

Project Title: Developing a sense of community through cross-level engagement between staff and students in creative industries subjects

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Executive Summary

The overall project set out to pilot and evaluate innovative programme level blended engagement events that aim to create a community of learners across a qualification. The project also investigated how an emergent sense of community at programme level facilitates students' retention and progression.

This project attempted to gain new understandings around the rather 'fuzzy concept' of community and connect these to the 'hard data' on student progression. Understanding the role of a sense of community at qualification level is significant for improving the attainment of our distance learners.

An action research methodology was used to design, test and evaluate different formats of blended engagement events. Qualitative and quantitative data from surveys and interviews was collected and analysed to evaluate these formats.

The analysis of the data provided evidence that the cross-level engagement events created a community of learners across a qualification amongst its participants. A larger percentage of students who participated in cross-level events progressed in the qualification (81%) compared to the overall cohort (51%) of the year the events were first introduced.

The most successful of these events was the Annual Show of student work (a poster competition and exhibition). The Annual Show provides a spectrum of engagement. Students can individually enter a competition with a poster of their work, or they can design and curate the exhibition itself, which involves teamwork and collaboration with peers and faculty. What students valued most was going through a shared, applied experience that offers them scope to demonstrate and apply their skills as exhibition designers. This helps students to gain confidence. With confidence they can influence others especially in discussion with peers, faculty and potential employers. Participants become advocates for the qualification. Blending face to face and online engagement was important. The events were used as catalysts to generate content that is further distributed on social media channels to achieve maximum impact, attract new students and inform the public. The learning from this project will influence qualification wide strategic changes in Design and Innovation.

In 2019, funding to continue to run annual cross-level engagement events has been secured from E&I.

1 Introduction and Background

Educational theories that are grounded in social constructivism promote the concept of learning in a community. In seminal work in social constructivism, Vygotsky (1978) suggested that learning can only take place under guidance of, or in collaboration with, others. While the Open University (OU) has developed designs and technologies that facilitate social engagement, critical discourse and community building within individual modules, establishing the sense of a community of learners at programme level is still underdeveloped. This is not unique to the OU but was reported as a wider gap in distance and blended learning literature (Akyol, Garrison, & Ozden, 2009; Drysdale, Graham, Spring, & Halverson, 2013) This study sought to explore approaches to creating communities of learners at Qualification Level that inspire, support and empower the learners and faculty alike (Carvalho, Dong, & Maton, 2009).

Literature suggests that creating a Sense of Community among learners facilitates higher level learning and increases retention (Bawa, 2016; Tresman, 2002). Students that actively engage in learning beyond module-specific activities, and especially those that engage in a blend remote and face-to-face events, feel part of a larger Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007) (Rovai & Jordan, 2004), and are 'more likely to have increased retention' (Boston et al., 2010, pp77).

This study attempted to investigate whether, and if so, how, cross-level qualification engagement events create a Sense of Community (SoC). Sense of Community is a feeling of belonging, a shared emotional connection to as well as influence from and on other members of a community. Being member of a community fulfils a specific need and is purposeful (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The terms community and membership suggest a social unit. Any form of community has impact on the identity of the individuals in it, and the cohesiveness of the connections between them. The distinction between grounded, life-style and projected communities is helpful (James, Nadarajah, Haive, & Stead, 2012). A community in the context of distance higher education, such as at the OU, is a projected community, not rooted in one place or aligned to a particular life-style. It is imagined, socially constructed based on a shared purpose. The following differentiations of 'purpose' of communities in the context of blended/distance learning are made in literature.

Concept of Community Definition

Community of interest	A group of people gathered around a topic of common interest, who exchange information to share common passions or to improve their understanding of a subject (Brown & Duguid, 2009).
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Community of practice	Group of people who shares a concern or a passion for something they do (a practice) and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly, such as a craft or profession (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).
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Community of inquiry	A group of individuals involved in a process of empirical or conceptual (scientific) inquiry into problematic situation. (Dewey, 1938; Garrison et al., 2010).
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Community of Interest is an umbrella concept, within which various types of communities can differentiate. While community of practice emphasises the practitioner and their practice, community of inquiry highlights the 'scientific', knowledge generating inquiry at a distance or in blended learning settings. However, this could also be categorised as a shared practice if the inquiry leads to, or involves, practical actions or a change in practice. Due to the rather unclear boundaries of purpose between these specific community concepts, this work drew mainly on the overarching concept 'Sense of Community' to understand and evaluate the engagement events. Within this evaluation, the goal is to draw out the purpose of attending events and being/becoming a member of the Q61 - Design and Innovation - community.

2 Aims and scope

The project set out to pilot and evaluate innovative programme-level blended engagement events with the aim to create and support a community of learners across a qualification. A second aim was to understand how an emergent sense of community at programme level facilitates students' retention and progression.

Specific goals were to:

1. Understand what types of cross-level events engage students in which ways,
2. Test strategies to blend f-t-f and online engagement at qualification level,
3. Understand what students' value when engaging in cross-level events,
4. Explore ways to work in partnership with students and AL's,
5. Develop a programme of engagement events that can be maintained beyond the pilot project,
6. Create a 'Sense of Community' amongst learners on the Design and Innovation Qualification.

3 Activities: approach, methods and analysis

3.1 Approach and Events

The overall approach was to plan and run a series of qualification-wide events and evaluate student's engagement in the events, measure how students perceive and what students gain from the events, and understand what impact the events have on students' progression through the qualification. At the time of writing, nearly three cycles of Action Research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007) have been carried out (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Q61 cross level engagement events between 2017 and 2020

In parallel to the events, a Facebook group was created to enable informal interaction between staff and students and the posting of interesting items within a platform already used by many students. This group also later enabled the capture and broadcast of events as they happened. The number of members in this group has risen to over 150 over a two-and-a-half-year period.

