are two fundamental elements to this study. One being informed from literature focused primarily on transition to HE for mature UGs whilst also being guided by research focused on social media and peer support in HE. These two aspects have a distinctive ontological difference, the former being dominated by more interpretivist styles of research the latter often being measured through 'positivist perspectives' (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2013, p.45).

In the literature for transition the case study methodology is frequently found, which allows for an in-depth understanding of a social setting and is suited to the measurement of social life complexity (Cohen et al., 2011). This approach was used to explore non-traditional UGs experiences of negotiating research intensive (Reay et al., 2009; Kasworm, 2009) and post 1992 (Leese, 2010) universities. However, in order to capture data over an extended period of time (e.g. an entire degree of study) a longitudinal methodology is more effective and is commonly found in studies focused on understanding the student experience of non-traditional cohorts (e.g. Christie et al., 2008; Cree et al., 2009; Waller et al., 2011; Hinton-Smith, 2016),

although this requires a considerable time commitment from the participants during such lengthy data collection periods (Cohen et al., 2011).

In contrast, studies of social media use in education are dominated by the mono-method online Likert scale survey which was used to measure online connectedness in Facebook (Grieve et al., 2013), first year transition, loneliness and Facebook (Wohn and LaRose, 2014) and Facebook and perceived social support (Chen and Pompel, 2015). However, unlike the case study or longitudinal methodologies, using a single survey methodology can fail to capture the contextual detail of 'lived realities' (Gale and Parker, 2014, p.747) or the student 'voice' (Creanor et al., 2006; Maunder et al., 2013) being a measurement of a predetermined set of questions created by the researcher.

This study is focused on the lived experience of being a marginalised mature student using an OPSC (Evans, 2010; Grieve et al., 2013; Mantymaki, 2016). This is considered from the affective domain (Christie et al., 2008) due to psychological concepts such as 'belonginess' (Osterman, 2000; Walton et al., 2012; Howard and Davies, 2013). Biographical detail (Reay, 2003) further adds to the 'complexity' (Jones, 2010; Degg, 2011) as this transition period is also impacted by wider 'social and economic structures' (Crossan et al., 2003). This led me to the selection of a methodology that is used for understanding psychological experiences.

### **3.3 Transcendental phenomenology**

Transcendental phenomenology is an interpretivist approach (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013) which has the ontological belief that knowledge is gained by exploring the 'lived experience' (Kang, 2012; Mulready-Shick, 2013). A psychological form of inquiry it seeks to understand human experience by capturing the 'internal perceptions' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45) of participants as they describe their 'life-world' (Schutz, 1970, p.15). From a position which argues humans respond uniquely to external stimuli, the focus is on how reality is perceived in the 'subjective consciousness' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 46) accepting that whether or not what is perceived internally is actually

evident in the external reality is irrelevant. The fundamental aim being to present the 'essence' (Miller and Salkind, 2002) from a group of shared experiences, highlighting the commonality from the participants 'own eyes' (Kang, 2012). Whilst more commonly used in psychology (Cilesiz, 2010) and nursing (O'Connor and Cordova, 2010) phenomenological studies have included a focus on: mature and part-time study (O'Connor and Cordova, 2010; Gagnon and Packard, 2012), the affective domain (Beard et al., 2007), transition (Scanlon et al., 2007; Flynn et al., 2012; Denovan and Macaskill, 2013), online social networks (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2013), community in online learning (Gallager-Lepak et al., 2009) and caring mediated by technology (Velasquez et al., 2013).

As acknowledged in similar studies within the literature (e.g. Ayres and Guilfoyle (2008), O'Connor and Cordova (2010) and Canning (2010)) my position is that of a practitioner-researcher; I am a WP educator who also has an 'understanding of working-class life' (Wilkins and Burke, 2013) from my own past. I am also a mature part-time student who has used online communities during my studies, therefore have various intersections of 'insider knowledge' (Kincheloe, 1991, p.50). Within phenomenological studies 'the puzzlement is autobiographical' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59) requiring the researcher to have such relevant lived experience of that being explored, adding 'empathy' (p.37) to the research process.

### **3.4 Context**

This study is focused on a part-time foundation year programme (year one of a four-year UG degree) at a city university in the North of England. The university campus is dominated with UGs who are 'traditional' by age and on a full-time programme of study. This 'pre-1992' (Williams and Abson, 2001) university is research-led (Cree et al., 2009) as similar settings are referred to within the literature as 'elite' (Reay et al., 2003; Mallman and Lee, 2014) this is the definition I refer to within this study. The course prepares students who will be progressing to a wide range of subject specialisms such as: child and family studies, criminology, education, English, dental hygiene,

midwifery, nursing and psychology. In a typical week the students attend campus teaching for six hours a week (two evening sessions) with additional Saturday sessions being held once a month. It has a blended design with further learning activities facilitated via the university VLE. The programme is located within a school which is responsible for supporting WP and as such is identified as a support service. The school is in one building which has a unique and diverse range of UGs who are predominately, but not exclusively, identified as being WP.

I created a Facebook group with the aim of providing a social space that could allow for peer support, such as connecting with others for studying, checking the location of a session room and organising social events. This was made clear to the students that it was an optional environment that was not directly linked to the formal module teaching and they did not have to join. Typically there would be just two or three students who did not request to join the group from a cohort of around 40. Students on completing the programme could stay within the group to continue to provide peer support to the next cohort year.

There were both academic and support staff members in the Facebook group. This staff presence was felt as being a necessary element due to our experiences of student vulnerability during this first year re-engagement with education, in addition to considerations of mental health conditions being commonplace in our mature student cohorts. Content was monitored by staff to check for inappropriate content, such as the over sharing of personal information or aggressive statements relating to the student experience. Whilst it is appreciated that this staff presence would have impacted the public content, such as students feeling less likely to be as open as they would be without it, this layer of content checking enabled us to identify if any students needed additional support, and also reduced the potential for anxiety provoking content such as students feeding into a negative feedback loop (e.g. perceptions of assessment tasks and academic ability). Staff interactions in this student space were limited to signposting centre or wider

university events, answering relevant questions (e.g. room locations). It was not used to provide module specific information, as that was shared only in the VLE. The group, therefore, provided a space for students to be informed of wider support services (e.g. student counselling), social events (e.g. family events for student-parents) however the main content was added by the student cohort.

### **3.5 Sampling**

Phenomenological studies (as also typical in qualitative and practitioner research) commonly have small sample sizes from five to 25 (Miller and Salkind, 2002). The sample size was also influenced by my own time constraints, being a practitioner-researcher and working full-time as a teaching fellow. Therefore, it had to be manageable due to the 'labor intensive' (Seidman, 2013, p.115) and 'demanding' (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p.223) aspect of conducting in-depth interviews and transcribing data verbatim, as required in a phenomenological study. In respect of these considerations the sample size was set to ten co-researchers being both manageable and the maximum recommended size for this approach (Miller and Salkind, 2002). However, as highlighted in the study by Moreau and Kerner (2012), students who were to be recruited tend to have life commitments which can impact on their availability to participate in a study with a time involvement such as this.

A necessary factor of sampling for a phenomenological study is that all of the participants must have relevant lived experience (Moustakas, 1994), therefore, each participant was required to have experience of connecting with their university peers during the first year by social media. This included students who self-identified as being either active and non-active (e.g. lurking in Facebook) users of social media; a selection of participants who had a 'unique position' (Schutt, 2012, p. 157) and met a 'specific purpose' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 156). This purposive non-probability method (Cohen et al., 2011) is commonly used in phenomenology studies (see Pereira and Gentry, 2013; Velasquez et al., 2013; Ozmen and Atici, 2014) and has many

variants (Cohen et al., 2011; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). This study used a criterion sampling method (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p. 315) see Appendix A. Recruitment was undertaken in March 2015 during which I spoke in person to 34 current UGs in our centre, along with a further 20 UGs being contacted by university email due to their location in various schools around the university campus. Six weeks after the initial request the required sample size was achieved, however, all were from cohort one.

### **3.6 Epoche stage**

Practitioner-research is often critiqued for the inevitable researcher bias; an educator, consciously or unconsciously, may present findings that portray 'a rosier picture' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 359) than the actual reality. However, in acknowledgment of this positionality, phenomenology requires the researcher to bring to the surface their 'prejudgements and biases' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85) via the process of the epoche, a fundamental element of this methodology. This is a reflective process during which the researcher considers their own 'feelings, sense experiences, and thoughts' (Moustakas, 1994, p.78) that relate to the study; also referred to as 'bracketing' (Moustakas, 1994, p.78) this is focused on 'suspend[ing] all judgements' (Miller and Salkind, 2002, p.151) in order to be open to new understandings beyond the current knowledge or experience of the researcher. The following presents a summary of my epoche being three points of potential bias resulting from my past and present life experiences relating to this study:

#### **3.6.1 Not fitting in at grammar school**

Throughout my grammar school years I had a persistent sense of being an outsider. I was a working class child in a middle-class school; I did not fit in. I found the prestigious building to be imposing and a daily reminder of difference. This had been highlighted in people's reactions to me being accepted to the school, 'oh, you're going to the *grammar school*'... placing a strong emphasis on this being an un-typical route for a child such as myself. Once I was amongst my peers it was clear I was not 'one of them'; I didn't

have the middle-class way of speaking, I did not wear their quality of clothing or take part in activities such as horse-riding, playing tennis or learning the piano. I felt like an outsider throughout my time in the school, in the minority of being 'not one of those posh kids'. This sense of not belonging was further impacted by my home-life after years of domestic violence my mother divorced my father and left us with a persistent theme of money being tight. From the age of 13 I started to rebel which included skipping school, failing to do homework and taking part in under aged drinking and smoking. I became disengaged with education and, rather than continue at the school with the traditional academic A level route, I was encouraged by the teachers to leave and study a vocational BTEC.

### **3.6.2 Sense of belonging in a Masters OPSC**

I had periods of feeling very isolated from my peers during a part-time MA in education; I had family commitments and was working as a further education tutor. I did, however, find a sense of belonging via a Facebook post-graduate student community. This online social space gave me a sense of being part of the student life-world. It was reassuring hearing how my peers were, or were not, also coping with juggling their study with similar life commitments.

From my experience as an adult education practitioner working with mature students who are on the whole within the WP policy, I was aware that having had a disrupted family upbringing and a sense of otherness at grammar would cause a potential bias when hearing about similar past life experiences. Similarly, having also been a mature part-time student who has used social media to connect with peers which did give me a sense of belonging, there was also the potential again for me to have an overly positive view of this.

## **3.7 Methods**

Data relating to the student experience of transition in HE and perspectives of marginalised UGs are typically collected by interview (e.g. Christie et al.,

2008; Reay et al., 2009), questionnaires (e.g. Bernardon et al., 2011; Forbus and Newbold, 2011) or a combination of both these methods (e.g. Cree et al., 2009; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Crozier and Reay, 2011). In contrast, studies of social media and online communities in HE settings have an over reliance on quantitative methods, with the online survey and use of Likert scales being particularly dominate (e.g. Dorum et al., 2010; Grieve et al., 2013; Wohn and LaRose, 2014; Chen and Popiel, 2015). Studies using a phenomenological methodology are focused on 'first-person reports of life experiences' (Moustakas, 1994, p.84) and as such typically use 'interviews, observation and documents' (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p. 158) to collect data. Although 'long interviews' (Miller and Salkind, 2002, p.152) are usually the primary data method and are frequently the only method used (e.g. Deggs, 2011; Bluff et al., 2012; Shepherd and Nelson, 2012; Gagnon and Packard, 2012;). Other methods evidenced in the literature include: short demographic questionnaire (O'Connor and Cordova, 2010), field notes (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2013), online observation (Chou, 2013), document analysis (Flynn et al., 2012) and the researcher's use of a reflexive journal (O'Connor and Cordova, 2010; Flynn et al., 2012; Velasquez et al., 2013).

There is diversity within the phenomenological interview method; interview length from the studies I reviewed ranged from the shortest being 30 minutes (e.g. Lin et al., 2013) up to a much longer two hours (e.g. Watson, 2013). Many studies also use the mono-method single interview (Moustakas, 1994; Bluff et al., 2012). Although Moustakas (1994, p. 104) also advises the benefits of using a 'follow-up interview', as used by Watson (2013). However, Velasquez et al. (2013) in exploring caring in online technologies within a school setting used a three-stage interview series with each participant. Due to the emotive focus of the topic, and as the students were on campus at least twice a week, the interviews were conducted face-to-face and made use of grand tour questions (Deggs, 2011) which avoided specific reference to concepts from the conceptual framework as I wanted to be open to new insights. The style was informal (Moustakas, 1994) and conversational (Ozmen and Atici, 2014) aiming for a 'relaxed and trusting

atmosphere' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114) so that the co-researchers may feel more comfortable to share their lived experiences with me.

### **3.7.1 Pilot study**

The pilot study began with three participants, however, finished with being two mature WP students who had already completed their part-time foundation year. From my professional experience of teaching mature part-time UGs I was mindful of not asking for an unreasonable time commitment. In respect of this I decided to have two shorter interviews, being 40 minutes each (1<sup>st</sup> in November 2014 and 2<sup>nd</sup> in December 2014), rather than one long interview. An additional benefit being participants can start to feel more comfortable with this data collection method; not being a module tutor to all the co-researchers there was still a need to develop a 'rapport' which can be helped by having more than one single interview (Velasquez et al., 2013). See Appendix B for the pilot interview questions. A 20 minute pre-interview clarified the aims and purpose of the research, their time involvement and gave an opportunity to ask any questions. All interviews took place in the SoOE were recorded by Dictaphone, transcribed and analysed to identify the essence of their experience. In response to the pilot study I made the following amendments to the research design:

I extended the main method to be a three-stage interview series (Seidman, 2013; Velasquez et al., 2013) (see Appendix C.2). The co-researchers were to describe two different life-words (Velasquez et al., 2013), being past childhood and current adult, and two separate interviews would allow the participant to reflect on one of these whilst 'reconstruct[ing] their experience' (Seidman, 2013, p. 24). This extended time period is also preferable to capture complexity, such as a deeper understanding of intersectionality and allowing identity to naturally emerge. The 3<sup>rd</sup> interview was for reflection upon the descriptions provided in the first two interviews, with the aim of identifying the 'meaning of their experience' (Seidman, 2013, p.22).

1. The research title was amended, removing the conceptual words.
2. The interview question format was changed to be more open and exploratory its wording, adhering to this methodology.

3. The interviews were to take place outside of the SoOE in an aim to make participants feel more at ease to share their reflections in more neutral space.
4. Two further methods were added – one being observation of the public posts in the Facebook group. The other being a co-researcher diary.

### **3.7.2 Pre-interview**

Students who responded to my request for participants were emailed a questionnaire (see Appendix D) to check for their suitability and to collect relevant demographic information (O'Connor and Cordova, 2010; Pereira and Gentry, 2013). Respondents meeting the selection criteria were emailed the information sheet (Appendices C.1– C.5) and invited to a 20 minute pre-interview held in the SoOE, to check the student's understanding of participation. The sample of ten was comprised of eight females and two males, however, this soon reduced to eight participants due to a lack of participation beyond the pre-interview by one student as well as mental health issues. Table 1 presents a brief summary based on the information<sup>8</sup> provided during the pre-interview.

Participants in a transcendental phenomenology study are referred to as 'co-researchers' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 103) acknowledging their position and shared experience or 'pairing' (Moustakas, 1994, p.37) with the researcher, both drawing from their life-world experiences. Each co-researcher was asked if they could provide a pseudonym for this study (Watson, 2013) this was to avoid researcher bias (e.g. non-representativeness of culture/ social class).

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All eight participants were members of the foundation year Facebook group.

co-researcher criteria selection - pre-interview stage											
identity					beyond student life			social media use			
co-researcher	gender	age	ethnicity*	social class*		caring commitments	employment (hours per week)	currently using	activity level**	connecting with uni peers	performance
Claire	female	30's	White British	working-class	-	mother	four job roles	Facebook Instagram	8	every day	actively write
James	male	20's	White English	working-middle class	dyslexia & movement disorder	-	21	Facebook ***	5	once a week	(not stated)
Jim	male	50's	White British	working-class	1. grew up in public care 2. dyspraxia & dyslexia	daughter and granddaughter living with him	40	Facebook	3	once a week	reading content
Jo	female	30's	White British	working-class	-	mother	-	Facebook Twitter	7	every day	actively write
Lisa	female	20's	Black British	working-class	-	full time carer for her mother		Facebook Twitter Instagram Google + YouTube	3	once a month	reading content
Louise	female	30's	Mixed-race British	working-class	-	1. mother 2. carer for her mother	18 (further 3 volunteering)	Facebook WhatsApp Instagram	6	every day	actively write
Sophie	female	40's	White British	working-class	periods of time being in public care	mother and grandparent	volunteering	Facebook	4	every day	reading content
Tatiana	female	30's	White European	underclass	English as an additional language	single parent	20	Facebook	3	every day	reading content

\* participant self-defined definition  
 \*\* selection range: low activity (prefer to read) = 1. High activity (writing posts/ responses) = 10.  
 \*\*\* also in a second student Facebook group which I did not have access to.

**Table 1 Co-researcher Questionnaire Criteria Selection**

### 3.7.3 Three stage interview

All 24 interviews took place in either a tutorial or meeting room on the university campus but were not in the SoOE itself. The interview questions used for interviews one and two (see Appendix C.2) were focused on encouraging descriptions of events; discussions were recorded by Dictaphone. At the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> interview each co-researcher was given a transcript of both interviews, apart from a few instances (due to time) when I was not able to give a fully verbatim text, presenting instead a summary (a verbatim transcript being provided later). The transcripts enabled each co-researcher and myself to reflect on these descriptions of life experiences in order to consider this in the final meaning-making interview, going back over the content of the earlier interviews. The individual interviews were on average 40 minutes long; the total co-researcher involvement ranging from 1 hour and 18 minutes to 2 hours and 42 minutes of interview time. In addition

to the interview the following two methods were also used, with data being collected during the five-month period of March – July 2015.

#### **3.7.4 Online observation**

Student's perceptions of their social media use may differ to their actual use (Junco, 2013), therefore, their online interactions were collected from the foundation year Facebook group. As this data was limited to their public interactions, such as posts they had 'liked' or commented on, or posts they had written, it was not able to be contextualised within a discussion.

Observation was limited to the main group (wall?), so did not capture the private messaging that took place in this group or elsewhere on other social media platforms. This method was also not able to record time spent or consider the benefits of reading the content. But this method was able to give some contextual data such as provide their level of active engagement with peers by number of posts, replies, or 'likes'. As well as qualitative data relating to the content of these written interactions.

#### **3.7.5 Co-researchers diary**

The co-researchers were each given an A4 paper diary and were asked to allocate around 20 minutes per week to capture information relating to their social media use. Instructions were included (see Appendix E) which were aimed at recording a brief note of their motivation and perceived benefits. This method was used alongside the Facebook group observation as a form of triangulation, in particular being mindful of participants who may not be actively writing in this space and as such not seeming to be 'present' even though reading the Facebook group content is an act of engagement.

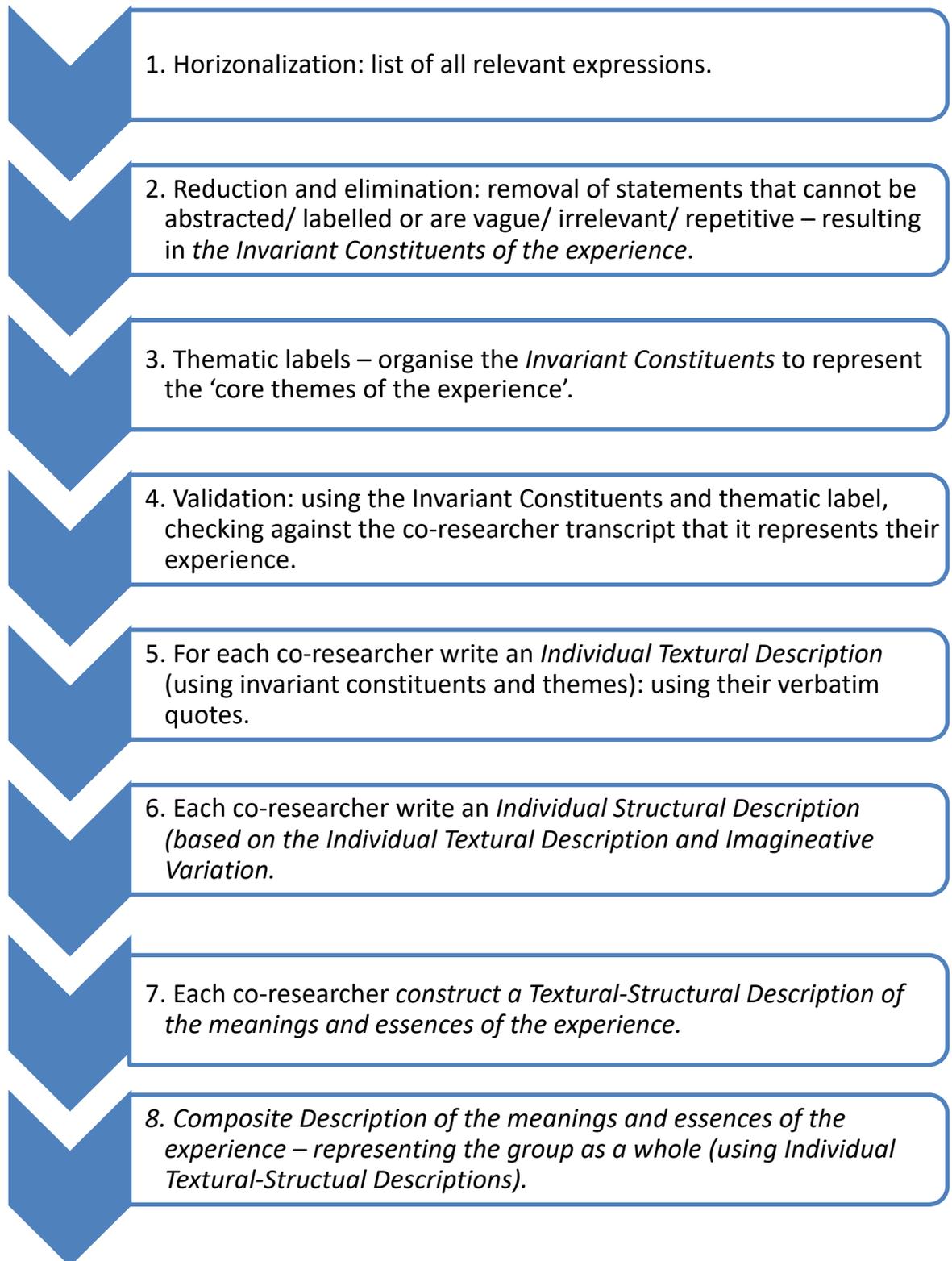
#### **3.7.6 Researcher reflexive journal**

During the data collection period I used a reflexive online journal (via the university VLE). This provided me with a space to reflect on my biases

before and after collecting data, being a continuous format of bracketing. It was also used for a practical purpose, to record key events. In practice I was not always able to reflect on interviews directly after, due to work commitments, so there was often a time delay in this process. In such instances I used to write down key words or brief notes to use as memory prompts for when time was available to write.

