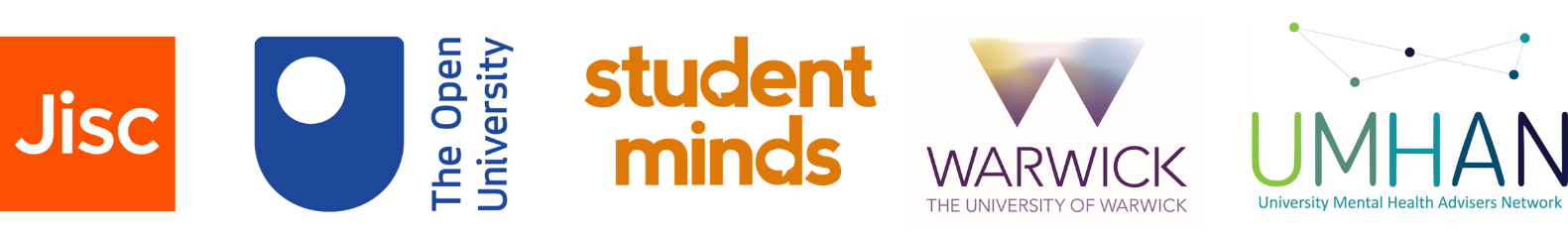


Authors and researchers: Sophie Jones-Tinsley, Hussain Akhtar, Paul Nyagah, Daniela Silva Lobo, Roshaan Khan, Alison Hartley and Ruth Lefever

**Positive Digital Communities – Guidance for creators, moderators, and users**

**Toolkit for creating, maintaining, and monitoring digital circles**

This toolkit is intended to be used as a guide and is therefore non-exhaustive or static. The resources can be used both electronically and printed and can be edited to suit the needs of your audience. To align with accessibility criteria, the reference style chosen throughout this document is Vancouver referencing.



Contents

[1 – Introduction](#_1__)

[1.1 Definitions – Digital Communities (Digital Circle)](#_Definitions_–_Digital)

[1.2 Definitions – Wellbeing and mental health](#_Definitions_–_Wellbeing)

[1.3 Definitions – Belonging and loneliness](#_1.3__)

[1.4 Our findings](#_1.4_Our_findings)

[2 – Underpinning structure of digital circles](#_2__Underpinning)

[2.1 Netiquette Guidance](#_2.1_Netiquette_guidance)

[2.2 Considerations for creating digital circles](#_2.2_Considerations_for)

[2.3 Learner inclusivity and intersectionality](#_2.3__Learner)

[2.4 Resource](#_2.4__Resource)

[3 – Platforms and what to consider](#_3__)

[3.1 Pros and cons list](#_3.1_Pros_and)

[3.2 Resource](#_3.2_Resource)

[4 – The benefits and challenges of digital circles](#_4__)

[4.1 The benefits of digital circles and what to consider](#_4.1_The_benefits)

[4.2 Resource](#_4.2_Resource)

[4.3 The challenges of digital circles and what to consider](#_4.4_The_challenges)

[4.4 Resource](#_4.5_Resource)

[4.5 Examples of good practice](#_4.6_Examples_of)

[5 – Monitoring and evaluating digital circles](#_5__)

[5.1 Resource](#_5.1_Resource)

[6 – Examples of good practice](#_6_Examples_of)

[6.1 Our programme community – staff to student](#_6_.1_Our)

[6.2 Our student peer community – student to student](#_6.2_Our_Student)

[6.3 Our student interest community – student to society](#_6.3_Our_Student)

[7 – Useful links](#_6__)

[8- References](#_7__)

[9- Appendix](#_9__)

List of figures and tables

[Figure 1: Type of student and how they may intersect](#_Figure_1:_Type)

[Table 1: Pros and cons of digital platforms](#_Table_1:_Pros)

[Figure 2: Eight basic dimensions of life](#_Figure_2:_Eight)

Please cite this resource as **Jones-Tinsley, S., Silva Lobo, D, Akhtar, H., Nyagah, P., Khan, R., Hartley A., and Lefever, R. (2022) Positive Digital Communities - Students: Specialist Interest Groups. [Online: Bradford website]**

# 1 Introduction

Positive digital communities are directly linked to students’ experiences of university and how they navigate their day-to-day lives as a student. They not only impact their social wellbeing (being included in activities) but also their emotional and cognitive wellbeing (increasing their sense of belonging and sharing information) (1, 2).

Digital communities offer students a safe space that encourages online togetherness and promotes a sense of belonging. They are convenient, accessible, and easy to use (3, 4, 5-Peeters and Pretorius, 2020) and they specifically support and aid the experiences of certain groups of students who do not belong to the demographic of a “typical” student; that being, a school-leaver, aged 18, who does not have family responsibilities or work commitments and lives on campus.

Mature students, distance learners, commuters or placement students, experience university life very differently; therefore, digital communities act as a bridge of support for those who do not have the typical day-to-day university experience. Despite their benefits, digital communities can pose challenges for students and staff alike due to privacy issues, cases of bullying and harassment and message overload (6, 7).

This guidance and its subsequent resources have been created to provide evidence-informed guidance on how to set up, maintain, monitor, and evaluate digital communities. It considers the underpinning structure of digital communities, what platforms could be used, and the potential benefits and challenges. It has been developed for academic staff, university leaders, student unions, students, and all of those involved in creating online support spaces for communication between staff and students. It is grounded in the research literature and has been co-created with students from the University of Bradford who were involved in conducting and analysing research, creating resources and evaluating them.

This project is part of a partnership between The Open University, Warwick University, Student Minds, JISC and UMHAN. It was funded by the Office for Students. Office for Students Logo



## Definitions – Digital Communities (Digital Circles)

Firstly, let us separate the digital from community. In terms of community, key aspects that appear in most definitions include sharing something in common with the other members, whether it be values, interests, goals, or purpose (8, 9, 10). These aspects can be separated into different types of communities:

* **Support communities**: A place for users to request and provide help on a specific subject, such as an auto-repair community where people can ask for maintenance and repair help.
* **Discussion communities**: A place for users to discuss a common interest, such as a community where people can talk about their favourite TV show, sports team, or hobby like woodworking.
* **Action communities**: A place for users to plan and work towards a common goal together, such as a community focused on organising fundraisers for charity causes (11).

All three types of communities can be applicable to a university setting and the context of students. What aligns all communities together, however, is the need to meet an objective(s). It is worth noting that individuals may not necessarily share values or identities, among other social aspects, but are united by the set of objectives for that community.