3.1.1 2017/2018

The seminal series of events were similar to a traditional OU day-school in that they took place in venues across the Regions. Each event engaged in design and innovation relevant activities over a period of 4-6 hours on a Saturday. The events were facilitated by 1-2 tutors. The difference to a traditional day-school format was that central academics attended and co-facilitated the events. The event was open to any student registered on the Design and Innovation Qualification or currently studying a design module (U101, T217/218, T317). Friends and family were also welcome to attend. The events were situated in 'unusual and interesting venues' compared to traditional day-school venues.

- The first event was a field trip to the Design Museum in London to coincide with the Beazley's Designs of the Year exhibition.
- The second event was a Design Fair around Sustainable and Narrative design at Walton Hall Campus in Milton Keynes.
- The third was a field trip and Austerity Design workshop at the Imperial War Museum in Manchester.
- The fourth was an End-of-year exhibition of Design and Innovation student work at Walton Hall Campus.
- Two online events were blended into these. The first 'Designers Talking' online session introduced photographic practice by an AL and the second introduced exhibition design strategies to prepare student-curators for the End-of-year exhibition.

3.1.2 2018/2019

The qualification team experienced unexpected high and low levels of interest in different events and so applied for MSQ funding in 2018 to re-run some high-interest events to try to repeat the successful and pilot other kinds of events to improve the offers. Students in particular asked for events in the Nations. Using online social media broadcasting to capture some of the events and enable remote attendance was also trialled this year.

- The first event was a field trip to the Design Week in Belfast to attend guided tour through artist and designer studios and an architecture exhibition in Belfast. The event was also broadcasted live on the Design and Innovation Facebook group.
- The second event was a repeat field trip to the Design Museum and Facebook Live broadcasting of the tour and group discussions
- The third was a field trip to the Senedd, Welsh Parliament in Cardiff and Facebook Live broadcasting of part of the tour and group discussions
- The fourth event was held in Scotland and involved the guided visit and a talk at the V&A in Dundee and the Riverside Museum in Scotland. Parts of the tours, the talk and the group discussions were broadcasted via Facebook Live.
- The fifth event was a repeat of the End-of-year exhibition of Design and Innovation student work at Walton Hall Campus.

3.1.3 2019/2020

Through dissemination activities, the Qualification team demonstrated student engagement and impact at the events, so that the E&I Management Team allocated a yearly budget to running these events in the future. Hence, some data stems from events that were completed up until the end of 2019:

- The first event was a field trip to the Engineering Design Show in Coventry. Parts of the event were broadcasted live on the Design and Innovation Facebook group.
- The second event was a field trip to the Museum of Brands in London, including meeting with its founder. A talk on food canning was streamed live on Facebook.
- The third event was a field trip to the Makerversity in London with Facebook Livestreaming.
- The fourth event was a repeat field trip to the Design Museum and Facebook Live broadcasting of the tour and group discussions

The following event was not considered in the report, as they it will be conducted after this report is handed in.

- The fifth event will be a repeat of the End-of-year exhibition of Design and Innovation student work at Walton Hall Campus in June 2020.

The optimised process for organising and running a blended event involves to:

1. Collect recommendations of interesting places to visit from students and staff,

2. Organise a suitable date and time to visit and coordinate attendance and share it on multiples OU sites, news and forum and Social Media. Camel students if possible (see Changes and Challenges section),
3. Events that have a small registration fee attached, e.g. museum entry, have better attendance if a money pool for reduced group entry is set up in advance,
4. Meet at venue, register attendees and introduce each other and run the event,
5. While one staff member facilitates the event, another is responsible to stream parts of the event live to the closed Design and Innovation Facebook group with permission of participants and venue,
6. Close event by receiving evaluative feedback on the event
7. Write a summative blog article about the event on Design@Open blog/FB group and Study website, linking to any videos taken at the event for others, who could not attend in person, to catch up.

3.2 Working in partnership with students

The Annual Students Design Exhibition is an exception to the usual event pattern. This event involves students directly in its organisation and design, and staff work in close partnership with the participating students.

The process for organising and running an Annual Student exhibition comprises:

1. Advertise the event months in advance and offer several ways for students to participate.
2. Ask students to submit one poster of their best work to the competition.
3. Recruit an AL to oversee the exhibition design
4. Select student jurors and curators from those who have volunteered.
5. Central academic staff and the AL exhibition designer, alongside the student jurors, judge the submitted posters, select posters for the public exhibition, and determine the winners.
6. The 3-4 student curators design the physical exhibition, guided by an experienced exhibition designer and OU AL.
7. Ask for student volunteers to design a poster and flyer announcing the exhibition in collaboration with a member of academic staff and work with them to do so.
8. Open the exhibition to the public for a few days. Staff and students across the School are invited to the opening.
9. Make a virtual exhibition permanently accessible to the public and to those who cannot attend in person.

3.3 Methods and Data

The project used a mixed methods approach to plan and evaluate students' engagement in cross-level events offered by the Q61 Design and Innovation Qualification.

We planned to run one pre-events survey (baseline) and a large sample post event survey to be administered to a large sample of students who were currently registered on Q61 (n=919). Due to staff shortages in the IET survey unit, the planned pre-survey could not be run in time and was run after some events had already been conducted in 2018.