### **3.8 Data analysis**

The interview data was analysed using NVivo (version 11) following the phenomenological method as described by Moustakas (1994, p. 120) which involves following eight sequential stages (figure 2). Stages 1 to 7 are mainly focused on each co-researcher in isolation (Appendices F to K), finishing with step 8 in which the findings focus on the commonalities from the group. The transcendental approach uses 'descriptions of experiences' (Moustakas, 1994, p.58) to keep the co-researcher voice, resulting in less interpretation than other phenomenology methodologies (Cohen et al., 2011).



**Figure 2 The Eight Stages of Analysis**

### **3.9 Quality**

The following section is focused on the strategies used including reflexivity, member checking and peer checking in order to 'ensure quality' (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p. 476) within the study. Phenomenology cannot and does not make claims of objectivity (Moustakas, 1994; Shipman 1997) being that it involves measuring reality by perception using 'memory, image and meaning' (Miller and Salkind, 2002, p. 151) it is unquestionably subjective (King, 2014). This study is limited to one context and only eight co-researchers therefore cannot make claims to achieving external validity (Cohen et al., 2011), similarly the benefits of triangulation (Chou, 2013; Velasquez et al., 2013; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013) are limited due to the over dominance of the interview method. However, the decision to select the three-stage interview process over the one lengthy interview has benefited the quality of the study. This allowed co-researchers who initially had not felt comfortable during interview one to become more relaxed by the final interview.

#### **3.9.1 Reflexivity**

In contrast to a positivist view of distancing the researcher (Cohen et al., 2011) I am the main 'instrument of data collection' (Seidman, 2013; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p. 474) with relevant professional and personal life experiences being a necessary element in this methodology. My biases (Cohen et al., 2011) were acknowledged throughout, both in the epoche stage and also in my reflexive journal, which allowed me to consider the impact I may be having on this study (Cohen et al., 2011). Whilst conducting the interviews there were several occasions when the co-researchers past lives resonated with my own reducing my ability to keep a 'degree of detachment' (King, 2014, p. 173).

### **3.9.2 Member checking: textural-structural descriptions**

Hard copies of the interview transcripts and final textural-structural descriptions were given to the co-researchers in order to gain 'participant validation' (Kang, 2012; Mulready-Shick, 2013). This resulted in transcript typos being corrected, as well as clarification regarding some instances of missing data. Whilst I did not receive any feedback that led to the final descriptions of their lived reality being amended, there was one request to remove a specific identifier from the study.

### **3.9.3 Peer checking: analysis**

To increase the 'intersubjective validity' (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p. 480) of my analysis, all of the interview transcripts for Tatiana were given to a work colleague who had received the necessary academic and ethical training to conduct peer checking (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013; Pereira and Gentry, 2013). Her research was situated within the field of psychology, focused on anxiety in UG students and she had previous experience of conducting this analysis process. There was some difference in the presentation of some of the concepts, e.g.:

- 'dedication to learning' V. 'engagement with education'
- 'management of commitments' V. 'responsibilities'
- 'feelings of inadequacy' V. 'self-doubt and low confidence'

Also, some concepts I had not used (e.g. engagement with tutors; managing other perceptions) however there was similarity in most of the concepts (e.g. peer support; sense of belonging). This level of similarity within our two separate analyses was high enough that it did not warrant another participant to be analysed for further quality checking.

### **3.10 Ethics**

Due to amendments from the pilot study, three ethics committee applications were made, with the final agreement to proceed being AREA 14-002 amendment March 2015. The two main ethical considerations for this study included the dual-role of being a practitioner-researcher and collecting data on the personal lived experience, which had the potential to raise issues such as emotional upset during the interview process (Seidman, 2013).

#### **3.10.1 Positionality and coercion**

As a practitioner-researcher I was undertaking 'insider' research (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 89) which presented me with the potential to abuse my position of power (Cohen et al., 2011). In respect of this, during the recruitment phase and taking into consideration that the students could have felt pressured into taking part, I limited my request for participants to two separate emails, (1) the initial call and (2) a follow up reminder sent a few weeks later. During the pre-interview I explained that I was undertaking this study as a student and therefore the research would have no impact at all on my professional role within the SoOE. I also explained their participation was entirely voluntary with any involvement or non-involvement having no impact at all on their academic work. In addition, I clarified their right to withdraw (BERA, 2011) at any stage during the study, up until the data was analysed.

#### **3.10.2 Emotive lived experience data**

The information sheets (appendix C1-C5) were emailed to interested students, as well as being verbally discussed during the pre-interview, to clarify the research purpose, aims and process (BERA, 2011). There was a minimum of two weeks in-between the pre-interview and commencement of data collection to give each student time to consider whether they would consent to take part. As mature and part-time UGs typically have multiple life commitments, I stressed that data collection will aim to be flexible in order to fit around their life commitments. Additionally, in respect of increasing student mental health issues (HEPI, 2015) it was necessary to highlight the potential for emotional upset (Seidman, 2013). I clarified the steps I would take should this occur (BERA, 2011) including stopping interviews in order

to not add to 'mental stress' (Cohen et al., 2011, p.89) and signposting relevant university psychological support. Data collection took place in the later part of the course, due to the first semester typically being the most stressful part of the programme.

During the pre-interview the students were advised they would be asked for a pseudonym (Watson, 2013) this was to avoid researcher bias (e.g. non-representativeness of culture/ social class) (Cohen et al., 2011). In respect of 'contextual data' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 93) including their past life (e.g. being brought up in the care system; having served time in prison), and current intersections of identity and personal circumstances, I could not guarantee complete anonymity. During the interview process and on member checking (see 3.9.2) transcripts I reminded the co-researchers to inform me if there were any personal identifiers or sensitive information they wished to be omitted, amended or presented in a vague manner. This resulted in the removal of a specific identifier and life experience relating to a parent, as well as presenting a SEND related disorder using a non-specific description.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Following from the literature review structure, the following chapter is similarly presented in two main sections. Part one presents the findings from the interviews being the groups lived experiences of difference in not being a traditional UG student. This being discussed in relation to a low academic self-concept manifest in the feeling of self-doubt, as well as having a marginalised identity being a mature and WP UG student. All eight co-researchers had a sense of having two often competing life-worlds, the student life-world and the personal life-world, inhibited as a parent/carer or employee. These feelings of otherness were in respect of this, further impacted by a sense of having to 'juggle' these multiple personal commitments and responsibilities.

Part two then draws from the three methods of interview, OPSC Facebook group as well as the co-researchers diaries. This data provides a partial understanding of social media interactions with peers, being that I only had sight of public posts in the private Facebook group. Whilst the Facebook group was viewed as a shared active social space that enabled the students to feel connected to one another and provided a sense of belonging, even the shared identity of '*being in the same boat*' was still not providing a safe space that all students felt they could share their affective experiences and reach out to their peers. It was interesting to gain insight to the benefit of smaller or one-to-one private Messenger or WhatsApp chats during which, away from the view of the whole cohort, students felt far more comfortable to share their lived reality and was the social space they were more likely to use in order to seek peer support. The following conceptual framework seeks to present a summary of the findings, whilst acknowledging this shared experience is complex, multifaceted with various intersections of identity and past and present life experiences, therefore being limited in its ability to fully represent this.

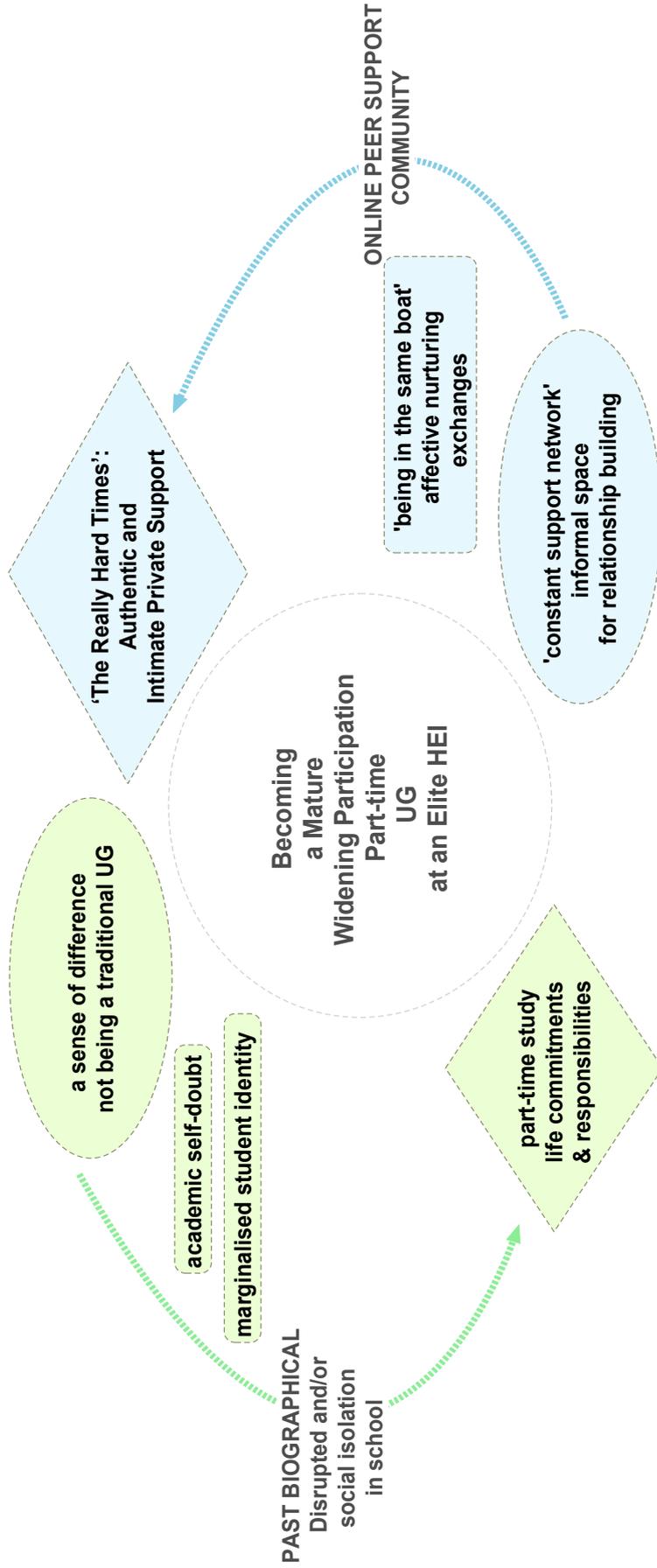


Figure 3 Conceptual Framework with Findings

## **PART ONE:**

### **4.1 Sense of Difference: not being a traditional UG**

The group expressed the shared feeling of difference. This arose from their perceptions of the majority traditional aged UG cohort who attended this elite university. This sense of otherness was expressed during the interviews by the two themes of (1) academic self-doubt (e.g. 'I can't do this') and (2) a marginalised student identity (e.g. 'too old'; not being 'posh') with worries about 'fitting in'. This sense of not being a traditional UG was further impacted by their part-time mode of study, and having to 'juggle' two often conflicting life-worlds, this was also about 'fitting in', however, from the perspective of time-management. These life-experiences will now be presented in turn.

#### **4.1.1 Academic self-doubt**

The 1<sup>st</sup> year of becoming an UG was impacted by a psychological sense of difference, of not feeling able to study at degree level, resulting in feelings of self-doubt that were overwhelming prior and during the initial weeks. During the first session **Claire** had felt 'anxious' and a 'bit insecure', similarly **Jo** had felt 'scared' and for **Tatiana** 'the first hour was very, very scary'. However, this self-doubt persisted, in varying degrees and times, throughout the foundation year, but was most strongly felt during the first half of the academic year and the following Christmas holiday period. Six weeks into the programme and **James** had 'doubts... I was just getting really scared and worried'. **Jim** also had repeated feelings of self-doubt 'I think, more than once I sat down at home and says to my wife 'you know, I'm kidding myself here, I can't do this''. While self-doubt for **Louise** was felt most intensely when speaking in front of her university peers 'I'm not good enough, people are going to laugh if I say the wrong thing. Do I even know what I'm talking about? And all them feelings come rushing to the point where I can feel myself burning up.' These feelings hindered her progress 'I'm thinking that

maybe I'm stupid or I don't know what I'm talking about... the worry is often what blocks me from being able to express it in the right way.' **Louise** felt tormented that she wasn't 'good enough to be here' and described how this 'fear of failing' affected her UG experience.

**Tatiana** recalled 'right at the beginning, it was like, shock after shock after shock, and thinking what, what, what, what? I can't do it, I can't do it... I remember first assignment and thinking 'I've failed, I've failed, I've failed'. This self-doubt left **Tatiana** feeling a sense of not belonging to the academic community 'I kind of doubted myself, but thinking, if I've been accepted... then I must be able to... [during the] first few months after the first assignment I think, I was constantly doubting myself, thinking... surely I'm in the wrong place.. surely.. I shouldn't be here..?' As **Tatiana**, **Sophie** also had a very strong sense of not belonging 'I never, ever in a million years thought I would end up coming to uni' which she thought was for 'really intelligent' people. She talked in her interview about having 'a nervous breakdown at least once a week' questioning 'what the hell am I doing here?' this intensity of feeling was overwhelming at times 'that doubt, like 'I can't do this'... I had a melt down on Tuesday, the washing machine wouldn't work and have this assignment to do and [I'm] sat crying because I've forgotten to post a letter.'

During the first six weeks **James** felt 'a bit lost' and had '...the worry of failure... just was, at the start.. there was a constant worry, there was a bitter battle with my own brain.' Similarly, **Jo's** questioning in her ability to be an UG was holding her back 'for the first few weeks, um, I spent a lot of time worrying if I was fitting in, if I was good enough, rather than getting on with the work and doing my best.'

These inner thoughts created a psychological sense of isolation, described by **Jim** who 'at the beginning of the course I probably felt more that, there's only here me that really hadn't had a proper education.' This was also experienced by **Sophie** and **Tatiana** who also talked about having a sense

of being the only with such strong feelings of self-doubt. In contrast, **Lisa** did not talk at all about having doubts in her academic abilities, although she did still describe her first year as being an 'emotional journey' which was 'really overwhelming to begin with' and 'challenging, definitely'.

#### 4.1.1.1 Attending an elite university

During the interviews six co-researchers highlighted difference relating to the eliteness of the university and the difference in social class of traditional UGs.

**Tatiana** described it as a 'middle class university' and 'I just felt like I don't belong here' feeling 'petrified of the whole experience' thinking 'everybody will be so smart'. While **James** highlighted it as being 'prestigious' which had made him feel 'out of place' comparing it to an 'Educating Rita' moment 'it was almost like being stood in her shoes'. This recognition of its status was also expressed by **Sophie**, who referred to her shock at attending what she referred to as being 'one of the best universities ever'. Similarly, **Louise** had 'amazement that I'd actually come to university, even if it was only to do the [name of level 0 programme] for me, it was huge, really huge.' **Lisa** described the university as 'intimidating' clarifying she was 'really scarred about how big this campus is, like I've still not managed to see all the buildings [laughing]'.

There was also a strong narrative of the UGs being perceived as belonging to a different social class. The traditional UGs were described by both **Sophie** and **Tatiana** as being 'posh', by **Jo** as coming from 'wealthy backgrounds' and by **Lisa** and **Sophie** as 'privileged'. There was an assumption that life was easier for the traditional UGs as **Louise** referred to a benefit of having 'money as having a good life. You know, they won't have had any hard times' and **James** in discussing traditional cohorts who 'may have come from independent schooling' and because of this may be 'a bit

cocky and know everything' feeling that this life experience wouldn't enable them to empathise with others such as himself 'how they perceive the world may be completely different', feeling they might not be aware that 'the world isn't all like that, and its not all rosey'.

#### **4.1.1.2 Primary/ secondary school: disrupted education**

These feelings of self-doubt were rooted in past negative experiences during schooling, typically at secondary school, and for six co-researchers this was in the form of a disrupted education, resulting in disengagement from school. Direct links were made from this past life to their present low academic self-concept.

**Louise** felt 'I'm not good enough' to be at university' due to her past experience 'I haven't done well in education, um, so it was all the confidence, all my confidence was affected.' she described an 'uncertain' and 'chaotic' childhood, with a mother who had mental health issues, being bipolar, having anxiety, paranoia and depression, and because of this was 'in and out of hospital a lot, um, sometimes for three months, sometimes for six weeks'. **Louise** turned to substance abuse in her teenage years using drugs and alcohol, and was involved in criminal activities which included shoplifting, graffiti and committing fraud. She had issues of school attendance and being disengaged with education later left both the family home and school aged of 13.

**Claire** also had a difficult childhood. Both parents had addiction to heroin, and during her teenage years had 'smoked a lot of weed and drunk a lot of alcohol at that age. So that probably didn't help. Um, I spent most of my days shoplifting..... hung around in like big groups of people, gangs, if you want to call it gangs maybe, I don't know. Um, that's probably where I went wrong'. As **Louise**, she also had issues of low school attendance 'I used to go to school, in a taxi, sign in, and go. And then sometimes I'd go back at

dinnertime and sign back in and go again.’ and describes being a challenging pupil ‘never wore a [school] uniform, didn’t do what I was told, didn’t want to do well, didn’t do my homework, so I was always in trouble.’ She was expelled aged 14.

While **Sophie** and **Jim** had both spent time in the care system as children. **Sophie** described how ‘things were really rubbish at home’ with conflict between herself and brother. At school she ‘was always outside the Headmasters office, I was always in trouble’. She truanted from school and aged 14 was ‘getting into trouble, the police used to come on a regular basis’ and ended up being removed from her family and placed into a children’s home for about three and a half months. **Jim** had never received encouragement to progress to university ‘I’ve been told ‘well, that’s not for you’ ‘you’ll never do it’. From the age of four he been brought up in the care system and this disrupted his education as he was ‘never there long enough to get into a school’. **Jim** felt he ‘never really had a positive experience at school’ he feels he didn’t learn anything ‘education wise, it, pretty much zero. I, I can’t ever remember learning ought’. His lack of academic progress was also visibly marked for others to see ‘most weeks, I was put outside in the hallway, I’ve even been made to sit in the hallway with one of them dunce caps on.’

**Jo’s** experience of bullying and not having a sense of belonging had impacted her attendance and academic achievement at school ‘I always kind of skipped school to stay at home, because it felt, it felt comfortable, it felt secure being at home. Whereas, at school, because I didn’t have many friends... it felt quite lonely at times.’ She ‘always had what has happened to me at school kind of in the back of my mind... from where I started university... I was always worried that because I had that lack of confidence that when I started all it would need would for something to not go right and I would, would pull out.’ Whilst **Tatiana** had disruption in her education due to having to change schools aged 15 years old, due to the bullying she had experienced. Although she did not discuss this in terms of academic impact,

she did describe this period as 'I absolutely hated it. My life just completely changed'.

Similarly, **James** was initially concerned that the tutors would 'pigeon-hole me, and just go, 'you're dyslexic, you're stupid' and 'Yer, again, school.. um... [intake of breath] you just walk into a room, once when you've had such a hard, well no, unusual upbringing... I was thinking right, 'I'm here, everyones going to think in four weeks I'm stupid, and everyone else is going to be very smart, and probably over take me' Which, that, that was a huge worry.' He had referred to his past schooling and lack of dyslexia support 'my teachers marked me as slow and a bit stupid' he described how they had put 'me in a room and it was horrendous, to a certain degree, it was called room 38, and it was known as the retard room'.