In relation to digital communities, there are many variations for the term, such as virtual communities, online communities, virtual groups, digital peer network, to name a few. Due to this, it is hard to pinpoint one definition that encompasses all that digital communities are. Some institutions class them as virtual communities, whereas others call them online support spaces. At the University of Bradford, we preferred those definitions that explicitly mentioned the word “digital” so that it was evident where the support or communication was occurring.

Equally, the term community, although encompassing of the purposes of a digital space for support and sharing of information, felt too general and somewhat overused. As a result, we decided the term “Digital Circle” was explicit yet powerful for evoking images of togetherness online. This term is applied throughout this document in place of digital communities. It is the readers’ discretion whether they adopt our term or use one that is more appropriate for the audience they wish to attract.

It is important to note the below distinctions regarding what we are referring to when we use the term ‘digital circle’ in the context of this guidance:

1. We are **not** talking about non-higher education digital circles.
2. We are **not** talking about formal teaching that occurs online such as lectures, seminars, or tutorials.

An online lecture, seminar or tutorial does not constitute a community or circle because that is the method of teaching and platform of delivery. These may be components of a digital circle, but logging into a Zoom or Teams lecture does not explicitly mean you are part of a circle. Instead, digital circles relate to the spaces that are set up for discussions and conversations to occur between students and staff relating to sharing event information, offering guidance to peers, and creating relationships. Virtual learning environments (VLE) may be used to set up a digital circle, but this does **not** mean the VLE itself is the digital circle.

That is not to say that other contexts (than the one stipulated above) may find our guide useful and they are welcome to use it if it is deemed appropriate.

## Definitions – Wellbeing and mental health

The term "well-being" is a vast, multidimensional concept. In general, the term "wellbeing" is used to define a person's state in terms of social, economic, psychological, spiritual, or medical status (12). It refers to all the positive aspects of an individual’s life that they experience (13).

Wellbeing and mental health are intrinsically linked, with mental health being defined as a “**state of well-being** in which an individual realises their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, thus being able to positively contribute to their community” (14).

This can be broken down further, with mental health comprising three key areas of wellbeing. Namely:

1. **Emotional well-being**: Refers to the state of happiness, satisfaction and having a general positive view on life.
2. **Psychological well-being**: Refers to the ability to have control over one’s own personality.
3. **Social-well-being**: Refers to positive functioning that enables individuals to have good relationships with others, contribute to the community (social contribution) and have a sense of belonging i.e., social integration (15).

In the context of higher education, a student’s university experience can have a profound effect on their wellbeing and mental health. Recently, the Open University, which is the largest academic institution in the UK, identified that “12.2% of students (16,139 in total) disclosed a mental health condition in 2019–20, compared to the [UK sector average of 4.2%](https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/27-01-2021/sb258-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers)” (16).

Research shows that feeling a sense of belonging, whilst at university, improves a student’s chances of both social inclusion and academic success (1, 17, 18). Not only this, but it also reduces the chance of feeling isolated and lonely, which is being reported by young adults more regularly (especially since Covid 19) (19). Digital circles are a simple, accessible, and established tool for overcoming this and evoking a sense of belonging amongst students (see Chapter 4, for more information on this).

## 1.3 Definitions – Belonging and loneliness

Belonging, as a concept, relates to an individual’s sense of self and is tied to their social identity. Brower explains that for an individual to feel like they truly belong, “you must feel unity and a common sense of character with and amongst members of your group.” (18).

In the context of higher education, belonging relates to feeling connected to peers and staff, feeling valued on their course or in their friendship circles and most importantly feeling accepted for who they are. Experiencing low levels of belonging can result in feeling isolated, helpless and may result in student drop-out (1, 2).

Startingly, feeling lonely whilst at university is being reported by students far more regularly than ever before, “with nearly one-in-four feeling lonely ‘all’ or ‘most’ of the time” (19). Loneliness and isolation are not just a result of being on your own. It can occur even if you have social connections (although it is usually when these are poor that you feel loneliness in its full extent) (20). This is evidenced in the below findings:

“35 per cent of respondents report feeling lonely at university, rising to 73 per cent of those who do not feel they belong…A quarter (26 per cent) of those who feel they belong still agree they feel lonely at university” (21).

Certain groups of students, such as international and distance learners, BAME students, disabled students and mature students experience higher levels of loneliness and lower levels of belonging compared to their peers (20; 21). Digital communities can aid students who are feeling lonely by offering a means of social connection and support. An important note is that for these circles to fully work, universities should ensure they are inclusive of all types of students and that they have the means to sustain and monitor these groups accordingly. Equally, it would be more advantageous to set circles up prior to the academic year starting, so students can form connections before coming onto campus (see Chapter 2, for more information on this).

## 1.4 Our findings

We conducted primary research to ascertain what digital circles exist at the University of Bradford and to understand staff and students’ experiences of them. We used a mixed methods approach by combining focus groups and surveys. Mixed methods approaches are common in Education research, and it was deemed the most appropriate based on the complexity of the research and the need for perceptions and experiences of those who use digital circles (47).

We used the quantitative data to support the qualitative data so that we could make sense of the research, which can be defined as an embedded approach (48). It is important to note that due to time constraints we were unable to conduct focus groups with staff members which limited our findings. Our response rate was good for our staff survey which helped provide an overview of their experiences and understanding of digital circles. Our findings can be found in the Appendix (chapter 9).

# 2 Underpinning structure of digital circles

Digital circles require planning, consideration and an intended outcome or goal for them to be successful. Guild (22), a professional communication platform for groups, networks, and communities, establish that having a clear purpose is essential, as well as having a specific audience in mind. Equally, identifying which platform is most appropriate and who will be in control of the circle will also ensure its longevity.

Alongside this, research shows that it is wholly important to establish “house rules” for the circle and its members at the point of creation. This is to consider what type of digital circle you want it to be (formal/informal), reduce chances of inappropriate behaviour (harassment/safeguarding issues) and reduce any subsequent negative impacts on students’ wellbeing (message overload/feeling unheard). Equally, it can impact staff members if the students’ expectations to reply, resolve issues and provide information quickly are too high. Therefore, it improves the experiences of all of those involved.

## 2.1 Netiquette Guidance

It cannot be assumed that students automatically know how to communicate in an online environment and instances occur where misunderstandings and misinformation can lead to negative experiences for those users of the digital circle.

Due to this, research shows that a set of rules or guidance in relation to how to behave online may benefit those within the circle. A term that has been coined is ‘netiquette – ‘[it] is network etiquette, the do’s, and don’ts of online communication. Netiquette covers both common courtesies online and the informal ‘rules of the road’ of cyberspace” (23).