At each event, a survey was administered to participants right after they had attended events. Both surveys gathered a mix of quantitative and also qualitative data. Survey questions for both, the large post-survey and the event surveys, were loosely aligned to the Community of Inquiry Survey Instrument (draft v15) (Arbaugh et al., 2008). The post event survey tried to understand expectations around 'community' and of engagement-events in general, and events surveys asked for agreement or disagreement to statements about a specific event (see Appendix A for more details on the large survey and Appendix B post-event survey questions)

Further quantitative data was collected from the participation in events, such as number of participants at location, on Facebook Live or Catch-up and the number of visits to the Design@open blog, where events were summarised for a broader audience and the Annual Show Online Exhibition is curated.

Some participants were interviewed about the progression on the qualification, the guideline interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviewees were self-selected following an open call for participation. The guideline questions for the interviewers are available in Appendix C.

Data from student email feedback and module or study site forum threads and the D&I Facebook group conversations were also collected for analysis to evidence students' perception of the events and emergent Sense of Community.

3.4 Analysis of data

The surveys were analysed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative comments from the surveys as well as any other qualitative data were imported into NVivo for analysis.

The qualitative data was conducted in two stages, first an inductive and then a deductive analysis. In order to get a 'sense' and overview of the data, the sources were analysed inductively first. This included reading through all data and coding any words or phrases in 'vivo' (as they were stated by the source) that captured a quality of engagement. Therein, a particular analytic focus were the expressions of purpose of engaging in community events.

In the second stage, a 'Sense of Community' code categorisation developed by (Comeforo, 2016) was used to code the data deductively. The coding scheme included the categories of:

1. Membership and reinforcement: distinguishing between 'us' and 'them', creating boundaries, feeling accepted.
2. Integration and fulfilment of needs: a shared purpose developed by community members.
3. Influence: individuals influences on group and the group's influences on an individual.
4. Shared emotional connection and experience: empathise with one another, develop a shared history and go through shared experiences.

Specific analytic interest was the overlap between the inductive codes and deductively applied coding scheme.

3.5 Changes and challenges

3.5.1 Organising and running events

Reaching the desired students to engage with was one of the most challenging aspects of this work. On the one hand, identifying who is on a Qualification was surprisingly opaque, and different answers were obtained from different parts of the university systems. This caused delays in administering the survey. Some students who received the survey replied they were not registered on the Qualification any longer.

We also experienced difficulties in contacting students. On one occasion we were denied contact with qualification students because the particular event involved paying a Museum entry fee and the email was consequently considered as 'Marketing'. Email overload was also offered as reason to deny us sending out Camel emails to Qualification Students. This affected the reach of advertising our events. We had most attendees when we were able to send out CAMEL messages together with posting news on forums, websites and Social Media.

Establishing which platform to use to organise events was also not simple. We tried several approaches, such as using Email, VLE forms or Eventbrite to register. While using Eventbrite offered us some surprising insights, e.g. non-OU students' interest in participating in such events, it also created problems. We ran into issues in identifying whether a registered participant was in fact OU student or not. Although we learned that the OU has a corporate Eventbrite account, it was too complicated and time-consuming to access it.

The OU has effective processes to book venues and organise face to face events on module level, but this does not apply to qualification-wide events. The amount of academic time required to get such events organised is considerable.

The first year's events focused on contacting students that became disengaged from their study. But we had no way to measure the success. The second year, we made a travel fund available for students who would otherwise not be able to attend and for students to fund bringing family members. The uptake was surprisingly low, with only three students. Two students attended and were grateful for this support, the other student didn't make it to the event. Even though we purchased and posted the train ticket to him, he could not afford to pay for the travel connection to the train. This highlights the 'hidden' costs of event attendance and perhaps offers an insight into one reason for the low rate of tutorial attendance in some regions.

Getting the timing of events right is not trivial. When, we took the opportunity to go live on FB while visiting a FabLab in Yucatan Mexico as part of a British Council funded project, we had the highest ever number of students watching the live stream due to the time difference. Through this experience we learnt that many students watch FB live around 11pm or midnight. There were some challenges with FB live streaming as it was dependent upon the venue allowing us to film, and in some places there were restrictions.

The project also tested our pre-conception that London events would be a guaranteed draw for attendance, as we found that, for some events, even if students had booked in advance, they not always attend as expected. Also, just as with face-to-face tutorials, weather conditions, strikes or events out of our control affected attendance.

3.5.2 Data collection

Although the IET stats team offer great support for helping to design and run surveys, we ran into several problems. Due to staff shortages in the IET survey unit, the planned pre-survey could not be run in time. The questions were slightly modified and the survey ran in between the first events in 2018. There was also a problem that may be due to the survey design, or may be due to the survey sampling. Surveyed students had not attended any event should have been set on a different question path to attendee. However, there were no answers returned from the path of non-attending students, which was very unfortunate.

We initially planned to interview willing students after each event, but this turned out to be too much to achieve on the day. Two interviews were held at the first event, but the audio quality was low (due to insufficient private space at the venue), we could not use these interviews as data. Instead, with help from the OU V&A we recorded interviews with some student exhibition designers after the first end-of-year exhibition. Meanwhile the PI had formed a research partnership with an academic at a German distance University (Diploma University) to investigate student progression through a Design qualification at two different Institutions. Ethics and SRPP and DP approval were applied for and granted separately to conduct this work. Except for one, we recruited interviewees from those who had attended at least one cross-level event.

3.5.3 Data analysis

Finding evidence to support the hypothesis that developing a sense of community aids retention and progression was difficult as data could only be compared between participants and a specific cohort (using SAS dashboard). The 2017/2018 starting cohort was chosen as comparison, as this was the year the events had started. However, we are aware that students from different cohorts participated in the events.

Using NVivo to collate and analyse qualitative data was beneficial to the quality of the analysis, although it prolonged the data analysis process.