**Lisa** had experienced a difficult upbringing with the death of her father in her early childhood, resulting in her being a carer for her mother who had schizophrenia and was in and out of hospital, leaving her to live with aunts. In talking about secondary school, she laughed and said 'yer, that's when it fell apart [laughs]' she described her school as 'academically, terrible, terrible school. Or it was a terrible education, like it's a good school now, but um, it was terrible then. And it just didn't engage me at all.' She described feeling the school system let her down 'I used to kind of skive and drink and smoke weed, and do things that I should NOT have been doing but just because we were bored, like, you know, we were the clever kids and they weren't, you know, giving us enough, they weren't challenging us'.

#### **4.1.2 Marginalised student identity**

A sense of otherness came predominately from perceived differences to traditional aged UGs and were expressed in differing ways and intensities. Whilst being a mature UG was the main marker of difference, having the label of WP was another. Less focus, however, was given to the identity of

being a part-time UG, although barriers relating to this mode of study were discussed by all eight students. Individual differences that further added to this sense of otherness arose from having English as a second language, gender (being male) and having an invisible disability.

#### **4.1.2.1 Being a mature UG**

Being a mature UG was the main focus of difference discussed during the interviews. For **Jim** this was experienced during the months prior to starting and also during the initial taught sessions; he was aware of being 'the oldest [student] on the course'. **Sophie** 'just thought I was too old' to go to university and had felt 'a little bit scarred' and concerned 'I would not fit in' with 'these fresh young people'. Similarly, **Louise** explained 'it was the age gap that bothered me' her mind captured images of 'six form leavers, college, young people'. For **Jo** it was 'seeing the rest of the [traditional] UG students, it doesn't feel like I fit in' referring to her 'children', 'partner and 'home'. In contrast, for **Tatiana** a sense of difference arose beyond campus; receiving 'mean' comments from her work colleagues, as a result she 'stopped telling people' she was a mature UG or when she did, she didn't 'say it proudly like I used to'. **Claire** (whilst laughing) was the only participant to present a positive perspective, being older 'makes you feel good about yourself' stating she didn't 'feel out of place'.

#### **4.1.2.2 Being a Widening Participation UG**

Being a WP UG was the next identity marker discussed during the interviews. Of the eight it was **Jo** who appeared to feel most worried '... you see the other [traditional UGs] students walking around, you're thinking, not only what are their opinions of me, but kind of, you feel like a bit of an outsider, like you're intruding on their kind of, their kind of university, their world, so to speak... I know a lot of them are from wealthy backgrounds'. She referred to the 'stigma... about being a WP student you're kind of under

this cloud of being from a lower class, from a disadvantaged background, um, instead of it being positive with yes, you're the first person to go to university it's kind of like, well, no-one else in your family has gone to university.' And felt she had to 'fit in with everybody else'. **Sophie** had been worried she would not 'fit in' due to not being 'posh'. She explained 'uni wasn't encouraged in that way, because nobody from my family ever went to uni. So, I never thought I'd come to uni cause I just didn't think it was the place for me, I didn't think I would fit in, I didn't think I'd be the right class'. However, **Tatiana** had not considered the difference of social class until becoming a student '...I never knew about [name] of university is all middle class, and all posh people'... 'I never thought that they [traditional UGs] would look at me, she is this girl who lives in a council house, she's typical single parent, who lives in a council estate, and its like a shock, is that what they think of me?'... 'I got very depressed [laughing] thinking...'what? Am I out of place?'. **Louise** had felt her difference coming from 'a lower-class background' feeling 'inferior' of traditional UGs she perceived as 'higher class'. **James** described his difference as 'psychological' as not having the 'effective A level' or gaining a university place 'through the normal kind of process' he had 'felt really uncomfortable... like I stuck out like a black sheep, and everyone else was the white flock, which was quite a worry'. **Lisa** was also mindful of not progressing to university in the 'conventional manner', referring to the traditional UGs as having 'privilege'. She was 'hoping I don't encounter any of those people/ professors who feel you know, people from my kind of situation aren't good enough to be here', stating she felt pressure 'to prove that there's a reason that I've been given this opportunity'.

#### 4.1.2.3 Further minority subgroups

Two further sense of difference were raised. Firstly, **Jim** found gender concerned him more than being the eldest in the cohort; he was in a minority as the foundation course was dominated by female UGs, stating it was 'more noticeable that I were one of the very few males'. For **Tatiana** it was being a

student who had English as an additional language, stressing she had been 'absolutely petrified' and felt isolated "am I going to be the only foreign girl? or is there going to be more?" this also raised political tensions "how are people going to look at me? What are they going to think? Are they going to think 'oh, this is just another foreigner, why is she here?' [laughing] you know with everything that's going on at the moment<sup>9</sup>".

#### **4.1.2.4 Primary/ secondary school: social isolation**

The present UG experiences were frequently referred to with reference to past experiences of difference and social isolation in educational settings.

**Jim** had felt 'isolated' at school 'we [Jim and his brother] weren't the best dressed kids' he recalled 'I can't actually name any single person from school that I actually hung around with'. 'Teachers did it by making me sit outside the classroom or at the back of the class. And I suppose other kids did it because you were the scruffy one [low laugh].' Similarly, at secondary school **Sophie** recalled 'there wasn't anybody at school [pause] apart from this one friend that I obviously had, there weren't no teachers that I was close to, there weren't any other people, there was just me and her, it didn't help cause I wore Doc Martins and had a Mohican... don't come near me kind of thing.' With the 'barbie dolls', 'geeks', 'ones that were into sport' or 'night clubbing' she felt 'there wasn't any group that I wanted to fit in'.

**Louise** compared her present UG otherness to '... something that happened years ago, with a similar situation, of not feeling good enough. Um, coming from a you know, a lower-class background, coming from a poorer

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<sup>9</sup> At the time of collecting data the UK was preparing for a referendum being held in June 2016 to leave the European Union, referred to nationally as 'Brexit'.

background'. She recalled being 'very bossy, um, probably very angry without realising it.' and described herself as having been a bully 'it was boys, I bullied boys really bad' and had felt she 'always got left out, I was always pushed out'.

**James** described how hard it had been to walk into the first session at university due to past experiences. Having undiagnosed dyslexia during primary school and at secondary school he experienced more 'stigma' due to having movement disorder in his hands. '...like the lowest person in the pecking order... [the] kids were nasty, really horrible, they ur, called me allsorts, names and, I was very screwed, I had one mate at primary school and that was it, um, and at some points I didn't really like him, he punched me'. Isolating himself 'probably the worse years of my life... petrified of breaks, I'd go and sit in a corner by myself or go and find a classroom and lock the door and sit there behind the wall and eat my sandwiches ... cause kids would literally come up to me and do all sorts of bad stuff, like um, the worse one was I got stabbed with a compass'. He left education during his A levels when his father came out as being transgendered, deepening his sense of difference.

**Tatiana** in her early teenage years, and after the divorce of her parents, had 'moved to a city and I absolutely hated it. My life just completely changed.' She experienced being 'really bullied' due to her accent and labelled 'a villager'. In becoming an UG she felt 'maybe, not bullied you know, but... I don't know, I just... I was just petrified of the whole experience, I just felt like I shouldn't be here, you know.' **Jo** also felt 'very daunted' starting university, due to past feelings of 'not being good enough' she felt a pressure to be 'this kind of person, I need to be able to make friends with people, to fit in, in order to.... to kind of succeed' which meant she was 'trying to please everyone, you're trying to be accepted'. She had been bullied when starting secondary school in the south of England, 'cause I was a Northerner... everyone was making fun of my accent.' This severely impacted her school

attendance. When reunited with old school friends in the North of England she 'didn't belong there anymore' and felt was treated like a 'castoff'.

In contrast **Claire** and **Lisa** didn't describe their experiences of difference in negative terms. **Claire** had been one of 'four or five white children' attending a school which, having a majority of Pakistani heritage pupils, followed Islamic religious holidays 'we didn't celebrate things like Christmas... we didn't go to school when it was Eid'. However, she never 'felt out of place'. Similarly, during her year living in the West Indies **Lisa** had been 'the only English kid in the school' and 'the youngest kid in that year' having been placed in a higher year due to academic ability, however, did not view this sense of difference as having being an issue.

#### **4.1.3 Part-time study: life commitments and responsibilities**

Of the three shared identity markers, only two participants raised a sense of difference in the status of being a part-time UG. For **Sophie** this was briefly represented in talking about the future '...[of being] a fully-fledged student, I'm not just kind of, not part-time any more, I'm full.' While for **Jo**, her sentiment was expressed very strongly stating 'it gets very confusing about who I am, I'm trying to be a mother but then a student at the same time, but it doesn't feel like I'm a real student, cause I'm only in part-time'. She compared being 'only in on two days through the week and like on an evening, you have that feeling of being separate from the rest of the university'.

However, all co-researchers expressed challenges with studying part-time which had an impact on their student experience. **Jim** 'found that time management side of it [was] really difficult to get into' referring to feeling 'pressured' with life commitments. Whilst **Lisa** had felt unprepared 'I didn't think about how much I would have to become a super-organiser'. **James** stressed 'at the start, it was exceptionally difficult', and **Claire** had felt

‘depressed, I cried a lot’. **Jo** expressed this metaphorically ‘with part-time, even though I’m only in two days a week, I’m trying to juggle, life at home with being at university’. Combining an UG life with wider life commitments was also described by **Sophie** ‘I’ve struggled with part-time, fitting everything in’... ‘Its been difficult juggling, it’s the time management’, whilst also highlighting the unpredictability ‘sometimes a bomb goes off, and my life doesn’t go as smoothly, you just have to re-arrange it, try and cope with it the best you can.’ **Louise** referred to ‘struggling’ and the pressure was expressed by **Tatiana** ‘wow, what... I can’t breathe... when do I sleep.. when do I eat?’

A summary table follows of the eight co-researcher caring responsibilities and employment commitments:

	Claire	James	Jim	Jo	Lisa	Louise	Sophie	Tatiana
caring responsibilities children	a teenager		an adult daughter living at home	two in early years		a teenager	four adult children	a teenager (single parent)
grandchildren			a granddaughter living at home				three grandchildren	
parent					full time live in carer for mother	part-time carer for mother		
employment per week	four work commitments	21 hours	37 - 40 hours			18 hours	part-time	part-time

**Table 2 Caring Responsibilities & Employment Commitments**

#### 4.1.3.1 Caring responsibilities

Seven co-researchers had caring responsibilities. **Jo’s** two children were in their Early Years of schooling and described ‘it’s like trying to be two people in one... as soon as I get the car to drive to university, it feels as if I’ve left that life behind and I’m coming to a totally different one’ also highlighting ‘you don’t get the feeling of being a student’. **Jo** felt ‘you don’t feel very connected sometimes, because you’re tired, um or because you’re just drained.’ and her concentration was affected ‘in the back of my mind, yes I’m

worrying about the kids'. This left her feeling 'very guilty, I feel like I, I should be with them [children] interacting with them more.'

**Tatiana** was a single parent to a teenage daughter, as Jo, she expressed her UG experience mainly through the emotion of 'guilt' referring at times as being 'a very bad mother'. She had regret due to her study commitments 'I didn't spend much time with her [daughter], and I felt guilty, you know, I did feel guilty, I said with Sundays, we used to always go shopping, or go cinema, or just chill together' this left her feeling '...like I've lost out on my daughter.' **Claire** also had a teen aged daughter, however, during the interviews did not share any details relating to this.

**Jim** and **Sophie** were both grandparents. **Jim's** daughter and granddaughter lived with him. He had little 'free-time' being '...the time I had to myself, to sit down and watch tv or just have a cup of tea, had gone [laughs].' And felt '...pressure as in, having to get things ready at home, and having to get the tea ready.' **Sophie** talked about the reduced time she had with her family '...the rest of the week I'm mum, I'm nanna, but here I'm a student.' **Louise** had caring commitments for both her daughter (older teen) and mother. She found being on campus helped her distinguish her student identity from home-life 'the minute I cross that road and I come here, its like, 'oh, this is for me, this is all about me... it was more my time, [rather than] family time, cooking tea, washing and ironing and stuff.' **Lisa** was a full-time carer living with her mother, '.. Its like double commitment... yer.. its been challenging, definitely.' As **Louise**, she also found being on campus helped reduce home distractions '... I can't read in the living room because my mum will just be like 'oh, **Lisa**, do you remember that' Um, and I'm like 'ah, did you have to say that, because I was right in the middle of a really hard paragraph'. She found 'just the small distractions that just throw me completely out'.

#### 4.1.3.2 Employment commitments

Apart from **Jo** and **Lisa**, everyone else had employment responsibilities.

**Claire** had four different work commitments and **James** had started the foundation year working full-time, having initially 'assumed that was possible' however, soon found 'it was exceptionally difficult', however, three months into the course reduced this to 'three days a week'. It was around this time that **Sophie** also decided to stop volunteering having found 'Its been difficult juggling, it's the time management... I stopped doing the volunteering... cause I was worn out Christmas... I'm glad I made that decision.' **Jim** was working full-time 'between 37 and 40 hours a week.' and having dyslexia he 'struggled with time management.' This affected him being able to meet with peers 'not cause I didn't want to, just mainly because of my work commitments.' **Tatiana** had chosen part-time work in catering which enabled her to have a better mental focus on her study 'when I come home, I can, my mind is free. So I can read, I can focus and I can remember. Rather than, you know, coming from an office work and just like 'uugghh'.' Similarly, **Louise** felt her 18 hours a week of one-to-one care work was 'quite flexible and quite easy'.

## **PART TWO:**

### **4.2 Online peer support community**

The co-researchers, as a group, were using several different social media platforms in their personal life (see Appendix D) being Facebook, Google +, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube. However, when using social media for connecting with their university peers the diary entries and interview data had reference to just two of these, being Facebook (including Facebook Messenger) and WhatsApp.

#### **4.2.1 'Constant support network': informal space for relationship building**

The following table shows the co-researchers self-reported activity levels of using social media and compares this with their visible Facebook group activities of:

- (1) Number of posts in the group
- (2) Number of comments posted in response to peer content.
- (3) Number of 'like' button response.

activity levels						
general social media use				observation		
co-researcher	activity level*	connecting with uni peers	preference	posted in group	commented on a group post	liked posts
Lisa	3	once a month	reading content	1	3	42
Jim	3	once a week	reading content	0	0	0
Tatiana	3	every day	reading content	0	15	150
Sophie	4	every day	reading content	15	16	39
James	5	once a week	(not stated)	8	28	48
Louise	6	every day	actively write	12	49	115
Jo	7	every day	actively write	7	26	30
Claire	8	every day	actively write	1	11	61

\* low activity (prefer to read) = 1. to high activity (writing posts/ responses) = 10.

**Table 3 OPSC Activity Levels**

#### 4.2.1.1. Facebook group as active social space

Five co-researchers had self-reported their ‘general social media use’ as being daily, **James** and **Jim** once a week and **Lisa** once a month. However, the Facebook observations and interview data did not confirm this, meaning the co-researchers had typically underestimated their actual usage. **James** had higher activity levels over all the three observation categories (post - 8, comment - 28 and like - 48) when compared to Jo who had reported connecting with peers ‘daily’ (post - 7, comment - 26, like - 30). Also, **Lisa** who had initially had reservations about joining the Facebook group ‘.. and then for that first couple of weeks there was a lot going on in the group and I was like, ‘oh cool’, she felt the online space was very active ‘we’re just like talking all the time’, thus also not reflecting her self-reported activity level of once a month. During the interviews **James** had described how his use of

social media had changed during the year, initially he 'didn't use' it to connect with peers, however, halfway through was doing so 'regularly'.

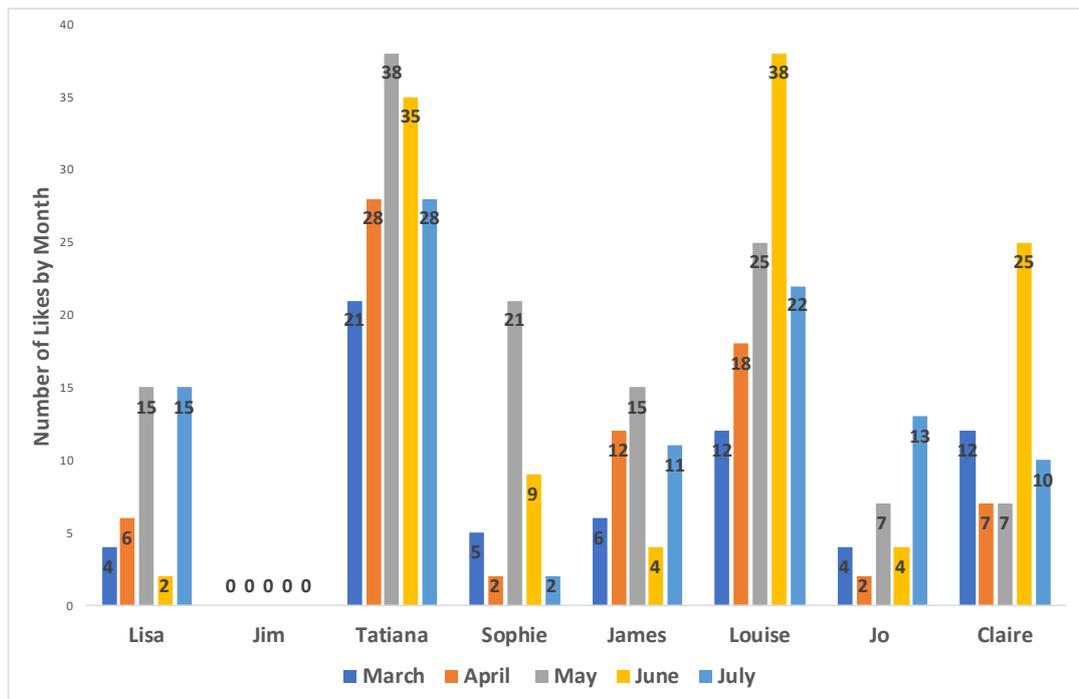
The Facebook group was seen as being a 'very active' social space with members logging in regularly, such as **Claire** 'we do all speak, probably on a daily basis because of Facebook. Although some students on the course had not joined the Facebook group, the majority had and it was viewed as an ongoing active social space '...you can join in the conversation or somebody's asking a question or, wants to meet up, some of us can and some of us can't, but there's always, everybody's included in it.' **Jo** highlighted the affordance Facebook has for communicating with a cohort of students 'We tend to really socialise through Facebook, and kind of, I suppose its an easier way to get in touch with many people at once'.

The response time from the group was 'quick' (**Claire**), in some cases 'if its like a reasonable hour you normally get a response back within half an hour' (**Sophie**). **James** found the Facebook group to be a 'massive benefit' due to the 'constant support network' as 'most people will reply less than 24 hours, some people are pretty instant... there's always somebody on Facebook, out of the 30 friends that you're at university with, who will respond to you.' As explained by **Sophie**, this support was also available at all times of the day, beyond university office hours '...because there's nobody [university staff] to get in touch with at eight or nine o'clock at night when you're thinking 'oh my god, I can't do this... you send a message at one o'clock in the morning saying 'I'm having a melt-down, I can't do this' then there'll be message there the next day.' **Sophie** highlighted the importance of this when being a part-time UG 'some of us, you know, that's the only connection we've got with them, outside the university'. This was evident for **Jo**, who was the only co-researcher who had talked about feeling isolated due to her distance from campus, the Facebook group made her feel 'as if you are connected to the university' '... because a lot of my studying is done at home I know if I went on to Facebook and had a problem, or if there was an event coming up or just general anything I was able to go on to that page and have

a look through, um, and it would just give me the information I need. Whereas if it wasn't there, suppose I'd feel more isolated.'

#### 4.2.1.2 'Like' activity levels

The main Facebook functionality used by all seven co-researchers to show their presence in the OPSC was the 'like' button. During the five months of observation there were 485 'likes' from the eight co-researchers, this was three times more than the 148 'commented on a group post' and eleven times more than the contribution of 44 'posted in group'.



**Table 4 OPSC 'Like' Use**

Of the eight co-researchers **Tatiana** had contributed the most amount of 'likes' being 150. The 'like' functionality is a tool which enables members to show their presence in responding to content and this action suggests the person has read the content. While 'likes' cannot be used to accurately measure if the content has actually been read or the amount of time a member spends reading the online content, it can give a partial

understanding of which content is viewed as being more relevant or of interest to that individual.

To triangulate the interview and Facebook observation activity data, the co-researcher diary had been intended to give an additional record of activity levels, however, **Tatiana** was the only co-researcher who had kept a regular pattern of her recorded behavior in using social media. Her diary had self-reports of 1,100 minutes (18.5 hours) of social media use during the five month period, being an average of 55 minutes per week.

**Lisa** had 'liked' 42 Facebook posts which, when compared to **Sophie's** 39 and **Jo's** 30 (both of whom reported using social media on a daily basis), suggests her connectivity with peers was greater than she her self-report of connecting with peers once a month, and having a low activity level of 3/10 (see table 2). Additionally, during the interviews **Lisa** had described using social media 'all the time'. **Jim** who was 'not a big user of social media' admitted he would 'go on Facebook every day, and I check it every day.' However, the members of the Facebook group would assume he was not an active member, having no visible presence during the five-month period (see table 3); unlike his peers he was not visibly 'liking' the content. But working full-time **James** found viewing the content to be a benefit 'people tend to use it [Facebook group] to inform each other what's going on, that, that kept me informed, even though I didn't respond'.