The term encourages ‘digital citizens’ to consider how they behave in digital environments, because each digital circle will have its own social and cultural norms, contexts (informal/formal), purpose (what it’s for) and people (known/unknown to the user) (24).

Netiquette Guidance aims to enable a positive, engaging, and constructive environment. It enables students to feel safe, respected and connected within the digital circle. Equally in the absence of visual and auditory cues, it reduces the chance of misunderstandings and misinterpretations of messages.

To encourage discussions around the above topic, we have created a downloadable resource titled: **“Netiquette Guidance”** which can be accessed here: [Netiquette-guidance.docx (live.com)](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bradford.ac.uk%2Fteaching-quality%2Ffunded-projects%2Fpositive%2Fdownloadable-resources-positive-digital-communities%2FNetiquette-guidance.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK). We hope this will help you in thinking about how you wish members to behave within your digital circle.

## 2.2 Considerations for creating digital circles

When setting up a new digital circle, several questions need to be considered first to understand the intended purpose, goals, and outcomes. To do this, you must put yourself in the shoes of those who will be accessing the circle so that you can better understand what they will want out of the digital circle and how you can meet their needs.

The below list of questions is adapted from Jisc’s scoping canvas for digital communities, and they recommend each member of the team (who will be setting up the digital community) should complete this task independently and then share their thoughts with the wider team for discussion. Your collective decisions can then be shared with any potential partners or other colleagues involved in the digital circle. It is recommended that around 20-30 minutes be spent on this, and leaving some blank is appropriate if you are unsure.

This is also a downloadable resource titled: “**Scoping tool for digital circles**” and it can be accessed here: [Scoping-tool-for-digital-circles.docx (live.com)](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bradford.ac.uk%2Fteaching-quality%2Ffunded-projects%2Fpositive%2Fdownloadable-resources-positive-digital-communities%2FScoping-tool-for-digital-circles.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK).

**Questions to consider when setting up a new digital community**

## 1. What is the purpose of the circle?

*Contemplate what the digital circle's reason for use is and what the members are expected to get out of it.*

## 2. What are the objectives and aims?

*Think about what the digital circles' main goals are and what the creators wish to achieve with the circle.*

## 3. What would the members' journey be? Why would they choose this circle to join?

*Consider what the members of the circle will do whilst taking part in the group and what makes this digital circle stand out/more advantageous to them, compared to other groups they could join.*

## 4. What do you know about your target group? What unknowns are there?

*Consider what type of person (or groups of people) you are aiming to support and consider what you need to know about them to engage them.*

## 5. What are the intended outcomes?

*Identify what the end outcomes of your digital circle are to be and how these results can be achieved.*

## 6. Who will keep the circle members engaged? Who will monitor the circle? How will this be achieved?

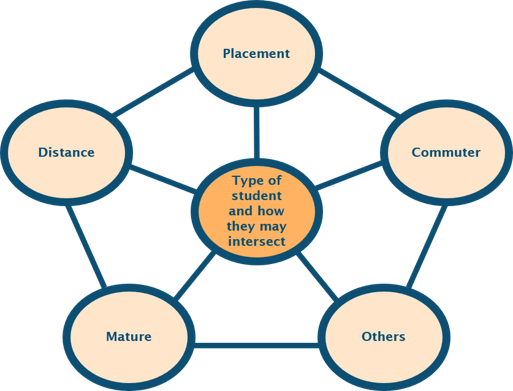
*Decide who should lead the digital circle (considering the context of the group and who the main audience is). For example, if it is set up for students, should it be run by students or staff members? Also consider who will monitor and maintain the digital circle once it has been created, to ensure its sustainability.*

## 2.3 Learner inclusivity and intersectionality

At any institution, the student body comprises several diverse types of students, all with varying needs. Although most students easily access digital circles, there are certain groups of students who may find it hard. Family commitments, work/life balance issues, lack of time and disability, to name a few, may get in the way of getting the most out of digital circles. The groups of students that we identified as facing additional challenges to the “typical” student include mature students, placement students, distance learners and commuter students.

The web-like diagram (Figure 1) illustrates how the student types discussed could intersect. Intersect means when two or more things cross over and connect. Examples of this in a university setting include a working mother who lives at home and not on campus. They would be a mature student and a commuter student; or an international student who has a placement as part of their studies, they would be a distance learner and a placement student; or a student could be older than 21, commute into university and have a placement.

## **Figure 1:** Type of student and how they may intersect



Since each of these student groups faces their own challenges, upon their intersection these will automatically increase. To create an inclusive digital circle, it is essential to consider what types of students make up your course, programme, or society to cater the digital circle to their needs.

Below we define and break down the barriers and challenges these groups of students may face whilst at university and provide suggestions for engagement and questions to consider when planning digital circles.

1. **Commuter students**

"‘Commuter students’ refers to those students who continue to live at home (during term time), rather than relocate to study in higher education” (25). Research demonstrates that commuter students tend to focus more on their academic studies than that on the social experiences universities have to offer. This may be due to a lack of integration amongst their peers who have the time, outside of lectures, to forge relationships and create friendship circles, which are harder to permeate for someone who is on campus for considerably less time.

Unsurprisingly, Stalmirska and Mellon (26) discuss the impetus a lack of social integration and belonging may have on a student and how it can lead to poor retention rates and a lack of motivation to continue their studies. There is limited empirical evidence showing the impact of commuting distance on drop-out rates; however, it is hypothesised by many that a longer commute results in less engagement which results in low retention rates (25, 27). In addition, for those students who prefer to stay within their existing support networks and the family home, this could be viewed as a “coping strategy” (26) which further reduces the chances of students having the confidence to integrate themselves within the University community.

A report by Brunel University found that of the 117 commuter students who took part, 70.2% stated traffic and public transport delays were the biggest issues they faced. Due to this, they must assess whether it is worth the time and money of attending campus at all, which can result in a lower rate of engagement in social activities and less value for money (28).

Considering this, some of the more common challenges that commuter students face include:

* **Additional expenses –** Commuting to campus results in additional travel and potentially parking expenses which can add up over the 3+ years.
* **Transport issues**- A reliance on public transport can result in being late, and missing lectures and adds to the length of a student’s day, with some commutes being over 2 hours long. Students may face penalties for turning up late or may not attend at all if they only have one lecture, which may result in course dissatisfaction.
* **Course structure** – Lectures can be sporadic or every hour and if group work is requested, commuter students may have to stay behind after lectures, getting home late. Commuter student may fight for space in the communal areas despite the on-campus students having their halls to go to.
* **Lack of belonging** - Evening socials are hard to attend due to family or work commitments and students may need to consider taking food and extra clothes to account for this. Joining clubs is also challenging and may result in feeling socially excluded.