Using one predetermined analytic framework has shown its limitations. It was difficult to choose the correct one in the outset of the project. The Community of Inquiry Col framework was partially helpful (to structure the surveys), but also limiting in the analysis of qualitative data. Adjusting to using the broader Sense of Community SoC framework improved the results of the qualitative analysis.

4 Findings

4.1 Engagement data

A total of 140 students (165 when counting multiple event participation by the same participant) participated in the events between January 2018 and December 2019, of which 97 are still discoverable on OU systems. Of those 97, 43 were registered on the Q61 Qualification in 2020 (Table 1). Of those 43 students, 8 have no recent study. All others, that is 81% of all participants from Q61, are still progressing. Of these, 4 students have completed their study and gained their degree. This means that progression for participating students is excellent. This can be compared to the overall cohort that started studying on Q61 in 2017/2018 (the year events were first offered), which comprises 523 students. In this cohort, 51% are currently on

track/progressing. There is no way of establishing a causation between attendance at events and progression, however, a positive relation between participation in community events and study progression is indicated by the much higher progression rate of those who took part in events.

The detailed event engagement numbers in Table 1 show different patterns and preferences. Two events, the Design Museum meet up and the Annual Student Design exhibition have received the best responses in terms of face-to-face engagement. Although events in London are generally better attended, the Makerversity London event, which took place in late afternoon on a weekday, was not. The conclusion is that that London events work better on weekends than weekdays. The Design Museum draws high numbers every year. Experience from this event taught use that some students wish to involve friends and family in the meet ups, for example, as can be seen in the chart below, a number of students brought along partners and family members. However, the latest Design Museum event in 2020 indicated that entirely family focused events are not as popular, this may be indicative of the demographic of students able and willing to travel to London.

The Facebook (FB) engagement numbers have been continuously rising with the increasing promotion and usage of the Design and Innovation Group on FB (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1599710346973999>). For example, although the Makerversity had no face to face attendees, it had over 80 FB views. The extremely high number of views of the Annual Show on the Design@Open blog stems from integrating these Online Exhibition into the Induction materials for new U101 students. To date, the FB group page grew to 153 members, with many being active. The focus on active participation and news, rather than static information, as is for example in the OU Qualification Study Home site, makes this a useful tool in growing and maintaining a community of learners at a distance.

Event	Students	Family Friends	Staff	Facebook	Blog	Additional Output
Design Museum 2018	25	7	5	-	9	
Design Fair 2018	9	3	6	-	23	Module material
Imperial War Museum 2018	3	1	3	-	47	
Annual Show 2018	45	0	35	-	1,372	Qualification Video, module material
Design Week 2018	3	0	3	26	20	
Design Museum 2018	17	5	4	26	41	
V&A 2019	3	1	5	26	29	Potential module material
Riverside 2019	5	2	4	26	29	
Senedd 2019	3	2	3	29	26	

Annual Show 2019	39	12	20	64	433	Module material
Engineering Designs Show	1	0	2	52	23	
Museum of Brands 2019	12	0	4	70	16	
Makerversity 2019	0	0	4	81	-	Potential KTP
Sum	165	33	98	400	2068	

Table 1 Engagement numbers face to face and online, and additional outputs from events (Sum is not total of students as some students participated in more than one event)

4.2 Result of large online survey

An online survey asked 919 students registered on the Design and Innovation Qualification about their attitudes towards feeling part of a community of learners in Design and Innovation at the OU. 69 students responded to the survey in total, 12 were partially complete responses and 57 were complete responses giving a 6.2% response rate based on complete responses only.

56 respondents (93%) hadn't attended a Q61 engagement event before filling in this survey, and over 20% of respondents stated that they have no interest in feeling part of the Q61 community (Figure 2). Interestingly, 34% did feel part of this community, even though they might have not been to a community building event.

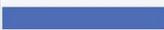
#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	I feel part of the Q61 community		23	34.3%
2	I don't feel part of the Q61 community but would like to		29	43.3%
3	I am currently not interested in feeling part of the Q61 community		15	22.4%
	Total		67	100.0%

Figure 2 Survey response: Feeling part of the Q61 Design and Innovation Qualification community

Most respondents (43%) didn't feel part of the Q61 community but would like to. Overall, 83.1% of respondents were on one of the 4 Qualification pathways in Q61 (Environment, Engineering, Arts and Business). The attitudes towards feeling part of the Q61 community split up across the pathways as shown in Table 1. Comparing the proportional distribution across pathways does not give a clear trend because of the small numbers. Respondents from the business pathway felt most part of the community followed by engineering and arts. Environment pathway

students had the most desire to feel part of the community, but didn't felt so yet. Arts pathway students showed the least interest in feeling part of the Design and Innovation Qualification community.

	Arts		Business		Enginee- ring		Environ- ment		None of the above		Not sure		Other		Grand Total
Not interested	4	25%		0%	4	18%		0%	2	100%	2	33%		0%	12
Don't feel part of, but would like to	7	44%	1	20%	8	36%	5	83%		0%	3	50%	2	100%	26
Feel part of	5	31%	4	80%	10	45%	1	17%		0%	1	17%		0%	21
Total	16	100%	5	100%	22	100%	6	100%	2	100%	6	100%	2	100%	59

Table 2 Feeling part of the Q61 community by Qualification pathway

■ Extremely important
 ■ Very important
 ■ Quite important
 ■ Not very important
 ■ Not at all important
■ Not applicable