#### 4.2.1.3 'Commented' activity levels<sup>10</sup>

All seven co-researchers also shared having 'commented' on a Facebook post as their next preferred method of engagement. **Louise** had the highest number of such interactions with 49 replies.

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendices L.1 to N.3 for content examples.

#### 4.2.1.4 'Posted' activity levels

Writing a new post in the Facebook group was the least preferred activity of the seven active members<sup>11</sup>. Of the 44 group total posts **Sophie** and **Louise** had contributed 27 of these. While **Sophie** had self-reported a preference for reading content, she had contributed 15 new posts during the five months, being the highest number of the eight co-researchers. In contrast, **Claire** and **Lisa** had both posted once, while **Jim** and **Tatiana** had never posted in the Facebook group.

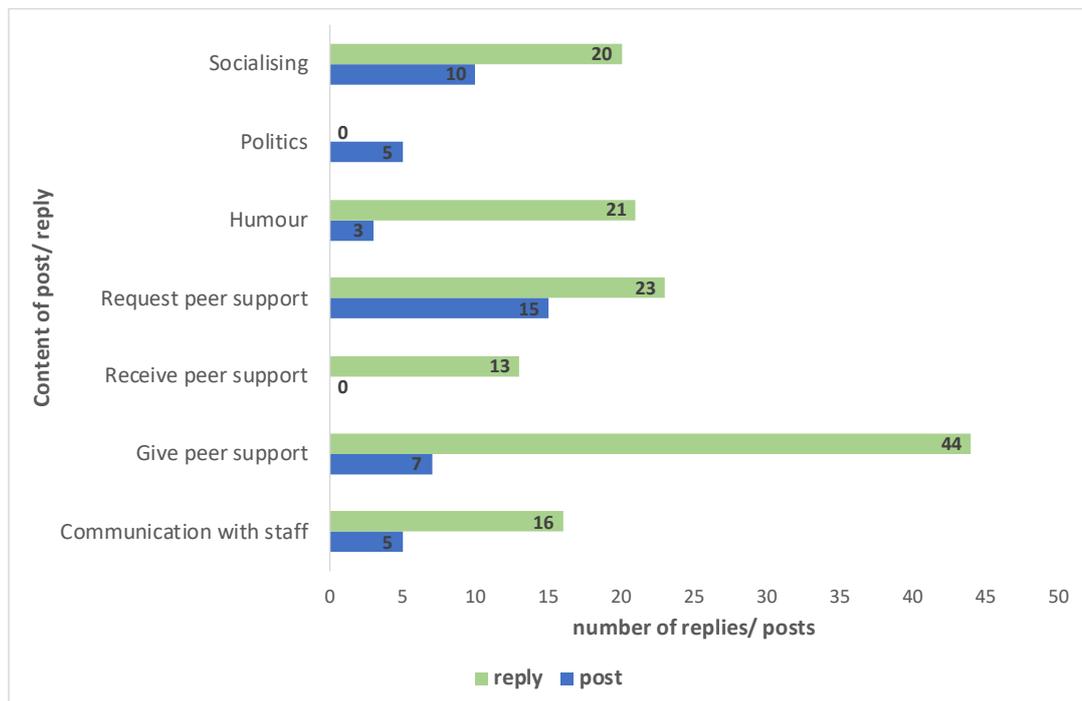
#### 4.2.1.5 Private informal social space

The eight co-researchers used Facebook in their personal lives, however, appreciated the OSPC settings as private and as such being out of sight from friends and family. **Jo** explained how this space was 'separate from home life' and hidden from her friends '...the fact that it is a closed group, so I've got my own page, where just my friends can contact me and that, but then I've also got this other part, where my friends can't see and it is just literally for me and the university, um, which I prefer really cause, with that I can be myself'. This privacy from their personal life gave a space to express their feelings 'it just feels reassuring in a way that you know, you don't feel like you're moaning when you go onto the closed group, you feel like you're just expressing how you're feeling, because somebody else will acknowledge it and say 'well yer, that's exactly what I'm thinking'...where if you're having a really bad day, and you go to the closed group and say 'I don't think I can do it' you're going to have a lot of people comment and say 'you know you can' and spurring you on.' (**Jo**). Similarly, **Sophie** also appreciated her non-university friends not being able to see the content 'the best thing about it is the [course Facebook group] it's a private group... that's just for us' this allowed her to feel comfortable writing online 'It doesn't

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<sup>11</sup> Jim had no observable Facebook activity during the five months.

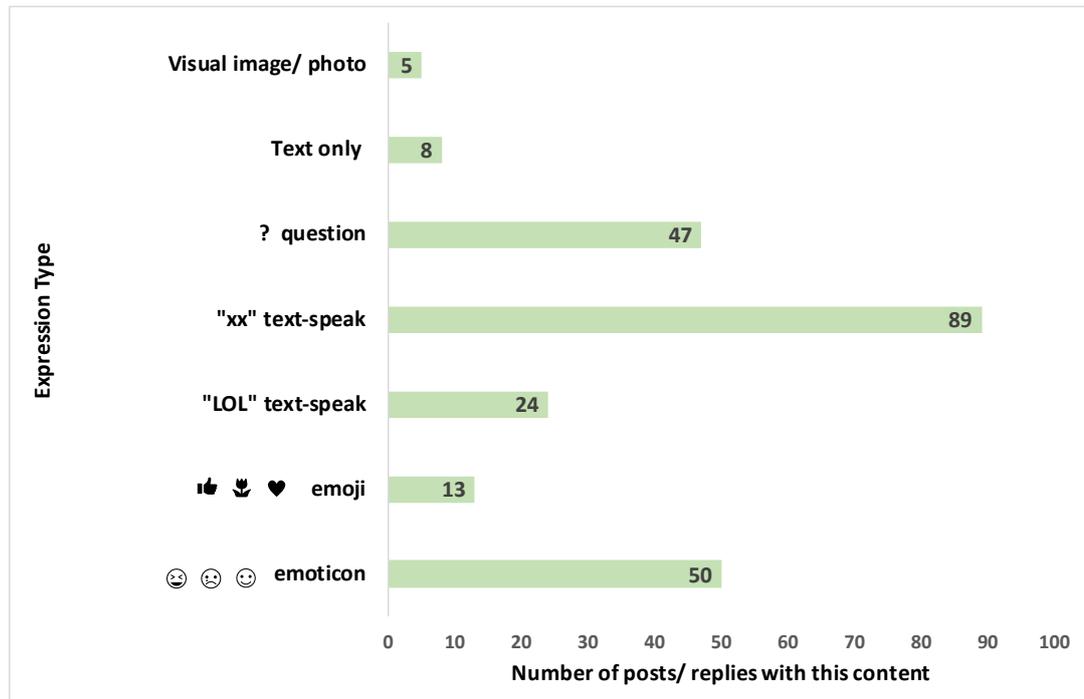
matter what question you ask, nobody comes up with a sarcastic remark, whereas I know.. everybody that I'm attached to outside uni they would be like 'what you putting that for?' 'oh you think you're clever now'. There'd be comments.' She felt her contacts beyond uni 'would make me feel stupid, whereas my peers in uni, they don't.' **Lisa** described the 'very nurturing, supportive atmosphere' as '...just being in the bubble' adding '...bubbles are comfortable'. Table 5 provides a summary of the content shared in the OSPC:



**Table 5 OPSC Posts and Replies**

The predominate content during the five months with 102 posts and replies requests from the seven active co-researchers was peer support (examples see Appendices L.1 – 3). This was also the strongest theme from both the interviews and diaries. This 'constant support network' was a space that was viewed as being suited for affective content, members posted for 'help', if they were 'struggling' with their university work. This peer support was seen as 'extra support' that was encouraging, made people feel 'safer' and 'cared for'. There were questions about the coursework as well as practical queries in terms of room locations. There was reference to students who had considered dropping out of the course, due to having a 'bad time'. However,

having ‘twenty’ or so peers providing support was viewed as being very beneficial, with a narrative of this peer support having stopped people who had contemplated leaving (see p.118).



**Table 6 OPSC Expression**

During the interviews the Facebook group was described as ‘an informal space’ ... ‘its just kind of um, a conversation continuing really’. It was noted for having elements of humour as ‘there’ll be jokes and what-not, and everyone’s just having a laugh as well as [sharing] the facts.’ There were 24 posts and replies that evidenced humour (e.g. Appendix L.2.2).

Only 3% of the posts and replies had content that was text only, as **Louise** explained ‘if they don’t put a kiss or a smiley face they are being rude or you know, off a little bit’ and this was reflected in the group content. During the five months of observation in the OPSC 48% (table 4) of the posts and replies contained the use of text-speak, being either a kiss (38%) and were typically expressed by using one ‘x’ or two ‘xx’, however there were comments and replies with several, being more expressive ‘xxxxxxx’. 10% of posts had added ‘LOL’ meaning ‘lots of laughs’. In addition to this text-speak, there was also visual content in 29% of the posts and replies. Of this

21% had incorporated emoticons (see table 4), 6% emojis (see table 4) and 2% a visual image or photography and a fifth of the posts and replies were questions.

The group was also used for 'informal information chit chat, like um... arranging to go out... socialising and stuff like that... its more of a development of social group' (**James**). There were 10 posts and 20 peer responses of social activities content (see Appendix L.3.1). These were for finding someone to study with as well as meeting for non-academic social purposes.

The seven active members contributed to the 21 posts and responses which directly referred to a staff member. This was predominately two students being **Tatiana** with seven and **James** with eight comments including 'speaking' directly to a particular staff member. (LR – impact of tutor presence).

#### **4.2.1.6 Facebook group for relationship building**

During the interviews there was recognition of how the Facebook group discussions and content supported face-to-face interactions '...I've seen them today some of them. Um... part of our conversation has been about what we've seen on Facebook'. This reduced feelings of not belonging 'When you walk in that door you don't feel a stranger to the rest of them, because you have had connect through the week, um it can bring up things where they can say 'oh I've seen you've had alike a weekend away or' you've done this' and it has that, you have that feeling of social with them, socialising with them, without necessarily constantly being with them all the time'.

**Lisa**, despite being Facebook averse, appreciated the affordances of being 'able to talk to everyone, being able to interact, to get to know everyone' she felt the Facebook group had been a benefit 'because of the amount that everyone shares in the group, and how much is impacted my year.'. The group content was predominately academic focused, however, the other content did help each other to feel an increased sense of socialisation 'yer we're talking about work and uni and then we'll have a little joke, and we're getting to know each other' (**Lisa**). This connectivity with one another helped to foster relationship building 'it's a way for me to kind of maintain some kind of relationship, with them, and you know, build whatever friendships I have, you know build on them.' In particular for **Louise** this enabled her to gain confidence connecting with peers 'I think the Facebook group helps because that helps me to talk to people that I might not feel confident in talking to face-to-face.', also helping her to 'get to know them [peers] a little bit better.'

This connection facilitated a sense of closeness within the group '... these little chats, or, you know, every little, you know you liking somebody's pictures you say.. and, you know, keep, then you chat up a little bit.. brings you closer, definitely. Oh, without Facebook we wouldn't be half as close as we are' (**Tatiana**). And group cohesion 'I can't exaggerate how much of a close group that we did become' 'the support network that we've got, with each other, the groups itself, its been fantastic.' (**Sophie**). Facilitated by the ease of using the platform 'I think we've bonded really well, because its easy to talk to each other on Facebook'. (**Sophie**). This closeness with one another felt like 'We've got our own little family going.'

During the interviews the co-researchers explained how the Facebook space made them feel 'part of a group'. It allowed them to be informed of university activities, as **Jo** explained '...to realise certain events that are going on within the university' made her feel 'part of the university'. This was seen to be an effective way of keeping updated '... like a little community really, because there's that much going on, and then you see it there on Facebook ... So there's that side of it, yer, I think it definitely needs it, I think its really good to

have.’ (**Louise**). It gave a sense of participation ‘... whereas at least on Facebook if somebody says ‘oh, we’re meeting up, at least you can comment and say ‘I can’t today’ for some reason, it still feels like you’ve been a part of it.’ (Jo). Similarly this mere sense of being part was also a benefit for **Jim** who had no visible activity ‘... I just mainly looked at what people were doing on Facebook, and kept a check on how things were going on there, rather than actually going to meet people face-to-face.’ But he didn’t ‘feel like I’m left out of the loop. Because I’m part of that group on Facebook, when people are talking or making arrangements or a night out or something.. I’m, on Facebook I’m invited so, I still feel part of that group, on Facebook, as if I’m sat in a room with them.’ He still experienced a sense of belonging to the group ‘It made me feel like I were part of it, even though I never replied.’ Reducing his sense of isolation ‘... I don’t feel I’m by myself, I feel there is a connection, there is that communication.’

Of the eight **Jo** was the one who was most geographically distant to campus taking 40 minutes to travel there ‘..its very beneficial cause it just, you do feel from one week to the next that you’re very much alone, especially because I live so far out of [north of England city], I can’t just meet up with people.’ The Facebook reduced a sense of isolation ‘... Well, with being part-time at the moment and not feeling as if I get to come to university a lot, at least with having the Facebook page there I’m being able to connect with other peers with Facebook you still feel as if you are connected to the university... Whereas if it wasn’t there, suppose I’d feel more isolated.’ (**Jo**). Similarly, **Jim** who was working full-time also felt a reduced sense of isolation ‘...whereas with Facebook, I don’t feel I’m by myself, I feel there is a connection, there is that communication.’ this resulted in him acknowledging ‘... I don’t feel isolated’. This connectivity was especially noted for being a benefit during the holiday periods ‘its keeping that connection, especially when you know, Easter holidays.’ (**Sophie**).

#### 4.2.2 'Being in the same boat': affective nurturing exchanges

All eight co-researchers appreciated the benefit of commonality which arose from having shared life experiences, this included past life and coming from 'similar backgrounds' with a sense of being 'all quite similar' due to there being 'no social class divide [as peers are] from similar backgrounds, or from harder' (**Sophie**), however the main focus was on the current 1<sup>st</sup> year and having similar experiences. **The idiom 'being in the same boat'** was referred to several times during the interviews, this enabled **James** to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences with his peers '...they told me, oh they're struggling and I said 'oh, I'm in the same boat' um, which kind of created a flow of conversation' The shared experience reduced feelings of anxiety 'they were going through similar feelings, and, at the same stage as well, it wasn't like you were just there, by yourself panicking, you know ...so, you felt a little bit more, at ease, knowing that. You feel a bit reassured' (**Louise**).

**Sophie** highlighted how this reduced a sense of psychological isolation '...It keeps you going, because, it keeps you positive, to know that there's always somebody there, and that I know this sounds really awful but you know that they're feeling the same as well.... its just nice knowing that there's somebody else in the same boat, as you.' She drew from a recent example '...that doubt, like 'I can't do this'... but when its from your peers, because that I know that they're feeling exactly same. I had a melt down on Tuesday, the washing machine wouldn't work and have this assignment to do and its like, yer you do get it, sat crying because I've forgotten to post a letter.... when I got speaking to other people, in the group, everybody felt exactly the same.' Similarly, **Jim** was able to recognise others had felt 'nervous' and had also been out of education for a long time 'you're not by yourself... that kind of helps because they're having the same issues really.'

**Tatiana** found being 'in the same boat' motivating '...so we're kind of supporting each other, and when you support one another, and when you

kind of push somebody else, you feel like you are pushing yourself... if you can do this and that, I will follow you, I will do it as well.' She stressed the impact this shared experience had on her during December, outside the taught semester, which she referred to as the 'struggling part' when she started to lose her confidence '...I was having doubts, can I do this?'. She saw on Facebook a peer was feeling the same 'I don't know if I can do this and I'm doubting myself', following this they had this conversation and straight way I felt comfort like oh my goodness I'm not the only one that's struggling, I'm not the only one that's having doubts, so, you know, I think that's the point where you kind of, make or break.' This brought a sense of normality for her, and stopped her feeling like a 'failure'. **Tatiana** stressed the 'massive impact' this had 'thinking we're not on our own' It was a life saviour.'

**Claire** did not post publically about her struggles, however, she had 'seen other students when they've been down, have put statuses on where they've not felt happy or they've felt stressed with uni. Or they've felt depressed and I've had people comment on it, 'oh you'll be fine, you're doing great, everything's good' um.. ' As **Jo** highlighted, the group notifications enabled peers to be alerted, while if it was shared beyond this on Facebook 'its something that you could easily just pass by'.

The commonality of the shared experience enabled peers to be able to greater empathise with one another 'you do need that extra support and most of the support that you do get is from your peers, because we're all feeling the same. I'm thinking I'm not the only, its just that, its just that extra.' (**Sophie**). Jo felt her friends beyond university would not empathise in the same way '... people [peers] understand what you're going through, whereas sometimes when they comment on your personal Facebook page, it can feel patronising sometimes, 'oh I know, we all had them days' whereas, on the university group they kind of, they sympathise with you'. **Lisa** referred to this closeness and group bonding as 'that kind of camaraderie between us, as a unit, supporting each other'. This sentiment of

group commitment was echoed by **Sophie** 'we've come so, we've come a long way, all of us. And we'll have had our challenges, but we're still here, we always say, we all want each other to do so well'.

**Louise** didn't actively seek support, however, appreciated knowing it was there '.. ultimately I know somebody will want to help on that page. If I said, 'guys this is what I'm struggling with' I can't believe for one minute everybody on that page would ignore me and not kind of try and help me in same way or another.' This peer support made her feel 'bit more, I suppose cared for and a little bit safer'. Knowing there were peers 'if you need to talk' or 'need that bit of advice' provided 'an extra support' and 'encouragement' (**Jo**). Although **Lisa** did not feel comfortable sharing herself, she felt the group was 'really supportive' and was active in supporting her peers '...I'm not one to pry if its just to ask something personal, I think if its something to do with uni I might feel like, 'oh what is it, what's stressing you out? Can I help?' I'd try and see if there's anything I can help with, if I've got an understanding of it, I'll try and help'.

There was a feeling that this peer support beyond taught sessions had a positive impact in terms of stopping people from giving up and leaving the course 'I think a lot of people would have dropped out if we didn't have Facebook (**Tatiana**), **Lisa** felt this was more visible early on in the programme 'at the beginning they [peers] kind of posted about how stressed they were, how they weren't able to kind of manage their home-life and being there and you know contemplating leaving and whatnot, and we'd all try and you know talk to them and say you know whatever, whatever decision you make is fine, but we're here if you need us'.

**Sophie** felt this really was an important factor for her remaining on the programme 'I don't think, if that support wasn't there, and that group of people weren't there, I don't I would have done this year.' She referred to the influence of multiple peers 'having a really bad time, and are thinking of giving up, you know they've got twenty people messaging you, or her, saying

please don't go, you've come so far... Its people who understand what you're going through.'

#### **4.2.3 'The really hard times': authentic & intimate private support**

The public posts that focused on 'struggling' often moved from the Facebook group to online private spaces within Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp '...or private message you and just, give you a bit of cheering up' (**Jo**).

**Jo's** diary entries were nearly all focused on her public contributions (referring to 'main page'), in comparison to **Tatiana** who of the 53 diary entries, 35 were describing her contact using private exchanges via instant messaging of which the majority were with 'one peer' while four were in a 'student group' and '3 peers'. While five of **Louise's** eight diary entries were focused solely on WhatsApp, which during the interviews she explained this had four peers in who she viewed as being 'quite similar to me... similar backgrounds'. Similarly, **Claire** talked during the interview about the WhatsApp group she was in with five peers and this was her preferred method of communication 'we spoke all day, every day, on WhatsApp' which felt 'like a little family'. **Lisa's** diary recorded her interactions with 'a peer', '3 others', a group on Facebook with two other students' and a Facebook group with 'most of our peers'.

**Claire, James, Lisa** and **Louise** all highlighted the difference of public and private spaces for online peer support, there was very much a sense of not wanting others to know 'my business' (**James**). **Claire** was very mindful about her online public identity '... you're on there to socialise and connect... anyone who doesn't know you, or knows you but doesn't actually know you, then that's you isn't it, so.. that's your life, your pictures, what you do, how you feel. How you express yourself. So, I guess like an artist right? You've got an artist that does colourful pictures, happy or ones that's got black pictures.' She was conscious about not posting negative experiences in the

Facebook group 'Well I prefer happiness rather than negative so I'd rather look at something that made you happy than something that didn't.' She struggled to empathise with others who did not share this perspective '... if I see somebody else posting negative things... I think 'what's wrong with you?' linking this to self-control '.. ones have got more self-control than the other ones, um, you know, you're moaning narky ones, the ones that rampantly post too much stuff'. In contrast to others in her group, **Claire** felt she 'wouldn't post a status saying 'oh I feel so sad today' or 'this happened' or 'that's happened' or anything, I wouldn't let anybody know anything had happened, no' deciding to present an image of positivity 'I'm always happy on my page'.. keeping her actual feelings hidden 'Yer, even if I was suicidal, and depressed in bed, no-one would know'. Similarly, **Lisa** also did not share her real feelings in the public Facebook group 'the way I am online is just totally different to how I am in real life, because in real life I'm open, I don't really hide anything, if you want to ask me a question about anything I'll answer it, and you know I make no bones about it, so, just like... two opposites, but online I just don't want to be that person' she explained 'I don't put myself out there to be supported' choosing to not share her feelings online with her peers 'I'm just not comfortable by putting it online. So, I wouldn't be like, 'oh woe is me'.... 'I'm stressed out'. Like I just wouldn't put that there' being aware of how the response this could have 'for me to put a status on that I'm stressed, that's.... and it begs questions then doesn't it, as well, like it begs 'are you alright then, whats wrong? Shall I message you?'