Digital circles can aid commuter students’ experiences by offering a means of connection to their peers. It equally provides them with a direct line for asking questions regarding course materials if they are not attending a lecture or seminar. University staff or lecturers could ask students to join a commuter student panel to decide what extra resources are required for supporting them. Brunel University (28) suggest creating a dedicated commuter student University webpage as well as developing a commuter student network to link new commuter students with those already studying at the institution. This could all be linked through digital circles.

1. **Distance Learners**

Distance education is used to describe education delivered to distant/remote locations “via print, audio, video (live or pre-recorded) and/or computer technologies, including both synchronous and asynchronous instruction” (29). While technology can help provide course materials for remote students, their geographical location poses challenges, and they often feel like their voice is not considered when setting up University systems and practices. This can result in feeling isolated and alone.

This is exemplified by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), which identified that “7.8% of the students studying at the Open University in the UK disclosed a mental health condition, compared to the United Kingdom, Higher Education average of 2.02%” (30). For those students who want to access student support services within the institution (such as academic study skills or counselling services), most of the systems are set up to support those on campus; therefore, they do not address the specific needs of the distance learner (31). Lister et al. identify this as one of the barriers to success within their Taxonomy of Barriers and Enablers for distance learners. Of the thirty barriers identified, approximately 16% (five) relate to a lack of support or feeling part of the university community (30).

Considering this, some of the more common challenges that commuter students face include:

* **Limited access to student support services –** A lack of engagement with staff and peers could result in the student requiring support; however, their geographical location may pose a barrier for accessing this support.
* **Lack of equipment and use of university facilities –** Materials are provided online, and the student is expected to own a technological device which accesses said materials. Due to this, they miss out on the use of the library, computers, and other facilities.
* **Managing screen time-** Due to the nature of an online course, students can become too dependent on technology which can result in feeling overwhelmed and a lack of motivation to learn.
* **Social isolation and mistrust –** Due to their reduced social contact/peer support during their period of studies, students may feel mistrusting of their peers since they do not know the people behind the screens; therefore, sharing experiences and working collaboratively may be hard.

Digital circles can increase distance learners’ satisfaction and their sense of connection and belonging amongst their peers (32). Equally, it is a place for both academic support (sharing of information) and peer support (offering help in times of struggle when services aren’t readily available) (33). Alongside this, digital circles allow for enriching knowledge exchange due to the diversity of distance learners and their different professional and life experiences.

So that students do not become overwhelmed by technology overload, digital circle creators could embed digital circles into their courses or activities so that students have the choice of engaging when it suits them. They could also ask the students for their input on the structure and style of a circle so that the student voice is listened to, and cultural misunderstandings are prevented.

1. **Placement students**

Students may study for a degree which includes a placement, which can last between a few weeks to a year (depending on the course and/or the profession) and are occasionally paid. Placements are commonly included in science, business, healthcare, and childcare-related degrees. Therefore, a placement is “a period of work experience which is an integrated and assessed part of a student’s degree…Students [are expected to] apply their learning from the course in the workplace and apply learning from the workplace in the course" (34).

Research on the experiences of placement students is minimal within the UK (pre-dating the Covid-19 pandemic) and is predominantly focused on healthcare professions such as nursing. Whilst this demonstrates a need for further studies, research suggests that placement students are expected to be independent, integrate within the workplace and develop relationships, all whilst fulfilling their degree requirements. This could impact the student’s ability to meet expectations. For example, in 2019, the average attrition rate for nurses was 24.0% (one in four) in the UK (35). This may be due to the additional pressures placement students face. Equally, placements can be situated far away from the university which adds the pressures of commuting and feelings of disconnection from their peers and university life.

Considering this, some of the more common challenges that commuter students face include:

* **Intended outcomes are not achieved**- Due to the concurrent pressures of the placement and the degree, it can impact the student’s ability to meet expectations.
* **Inappropriate workloads** – Students may be given too little or too much work or assigned work that is out of their remit. This may affect performance and create additional stress. Assigned inappropriate levels of work.
* **Financial pressures** – Some placements are unpaid; therefore, financial issues may arise when the student has additional commuting expenses alongside their university expenses.
* **Workplace conflicts** – Developing relationships with colleagues in the workplace may be challenging for students and if conflicts arise, the lack of support may add to feelings of isolation.

Digital circles can act as a bridge between students’ university and placement experiences by offering a safe space to share experiences, offer peer support and develop a sense of belonging amongst a community (36, 37). Depending on the profession, placement experiences can be incredibly challenging and even harrowing for students; therefore, those creating the circles should point towards student support services and engage with them if necessary. Equally, to avoid overwhelming the users, it is best practice to discuss timings for posts and messages and whether there needs to be ‘silent times’ or an AM and PM circle for those working late shifts. Lastly, regular check-ins may be useful for those who are on placement, especially if it is a year-long placement because they are more likely to feel out of the loop compared to their peers who are not on placement (38, 39).

1. **Mature students**

Mature students refer to students aged 21 years and above, that are enrolled on a full-time or part-time basis at an institution of higher learning in the UK, after being out of full-time education (40).

Mature students are more likely to have connections and social networks outside of the university, due to older students having more responsibilities which occur externally such as part-time jobs and caring responsibilities. Subsequently, the identity of a mature student differs from that of a non-mature student, and this poses challenges for integration amongst their younger peers.

Regionally, "the drop-out rates for older students are much higher than for younger students" (41) with an average of 6.2% drop-out for younger students compared to an average of 11.4% for mature students. This may be due to issues with commuting, financing their degree themselves, lack of engagement within the universities social circles and struggling to juggle multiple responsibilities, both inside and outside the university.

Some challenges that mature students face include:

* **Work-life-balance struggles**- Most mature students (more so those at undergraduate and postgraduate level) often struggle to balance study and other life commitments thus impacting on their mental well-being.
* **Age disconnects and stigma** - A significant number of mature students often struggle to fit in with younger students in the university due to the age difference. As such, most of them often prefer to hold back for fear of being stereotyped as an 'over-ambitious', 'talkative' and 'controlling' old student.
* **Social exclusion** - Due to the varying nature of career experiences, social differences and independent nature of the curriculum, most mature students often struggle to integrate with each other.
* **Digital Immigrants -** Unlike younger students who adapt quicker to modern technologies, a significant proportion of mature students often find it difficult to embrace and adapt to the latest changes in technology. Thus, they may have difficulties accessing course materials or using digital platforms.