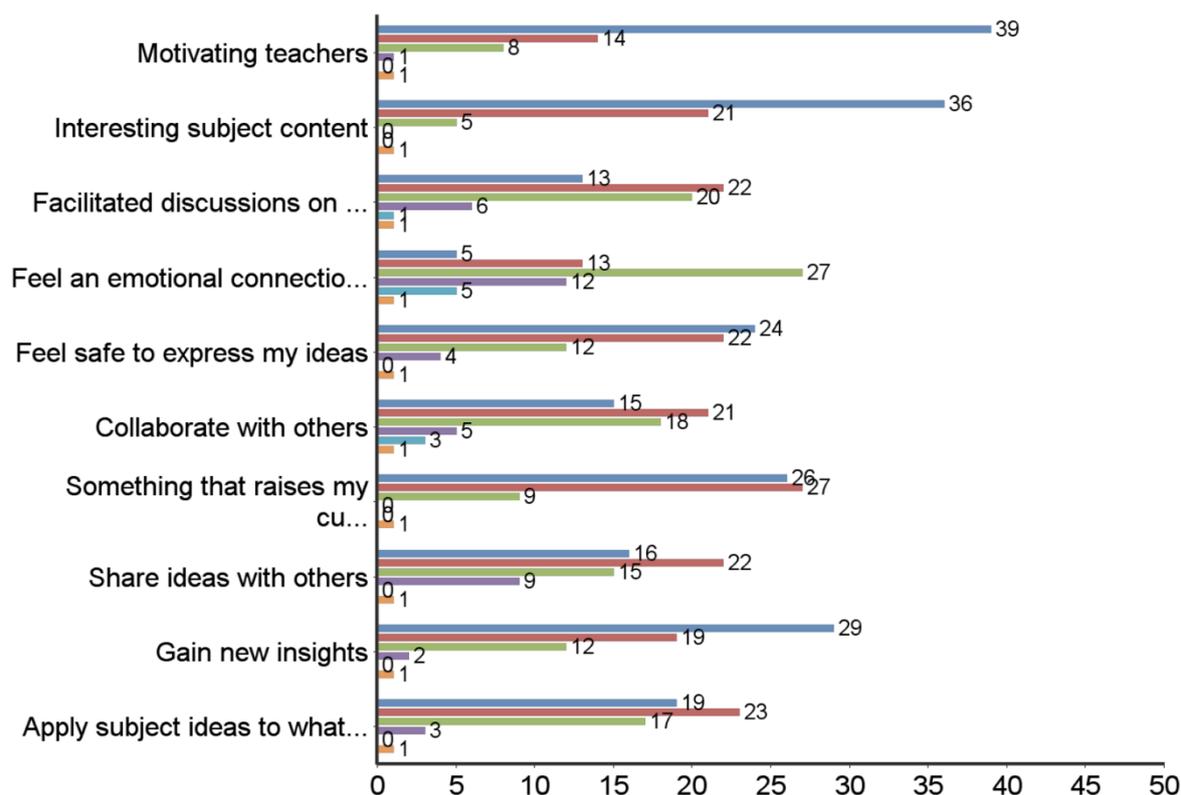


Figure 3 Attributes that students feel contribute to feel part of a Community

Attributes that students perceive as important to make them feel part of a community are shown in Figure 3. The most important attributes were motivating teachers, interesting subject content, gaining new insights and something that raises student's curiosity. The least important attribute was feeling an emotional connection, followed by facilitated discussions and collaboration. The attributes perceived to be least important in the pre-event survey are in stark

contrast to the findings from an analysis of qualitative data from students who then participated in the community events (see 5.4)

4.3 Post-events survey results

The post-event surveys show exceptional levels of satisfaction with the events. Respondents strongly agreed or agreed to most of the questions, resulting in very high average of agreement for each statement. It is notable that two statements 'I was appropriately challenged by the event' and 'I was given ample opportunity to demonstrate my skills' scored less, and this gives indication what future events could focus on more.

Question	DM1 N=16	DM2 N=7	MK N=5	MCR N=4	BF N=2	DU N=2	GL N=4	AV
I understood the purpose of the event.	4.8	4.9	4	5	4	5	5.0	4.7
I was appropriately challenged by the event.	4.8	4.4	4	5	4	4.5	3.7	4.3
I was inspired by the event activities and discussions.	4.7	5.0	4.8	5	4.5	5	5.0	4.9
I will be able to apply what I learned.	4.5	4.7	4.6	5	5	4.5	4.3	4.7
My learning was enhanced by the knowledge of the facilitator(s).	4.4	4.7	4.75	5	5	5	4.7	4.8
I found the facilitator(s) approachable and welcoming.	4.8	5.0	4.8	5	5	5	5.0	4.9
It was easy for me to get actively involved during the session	4.7	4.9	4.8	5	4.5	5	5.0	4.8
I was comfortable with the duration of the session	4.7	5.0	4.75	5	4.5	3.5	5.0	4.6
I was well engaged during the event.	4.7	4.9	4.8	5	4.5	4.5	5.0	4.8
I was given ample opportunity to get answers to my questions.	4.9	5.0	4.2	5	5	3.5	5.0	4.7
I was given ample opportunity to network with others.	4.8	5.0	4.6	4.75	4.5	4.5	5.0	4.7
I was given ample opportunity to demonstrate my skills.	4.0	4.3	4.2	4.75	3.5	4	5.0	4.2
I was pleased with the venue.	5.0	5.0	4.6	5	4.5	4.5	5.0	4.8

Table 3 Student average rating of agreement (where 5 is strongly agree and 1 is strongly disagree) statements asking for satisfaction and engagement

Although the baseline survey showed that initially, few students felt part of the Q61 community, many students who engaged in the events gave positive ratings, and a large percentage was retained on modules and progressing in the qualification. Students who attended events could

just be more engaged students overall. However, a positive reinforcement between attendance of events and a sense of community was also observed in the qualitative data.