There was more direct and regular contact with each other in the private spaces as **Claire** explained in her WhatsApp group 'we all do message like every day. So its always a morning and a goodnight, and anything that's happening, that we all. Every day there's contact on there.' **Louise** also talked about getting her 'reassurance and support' from the WhatsApp group where they 'spoke daily'... 'if I was like with the panic and the struggle and stuff. I don't think I often put, the negatives, you know the really hard times on Facebook....' In this smaller private space they felt they could share their struggles more openly '...one of us would always come and say 'right, listen, we're here for this reason, we've made it this far, if we get into the new year,

there's only so many months left'. So, it was just supporting each other'. The support in WhatsApp was more intimate than the public Facebook group 'three of us kind of [saying] 'you can' and 'we love you and we care for you' you know, [in response to] one member of the group kind of saying 'I've had enough, I don't want to come anymore' (**Louise**). **Claire** who had presented her experience as being the most positive of the eight also talked about the importance of her WhatsApp group did not discuss her 'Yer, we've all supported each other I think, maybe if, and it wouldn't have been as [unclear audio]... we might not have all made it, maybe to the end of the first year [foundation course]'

**James** also felt more comfortable admitting his challenges away from the public Facebook group, preferring to use the private chat functionality, using this form of 1:1 communication he felt he could 'almost um, blossom[ed] a little bit more, in the sense of my conversation' he felt more at ease to 'show more weakness, and get help from other people'. He explained he had been able to share his past life 'tell [one peer] about school and stuff like that and how it affected me. Um... don't want everyone knowing my business.' Explaining 'talking with someone one-to-one you can get a tad bit more personal'.

Contributions to effectively receiving or providing peer support via social media were also impacted by being able to, or, having the confidence to contribute for **Jim**, **Tatiana** and **Sophie**. This was predominately due to writing in public which led to some 'lurking' but was also impacted by access to technology. **Jim** was the only co-researcher who had not connected with another student by social media, but did read the public contributions in the Facebook group. His reduced interaction with peers was partly due to confidence with using social media '..my lack of knowledge really. And, confidence with it. Rather than not wanting to reply.' Although he did have encouragement and support at home 'I didn't know at the time, when you press on the name, that a little box comes up for a private conversation. And the couple of replies that I have put, I've had to ask my daughter how to

send them.’ During his first year **Jim** was diagnosed with having dyspraxia and dyslexia. He felt this also added to his lack of confidence using social media ‘...its just that barrier of replying on Facebook.’ He did have the motivation to respond ‘I want to write something, I look and I, like somebody put something on the other week, I think it was [name of student] that and I’d gone through this whole scenario in my head, of what to reply to that’ however, unlike talking on campus, he ‘sat down at the computer, and just couldn’t write it.’ This ‘struggle to feel confident about writing something’ made him feel ‘embarrassed’. He was aware of the permanence of this form of online text communication ‘if I say anything wrong, you can say, ‘oh, I didn’t mean that’ or apologise for it... Whereas once you’ve put something in writing, its there, you can’t change it.’ He felt more comfortable talking to peers face-to-face ‘if you’re talking to somebody, sometimes you can get mixed up with what you want to say, then you can clarify, whereas when its in writing, its another matter’.

Although she did contribute, **Tatiana** was not an active user of social media, referring to herself as ‘a browser’ and a ‘liker’ explaining ‘I don’t post there myself much, I don’t have the confidence like.’... ‘I’m always the one just to read.. ‘ She recalled ‘at the beginning the main thing why I never really posted anything, or asked questions, on the actual [group Facebook page] was cause I’m thinking, my spelling will be wrong and people will think ‘oh my god, look she can’t spell, how can she be on this course?’ So I always had this at the back of my mind, the confidence thing, because of English not being my first language... and no matter how much people will say, ‘oh your English is so good’ its something personal. You know? Something, yer... and also with the immigration, so much talk lately and things are changing and just like this perception of us.. ‘ This last point reflecting the additional impact of the political climate.

At the time of the interviews **Sophie** did not have a smart phone ‘I don’t do Twitter, or ought. I ain’t got a phone that does all that. Whatsapp. And all those different applications.’ As **Jim**, **Sophie** also felt she ‘didn’t know

anything about technology... I'm still learning about technology side of it, and I did look to do an IT workshop but... because of um, volunteering work and training and uni, I couldn't fit it in'. In addition, she did not have internet access at home, this meant at times she had to use her local 'community centre where I live, they're free, you just make a donation.'

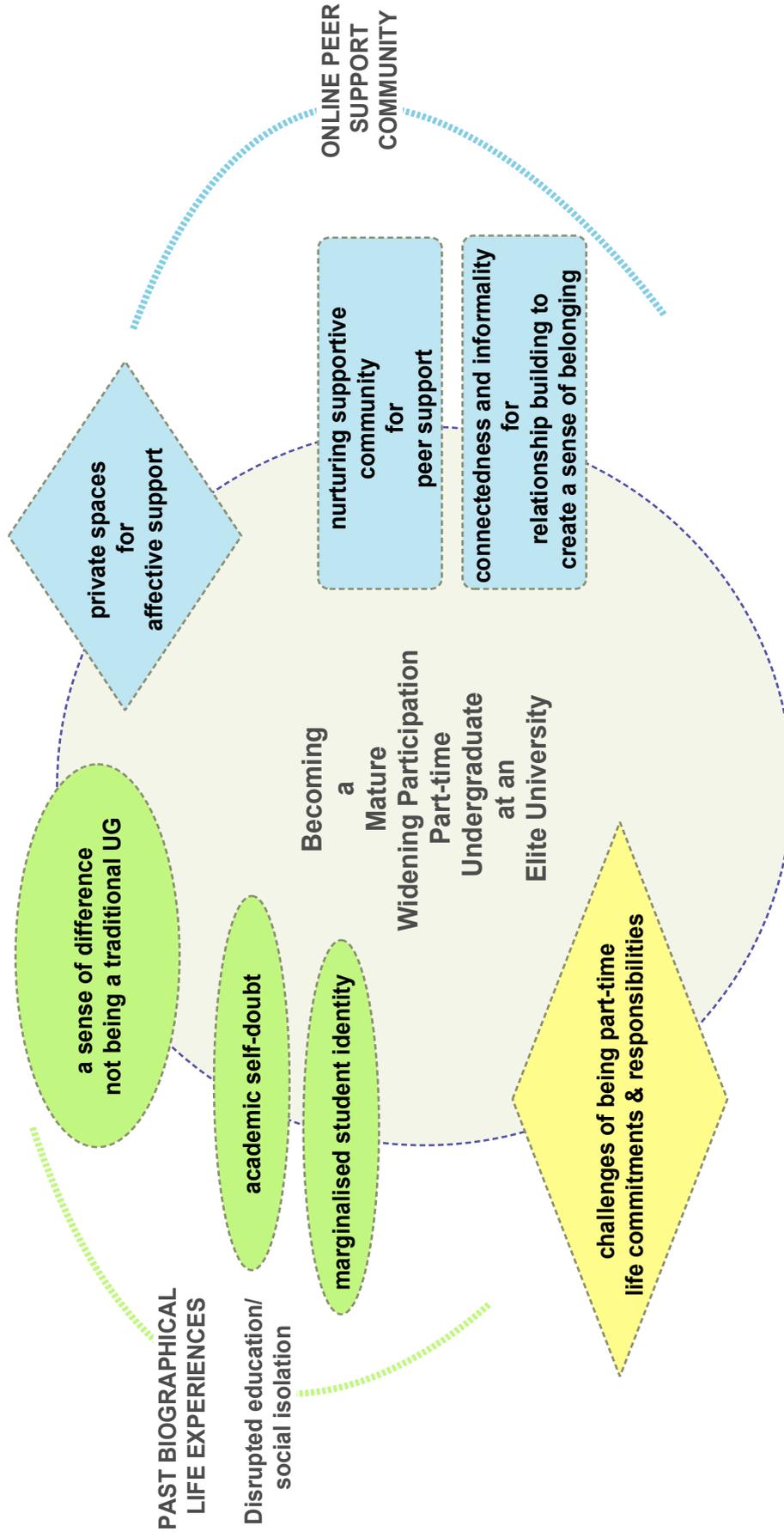


Figure 4 Final Conceptual Framework of the Study

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Becoming a mature WP part-time UG is an emotive transition and one that is influenced by institutional culture. The findings of this study have evidenced how this student experience, when situated in an elite university, can further intensify psychological feelings of academic self-doubt and lead to a marginalised positionality of difference, due to not being a traditional UG. These psychological barriers are then further impacted by the challenges of studying part-time and having to 'juggle' multiple life commitments and responsibilities, bringing in additional intersections of identities and can lead to feelings of stress and anxiety. This is important being that the affective has less dominance in the literature, but will fundamentally impact the cognitive and as such is just as necessary to consider. In addition, the findings have also evidenced that this present lived experience is impacted by biographical past life, in the context of this study being a past disrupted education and social isolation amongst school peers. This is important to highlight as past biographical experiences are not always considered in similar studies of marginalised students.

In this study the OPSC was comprised of two main areas, being the 'public' and private. Both are evidenced as having been necessary and effective elements, with the public social spaces, via the connectedness of social media and informality of community atmosphere, helping to facilitate relationship building. An unanticipated and significant finding is the extent this Facebook group was able to provide a sense of belonging, even for students whose participation within this was limited to reading.

The Facebook group membership and activity within gave a sense of group cohesion and commonality. The empathetic content revealed this was viewed as a safe nurturing space which allowed some members to actively seek peer support. However, an important finding of this study was the impact of audience and resulting performative discourse, resulting in partial

overly positive group reality. It was through the additional interview data that the hidden private Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp peer interactions were evidencing authentic exchanges of an affective nature, sharing their more intimate realities of becoming an UG away from the cohort and staff gaze.

This discussion chapter will now present these findings to address each of the three research questions and situation them within the wider literature. It will also highlight the limitations and implications for research and practice.

## **5.1 What feelings are expressed relating to the challenges faced during the first year transition to becoming a mature Widening Participation part-time undergraduate?**

### **5.1.1 Sense of difference - not being a traditional UG**

Difference by identity was very much at the heart of this student transition of becoming a mature WP part-time UG and psychologically manifest itself in two ways. Firstly, as Tinto (1988) identified, this transition of becoming was an '*emotional journey*', with strong feelings of academic self-doubt, ruminations of self-questioning '*can I do this?*' which was compounded by worries of '*I don't belong here*', due to perceptions of being surrounded by more intelligent and affluent traditional UGs. This sense of difference was then further intensified by having a marginalised student positionality, formed by perceiving the self as different to the wider elite university student body. Supporting the work of Tinto (1988), negative feelings arose from the students not having a sense of membership fitting into the wider social community. One example which expresses the extent of such a sense of otherness is evident in Jo's reference to feeling like an '*outsider*' and '*intruding in their world*'. This sense of 'them', being traditional aged UGs studying full-time and typically living in student halls and 'us', mature part-time home UGs. Their limited , or lacking, availability of time to take part in

wider student experiences was a distinction also made by Tinto (1988), in the separation stage of transition for home students as they navigate the new university culture, amongst their current life-world commitments. Both of these will now be discussed in turn.

#### **5.1.1.1 Attending an elite university: academic self-doubt**

The psychological self-doubts in their abilities to be competent at degree level education was mainly drawn from comparisons of self to their perceptions of the traditional aged UGs and recognition of the 'prestigious' university status. Lisa's description of '*intimidating*' in reference to the immense scale and grandeur of the university architecture corresponds to the findings of Christie et al. (2008) in which non-traditional UGs similarly experienced a highly emotive reaction to their new academic culture. However, as highlighted by Williamson (1998), this eliteness created a sense of difference in which the co-researchers considered the traditional aged UG students who typically inhabited this social space to be more intelligent, '*posh*' and included assumptions around them having had an easier '*privileged life*'. As in this current study, social class otherness has also been a key finding by Christie et al. (2008) with non-traditional UGs also feeling 'intimidated' (p.576) by the traditional middle-class students. As stressed by Leese (2010) and Read et al., (2003), this student experience is not benefited by educational labels of difference (e.g. 'non-traditional') being a further reminder as was evident in this study that students are in the minority category of 'other', a status of disadvantage rather than eliteness.

The co-researcher descriptions evidenced the impact of having not progressed to university via the '*normal*' route, resulting in a psychological barrier of accepting the self as having a sense of place as a university student, corresponding to the findings of Marandet and Wainwright (2010). This otherness, derived from a sense of place and identity, is further impacted by being a first-generation UG. Waller (2011) and Leese (2010) highlight privileged '*insider knowledge*' is often passed on from middle class

parents who experienced being an UG. The findings clarified how this creates additional layers of anxiety and supports the similar findings of Lefever and Carrant (2010) and Christie et al. (2008). An invisible sense of difference to the external world creates an additional layer of psychological isolation in feeling it is only '*me*' feeling this way which, if not addressed, can lead to Gennep's (1965) 'stranger' positioning. Such isolation, as Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) have evidenced, will reduce a person's coping ability, increase levels of 'stress' (p.141) and also potentially reduce 'cognitive functioning' (p.11).

The first student year at university is widely acknowledged as being a critical time, a period in which students who do not feel a sense of belonging to this new academic culture may consider 'dropping out' (Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012; ARC Network, 2013). The co-researcher descriptions confirmed this was not a fleeting feeling. Whilst it was at its most intense prior to, and during, the initial first taught session, this self-doubt continued throughout the year, and was typically evidenced by a strong fear of failing due to an inner critical self-feedback of '*I can't do this*', the intensity of such feelings being evidenced in Tatiana's description of '*shock after shock after shock*' and James's reference to a '*bitter battle with [his] own brain*'. This re-engagement with education for mature UGs, whilst under-researched, is known for being a more difficult transition (McVitty and Morris, 2012; HEFCE, 2017) than commonly experienced by traditional aged UG peers. Outside taught semesters, the periods of university holidays (e.g. Christmas and Easter) were when levels of self-doubt typically started to increase again.

### **5.1.1.2 Marginalised student identity: being a mature UG**

Whilst academic self-doubt is a form of invisible difference, being that it is psychological, there were other more visible (as perceived from the person having such feelings) markers of difference. The main marker of difference arising from the eight co-researchers was that of being a '*mature*' UG, with

descriptions including being *'too old'* to be a university student. Which was also evidenced in the study by Christie et al., (2008) involving non-traditional UGs similarly navigating their way at an elite university. Being a mature UG was described by the co-researchers as having to *'fit in'* and as such supports the work of Marandet and Wainwright (2010) and Mallman and Lee (2014). However, for Tatiana her feelings of being ashamed of being a mature UG arose by the reactions of her work colleagues due to going to university later in life. This gives insight into how being a mature UG can also potentially be affected by the perceptions of others in the students personal lives.

During the five months of data collection whilst there were social events (e.g. cinema, restaurant), the findings of this study clarify the dominant socialization need from the Facebook group was peer support. This was centered around academic related questions, and corroborates with the findings of Scanlon et al., (2007) in which mature students during this transition also gave greater precedence to academic work. This focus on the academic work may also stem from the perception of risk (Waller et al., 2011) in this re-engagement to education for mature students, both financially and in terms of impact to partners/ family. As identified by Christie et al., (2008, p.577) it could also be because mature students often cannot take part in 'student social life' due to having other life commitments and responsibilities. Another consideration being, as was the case for all eight mature students in this current study, mature UGs tend to not move away to study and as such normally have an established social network (Thomas, 2012).

### **5.1.1.3 Marginalised student identity: being a WP UG**

The findings evidence that the student identity of being a WP UG had less significance as a source of difference when compared to the co-researchers discussions around being a mature UG. However, being a WP UG was described in the same manner as mature, in having to *'fit in with everybody else'*. This perception of having to assimilate the self amongst the others

supports the findings of Reay (2002), Miriam (2008), Leese (2010), Reay et al. (2010), Jones (2010), Moreau and Kerner (2012), Wilkins & Burke (2013) and Mallman and Lee (2014) in which under-represented WP students faced similar perceived psychological barriers of difference when navigating university. Such co-researchers descriptions of having to fit into the traditional UG life-world and feeling '*inferior*' also supports the literature around a model of 'deficit' (Lawler, 2005; Leese, 2010; Jones, 2010; Waller et al, 2011; Wilkins and Burke, 2013) having not a transition to university in the expected manner. The findings clarify being WP was seen as a source of '*stigma*', with the students reporting being not the '*right class*', this issue concurs with the same conceptualization in the work of Mallman and Lee (2014).

Being a WP UG was identified as a marker of disadvantage, which resulted in the co-researchers having a psychological sense of being '*out of place*', this finding resonates with Read et al. (2003), Lawer (2005) and Kasworm's (2009) concept of 'otherness' in being a non-traditional student, a marginalized positionality. The theme of university being a '*middle-class*' space was very much evident in this present study, with a strong sense of '*them*' and '*us*' due to differences in social class positioning and is again consistent with similar findings by Read et al., (2003), Byrom (2009), Reay et al., (2009), Wilkins & Burke (2013) and Lehman (2014). The co-researchers descriptions of the '*middle class and all posh*' traditional UGs having increased confidence inhabiting this academic social world, is also a factor highlighted by Leese (2010) and Waller (2011) within their research into WP student experiences. The extent of this sense of difference can be understood by the example of Sophie who '*never, ever in a million years thought I would end up coming to uni*'. Similar UGs who are also first in the family to attend university have described this as transition as a 'culture shock' (Quinn et al., 2005; Crozier and Reay, 2011) and feeling 'alien' (Read et al., 2003; Quinn et al., 2005; Beard et al., 2007; Christie et al., 2008; Leese, 2010).

#### **5.1.1.4 Intersectionality and becoming an UG**

In addition to the shared identities of the eight co-researchers, further marginalized identities were also present in the findings and created other layers of difference. Jim and James both experienced differing psychological barriers due to having hidden disabilities and is an important finding as mature students are more likely to have a disability in comparison to traditional students (McVitty and Morris, 2012). In addition, Jim's difference by gender identified by his experience of being a minority male in a female dominated social space, is again often the gender imbalance evident within UK mature UG cohorts (McVitty and Morris, 2012). While Tatiana in her feelings of being '*absolutely petrified*' and '*isolated*' brought to the surface considerations of political tensions; being '*a foreigner*' during a UK political uprising of far right nationalism. This finding further adds to the work of Williamson (1998) and Swain and Hammon (2011b) who have highlighted such 'political' considerations and their potential to further influence the student experience. Being a mature UG who has English as a second language is a missing voice within the wider literature. These findings support the work of Museus and Griffin (2011) who argue the limiting nature of research which only captures the student experience from a singular identity marker (e.g. mature) rather than allowing for such intersections of additional individual identities to arise (Crenshaw, 1991).

#### **5.1.2 Part-time study: life commitments and responsibilities**

In contrast to the students in Butcher's (2015, p.37) study who felt they had an 'outlier status' and were a 'forgotten cohort', being a part-time UG was only discussed in a limited way by two co-researchers in this current study. This may have been due to being students supported by a centre which specifically provides part-time study for mature students. Had the eight UGs attended a course within a 'typical' school of full time degree study, this identify of being a part-time student may have been more strongly perceived. Only Sophie and Jo made reference to psychologically and physically feeling '*separate*' they did not feel like a '*fully-fledged student*' due to being part-

time. Additionally they both referred to having to navigate multiple identities (e.g. mother, grandparent, student). This finding is very much in line with the work of Butcher (2015, p.37) in which having 'multiple identities' was noted to impact the formation of a 'student identity' for part-time students.

Whilst not being a strong theme in terms of identity, being part-time was a barrier which affected all eight co-researchers due to having reduced time for academic study. Butcher's (2015, p.36) report identified the 'majority' of part-time cohorts are in employment during their study, and around 50% have 'caring commitments' (children as well as older family). These statistics are actually lower than the range of commitments and responsibilities in this current study, as seven of the co-researchers had caring responsibilities and six were employed. Although, Lisa in caring for her mother is also 'working' so whilst not self-identifying as such, could arguably be also included in terms of having work commitments.

The metaphor 'juggling' is commonly discussed in the mature and part-time literature (UniversitiesUK, 2013; King, 2013; Butcher, 2015; London Economics, 2017) and this was referred to several times during the interviews in relation to descriptions of their time management in being a student and having other life commitments and responsibilities. The co-researchers also used phrases such as '*pressured*', and '*like a roller-coaster*' which gave a sense of having not felt prepared for this new life, an issue also identified by Christie et al., (2008), David et al., (2010) and Howard and Davies (2013). It is worth noting such descriptions of having felt '*depressed, I cried a lot*' was the only time during data collection that Claire made any reference to having experienced negative emotions. Similarly, Tatiana's overwhelming expressions such as '*I can't breathe*' illustrate the extent that being a 'student-worker' (Munro, 2011) can negatively impact mental health (Christie et al., 2008; Universities UK, 2015) and is often a stressful experience (Forbus and Newbold, 2011; Denovan and Macaskill, 2013). There was evidence of feeling torn between competing lives '*two people in one*' and '*left that life behind*' due to all the co-researchers having caring

responsibilities and/or employment commitments. This sense of inhibiting two conflicting life-worlds fits in with Beach's (1999) shopkeepers who attending evening classes found their work commitment hindered academic progress.