Digital circles offer flexibility where mature students need it most, yet the circle creator and moderator should consider when the best time is for these students to engage with the circle and not feel disheartened if they do not engage as regularly as expected. In line with the university's value of inclusivity, images and videos circulated on digital platforms should increasingly capture the mature student demographic, to promote representation for mature students. Mature students are prone to get overwhelmed thus forgetting upcoming activities. Pop-up reminders, via the digital platform, could be of great assistance in reminding the students of tasks requiring high priority.

Reflecting on the above types of students and their subsequent challenges, considering their needs when setting up or monitoring a digital circle is paramount. Furthermore, considering how these groups may intersect and cross over is also crucial to create inclusive, supportive, and beneficial spaces for students to engage with others. Below are suggestions and key questions to reflect on in the context of intersectionality.

## 2.4 Resource

We have created a video titled: **“Digital Circles and the Groups they Attract”** which provides a condensed overview of these types of students as well as highlighting some of the challenges they face whilst in higher education. It poses some key questions that should be considered when setting up a digital circle to ensure inclusivity (shown on the next page).

It is recommended that it be watched by colleagues who will be working on the digital circle. It can be accessed here: [Digital Circles and the Groups they Attract - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbSEMxXapRI). It is also a downloadable PowerPoint should you wish to edit it or present it: [Digital-circles-and-the-groups-they-attract.pptx (live.com)](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bradford.ac.uk%2Fteaching-quality%2Ffunded-projects%2Fpositive%2Fdownloadable-resources-positive-digital-communities%2FDigital-circles-and-the-groups-they-attract.pptx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK).

**Suggestions for intersectional engagement**

* **1-** Have a digital circle for each type of student, to allow for integration and a sense of belonging to develop.
* **2 -** Allow for social/personal communications outside academic requirements to take place for better chances of bonding and connecting.
* **3-** Build a digital circle where inclusive imagery, language and resources are used to ensure all types of students are considered and no-one is left out.
* **4**- Ask students on arrival what they would gain from joining a digital circle – for example, mature students may prefer information sharing in the evenings.

**Key questions to consider for inclusive digital circles**

* **Question 1-** How can cultural and time zone differences be overcome for distance learners, who are also mature students and have other priorities such as children and work schedules?
* **Question 2** -What steps will be taken if distance learners develop technology-dependence or feel overwhelmed by message overload?
* **Question 3** - How will students with special needs be supported whilst on placement?
* **Question 4**- How will time constraints (including work and family commitments) be accounted for, for students who set up and run digital circles?

# 3 Platforms and what to consider

The platform you choose to use to set up your digital circle is entirely up to you. It is however important to consider a few things before choosing the platform and that the decision should not be made solely on which you feel most comfortable using or which may be the easiest to use.

Below we have collated a list of pros and cons for a range of different platforms that may be suitable for your digital circle. The purpose, audience and aims of the digital circle will dictate which platform is most appropriate; however, the below list may also provide some guidance on which platforms could be used (42). Please note, the below was correct at the time of writing.

## 3.1 Pros and cons list

## Table 1: Pros and cons of digital platforms

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Platform** | **Pros** | **Cons** |
| WhatsApp | * You can block someone. * Keeps an audit trail. * Encourages empathy and acceptance. * Informal. * You can unsend messages. * Messages are end-to-end encrypted. * It is free. * You do not need an account to access the app (only a phone number). | * Can get added to a group without giving consent if someone has your number. * Anyone in the group can access your number. * Asynchronous communication (can get called or messaged at any time). * Doesn’t enable collaborative working. * Surveillance- shows the person has read the message. * The university cannot control what happens outside of the university – accountability issues if issues arise. |
| Facebook Messenger | * You can unsend messages. * You can block someone. * Keeps an audit trail and you can search back through the conversation. * Informal. * It is free. | * Asynchronous communication (can get called or messaged at any time). * Doesn’t enable collaborative working. * Surveillance- shows the person has read the message. * You need to create a social profile to access the messenger function. |
| Teams | * Can choose which group to join. * Synchronous communication (can schedule interactions by phone, or video). * You can edit or delete posts/messages. * Enables collaborative working. * Can view analytics relating to activity and engagement. * Q&As, polls and interactive features. * Screen sharing. | * Can get added to a group without giving consent if someone has your email. * Has limited reach (only those in the group can see the information shared). * Does not provide an audit trail (gets deleted after a certain period). * You can’t block anyone on a work account. * Surveillance- shows the person has read the message. * Formal, so less personable. |
| Yammer | * Can have many group members. * Can choose which group to join. * Enables collaborative working. * Can view analytics relating to activity and engagement (must ask IT, however). * Q&As, polls and interactive features. | * Has limited reach (only those in the group can see the information shared). * Formal, so less personable. * Not commonly used. |
| Instagram | * Groups chats are enabled. * Engagement is easy/user friendly. * Most of the members are already well familiar with it – easy to connect. * Can share photos/videos that are graphically appealing. | * Requires a picture to post an update (if using a page). * You need to create a social profile to access the messenger function. |
| Telegram | * Can have many group members – up to 30,000. * People can join many channels to stay connected. * Easy to use – the mobile app is user friendly. | * Cannot send anonymous messages. * Messages are not end-to-end encrypted. * No individual read receipts in group chats. |
| Discord | * Specific channels for text and voice chat make planning and holding meetings easy. * Can assign custom titles to users, which makes identifying a user’s job or position easy. * Screen sharing. * Most Discord services are completely free of charge. | * Limit to users and channels per server. * Predominantly used as a platform for gamers. |
| Twitter | * Can create group chats which support sharing pictures, links, emojis, and tweets in addition to text. * Reach a wide audience and use hashtags to help encourage engagement. * Twitter Analytics shows you how your audience is responding to your content, what's working, and what's not. * It is free. | * Only allowed 20 participants in a private group chat. * Additional users can be added to the group chat at any time and by any group member -- not just the user who started the group- Privacy issues. * Restrictive 280 character-limit for posts. * You need to create a social profile to access the messenger function. |

## 3.2 Resource

We have created a downloadable resource titled: **“Choosing the best platform for your digital circle**” which provides some questions for consideration when choosing the platform for your digital circle. It is recommended that you use it in a discussion space with colleagues who will be working on the digital circle. It can be accessed here: [Choosing the best platform for your digital circle (bradford.ac.uk)](https://www.bradford.ac.uk/teaching-quality/funded-projects/positive/downloadable-resources-positive-digital-communities/Choosing-the-best-platform-for-your-digital-circle-(3).pdf)

# 4 The benefits and challenges of digital circles

Digital circles come with both benefits and challenges due to their inherent make-up and usage. Thankfully, for most higher education digital circles the benefits outweigh the challenges. However, the challenges that some students may face whilst in a digital circle could have negative impacts on their wellbeing and mental health. Therefore, considering what benefits and challenges your digital circle may encounter and discussing ways these can be encouraged or prevented with colleagues is the best way for ensuring their success.