4.4 Findings from qualitative analysis

NVivo was used to get a sense of the different data sources: student interviews, social media and forum posts and email conversations. The initial inductive analysis of qualitative data focused on what 'stood out'. Firstly, several students (all female, but on different pathways in Q61 and at different stages in their study) could be identified in different data sources, such as interviews, email, forum and social media data indicating a continued engagement in events and/or in online discussions after their first participation. The first participation was at the Annual show in 2018 or 2019. Recurrent coded observations within the Annual Show are shown in the Hierarchy (tree) diagram in Figure 4. Most notably, the codes *Shared experience and emotions* and *Skills demonstration* together with *Gaining applied experience, Confidence* and *Study progression* feature largely in the visualisation of the coded data. The prominence of coded data in the category *Shared experiences and emotion*, which was negligent in the large baseline survey of the expectations of a Qualification community, was surprising.

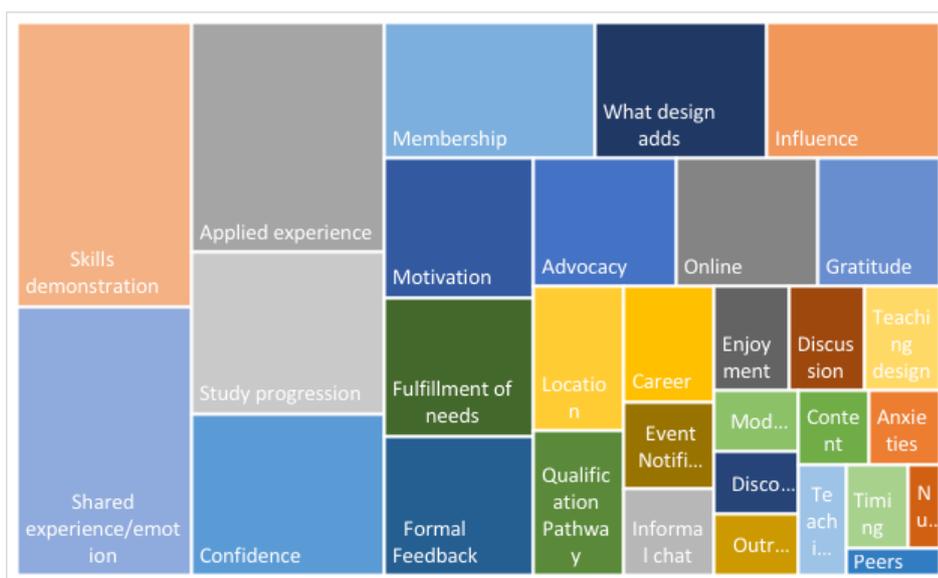


Figure 4 Diagram of codes associated with Annual Show

A tutor said in an interview about the Annual show:

With the Open University being an online distance learning facility there are not many occasions when students can come together to work and this is one of those opportunities and it's really been nice to see how they've all actually gelled and really got into this. (DC)

A student emphasised the opportunity to create a community of likeminded, contribute to shared tasks and work on personal goals at the same time:

... nice to be able to take part in a real design sort of event rather than just something in a in an assessment – in a TMA. And also get some real experience. ... students and lecturers and academics have all sort of met on a level playing field and it's nice to be able to just talk to them without the hierarchies.

I've also thought it would be a good experience to put on my CV and also decide whether perhaps exhibition design might be an area that I might like to go into. (AJ)

Participating in the Annual show gives the best opportunity to reinforce community membership by providing a shared experience and working towards a shared goal. The invited students worked with an experienced exhibition designer to plan and implement the exhibition of posters of students' works. This afforded them the opportunity to demonstrate skills that they have gained during their study and to provide evidence of their skills for their CV's. Applying experience, using design skills in a real-world task, gave the students confidence in their abilities and provided a platform from which to influence others, reinforcing the sense of community.

... to come to the OU and get involved and chat to everyone on the Q61 team boosted my confidence no end. ... I feel the project in the summer was invaluable work experience and gave me the confidence to speak up about my experiences. It took me from not being particularly confident in how I would take my degree into the world of work, to realising that the degree and the exhibition has given me a huge amount of applied experience that I can apply to almost everything I do. I wouldn't ever have applied had I not been asked to and that was all down to having something to talk about, the exhibition being that something! ... I've recommended to other students to get involved with anything that comes up in the future as from chats/their posts online on social media they seem to want to gain work experience in design roles. (CL)

Many participants agreed that involvement in the exhibition was a very positive experience. One student changed her idea of taking a study break after the event and instead progressed to other modules on the pathway, others continue to be engaged with their peers in the Qualification's Social Media channels reinforcing a sense of belonging and purpose. These students become influencer for new students, sharing their positive experiences and animating others to participate in qualification wide events.

Participants who chose to individually submit a poster and enter the price draw rather than engage in team work as exhibition designers were still able to feel connected to others who participated. A student who participated twice, who who won a special mention in the Annual show 2018 and the first prize in the end of year exhibition in 2019 commented:

What wonderful news to be one of the winners!!! Was a lovely surprise indeed and a brilliant end to my OU journey! (RM)

Also of note was the gratitude expressed by students for the work everyone had put into organising the extracurricular events. Gratitude was also expressed for the opportunities to engage in career and progression related discussions with peers and academic staff that are not confined to the module they were on, but the direction they were traveling on. The themes 'peers' and 'discussion' were frequently coded in feedback on any cross-level event. These opportunities for discussion create an emotional connection among participants that goes

beyond the modules they may coincidentally study together. These events offer connections to others on the Qualification and offer reinforcement in community membership, which is essential for study progression. This is clearly demonstrated by the following exchange on the Study site forum around a planned visit to the Design Museum in London:

S (17.11.2019): Will this go ahead? Keen to attend.