The co-researchers working hours were quite extensive, with Claire having four work commitments, James working 21 hours and Jim up to 40 hours a week. Mature UGs typically have longer working hours in comparison to their traditional aged peers (Forbus and Newbold, 2011). In this study employment was undertaken during the working week, which again is in contrast from traditional students work who are more likely to work evenings and weekends (Munro, 2011). The intersections of these varying responsibilities are also evident (see Table 2) such as Louise who was a parent, a carer for her mother and also worked 18 hours a week.

There was positive impact in spending time on the university campus for co-researchers who were in a position to be able to, such as Louise who regained a sense of student identity or Lisa who benefited from the 'small distractions' of home. However, not all the students lived in close proximity, with Jo being the furthest away and who specifically talked about being isolated from her peers. A sense of 'isolation' is in the work of Marandet and Wainwright (2010, p.799) and Gennep (1965) who recognise this as impacting a sense of belonging due to reduced time with fellow students. This also brings to the fore the impact of home location, as living near campus or being in student accommodation allows increased physical time on campus.

An interesting element of the caring responsibility findings were in Jim and Sophie both being grandparents. This is an identity marker which is not strongly evident in the literature, such as the Butcher (2015) report which although it does refer to 'children' would benefit from clarifying caring responsibilities as stemming from immediate children or grandchildren. The mature and part-time literature is female dominate, and lacks the voice of

male students who have caring commitments, such as Jim and his reference to needing to '*get things ready at home*' and challenge the often dominate view that male students can have an easier time than their female peers, due to cultural and societal norms around division of home labour. Similarly, Lisa and Louise brought in the voice of being carers for a parents, and the different challenges this '*double commitment*' brings, this being another identity marker that is lesser understood within the current literature, being as it is focused more on the perspective of being a student-parent (e.g. NUS, 2009; Brooks, 2015).

Low energy levels of being '*tired*' were expressed culminating by the end of semester one in being '*worn out*'. These support Hinton-Smith's (2012, p.160) similar expressions from student-parents who also found UG study '*hectic*'. Feelings of '*guilt*' is often experienced by student-parents (NUS 2009; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Brooks, 2015) and was the case in this study, with '*guilt*' and '*regret*' in relation to a lack of time to spend with children being expressed during the interviews. Hinton-Smith (2012) has focused her research specifically on highlighting the lived experiences of lone student-parents; the challenges of which were evident with Tatiana's reference to '*I'm on my own*'.

Sophie identified her personal life as being '*unpredictable*' which was also referenced in relation the mature student experience by Stevenson and Clegg (2013). Although an unexpected finding was the lack of direct reference to financial worries as being a barrier, only Sophie referred to having such concerns. Given the impact of the '*austerity*' programme (Cameron, 2009) and reduction in student financial support (e.g. maintenance grants which were abolished in 2016). However, it may be that this was felt as a '*private trouble*' (Field, 2012) being issues of money are a topic which can bring an unnecessary sense of shame or embarrassment.

In addressing the first research question, it was evident that this first year transition to becoming an UG was highly emotive for all eight co-

researchers. This centred predominately around the theme of difference in not being a traditional UG, with hidden worries of academic self-doubt, being a mature and WP UG as the main makers. In attending an elite HEI and viewing the traditional UGs as more intelligent, intensified such worries and became a psychological isolation, due to assumptions of being the 'only one' to feel this way. This sense of otherness was further impacted by intersections of identities, going beyond the shared student markers (e.g. being mature). However, whilst being a part-time student itself did not appear to be a source of otherness for the group, it was another major factor which did increase all eight co-researchers levels of stress and anxiety due to the additional challenges of juggling multiple non-student life-worlds.

## **5.2 How can the biographical past life further impact this present lived experience?**

### **5.2.1 Primary/ secondary school: disrupted education**

All eight co-researchers had experienced circumstances at home that, in varying degrees, impacted their compulsory schooling and in turn their academic achievement with past-life family circumstances described as '*chaotic*' or isolating '*felt invisible*'. This disruption stemmed primarily from parents and circumstances often led to being cared for others beyond the immediate family or the care system as well as behaviour that evidenced mental health issues including being rebellious and engaging in criminal acts. There was disruption to education from attending different schools as well as attendance issues, including school suspensions and expulsions. In addition the findings highlight the experiences of past education for students who are care leavers. These findings support Deggs (2011, p.1541) being as these past negative educational experiences created an additional layer of 'vulnerability' for these WP UGs, as they were making the transition to re-engage with education for a second time.

This additional past biographical detail (Gape and Parker, 2014) also allows for a more considered contextualised understanding in terms of how the student experience is impacted (Read et al., 2003; Awang et al., 2014). This past education experience highlighted why the eight co-researchers had such 'deep anxieties' (McVitty and Morris, 2012, p.22) in relation to their present lived experience and re-engaging with education to study at UG level. Additionally, the relevance of these past educational experiences in explaining current low academic self-concept has also been highlighted by Reay (2002) and Stevenson and Clegg (2013).

### **5.2.2 Primary/ secondary school: social isolation**

Six of the co-researchers described past experiences of school which align with the psychological sense of 'social isolation' in Osterman's (2000, p.327) seminal work, similarly presented from the context of secondary school. These differences arose from visible and hidden markers, such as disability, poverty, dialect and clothing. The descriptions during the interviews evidence the co-researchers had commonality in past childhood experiences of being in the position of an outsider, not fitting into the social world, during which such loneliness can result in increased feelings of being 'fragile, negative and self-critical' (Cocioppo and Patrick, 2008, p. 174). During their past life, social needs were not being met at school (Cocioppo and Patrick, 2008) and four co-researchers directly referenced to this past life when talking about their current experiences of becoming an UG. This aligns with Osterman's (2000) focus on the educational culture, rather than pedagogical activities as impacting a sense of belonging.

These two themes have evidenced that past biographical experiences during primary and secondary school, consciously or subconsciously, do appear to have affected the present lived experience of becoming an UG. This contextual information explains the levels of academic self-doubt as the

eight mature students re-engaged with education as well as their concerns relating to '*fitting in*' to this new and elite academic culture.

### **5.3 What impact does membership of an online peer support community have on the coping strategies of mature Widening Participation part-time undergraduates during their first year?**

In contrast to the range of social media platforms the eight co-researchers used in their personal lives, the findings only reference Facebook and WhatsApp as selected platforms for connecting with their university peers. However, these are the dominate social media platforms (Ofcom, 2018) currently used by the UK general population. Of the two, it was an expected finding that Facebook was the main social media used for connecting with peers in respect of the sampling criteria. The findings confirm the private Facebook peer support group did help build relationships between the part-time UGs. Being part of this OPSC also facilitated a sense of belonging, which in turn was able to reduce a sense of isolation. However, the authentic affective peer support interactions were taking place in Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, during private small group or one-to-one discussions, away from group members which included university staff. This final section will discuss how these public and private social media spaces were used during this transition to becoming an UG, focusing on the three common themes that emerged from the eight co-researchers of this lived experience:

- (1) Connectedness and informality for relationship building and sense of belonging**
- (2) Nurturing supportive community for peer support**
- (3) Private spaces for affective support**

These three themes address the third research question. They build upon the community work of Lakey and Cohen (2000) and Pfeil (2010).

### **5.3.1 OPSC: connectedness, informality for relationship building & sense of belonging**

All eight co-researchers had Facebook accounts before joining the OPSC. Having the group located in a platform they were already using, and was therefore familiar to them, provided an efficient way to navigate between the two life-worlds of university and their wider '*juggling*' of life commitments and responsibilities. Studying part-time, and physically distanced from peers for extended periods, the active social presence that was generated in the OPSC resulted in a psychological sense of 'connectedness' (Rovai, 2002; Tazghini and Siedlecki, 2013; Uusiautti and Maatta, 2014; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2015; Grieve and Kemp, 2015; Thai et al., 2019) and gave a sense that '*there's always somebody*' there. It is such affordances that social media is used increasingly for supporting transition at university (Madge et al., 2009; DeAndrea et al., 2011; Jackson, 2012; Mazzoni and Iannone, 2014; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2015).

As the Facebook platform was created specifically for connecting university students together socially (Miller, 2013) it is not a surprising finding that this globally dominate social media platform would be efficient for such needs and wants. As highlighted by Berki and Jakala (2009) this provided an additional support beyond staff office hours that was potentially available 24/7, depending on the usage of other group members. This speed of response could, as argued by Madge et al., (2009), Dorum et al., (2010), Lefever and Currant (2010), Jackson (2012) and Wohn and LaRose (2014) help in reducing mental health related concerns, such as anxiety over assessment. When compared to university VLEs, which are seen as being less efficient for such 'social integration' (Dorum et al., 2010; Jackson 2012) as predominately limited to asynchronous modes of communication, thus

typically providing reduced social presence. However, there are growing concerns about using social media platforms which go beyond HEIs, both in terms of a 'blurring' (Prescott, 2013) of private lives and academic for both staff and students as well as data protection issues, due to such social media platforms going beyond the control of universities.

Online exchanges were often referred to during the interviews as a '*conversation*' and as such align with Deng and Tavares's (2013, p.174) reference to social media affordances being able to facilitate 'instant, spontaneous and organic' forms of communication. Such online conversations with empathetic exchanges are fostered by high levels of perceived 'social presence' (Short et al., 1976; Humphreys, 2016) and 'timely responses' (Preece, 1999, p.79). The findings from the co-researchers who actively posted in the Facebook group evidence this was viewed as an efficient way to seek clarification with responses being '*pretty instant*' or normally happened in '*less than 24 hours*'. It was this perceived ability to connect with university peers 'constantly' which was viewed as a key benefit, especially when feeling overwhelmed (e.g. '*having a melt-down*'). This supports the work of Henri and Pudelko (2003) who measured the effectiveness of an online community by its activity levels as well as Deng and Tavares (2013), Grieve et al. (2013) and Uusiautti and Maata, (2014) who also highlight the impact of such connection to others and the university which can work towards reducing a sense of isolation as an UG, as evidenced in this study.

References in the findings of feeling part of '*a close group*' and '*our own little family*' evidence a strong sense of familiarity between one another, which Argyle and Dean (1965, p.293) argue arises from having 'intimacy of topic' and supports the fostering of 'interpersonal relationships' (Short et al., 1976, p.65). Additionally, references made to '*bonding*' and '*group cohesion*' by the co-researchers align with the 'sense of togetherness' by Uusiautti and Maatta (2014, p. 300) and is argued by Greive et al., (2015) as being a sign of group members having a sense of belonging. The Facebook group seems

to have acted as a form of 'social lubricant' (Ellison et al., 2011) in fostering these friendships to develop. This familiarity between the students in the OPSC also suggests there was a 'social identity' (Shen et al., 2010; Howard & Davies, 2013; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Mäntymäki & Islam, 2016), this 'unified identity' (Quinn, 2010, p.45) being an essential element of an online community. In addition, the Facebook group content influenced the UGs offline social world interactions, being a conversation focus (e.g. '*what we've seen on Facebook*') it also increased face-to-face meetings as well as encouraging social events (e.g. cinema) to be more easily arranged.

### **5.3.1.1 community atmosphere**

The social spaces we inhabit within our life worlds involve the relationship of 'person-environment' (Awang et al., 2014, p. 262), meaning our perceptions of our environment have an impact on how we engage and interact within these social spaces. The co-researchers appreciated Facebook group having been set to private, and as such, being separate to their personal Facebook page with friends who may tease them '*think you're clever now*' over such academic content. Having a separate online social space allowed the students to feel more comfortable to be a student and provided a sense of '*camaraderie*'. These privacy settings being typical for such educational Facebook communities (Manca and Ranieri, 2013). The findings support Camus et al. (2016) in that the active co-researchers saw a benefit from having this informal online space and sense of '*commonality*'.

The social 'routines', 'values' and 'symbols' evident in the Facebook group further created an atmosphere of community spirit (Williamson, 1998, p98). The findings evidenced emotively expressive content being text-speak, emoticons, emojis and humour. As Gunawardena and Zittle (1997, p.10) have stressed, this facilitated an atmosphere of informality, friendliness and encouraged affective expression. Such a text heavy medium without this additional expression can lead to misinterpretation (Hope, 2016). However,

this form of communication also relies upon the members having a knowledge and understanding of how to communicate in such a manner.

The amount of questions that were observed also evidence this was a space perceived as being safe for seeking support or clarification. However, unlike the private Facebook group in the study by Deng and Tavares (2015), which similarly evidenced students using it for 'help and support' (p.173), in this current study staff were also members. As this was not evident in the data, it can only be assumed that it was this staff presence that had an impact in terms of the students feeling comfortable sharing their more personal thoughts (Humphreys, 2016) in the public group. This would explain why so many affective discussions quickly moved from this public group to Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp for private interactions.

### **5.3.1.2 benefits of a mere sense of belonging**

The OPSC gave the eight students a sense of being part of something, lowering a sense of isolation (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008) and also helped reduce anxieties that were being experienced in relation to becoming and being an UG. However, it was clear from the findings that the seven active co-researchers were less confident adding content to the public space, having a preference to view and 'like' rather than actively post. However, the action of 'liking' a post is argued by Johannesen et al., (2016) as adding a sense of 'intimacy' to the community.

However, an unanticipated finding from the OPSC was the extent that a sense of belonging could still be experienced by students, such as Jim, whose sole participation was reading the Facebook group content. Similarly Claire and Tatiana who, whilst having some visible activity, also had a preference for reading content. This is an important finding, as such 'lurking' behaviour is typical of online communities (Scheider et al., 2012), often being the main form of participation, with such members having no visible

presence. Drawing upon the work of Walton et al. (2012, p.513), who was informed by the work of Baumeister and Leary (1995), Jim evidenced having a 'mere sense of belonging'. Whilst, unlike Walton et al. (2012) this was not based upon similarities perceived in offline contexts (including having a shared birthday) their four experiments did have a psychological focus and also included the benefit of having a shared goal. This shared journey of becoming an UG being the key similarity for the students using this OPSC, and this 'mere' connection along with Jim's invisible passive participation was still able to result in him feeling '*part of the group*' and not '*left out of the loop*' and confirms a sense of belonging. Claire in viewing the OPSC as 'a little family' and Tatiana who, of the eight, seemed to have the most positive view feeling the Facebook group had been '*a life-saver*', knowing she was not alone feeling this way. These findings highlight the benefit of 'social media memory' (Brake, 2014, p.102) with such online group conversations having a permanent<sup>12</sup> record, which is argued by Pfeil (2010) as helping to foster a sense of belonging.

### **5.3.2 OPSC: nurturing supportive community for peer support**

Conceptualisations of communities in educational contexts, such as the hierarchy of online communities by Henri and Pudelko (2003), often fail to highlight affective discourses. It was this reason which led to my research into 'patient support communities' (Preece, 2001) which typically exhibit such affective discourse and high levels of empathy. The peer encouragement was a '*kind of camaraderie between us, as a uni, supporting each other*' a finding which fits into the support communities literature (Pfeil, 2010). The data also highlights this peer support was particularly beneficial outside taught semesters during the holiday periods when self-doubt often started to increase again. However, it was not anticipated to understand the extent the

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<sup>12</sup> Unless the online content is later deleted.

co-researchers held an impression that this connection with peers via social media had at times been a reason for them continuing with their studies.

The Facebook group content provided a sense of commonality, this was expressed many times as '*being in the same boat*', feeling their peers were '*going through similar feelings*'. These findings correlate strongly with the study by Jackson (2012) in which the 36 WP business students also found it was a benefit to know 'everyone's in the same boat' (p.34). This commonality of a shared journey in becoming an UG (Preece, 1999; Berki and Jakala, 2009) and having 'overlapping histories' (Rovai, 2002, p.4) resulted in the students sharing 'common stressors' (Dhar et al., 2018, p.568) exhibiting this as a support community. The findings evidence this was a '*nurturing, supportive atmosphere*', expressed during one interview as a '*being in the bubble... bubbles are comfortable*'. These findings fit in with the 'psychological support' and 'sociological superglue' of Putnam (2000, p.22) in reference to the benefits of sharing life experiences with similar others. This suggests such psychological peer support has an ability to reduce worries and provide a sense of hope via peer motivation, being 'a buffer' (Pfeil, 2010, p.124) amongst the emotional student journey of becoming an UG.

This personal affective information reduces the psychological isolation of feeling alone with negative thoughts, such as self-doubt. These 'communal experiences' (Uusiautti and Maatta, 2014, p. 299) viewed by the co-researches as '*extra support*' were reassuring and, as clarified by Rodriguez et al. (2015), helped to reduce anxieties with references to feeling '*safer*' and '*cared for*'. Although in order to access this extra support there needs to be a request or acknowledgement that this is needed in the first instance.

The reliance on text communication and the public nature of the group created a barrier for participation for the co-researchers who did not feel comfortable to write in the Facebook group. Text contributions have a sense of permanence and, can be a daunting form of communication. Jim had

wanted to write and played out '*whole scenarios*' of actually contributing, but just felt '*embarrassed*' due to having dyslexia and dyspraxia. This barrier is discussed by Delahunty et al. (2013) and Reynolds and Wu (2018) who highlight how stressful such forms of public writing can be, particularly for those who are not writing in their first language or have a learning disability, both being applicable to this study. This can be understood from the example of Tatiana, in being having English as a second language and worries of peers questioning her right to be on the course, bringing to the surface her sense of audience.

In addition, Sophie gave prominence to the barriers in participating when a student does not have access to the right forms of technology, in her case this being without a smart phone or internet access at home, leaving her to rely on the local public community centre for access. This serves as a reminder that there is still inequality of access to technology (Bass and Movahed, 2018). Similarly both student-grandparents, Sophie and Jim, reported having low levels of digital literacy which also impacted their online contributions (Bancroft, 2016). However, despite this technological barrier of access and digital literacy confidence of the eight it was Sophie who had posted the most new content to the Facebook group and had also talked about how this peer support had kept her motivated '*if that support wasn't there... I don't think I would have done this year*'.

### **5.3.3 OPSC: private spaces for affective support**

Claire, James, Lisa and Louise all talked about not sharing their real feelings '*my business*' in the Facebook group. As such, the Facebook group public content gave a partial reality, which was overly positive due to the '*performance of self*' (Aleman and Wartman, 2009; Humphreys, 2016) a form of behavior that suggests members were seeking social validation. Leaving the '*really hard times*' and '*the negatives*', of the private self to be kept private. This was also evidenced in the study by Bareket-Bojmel et al.'s study (2016) in which '*self-enhancing*' forms of '*self-presentation*' were also the dominant format for the 156 UGs Facebook status updates. It is this

presentation of our 'ideal' self (Humphreys, 2016, p. 86) via social media that is often critiqued for having a negative impact to mental health due to making the viewer feel inadequate. Whilst feelings of jealousy (Appel et al., 2016) were not a finding specifically, there were occasions when the Facebook content led to a negative impact on emotions, such as Jo who felt disheartened in seeing social arrangements made on the Facebook group which she typically could not attend.

The extent that this Facebook group did not reflect reality were evidenced in Claire's reference to creating '*colourful pictures*' being '*always happy on my page*'. As well as Lisa who explained online she is '*totally different to how I am in real life... in real life I'm open*'. Such contrasts between offline and online behavior reflects Goffman's (1956) reference to the self as 'actor' (p.17) and the performative nature of such public social spaces. Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp were where the students felt more comfortable revealing their 'backstage' (Goffman, 1956, p. 69) life realities, away from the Facebook group 'audience'. This performance of self was exemplified in Claire's reference to this being about '*self-control*' and not '*moaning*' and also Lisa's reference to Facebook as being '*a very self-indulgent platform*', highlighting she would not share such '*oh woe is me*' emotions online. Whilst there was content in the Facebook that was emotive '*I feel nervous now*' it was evident that posts mainly concentrated on practical information such as seeking out guidance on assessment, how to use the VLE and technology related issues.

As evidenced in the study by Bazarova et al. (2015) these findings confirm the UGs in this present study similarly used the public and private social media spaces differently. The more intimate and private discussions took place in private therefore suggesting that the peer support which was most effective in discussing genuine feelings was happening beyond the public Facebook group, and as such, was not visible to the group. Whilst Lee-Won et al. (2014) have highlighted the impact of culture in self-presentation, the co-researchers impact past trauma (biographical findings) and the need to

present the self as being in a more positive psychological place, could derive from a need for self-protection. Although, as Kennedy (2018) discusses, some members of an online community can choose to be quite explicit in public social spaces, writing in abundance about their personal lives and is argued as whilst this can be a student seeking attention, it can also be a sign of having mental health issues.

This highlights the limited extent to which the members perceived the Facebook group as having an atmosphere of 'trust' (Garrison, 2000; Rovai, 2002; Mason and Rennie, 2008; Berki and Jakala, 2009; Preil, 2010; Plante and Asselin, 2014; Humphreys, 2016). Whilst there is no observable data from Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, they appear to have had higher levels of 'intimacy' (Argyle and Dean, 1965; Johannesen et al., 2016). James had talked about how private discussions, especially with one person, were more '*personal*' and allowed him to feel able to show '*weakness*'. Additionally, Louise talked about the WhatsApp group and exchanges that included '*we love you and we care for you*', and feeling comfortable to share '*the panic and the struggle*'. However, whilst being more affective in content, it was the experience of being in these smaller groups that Louise highlighted as creating another issue which Humphreys (2016) has highlighted, when students re-enforce one another's negativity. Which rather than being a benefit can further add to students' mental health. Additionally, this peer support was also at times providing additional workload, as expressed by Louise with some peers over relying on support.