## 4.1 The benefits of digital circles and what to consider

There is a wealth of research surrounding the benefits of digital circles within the context of higher education. Below is a non-exhaustive list of the common ways in which digital circles can aid, support, and improve the experiences of students in Higher Education.

* Fosters a sense of belonging and connectedness/togetherness
* Welcoming atmosphere through daily interaction
* Increases feelings of self-belief and autonomy
* Encourages camaraderie and peer support
* Acts as a lifeline for people who don’t live on campus, are on placement, are older students and who may not have the confidence to interact in person
* Convenient and accessible always – geographically neutral
* Fast responses
* Allows people to express themselves (use of emojis, GIFs, pictures etc)
* Helps reduce stress and anxiety, and other mental health and wellbeing issues
* Helps broaden social networks
* Less intimidating than face-face contact and interaction is not mandatory
* Enables everyday greetings - day-to-day micro-interactions
* Can share documents
* Time to think before sharing information or opinions – less likely to rush into saying something that may be regretted

**Figure 2** demonstrates the connections between wellbeing and digital circles, explaining how they can aid an individual’s wellbeing across eight dimensions.

## **Figure 2**: Eight basic dimensions of life (adapted from Schalock (43, 44)

**8 Dimensions of Quality Life and their Link to Digital Circles**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Dimensions** | **Physical wellbeing** | **Emotional wellbeing** | **Interpersonal relations** | **Social inclusion** | **Personal development** | **Material wellbeing** | **Self-determination** | **Rights** |
| **Description** | • Health  • Daily life activities  • Healthcare (access, effectiveness, satisfaction) | •Happiness  • Self-concept  • Absence of stress | • Interactions (social media/in person)  • Relations (family, friends)  • Support (emotional, physical) | •Community roles, integration, and participation  • Social support | • Education  • Personal competencies  • Performance | •Financial status  •Employment  • Housing | • Autonomy and self-control  • Goals and personal values  • Choices | • Human  • Legal |
| **Relation to digital circles** | Partaking in digital communities can positively change physical activity levels, diet behaviours and daily habits, through motivation and support provided by members. | When engaging moderately, community involvement may provide a sense of belonging/social connectedness, meaning and purpose to everyday life. | Digital communities nurture spaces for people to support and interact with each other, sharing ideas, experiences, concerns, information, etc. | Digital communities bring people together and provide users with a fast and easy way to navigate collectively and find solutions to challenging situations. | Through knowledge and experiences exchange, digital communities can become a space where people discover more about themselves and develop hidden talents. | Depending on the community guidelines, networking, obtaining financial confidence and other types of help through experience and information sharing is possible. | Sustained participation in a digital community can promote the internalisation of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation[[1]](#footnote-2) for achieving personal goals. | These communities can provide tools that help members exercise and safeguard their rights and freedom of speech. |

It is important to consider how your digital circle will benefit the user’s higher education experience. The aims and objectives for the circle could be aligned with the intended outcomes (benefits). That way, when evaluating, it is easier to identify whether there have been any benefits to users’ social and emotional wellbeing, as well as their academic success.

## Resource

We have created a downloadable resource titled: **“Reflection time: exploring the benefits of digital circles”** which provides some questions for consideration when planning your digital circles’ aims and objectives. It is recommended that you use it in a discussion space with colleagues who will be working on the digital circle. It can be accessed here: [Reflection-time-The-benefits-of-digital-circles.pptx (live.com)](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bradford.ac.uk%2Fteaching-quality%2Ffunded-projects%2Fpositive%2Fdownloadable-resources-positive-digital-communities%2FReflection-time-The-benefits-of-digital-circles.pptx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK)

## 4.3 The challenges of digital circles and what to consider

Digital circles pose challenges within the context of higher education. Below is a non-exhaustive list of the common ways in which digital circles can create negative and unhelpful experiences for students in higher education.

* Information overload (access to platform 24/7)- constant notifications
* Misinformation and rumour spreading
* Lack of privacy and data protection
* Addiction or reliance on the digital circle
* Prefer online to real-life
* Miscommunication and misunderstanding of what group participants mean by the language they use
* Becoming too dependent on technology (frustration, social anxiety, depression) – because they are already spending too much time online during their online classes.
* Different time zones and cultural differences could lead to misunderstandings.
* Managing screen time.
* Online bullying and disrespectful attitudes towards other members of the circle.
* Mistrust, since they do not know the people behind the screens it may become difficult to see if people are genuine or if it is safe to open up about specific issues.

It is pertinent to consider what challenges may occur before the circle is set up so that they do not have to be resolved retrospectively. Any potential challenges can be highlighted within the Netiquette Guidance so that users are aware of the potential implications of joining the circle. Equally, it highlights what moderators of the circle should look out for so that challenges can be tackled quickly and effectively. If the circle is already set up, the Netiquette Guidance can be edited to account for any new challenges that arise.

## 4.4 Resource

We have created a downloadable resource titled: **“A reflection on addressing challenges in digital circles**” which provides some questions for consideration when addressing any challenges that may arise during the digital circle’s use. It is recommended that you use it in a discussion space with colleagues who will be working on the digital circle. It can be accessed here: [Addressing-challenges-found-in-digital-circles.docx (live.com)](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bradford.ac.uk%2Fteaching-quality%2Ffunded-projects%2Fpositive%2Fdownloadable-resources-positive-digital-communities%2FAddressing-challenges-found-in-digital-circles.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK)

5 Monitoring and evaluating digital circles

Evaluating digital circles is a healthy practice and provides an opportunity to check how it is going and whether it is fulfilling its purpose. It can be seen as a “health check” for those using the circle also, to assess whether it meets their needs as intended. When monitoring digital circles, several aspects should be considered and evaluated, namely: the platform choice, the level of engagement, the accessibility, the sustainability, the risks, and the impact it has on users’ wellbeing and potentially their academics.