A (18.11.2019): We are fairly sure this will go ahead on that date but will confirm as soon as possible. Do please keep the date free.

S (24.11.2019): Ok great. Currently studying polar bears on U116 as part of the enviro track, but keen to keep connected with the Design side

5 Discussion

The project piloted and evaluated several innovative programme-level blended engagement events. These events created a community of learners across a qualification amongst its participants. This is evidenced by the analysis of the qualitative responses from event participants and becomes particularly apparent when this feedback is compared to the results of the baseline survey of a cross-section of all Q61 students. A larger percentage of students who participated in cross-level events progressed in the qualification (81%) compared to the overall cohort (51%) of the year the events were first introduced. In the further discussion of these key findings, the project's objectives will be re-considered.

5.1 Test strategies to blend f-t-f and online engagement at qualification level

Different blends of face to face and online engagements were tested. The, then newly introduced, study website proved to be less effective in providing a platform for blending events, when compared to Social Media sites, such as the Design@Open blog and Design and Innovation Facebook group. The Social media sites offered more flexibility to blend face to face and online participation in qualification wide events, using live video streaming (and catch up) and summative event descriptions. One of the advantages of Facebook is the built in alerts that let group members know when there is a live broadcast, this stimulates both synchronous and asynchronous engagement.

5.2 Explore ways to work in partnership with students and AL's

Associate Lecturers were considered equal partners in organising and running the events. ALs suggested venues and organised some of the most successful events. Generally, the less ownership and initiative an AL took in organising the event, the less successful the event was. Although there were exceptions in which ALs put in a lot of effort but few attended the event. This was often also associated with parallel disrupting events, such as bad weather, remote location or unfortunate timing of the event.

Students co-designed the Annual Shows in 2018 and 2019 as equal partners. This boosted students' confidence and progression, as evidenced in the qualitative data. Many of the participants are now go-to-students, who can be easily contacted with a guaranteed response, e.g. for accreditations or to spread the word of events, etc. This ongoing engagement with students as partners creates strong advocates for the Qualification.

5.3 Understand what types of cross-level events engage students, in which ways and with what value to the student

The Annual Shows engaged most students and the value of these events became most visible in the feedback on them. What students valued most was going through a shared and applied experience that offers them scope to demonstrate and apply their skills. An important aspect was offering students different ways to participate, either individually through poster submissions or as part of an exhibition design team. The active participation helps students to gain confidence. This confidence enables them to influence others especially in discussion with peers but also faculty and potential employers. Discussions centred around study and career progression. While the Design Fair would have been another event to demonstrate skills and gain confidence, this type of event was not repeated due to the small initial attendee numbers. The museum and day-trip events provided ample opportunity for informal discussions with peers to inform progression, but lacked the applied experience and scope to demonstrate skills (which was also evidenced in the post-event surveys).

When students meet others across their qualification they develop a sense of where they belong and what they are heading for. Every event offered an opportunity to learn to be part of a discipline. This has been termed the 'Hidden curriculum'. It refers to the:

“unintended, and often unacknowledged, learning that occurs during a programme of study. This includes the absorption of attitudes, values and perspectives that are experienced during the daily routine and the interplay of social relationships in the learning environment.” (Advance HE, n.d.)

Following this definition, it is not difficult to see that taking advantage of the qualities of the hidden curriculum is even more challenging in distance education, as many routines are down to the individual to maintain and lasting social relationships with other distance students are hard to maintain. Anderson (2002) maintained that aspects of the hidden curriculum, such as learning to learn, learning to be a professional, learning to be an expert and learning the rules of the game, can be found in distance education. A problem that remains is the visibility and opportunity to experience some of these aspects. At the OU we can find these being embedded in module material, assessment feedback and discussions on the forum or OpenStudio and tutorials. But with decreasing tutorial attendance, the opportunities for experiencing the hidden qualification curriculum are diminishing. Such community wide events give an additional opportunity to develop a sense of what it means to be and become a designer. They help to foster an understanding about what is 'important' in a subject area, such as design. The tone and emphasis in a discussion around a discipline relevant topic provides invaluable and unexpected insights that are difficult to recreate in structured writing. The hidden curriculum is socially transmitted and reinforced by a community of learners and teachers. At distance institutions, building such qualification community's needs to be actively facilitated.

5.4 Create a 'Sense of Community' amongst learners on the Design and Innovation Qualification

The analysis of data collected from the qualification wide events has shown that students who attend events do develop a sense of belonging, a sense of community. Brown, Collins, Duguid, & Seely (2007) argue that:

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“The activities of many communities are unfathomable, unless they are viewed from within the culture. The culture and the use of a tool act together to determine the way practitioners see the world; and the way the world appears to them determines the culture’s understanding of the world and of the tools. Unfortunately, students are too often asked to use the tools of a discipline without being able to adopt its culture. To learn to use tools as practitioners use them, a student, like an apprentice, must enter that community and its culture. Thus, in a significant way, learning is, we believe, a process of enculturation.” (pp. 33)

The analysis of the qualitative data gathered with attendees allowed this interpretation. Participating in the events, and especially the Annual Show, gives the best opportunity to reinforce community membership by providing a shared experience and working towards a shared goal. Using design skills in a real-world task and in external-to-OU settings, gives the student confidence in their own skills and provides a platform to influence others, which reinforces the sense of community. In short, the events offered enculturation. Indicators for a sense of community, such as membership, shared experience and emotional connection, influence and the fulfilment of need were detected in attendees’ feedback. This research has also confirmed that developing a Sense of Community increases retention and progression. Data of cases shows that a larger number of those who engage in community activities (compared to those who did not engage) are retained and progress in their qualification.