The findings from this third and final section clarify the differing social media spaces of public and private were used for different purposes, however, both provided benefits during this first year transition to becoming an UG. While the Facebook group was viewed as being a '*constant support network*' and the informal atmosphere supported relationship building. This reduced feelings of isolation during extended periods of being away from one another. The informality of the group generated by expressive and emotive content helped create a nurturing supportive environment in which the

students were able to bond. The Facebook group provided a sense of belonging, a feeling of being a university student even for those who had low or no visible participation, still gaining this benefit from reading the Facebook group content. It also provided an effective space for peer support, mainly relating to practical information. However, it is apparent that students seeking out affective peer support often moved from the public to private spaces in smaller groups or one-to-one beyond sight of the whole group, which included university staff.

## **5.4 Limitations**

The following section highlights the reality of undertaking practitioner-research using this methodology and also brings focus to working with participants who have limited available time. Being a single case study, the findings cannot necessarily be generalised beyond this one cohort of students (Cohen et al., 2011; Miles et al., 2014). Also, due to the methodological criteria that the participants must have relevant lived experience, the findings exclude the voice of students who were not using social media. It could be argued the eight co-researchers, in agreeing to take part, may have a more positive view of using such technology. Whilst I also acknowledge there are a range of positive emotions during this transition, these were beyond the focus of this study, being as it is limited to perceived barriers. This was due to the complexity of trying to measure this lived experience, and looking for some narrowing of focus.

The practical reality of adhering to the three-stage interview timing, which involved participant validation of verbatim transcriptions, was very difficult due to the work and personal life commitments of all involved. The timeframe presented by Seidman (2013, p.25) requires all three interviews to take place within a '2-3 week period', with the individual interviews planned so that a minimum of three days to a maximum of a week is between them. The resulting participant data from the three-stage interviews ranged from the least being 13,416 and the maximum 27,390 words. This difference in

breadth of data reflects the pace of speech, answer style and external factors reducing the interview time, such as parking issues and child care commitments. Additionally, this methodology relies heavily upon the spoken word and descriptions of feelings. Two participants did not seem comfortable talking about their experiences through such an emotional lens, which arguably limits the presentation of textural qualities.

There is innate complexity in a psychological study which aims to capture a person's perception of past and current life-worlds by drawing upon memories, which are known to be highly subjective. Additionally, one person's life experience can never be fully understood by another, due to the multiple intersections of identity (Stevenson and Clegg, 2013; Rubin et al., 2014) contextual differences and human uniqueness. Transcendental phenomenology, with its requirement for the researcher to have similar lived experiences to the co-researchers, is an appropriate methodology for practitioner-research such as this. Throughout this study this methodology has supported me in challenging and being mindful of this bias.

Whilst there was a benefit in having methodological triangulation, such as being able to highlight the difference in self-reported and actual use of social media, the interview data was the main data source. The online observation focused on one social media platform and was limited to capturing the public actions from the seven active co-researchers and therefore does not include any observable data from Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp. The co-researcher diary was the least effective method with two not being returned and of the six only one corresponded with the level of engagement referred to during the interview and online observation (see Appendix M ). However, the diary was still a benefit in providing further contextual data allowing me to gain a partial insight to the 'invisible' social world of Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.

## **5.5 Implications for research**

The student experience, as with any social context, is a complex phenomenon to study if the aim is to seek a rich understanding of this lived experience. It is impacted by a myriad of factors including, but not limited to, intersections of current and past identity, life commitments and responsibilities beyond university, family and societal culture, socioeconomics and political change. Thus there needs to be recognition that positivist methodologies, mono-methods or sampling of singular student identities are limited in providing meaningful insight of the student experience, regardless of whether offline or online. Collecting data by only observing visible online community participation, for example, would not capture the experience of a student who is actively participating by reading and gaining a sense of belonging from doing so. Whilst underused in similar studies of online communities, transcendental phenomenology allowed for such invisible online experiences to be understood.

As with the non-traditional study body, there is often a similar marginalised status for the academic staff who support them. As such, their professional practice voices are often unrepresented in the wider HE discourse which further hinders having an appreciation of marginalised students experiences. Additionally, there can be concern in conducting practitioner-research that student involvement in a study such as this with the three stage interview has a heavy time commitment. I did have such thoughts however, during this study during the final stages of data collection over half of the co-researchers informed me that they had positively enjoyed having had a time and space to stop and reflect upon their life journey. This perhaps verging on the therapeutic, enabled them to appreciate and celebrate their achievements.

## **5.6 Future research**

A longitudinal methodology would have the potential to give a deeper understanding of the whole student journey. Capturing the lived experience

of marginalised UGs from pre-entry through to the final degree year and any subsequent post graduate study, would enable multiple educational transitions to be considered. In addition, having multiple case studies on a national scale which aimed to represent the hierarchy of our UK HEI sector provision, including a greater sample size and increased diversity of participants would also increase our appreciation of the impact institutions, a sense of place and how the wider student body is perceived. Future studies could also consider alternative methods which are better able to capture the *invisible* OPSC participation acts.

## **5.7 Implications for practice**

The findings of this study evidence there should be a similar appreciation for reducing barriers to experiencing the affective and social dimensions of learning, as there has historically been for the cognitive. The psychological barrier of self-doubt and isolation can be very disruptive to the learning process. In consideration of the student experience, and awareness we have of students who are positioned as non-traditional UGs, HEIs would benefit from considering where, when and how can marginalised cohorts connect with one another? Working with the student body to identify their online communication needs. As HEIs are understandably cautious about using platforms beyond their centralised control, it would be appropriate to develop institutional online spaces that provide the same level of affordances as social media, such as synchronous chat and the perception of having a constant support network with an informal conversational tone. OPSCs could be monitored by support staff who often have a different relationship with students, being less hierarchical than the academic staff, and could support an increased atmosphere of trust and authentic peer support exchanges.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This final chapter demonstrates how the findings of this study have addressed the three research questions:

- *What feelings are expressed relating to the challenges faced during the first year transition to becoming a mature Widening Participation part-time undergraduate?*
- *How can the biographical past life further impact this present lived experience?*
- *What impact does membership of an online peer support community have on the coping strategies of mature Widening Participation part-time undergraduates during their first year?*

This re-engagement with education, after having experienced challenges and disruptions during previous study, was an emotive experience for all eight co-researchers. There was an overwhelming theme of *not being a traditional UG at an elite HEI*, a psychological barrier of difference due to a marginalised student identity which manifests itself in each individual in unique ways, due to intersections of current and past lives. There was, however, strong commonality in their wave of overwhelming academic self-doubt at the start of their academic first year, fuelled by previous disrupted study and past experiences of otherness in school. This created a barrier, impacting their ability to visualise themselves as being able to effectively undertake this level of study.

This intense fear of failure was at times isolating, due to individuals perceived they were alone in experiencing this mental anguish. Being 'non-traditional' served to further position these mature part-time UGs into an inferior position of feeling they had to *fit in* with the 'others'. To feel one does not belong, to feel psychologically isolated is not an advantaged start to a new life at university. The findings evidence the impact of HEI context, which

further intensified a sense of otherness due to the elite sense of place and being *not for the likes of me*.

Being part-time, juggling multiple life commitments and responsibilities was overwhelming, *exceptionally difficult* and amongst this for those with caring commitments, there was the additional layer of *guilt*. The present feelings of self-doubt in reengaging with education and becoming an UG was affected by the past. This transition brought to the surface past disruption and social isolation during their school years, which resulted in being disengaged with education or social isolation.

The affordances of social media provided a sense of having a *constant support network* to similar others was more beneficial than I could have envisaged. Being part of the Facebook group was a source of student identity, their commonality of experience expressed by '*being in the same boat*'. The daily connections with similar in an informal space encouraged friendships to grow and led to affective nurturing exchanges of peer support. Participation in the Facebook group by reading also had an unexpected benefit in being able to provide a sense of belonging. However, '*the really hard times*' were not disclosed in the public Facebook exchanges, which were limited to a partial overly positive reality. This may have been due to staff presence and/or awareness of audience, led to authentic exchanges of their student experience being shared and discussed during intimate private spaces of WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Whilst the OPSC was not without its own challenges, the findings suggest that it was effective in reducing the psychological barriers that each and every-one of the eight co-researchers experienced due to not being a traditional UG.

The student experience is complex, it involves various locations of place, persons and has affective and social dimensions. The transcendental phenomenological methodology allowed time and space for the student experiences to emerge, creating a rich picture including the invisible online and hidden personal. Intersections of current and past identities and life

experiences enabled a wider contextualised understanding. Each student is an individual and will have their own perception of this transition. However, current online spaces in HEI contexts, such as VLEs are often lacking in providing an informal online space for students to connect with one another in the manner the eight co-researchers were able in this study. The affective and social dimensions of learning play just as important a role as the cognitive, and as such, HEIs would benefit from reflecting to what extent their online technologies provide a similar quantity and quality of social presence, as social media can and does facilitate. Psychological barriers, such as evidenced in this study, are hidden. They are also disruptive to the process of learning. As the relationship with student support staff can be less hierarchical, in comparison to academic staff, they are well placed to have a presence in terms of monitoring content and safeguarding students (e.g. mental health). Students will benefit from having an OPSC which allows them to share this journey with similar others, navigating these unsailed waters in an online conversation, they can dip in and out of.

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## List of Abbreviations

ARC	Aimhigher Research & Consultancy Network
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CoP	Community of Practice
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
DfE	Department for Education
FB	Facebook
HE	Higher education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEI	Higher education institution
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
LOL	Lots of laughs
NUS	Nation Union of Students
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfNS	Office for National Statistics
OLE	Online learning environment
OPSC	Online peer support community
OSC	Online support communities
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SoOE	School of Ongoing Education (pseudonym)
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UCISA	Universities & Colleges Information Systems Association
UG	Undergraduate
UK	United Kingdom
VLE	Virtual learning environment
WP	Widening Participation

## Appendix A: Co-researcher Criteria

1. A 'mature' undergraduate as aged 21 years or over at registration
2. Identified as a Widening Participation student:
  - Are you the first person in your immediate family (excluding older siblings/ your own children) to achieve a degree?
  - Is your permanent address in a neighbourhood with low progression to higher education?
  - Is your household income £25,000 or below – both you and partner's, where applicable
  - Did you attend a school which achieved less than the national average of 5 A\* to C passes at GCSE
  - Have your studies been disrupted or adversely affected by circumstances in your personal, social or domestic life?
  - Did you grow up in public care?

(source: university setting)

3. Currently using social media to connect with university peers

## **Appendix B: Pilot Study**

### **Interview one**

1. How would you describe your past identity\* during childhood?
2. As an undergraduate at this university, how would you describe your identity now?
3. Thinking back to being at secondary school, how did you view yourself in being able to achieve with your school work?
4. Being an UG now, how do you view yourself at being able to achieve with your current academic work?

(\*by identity I am asking how you see yourself, examples being: racial/ ethnic origin, nationality, social class, socio-economic status, occupation, caring responsibilities)

### **Interview two**

1. What is your experience of being a mature part-time student?
2. Can you explain your experience of using online social networking with other students?

## Appendix C.1: Informed Consent

### Information sheet

#### **Title of research project: 'Exploring mature and part-time undergraduates' experiences of using social media to connect with peers in a Russell Group university'**

*You are invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether, or not, you wish to take part.*

#### **What is the purpose of the project?**

Transitional periods can be emotional for mature and part-time non-traditional learners, an under-researched group, in particular as studying at a research intensive university. There is a lack of research that recognises the other identities that 'mature' and 'part-time' learners have (e.g. employment) and also the role of emotional support.

The purpose of the project is to understand the experience of mature and part-time non-traditional learners who are choosing social media to connect with peers in a Russell Group university.

The project will start in September 2014 and the aim is for it to be finished by September 2016.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen as you are a mature, and part-time, widening participation undergraduate at a Russell Group university. You will be one of ten participants taking part in this research project.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time before the 1/8/15 without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

#### **What do I have to do/ what will happen to me if I take part?**

There would be an initial pre-interview which will be around 10 minutes long. This is to clarify the aims and purpose of the research, your involvement and allow you to ask any questions. If you decide to proceed you would be asked to complete a questionnaire focusing on use of social media and demographic information (e.g. gender, ethnicity), this will enable me to select a range of participants.

## Appendix C.2: Informed Consent

### 1. INTERVIEWS

If you decide to take part, there will be three interviews, 60-90 minutes in length. These will be at a time and location best suited to you on campus. The interview will be like an informal discussion, allowing you to talk in depth about the following:

Interviews will take place during March 2015 to July 2015.

However, your involvement would aim to take place within a three week period during this time.

#### **Interview one 60-90 minutes**

- Please choose a pseudonym for the purpose of this research project.
- Can you tell me about your past family background before starting the foundation course.
- Can you tell me about your past educational experience (starting with primary school), before starting the foundation course.
- Before becoming an undergraduate, can you tell me about your prior experience of using social media?

#### **Interview two: Contemporary life as undergraduate – 60-90 minutes**

- Can you describe your experience of studying part-time as a mature student WP undergraduate in a Russell Group university?
- Can you tell me about your social connections with other learners?

#### **Social media (outside of formal learning)**

- How do you access [name of social media]? (e.g. home computer/ mobile phone).
- Can you describe the reasons why you use [name of social media] to connect with other learners?
- What specific aspects of [name of social media] stand out?
- What experiences have you had, when you have chosen to use [name of social media] to connect with other learners?

## Appendix C.3: Informed Consent

- Can you focus on a particular event, when you have used social media to connect with your university peers, and describe this?

### **Interview three: reflecting on meaning – 60 minutes**

Open reflections on meanings. Review content of 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> interviews.

- How has this experience affected you?
- You said [points made from 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> interviews] how does this make you feel?
- What does using [points made from 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> interviews] mean to you?

## **2. JOURNAL**

### **Co-researchers journal: During March 2015 to July 2015**

During the pre-interview I will explain about the journal. The reason I have chosen this method is so that you can write very brief notes (or even just a few words) about your reasons for using social media. I will collate these notes and use them for analysis.

Time involved: no more than 20 minutes per week

## **3. OBSERVATION**

**Observation:** with your permission. I would like to observe any postings you make to two of the

## Appendix C.4: Informed Consent

### What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Your time in having to attend a 10 minute pre-interview, and three 60-90 minute 1:1 interviews, as well as having to read the interpretations I have made from the interview transcripts, and confirm if you agree that this represents your experience.

As the focus of the research is on how you feel about studying part-time it is possible that this might touch on topics that you find difficult or upsetting. Were this to happen, the interview would be stopped and guidance for support would be provided (e.g. student counselling services, mental health services). **covered for ethical reasons**

When participating in this project, it will have no impact on your academic assessment. This project is being conducted in my role as a student.

**covered for ethical reasons**

### What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there will be no direct benefits for those people participating in the project, however, it is hoped that this work will increase awareness of the mature and part-time learner experience of using online social networks. You may find the process of reflecting on your experience beneficial, and also, the experience of taking part in a research project as a co-researcher.

### Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential/ what will happen to the results of the research project?

All the information that I collect during the course of this research will be anonymised. You will not be identified in any reports or publications.

Should any data suggest physical or psychological harm to yourself, or others, or relate to criminal activity then I will not be able to keep this knowledge to myself. However, under these circumstances I would only disclose such information to those who need to know.

Interviews will be recorded using a Dictaphone; the recordings will be kept on this portable device for a temporary period.

The audio recordings of the two interviews will be used only for analysis and for illustration (direct quotations) may be used for future publications in journal articles or conference presentations. It may also be used for additional research. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside of this project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

**covered for ethical reasons**

If possible, I will transfer the audio data from the Dictaphone to a password protected folder on my laptop (M drive) which is password protected. The audio data on the Dictaphone will then be deleted. No raw data will be taken away from myself, and supervisors, will have access to the audio recordings. As soon as possible after the interview, transcripts will be anonymised and each transcript will have a unique number so I can identify which transcript is yours.

**covered for ethical reasons**

Personal data will be kept separate from the audio data and transcripts on a password protected server, my personal area (M drive) which is password protected. I will not share any data with anyone else.

**covered for ethical reasons**

## Appendix C.5: Informed Consent

Protection Act 1998. The audio and transcripts will be kept for at least 2 years after publication, or three years after the end of data collection, whichever is longer.

The intellectual property rights lie with the educational institution to which I am a student – the  
covered for ethical reasons  
I will have access to the final thesis if you so wish.

### What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research projects objectives?

I will need your permission for me to access data in order to know if you  
covered for ethical reasons  
for being 'mature' and 'widening participation'.

I would also be asking you for personal information relating to your identity including: age, gender, racial/ ethnic origin, nationality, and responsibilities (e.g. employment hours/ caring responsibilities).

This information will give a clearer picture of your situation and how this may affect your experience as a mature part-time student.

### Who is organising/ funding the research?

The research is not funded. It is a post graduate student research project for an EdD in Education.

Ethical approval: Ref: AREA 14-002, amendment February 2015

Date of ethical approval: 9 March 2015

### Contacts for further information:

Student researcher:

covered for ethical reasons

Supervisor:

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed informed consent form to keep.

*Thank-you for your time in reading through this information sheet.*

ID: 200374559

Date: 2/2/15

## Appendix D: Pre-interview Questionnaire

### Initial questionnaire for participant/ co-researcher selection

#### Social media

- Which social media do you use? (e.g. Facebook, Twitter)  communicate with another student(s) at the

covered for ethical reasons

Every day once a week once a month rarely never (please circle)

- Are you in either the  covered for ethical reasons
- Are you in any other
- Would you say you are, in general, more active (writing posts/ responses) when using social media or more passive (prefer to read the posts of others).

Please can you circle one of the following to rate your activity level:

Low activity (Prefer to read) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 high activity (writing posts/ responses)

**In order to ensure you have the full criteria for this research project, please can you also provide the following information:**

- What age are you?
- What gender are you?
- What ethnicity are you?
- What is your first language?
- Do you have a known disability?
- What degree and university school are you in?
- If you consider yourself in terms of social class, how would you describe yourself?
- Do you have any commitments beyond university? (e.g. employment/ caring responsibilities such as having a child) If working – how many hours?
- Do you have any commitments in university (e.g. volunteering)?

Do you give your permission for me  covered for ethical reasons  \* we hold on file? Yes No

covered for ethical reasons

criteria being:

- Are you the first person in your immediate family (excluding older siblings/ your own children) to achieve a degree?
- Is your permanent address in a neighbourhood with low progression to higher education?
- Is your household income £25,000 or below – both you and partner's, where applicable
- Did you attend a school which achieved less than the national average of 5 A\* to C passes at GCSE
- Have your studies been disrupted or adversely affected by circumstances in your personal, social or domestic life?
- Did you grow up in public care?

## Appendix E: Co-researchers Diary

**Diary to record your experience of choosing social media to connect with university peer(s).**

Please can you bring the diary to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> interview.

**What information to include:**

- Which form of social media? (e.g. *Twitter, Facebook*).
- What date and time?
- Who did you connect with? (*no names please: e.g. student from my current programme/ or study Facebook group*).
- What reason did you have for connecting with a peer(s)?
- Which tool did you use? (e.g. *instant messaging, looking at a peers page*)
- What did you do? (e.g. *actively writing or passive – just reading*).
- How did you feel after you connected with a peer(s)?

Please record your experience of using social media to connect with a peer(s) as soon as possible after the event.

Please try to not let the diary impact on your natural behaviour. Allocate around 20 minutes per week for writing your diary entries.

**When to return the diary: eight weeks after the first interview.**

**Please return this diary to me w/c 18<sup>th</sup> May 2015**

**An example entry:**

Which social media: Facebook

Date: 23 March 2015 - 11am – for around 15 minutes.

Who: I logged on to connect with the study group I am in with four other students.

Reason: I was worried about the progress I was making with our current assignment.

Tool: instant messaging

What I did: Chatted with one peer about how I was feeling. We shared our current progress.

After: I felt less anxious. We were both in a similar situation and agreed to meet up to study together later this week.

## Appendix F: Invariant Constituent - example

Significant statements which contained relevant content to each research question were taken from the interview transcripts. Following is an example of the Invariant Constituents from Jo relating to the research question: *What feelings are expressed relating to the challenges of being a mature and part-time WP undergraduate in a Russell Group university?*

Jo: Scarred.

Jo: Um, I suppose... because I've, I've been out of education for so long, I was worried about how to, how I would fit in, how.. I would I be capable of being able to study, or [audio not clear] doing my essays and that. Um, and I suppose to be honest, as a mature student you've kind of, you set up your life as it is, for me, like with children and that, I've got my children, I've got my partner and I've got my home. And then to suddenly go away from all that into, being a student, even though it was part-time, it, it took over quite a lot of my time at home, um...

Jo: It was mixed feelings, it was kind of.. excitement, I kinda of felt like 'yes, I've done it' I've got that first step, but then it was very daunting, it was kind of, 'what am I doing?' kinda thing, you know and even walking up the stairs to go into, to sit with everyone else, that I was going to be in for rest of the year with, 'I was kind of thinking, how will they see me, what will they think about me? Am I going to get on with anybody here, am I going to be ok?' It wasn't until I left the first initial, ur time that I came, that I just felt a bit more, you know, I was doing the right thing but, it was just something very, very different.