Who conducts the evaluation depends on who is currently monitoring the circle and who will make any changes, should they need to. If the circle has no monitor, it may provide evidence that one needs to be selected. In the reverse, if the circle is running successfully without a moderator, it demonstrates good practice. An evaluation could be conducted monthly, tri-annually, or annually, usually by the circle’s moderator (this may not be the same person as the one who created the circle). It depends on the time available to undertake such a task and how regularly you want the circle’s structure and/or practices to be reviewed and updated.

Due to the nature of digital circles, there is not an all-encompassing way of evaluating them, as each circle will have a unique purpose and audience (45). Equally, most platforms for digital circles provide audit trails or analytics that can track information and be used for evaluation purposes (such as engagement) so in-depth evaluations may not be necessary for all types of circles (46).

Considering this, we have created two separate resources to evaluate both the structure and the impact of the digital circle. We define the terms ‘moderator’ as someone who monitors or coordinates the activity within the circle, solves issues or challenges that arise and acts as a port-of-call. The term ‘user’ relates to those who are using the digital circle and do not play an active role in monitoring or coordinating. Therefore, we propose using two separate forms for these two roles because one will likely evaluate the digital circle’s structures (for the moderator) and the other will likely evaluate the impact (to the user).

We chose to use Microsoft Word; however, you could use Survey Monkey, Microsoft Forms, or another method for collating a mixture of qualitative and quantitative information and the links could be shared as opposed to sending a document. Equally, it may be appropriate that only one evaluation is conducted as a collaboration between the moderator and users if the function of the circle suited that. Therefore, what we have created is there as an example and can be amended and changed as you wish.

## 5.1 Resource

We have created a downloadable resource titled: **“Moderator Evaluation for Digital Circles”** and **“User Evaluation of Digital Circles”** which provides some questions for consideration when addressing any challenges that may arise during the digital circle’s use. It is recommended that you use it in a discussion space with colleagues who will be working on the digital circle. The moderator evaluation can be found here: [Evaluation-of-the-structure-of-digital-circles-(moderator-version).docx (live.com)](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bradford.ac.uk%2Fteaching-quality%2Ffunded-projects%2Fpositive%2Fdownloadable-resources-positive-digital-communities%2FEvaluation-of-the-structure-of-digital-circles-(moderator-version).docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK). The user evaluation can be found here: [Evaluation-of-the-impact-of-digital-circles-(user-version).docx (live.com)](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bradford.ac.uk%2Fteaching-quality%2Ffunded-projects%2Fpositive%2Fdownloadable-resources-positive-digital-communities%2FEvaluation-of-the-impact-of-digital-circles-(user-version).docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK)

# 6 Examples of good practice

This section provides examples of how the three project strands may use the resources. They are set in a real-life context and aim to help show how the resources can be adapted for the circle’s purpose and the audiences’ needs.

## 6 .1 Our Programme Community- Staff to Student

Below is a worked example of how a group of lecturers in the faculty of Health Studies used the resource to support a group of placement students in the Mental Health Nursing programme.

A group of six lecturers wanted to find a way to engage students in support groups who were in the Mental Health Nursing programme due to the intensity of the course and the requirements of their placement. They felt creating an environment online where students can support their peers may reduce feelings of isolation and/or feeling lonely during challenging times in their degree. The lecturers had their first meeting in the summer break to brainstorm ways they could create a digital circle that would engage the array of student types they had on the course.

They accessed the Positive Digital Communities resource pack and identified that the **Positive Digital Communities – Guidance for creators and moderators** document was the best place to start as it provided an overview of what each resource could be used for. They identified that the **Scoping Tool for Digital Circles** and **Choosing the best platform for your digital circle** would be a great starting point for identifying what their aims and goals are and which platform is the best for meeting the needs of the students.

The discussion questions from the resources enabled the lecturers to identify the following aims and goals:

1. Improving student’s access to support from peers (primary goal).
2. Providing a safe space where students feel comfortable sharing their experiences and advice (primary goal).
3. Engaging all types of students on the course and meeting their individual needs (primary goal).
4. Providing a space where information about the course is shared (secondary goal).

It also helped them decide Teams was the best platform, due to the familiarity of the platform and the accessibility via the app for students who are on placement.

After this initial meeting, the group met again to use the prompt questions found in the **Netiquette Guidance** and the video on **Digital Circles and the groups they attract.** These questions helped them acknowledge the different experiences students face as well as what behaviours and practices were acceptable within the circle. After a lengthy discussion, they agreed that it was appropriate for students to run the circle, but that there needed to be a staff member on hand if issues or challenges arose to moderate the circle. They equally agreed that they would share a document outlining the appropriate practices within the circle and the consequences that would occur should they not be adhered to. It was deemed important that students should have their say about the practices in the circle too.

At the start of the term, the digital circle was created and shared amongst students on the programme. They had 100 students join the group, which was advertised on the Virtual Learning Environment as well as at the welcome lecture. The group thought it was good to have quarterly reviews of the digital circle to see if they were meeting their aims. After the first term, the circle moderator used the **Evaluation of the structure of digital circles** to assess their key goals and they also asked students to fill out the **Evaluation of the impact of digital circles** to assess their experiences.

They used the **Addressing challenges found in digital circles** to help solve some of the negative feedback received. The key actions were:

* Adapting the Netiquette Guidance document to include a specific time for sending messages to avoid overwhelming students (between 11:00 am and 1:00 pm (lunchtime) was agreed upon.
* Sharing links to wellbeing services at the university in the circle.
* Sharing the responsibility of moderating the circle with another colleague to reduce the administrative responsibilities of evaluation.

The group did not utilise the **Reflection time- the benefits of digital circles** resource; however, they agreed that it may be worthwhile as a starting resource should they create another circle in the future. They hope to continue using the circle and share their experiences with other lecturers inside the University. They found the resource pack, and the complimentary guidance document helpful and useful in creating and monitoring their digital circle. They could not comment on the success it had on students’ wellbeing due to the infancy of the circle. They believe it will have positive effects on students’ engagement with the course and feeling less lonely whilst on placement though.

## 6.2 Our Student Peers Community - Student to Student

Below is a worked example of how a group of students on the Masters in Business Administration (Distance Learning) degree used the resources to create a programme specific group to support each other.

During their second term, a group of students discussed how they could improve the support they receive in relation to being distance learners whilst at university. They agreed that not being on campus made it hard for them to feel connected to their peers and often created feelings of loneliness and isolation. They identified that a digital circle would be an effective way of offering support to each other, whilst bypassing the issue of distance. As they were all part of digital circles in their personal lives, they were aware of how to set one up, but they needed guidance on the type of practices that would be allowed in the circle and ways of monitoring and evaluating its success.