What remains to be discussed is what kind of community is created.

Initially, this research aligned to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework for the baseline survey and informed the post events survey questions. The framework consists of 3 presences: cognitive, teaching and social presence (Garrison et al., 2010) (<https://coi.athabasca.ca/coi-model/an-interactive-coi-model/>):

“Cognitive presence is the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication.

Social presence is the ability of learners to project their personal characteristics into the community of inquiry, thereby presenting themselves as ‘real people.

Teaching presence is defined as the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educational worthwhile learning outcomes.”

Garrison maintains that paying particular attention to the interaction between cognitive, teaching and social presences helps to retain and progress students and offers a good educational experience. The vehicles for interaction between the presences were described as, selecting content, supporting discourse and setting climate, which together offer some enculturation opportunity into a disciplinary area or domain.

Some data suggests that what is gained through the events goes beyond ‘inquiry’ within the educational context. We might be able to see a Community of Practice being developed. The purpose of a CoP is to develop a shared practice within a community of practitioners and within a certain domain (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The events can be understood as offering enculturation into the ‘situated practice’ of design and innovation. Situated practice develops a shared collection of experiences and stories, tools and methods, and ways of addressing recurring problems. The involvement of students in designing the annual design

student exhibition was one of the most effective avenues to develop such shared practices and enculturate participants into the domain of Design and Innovation. Again, we believe that the variety of options for engagement, from individual poster submission, to teamworking as exhibition curators offered personalised and accessible ways into enculturation. Developing more of these kinds of opportunities should be a priority for the Qualification team.

5.5 Develop a programme of engagement events that can be maintained beyond the pilot project

The qualification team was successful in securing MSQ funding for the second-year pilots (2018/2019) and then School funding for the continuation of events since autumn 2019. While, the Annual Show will be maintained more or less as it started out, the trials have shown that other events need to change year on year. It would be valuable to explore a second larger event that offers more opportunity to develop a shared practice. The authors of this report received funding to pilot employability workshops (solving real world problem a local company had posed using a design thinking methodology) in the south of Mexico at the end of 2019, which we are eager to implement with OU students.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, face to face events are on hold. For the first time, the Annual show will be held entirely online. We will have to experiment how to achieve the same level of student engagement in designing the event for online delivery, which will be a further valuable learning experience for the qualification team.

6 Impact

6.1 a) Student experience

Bringing staff, faculty and students together in cross-level engagement events and working as partners in organising and running these events offered an excellent experience for everyone. Students felt more confident about their study direction, skills and abilities, and they became more aware about their progression pathways. Students gained experiences that proved valuable for employability and building their CV's. Moreover, some students became advocates of the qualification to other students and the public. The community building aspect of the cross-level events has been embedded as an ongoing process and is now considered routine by the Qualification team.

6.2 b) Teaching

The qualification wide events had a positive impact on teaching the Q61 curriculum. For years, the qualification team was talking about implementing an end of year show, which is common practice in conventional design schools. This has been achieved with an astonishing impact. The Annual Show not only demonstrate the achievements of our students, but it also offers a baseline for new students to aim at.

The events also had an impact on our ability to teach the 'hidden curriculum', the values, norms and good practices around the Design discipline. This impacts the students' ability to become a professional and the qualification staffs' ability to offer enculturation into a domain.

6.3 c) Strategic change and learning design

This project had a strategic change in mind from its onset, but was taken by surprise about the real impact it has achieved in this area. We were able to secure MSQ funding to investigate a second year of trials, exploring different locations and types of events. We were then able to secure School funding to make these events a permanent part of curriculum delivery. The project already had wide-ranging impact on strategic change of how the curriculum is delivered.

Future events will even go further. The cross-level events for the coming year will trial employability workshops to offer student applied experience in solving real world problems through design thinking. These events facilitate the generation of new ideas for the 'BDes', our new Design Qualification, with a true cross-level and qualification wide approach to its curriculum design.

6.4 d) Any other impact

In parallel to this project, in 2018, Nicole Lotz developed a research collaboration with an academic from a German distance university, called Diploma University. The interviews were conducted with the German partner, who published a comparison between progression in a design qualification in Germany and the UK (Lanig, 2019).

In 2019, the authors secured funding from the British Council Mexico, to run Employability workshops in Yucatan. The methodology we have developed during this project will now be used to organise employability by design workshops at the OU with STEM students. This will feed into the BDes development and wider changes in Career Development support at the University, we hope.

7 List of deliverables

U101 module material, for example

<https://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=1538863§ion=2> [URL]

Qualification site material, for example

<https://learn2.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=206407&cmid=1374207> [URL]

Active Qualification Social Media FB channel

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1599710346973999/> [URL]

12 Design@Open Blog entries <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/design/> [URL]

Qualification marketing video [URL]

2018 Student exhibition, physical and online <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/design/annual-show-2018/> [URL]

2019 Student exhibition, physical and online <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/design/annual-show-2019/> [URL]

eSTEEEM 2018 Workshop slides Appendix [ppt]

STEM Student Conference presentations slides [ppt]

Contribution to eSTEEEM Tuition Projects report (pdf)

Journal paper in planning.

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10 Appendices

Appendix A Large survey report [Lotz_AppendixA.pdf]

Appendix B Post-event survey template (happy sheet) [Lotz_AppendixB.pdf]

Appendix C Interview questions [Lotz_AppendixC.rtf]

Appendix D Qualitative analysis in NVivo example [Lotz_AppendixD.png]

Appendix E Student email qualitative data example [Lotz_AppendixE.doc]

Appendix F eSTeEM workshop slides [Lotz_AppendixF.ppt]

Appendix G STEM student conference presentation slides [Lotz_AppendixG.ppt]