Jo: Um.. it is hard sometimes, because with part-time, even though I'm only in two days a week, I'm, I'm trying to juggle, life at home with being at university, but then it sometimes feels as if I don't come in enough, I'm not in the environment enough to be able to sit down and do the work, um, because I can't, with my youngest being at school only in a morning until 11.30am, I can't say get up, take them to school and come to university, do some work in that environment and then go home. Um, so part-time for me, I'm, I don't feel as if I'm in university enough, um, to actually get the full experience and to, to be able to have that time away from home, I'm trying to juggle with the home life and the, with having my kids at home, trying to sit down and do the studies, 'cause by time they've gone to bed, I'm tired, I've had, housework to do, I've had all my other jobs to do. I really just want to have some time where, just to sit down and watch a bit of... soaps on the tv or something.

## Appendix G: Thematic label - example

Using Nvivo, the invariant constituents for each participant were then organised into thematic labels. At this stage the process was undertaken on an individual student level. The following are the core experiences which related to Tatiana's theme of *self-doubt* as experienced during her 1<sup>st</sup> year becoming an UG:

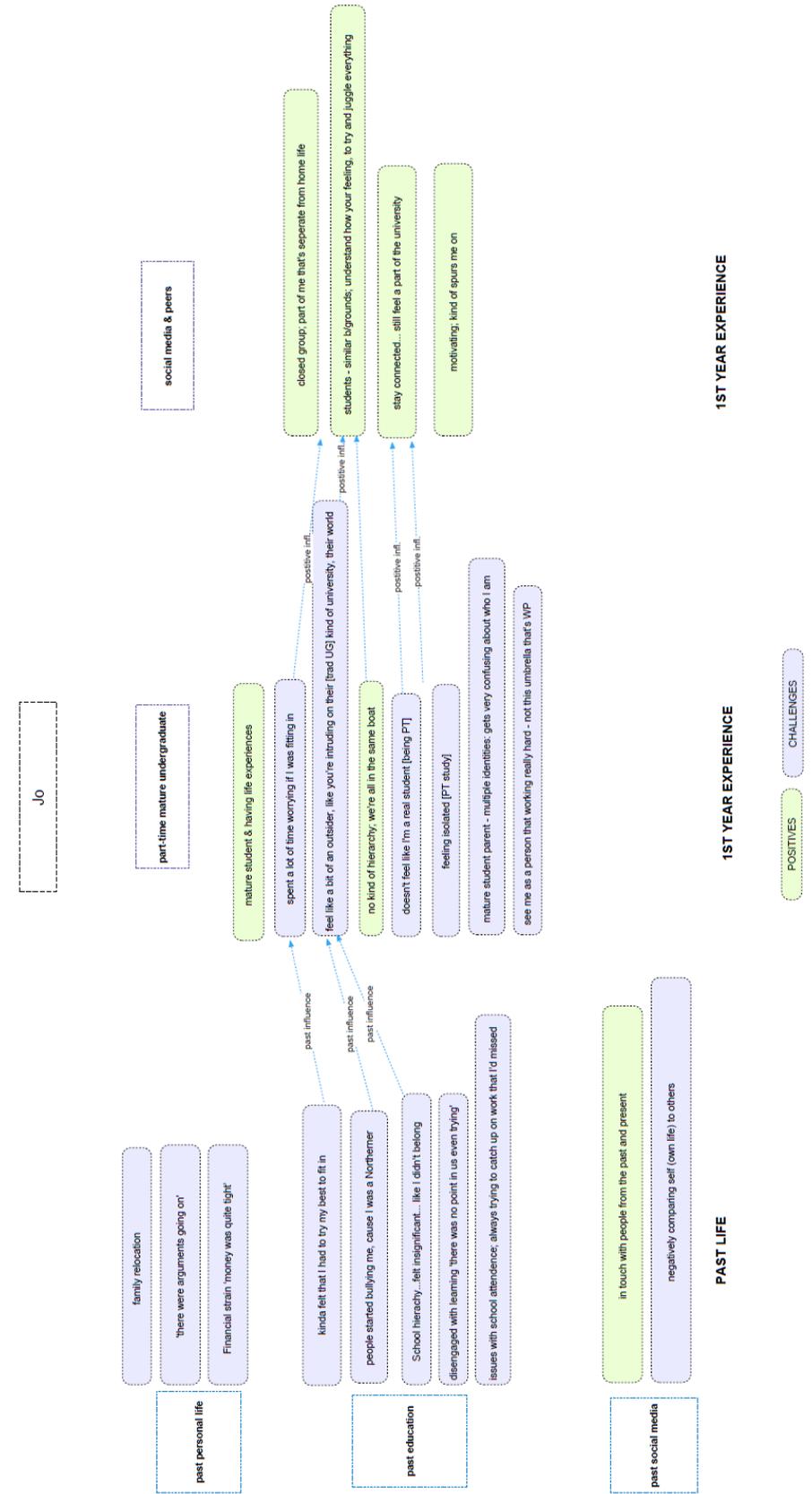
I didn't like that, I was having doubts, can I do this? Is this too much? Am I taking on too much? Am I kidding myself?

Yer, oh wow, we wasn't expecting, that was a shock, I didn't mention that, right at the beginning, it was like, shock after shock after shock, and thinking what, what, what, what? I can't do it, I can't do it. And then you go through the first assignment, and think ... I remember first assignment and thinking 'I've failed, I've failed, I've failed'

So, right, I don't know, maybe the last ur, first few months after the first assignment I think, I was constantly doubting myself, thinking... surely I'm in the wrong place.. surely.. I shouldn't be here..?

Maybe, not bullied you know, but... I don't know, I just... I was just petrified of the whole experience, I just felt like I shouldn't be here, you know. I just felt like I don't belong here, this is [name of university] you know, it's a university, its not a college, its not a school, its not where you go to learn languages. Its, you know, it's a proper thing, and I thought everybody will be so smart, and you know, they'll come from probably you know colleges, and they know most of the things and how am I gonna cope and... you know.. with my foreign language.. and obviously perception of people as well, you know, how they going to accept me, how are they going to take me? And when I realised, well it wasn't just me, there was a couple of more guys, I'm thinking oh my god, what am I gonna do? This is like so scary.

## Appendix H: Validation and Individual Summary - example



## Appendix I: Individual Textural Description - example

Using verbatim quotes the following presents a textural or '*noematic*' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 31) description of 'what the individuals experienced' (Miller and Salkind, 2002, p. 153) including the inner 'thoughts, feelings and struggles' (Moustakas, 1994, p.133) which James described as he reconstructed his emotional past life experiences of education:

For James his worries as an UG were directly related to his past life "it all links into school, it really does, without a doubt" and his "rubbish" past experience at school during which he described as "I just didn't feel pushed" which "really wound me up". He had dyslexia and the lack of support led to him having a negative academic self-concept "you're dyslexic, and you just think you're stupid". He had a sense of difference being physically removed to study away from his peers "I'd hate people knowing; hated that room; horrible, horrendous" the lack of support from one particular teacher created deep inner emotions "made me angry, angry very angry" and this sense of difference left him not feeling comfortable in his own skin "I'd wish I was somebody else".

Aged 11 and being diagnosed with having a movement disorder he felt there was "more stigma attached". His frustrations left him "completely disconnected from it [education]" which impacted his academic achievement "during my GCSE's results, I won't lie, I didn't revise, I couldn't be bothered".

During this time James was also physically and mentally isolated "How I was perceived and bullied...by students & teachers, very lonely place" he described how he was "petrified of breaks, sit in a corner by myself" this left him "constantly felt like I was standing on eggshells throughout childhood".

## Appendix J: Structural Description - example

Using verbatim quotes the following presents a structural or '*noetic*' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 31) description which captures the wider influences being 'the context, the setting or the situation' (Miller and Salkind, 2002, p. 153) that relate and directly impact what has been perceived. For Jim the structural beliefs related to his experience of writing publicly on Facebook included the impact of his limited social media experience and having dyspraxia and dyslexia:

Jim did not actively engage with his peers via social media "rather than me being involved in. Not speaking, I'll look on it"... "I've not had any one-to-one conversations, and that's not because I haven't wanted to, its just cause I'm still not sure about Facebook." However, this lack of engagement was not through choice, Jim did want to be more active "I want to write something, I look and I, like somebody put something on the other week, I think it was [name of student] that and I'd gone through this whole scenario in my head, of what to reply to that" he finds himself unable to respond "Yer, it's a block, its just, its just something that I don't know, it just wont allow me to go past that point." Having dyspraxia and dyslexia writing online in a public space can be daunting "I can speak better than what I can actually put it down in writing. I don't know whether that has anything to do with me not using social media in speaking to people, um... because I would rather stand and talk."... "it's a barrier that I need to get over". This was in addition to having a lack of experience in using social media "even my daughters have said, 'send a reply, say something' well how do you do it? 'you press this box here'.. Ok.. and I know how to do it... and I'm asking them... but... I just can't bring myself to.. to do that.... [laughs]." Which has resulted in him seeking support from his family "And the couple of replies that I have put, I've had to ask my daughter how to send them. Because I were writing things, I'd wrote something and I didn't know what to do, from that point. Then when I switched my computer off, it had gone."

## Appendix K: Individual Textural-Structural Description - example

Finally, the written summaries from stages 5 and 6 are combined to create an *Individual Textural- Structural Description*, a combination of “what” people experience and “how” (Miller and Salkind, 2002, p.152). The following presents two separate concise extracts from the 3,700 word summary of the lived experience for Louise:

### **Past education**

Louise was very angry and didn't have a lot of friends at school, she felt her difference to her peers who 'came from working families they seemed to have a lot more than me'. She would 'lie about going to Spain, always Spain. Um, because friends went away there... probably the furthest I went was the caravan park.' She also made attempts to fit in with the children on packed lunch 'if I got any money... I would go to the local shop, buy um, prawn cocktail crisps, a yogurt, and a piece of fruit. And pretend I was on packed lunches and go and eat that, with the rest of the kids. Even though I were on free school meals.' This made her feel out at school, 'I think I was a bit of a bully. To be honest [sounds regretful]. So if I didn't get included, or, people weren't being nice, then I would bully them. And be quite mean.' This bullying was due to feelings of isolation and inner anger 'about the bullying side of things, um, and I were, I was quite a tom boy and quite.. looking back I was very angry. Really angry and.. um.. lonely, so I know that I was left out a lot.'

### **Sense of difference**

Although Louise had briefly made reference to age, it was social class that created in herself a sense of difference. Throughout the interviews she had made several comments comparing herself to those who have had a more privileged life, she refers to seeing herself as 'inferior.. of um, people, I'd see as higher class... um, having maybe good job, good education or just financially being better off than myself... 'not feeling good enough. Um, coming from a you know, a lower class background, coming from a poorer background.' Before coming to university Louise had made assumptions regarding class 'if you come from a poor background, lower class, then you will have had a rubbish life. And somebody from a upper-middle class background wouldn't because they had money, because they could be educated.'

## Appendix L.1: Facebook Group Content<sup>13</sup> - example

### L.1.1 Requests for peer support

- [reply] cool, so we have our individual marks for each module, how do you work out the average?
- [post] Hi guys: regarding scholarship form, section B3. do we fill this section in ourselves???
- Hello my lovely peers, do any of you know how to delete and edit on the forums???? Thanks in advance
- [reply] No logged into portal. Can log into my account and library but won't bring up modules in VLE x I

### L.1.2 Communication with Staff

- where are we [tutor name] Normal room? Thanks
- [reply] Thank you [tutor name] and [tutor name], awesome teachers, amazing women x x
- [reply] Oh nooooo maybe our good friend [staff name] can help out???? [emoticon]
- [reply] Thank you [tutor name] [tutor name] and [tutor name] for your hard work, support and encouragement! You are true superstars!! [stars & flower emoticons]
- [reply] Happy Easter [tutor] x
- [reply] Thank you [tutor name]! Between you and [tutor name] and the whole group, its been an amazing year.....forever grateful! [smiley face]
- [reply] Thanks [tutor name] [hearts x 4]

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<sup>13</sup> Examples are drawn from each co-researcher where available

## Appendix L.2: Facebook Group Content - example

### L.2.1 Provide support to peers

- [reply] oh dear! Do you want me to sort it remotely? X
- [same post] ya welcome [name] just give us a shout if you need any help if i cant help you i am sure one of our marvellous group can help us xxxxxx
- Anyone need me to help with regards to questionnaires or other research methods, I'm in uni Monday after 4 or inbox me (emoticons)
- [reply] It wont let you do it hun? X
- [reply] Not sure. It may tell you on [uni] portal site under library and referencing x
- [reply] Congrats! [smile emoticon]

### L.2.2 Humour

- [reply] I'll come in a track suit and slanted baseball cap then x
- [reply] sorry [name of student] from now on i pinky promise to listen to you lol
- [reply] When are you guys going to realise I'm always right [ 3 x smiley faces] x x
- [post] Since we're studying [module title] would it be wrong for tonight's lesson to be in a beer garden?! X
- [reply] Lol, nope we're trying to figure it out, hopefully someone will know...
- [reply] LOL

## Appendix L.3: Facebook Group Content - example

### L.3.1 Socialising

- Good morning all, I'm at the library this morning for exam preparation. If anyone else is in please personal message me. [smile emoticon]
- will be in [name of centre] tomorrow 12pm onwards if anyone wants to join me and [name of student] xx
- [post] I know this page is for learning purposes but I don't have everyone on FB. Please can all students from [year cohort] inbox myself if they are interested in going out for a bite to eat at a local (near uni) curry house my friend owns it so extra discount [name of restaurant] just off [name] lane
- [post] Who's off to see [name of famous political comedian] on [date] at cinema?
- [post] x 3 photos of student cohort and staff out drinking.

### L.3.2 Received Peer Support

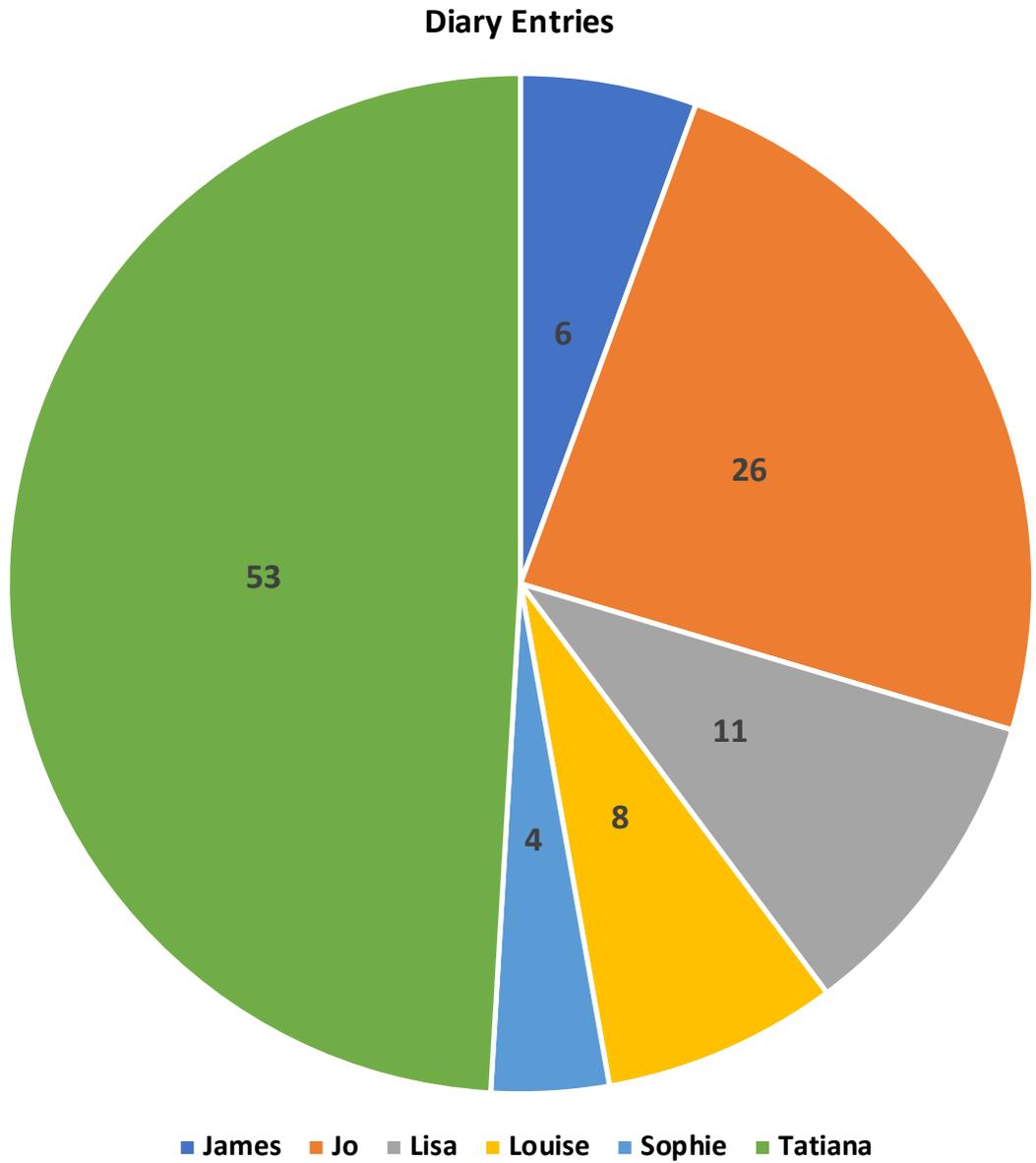
- [reply] Cool! That's annoying thanks for the info [name of peer] [smile emoticon]
- [same post] wont let you go any further on form without it.... i am in [centre] tomorrow so will shout for help from [staff name] lol xxxx thanks guys xxxxx
- [reply] Perfect and thank you xx
- [reply] Fab idea [student name] [emoticons]
- [reply] Your support got me through it xx
- [reply] Thank you [heart]

## Appendix L.4: Facebook Group Content - example

### Political examples

- [post] [shared a BBC blog post about Scottish referendum 'take us with you, scotland' say thousands in North of England.]  
Who agrees? I kinda do
- This programme was aired on 03/03/2015 on BBC 1 if anyone interested. It explores the affects of homelessness on children's education aswell as physical,mental health and future chances in life...
- well unless something drastic happens with the current parties involved this might be getting my vote x

### Appendix M: Co-researcher diary: number of entries



## Appendix N.1: Facebook Group Content - examples

### N.1 Not alone feeling this way (only three entries in total):

- Found out wasn't only one – x 2 (reassurance)
- **Posted on course page.** Statement about enjoying the year. Others responded in agreement. Sad that the year has ended but happy others felt same way.
- 30 mins. **Instant messaging** with one peer. Discussion about academic work – felt clearer & helped peer; felt good to share concerns and know I am not on my own.

### N.2 Give peer support

- Giving peer support to another x 1
- Main page. Another student asking how you would reference something. Responded – giving peer support. I wanted to help and would not answer unless I was absolutely certain, as don't want to be wrong and be made full of as I was at school. Up to today, have looked at posts but not added comments as either not relevant or needed messenger to reply.
- **30 mins. FB messenger.** Had a query from peer about using the VLE. She helped & they had a catch up. Felt happy being able to help and great being able to catch up. Don't see them as often as would like.
- **Entry 2 – Facebook - arranging to meet F2F. instant message.** Helping a peer with discussion forum – using it. Use public group then private messages. She helped her peer with this issue. (**provided peer support**)
- FB – 10 mins. **Instant messaging** Connect with a peer. – helping a peer who had missed a session – to offer information from it (giving peer support). Instant messaging. Felt better knowing she was fine and being able to help her.

## Appendix N.2: Facebook Group Content - examples

### Social

- Connecting with all students to organise an event
- Ongoing – invited into a group on FB with two other students. Moving onto same course in yr 2. Wanted to check in with one another. Discussed Qs about application finance etc.. great to know I will remain in contact with these people.
- Entry 1 – FB page – 5 mins – arranging study buddy
- Entry 1 – Facebook - talked with a few peers about academic work – arranged to meet F2F
- 5 mins. instant messaging. One peer – meeting up F2F next week. Feels good to have new friends and build solid friendships

### Feeling of anxiety contacting peers (only three entries in total):

- Nervous about messaging students on FB
- Main page – to see if others going to a cinema night. No replies – maybe I should have written the post differently. Slightly deflated.
- Main group. Post wishing others good luck. Felt need to say something positive. Nervous but happy others in group responded positively.

### Receive peer support

- Main page. Asked for peer support as had issues with Turnitin – had replies and felt heard.
- Entry 7 – Facebook – left memory stick. Found it. Felt supported.
- Entry 4 – Facebook 15 mins. Instant message. Peer checking with [name of peer] to see how things are going. Issue with internet affected conversation. Felt more relaxed from peer support – knowing support is there.
- 20 mins. A peer. Instant messaging. Felt down and lacked motivation. Received peer support, inspiration – felt much better, motivated again.

## Appendix N.3: Examples of Facebook Group Content

### Private chat

- **Ongoing discussion** – with 3 others. Notes and study sessions. Happy helping each other which feels great.
- **Entry 5 – WhatsApp – 15 mins – group chat.** Discussing uni work – all struggling – didn't; help 'not very positive' 'felt worse'
- **Entry 2 – Facebook - arranging to meet F2F. instant message.** Helping a peer with discussion forum – using it. Use public group then private messages. She helped her peer with this issue. (**provided peer support**)
- 20 mins. **Instant messaging.** Student group. Banter and laugh. Felt so delighted how close we have become – many new friendships.