They accessed the Positive Digital Communities resource pack and identified that the **Positive Digital Communities – Guidance for creators and moderators** document was the best place to start as it provided an overview of what each resource could be used for. After this, they felt the **Choosing the best platform for your digital circle,** the **Netiquette Guidance,** and the **Evaluation of the impact of digital circles** would be the most helpful.

The group decided that WhatsApp would be the best platform because most students used it. They read about the pros and cons of WhatsApp and although there were concerns about privacy, the students agreed they would highlight the consequences of sharing information in their Netiquette Guidance.

One student volunteered to be the circle creator and moderator and the group agreed that this student would be on hand if any issues or challenges arose. They also agreed that they did not want any staff involved in the group; however, they would identify the relevant people if issues or challenges became out of hand.

Before setting up the group, the students agreed on what behaviours and practices were accepted in the group and they created their personalised Netiquette Guidance. They agreed that there would be a review of the circle at the end of each term to ensure students were following the guidance and were getting the most out of the group. The students then informed their module leader about this group and asked them to advertise it.

Around 50 students joined the digital circle and were signposted to the Netiquette Guidance (which was attached as a document). After the second term, the group reviewed the circle and several students stated how the group had given them confidence to continue their studies and not give up. Unfortunately, there were reports of bullying and harassment received in the group, so the students agreed that the processes for reporting students needed improving.

The students found the resources they used to be helpful in guiding them in the right direction and providing a foundation to work on. They did not feel they needed to edit the resources either because they were suited to the purpose of the circle and its audience.

## 6.3 Our Student Interest Community - Student to Society

Below is a worked example of how a student used the resources to monitor an Artificial Intelligence society which they inherited as social secretary.

A student, who was elected to take over as society secretary, did not receive any hand-over notes from the previous secretary about the digital circle that already existed. They were aware of how many students were in the circle (25) and that several of them were mature students, but they were unsure how the circle was set up and how it was monitored. The student wanted to make sure that the circle had a clear purpose and that the needs of the students were being met.

They accessed the Positive Digital Communities resource pack and identified that the **Positive Digital Communities – Guidance for creators and moderators** document was the best place to start as it provided an overview of what each resource could be used for. They identified that some of the resources would not be relevant because the circle already existed. Instead, they would need to retrospectively assess the circle and the platform that was being used (Instagram). They chose to use the **Reflection time- the benefits of digital circles** resource to identify what was working well in the circle as well as what might need improving. They also watched the video **Digital Circles and the groups they attract** to consider how the circle could better support mature students.

The student organised a small working group of circle users to discuss the benefits of the circle and the needs of the students. They identified the following areas of success:

1. Sharing information about society events (such as location, times, and dates).
2. Sharing advice and information in relation to Artificial Intelligence as a subject.
3. Offering a sense of belonging and community with like-minded individuals.

However, it was highlighted that how this information was communicated was ad hoc and the number of messages sent could be overwhelming, especially for students who had family commitments and jobs outside of studying.

The student used the discussion points in the **Netiquette Guidance** document to identify how this could be alleviated. They created their own guidance which stated what time of day messages should be sent as well as how the group could be muted if people felt overwhelmed.

A couple of months later, the student evaluated the circle using the **Evaluation of the structure of digital circles** to assess whether it had improved. They used Survey Monkey instead of the form and edited the questions, so they were most catered around wellbeing, specifically for mature students. The feedback showed that 85% of students felt less overwhelmed, and the group were clearer on when they would receive information, so more people were aware of events and activities taking place. Students reported how this improved their feeling of community and sense of connection to their peers.

The student found the resources they used to be helpful in evaluating and re-designing the circle. They saved the **Addressing challenges found in digital circles** resource to use should any issues arise in the future.

# 7 Useful links

## Mental health support charities

* <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/>
* <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/>
* <https://www.mind.org.uk/>
* <https://www.umhan.com/>

## Further guidance for digital circles

<https://www.keele.ac.uk/kiite/workingwithstaff/flexibledigitaleducation/creatingadigitalcommunity/>

<https://eactivities.union.ic.ac.uk/training/articles/489?collection=90>

<https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/digital-pedagogy-toolkit/scenario-three-managing-digital-communities-of-learning>

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/education-planning-2021-22/online-teaching-guidance-tips-and-platforms/netiquette-good-online>

# 8 References

1. Capper G, McVitty D. Belonging inclusion and mental health are all connected | Wonkhe [Internet]. Wonkhe. 2022 [cited 1 August 2022]. Available from: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/belonging-inclusion-and-mental-health-are-all-connected/>
2. Parker Humphreys E. Student Loneliness Report 2020 [Internet]. London; 2020 [cited 2 August 2022]. Available from: https://www.cambridgesu.co.uk/pageassets/resources/reports/studentlonelinessreport/CUSU-Student-Loneliness-Report-2020.pdf
3. El Morr C, Maule C, Ashfaq I, Ritvo P, Ahmad F. Design of a Mindfulness Virtual Community: A focus-group analysis. Health Informatics Journal. 2019;26(3):1560-1576.
4. Naslund J, Aschbrenner K, Marsch L, Bartels S. The future of mental health care: peer-to-peer support and social media. Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences. 2016;25(2):113-122.
5. Peeters W, Pretorius M. Facebook, or fail-book: Exploring “community” in a virtual community of practice. ReCALL. 2020;32(3):291-306.
6. Chung J. Social interaction in online support groups: Preference for online social interaction over offline social interaction. Computers in Human Behavior. 2013;29(4):1408-1414.
7. Rashid A, Zaaba Z. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram: The privacy challenges. International Conference on Promising Electronic Technologies (ICPET) [Internet]. Malaysia; 2020 [cited 2 August 2022]. Available from: <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/abstract/document/9319383>
8. Allen I. VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: A NETNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF PEER-TO-PEER NETWORKING SUPPORT AMONG DOCTORAL STUDENTS [Ph.D]. Capella University; 2014.
9. Eysenbach G, Powell J, Englesakis M, Rizo C, Stern A. Health related virtual communities and electronic support groups: systematic review of the effects of online peer to peer interactions. BMJ. 2004;328(7449):1166.
10. Goodall M. Community Strategy Training: What are Online Communities? [Internet]. Guild blog: community building best practices, trends and insights. 2020 [cited 1 August 2022]. Available from: <https://guild.co/blog/what-is-online-community/>
11. Harold F. 4 Examples of Great Online Communities and What Makes Them Work [Internet]. Khoros.com. 2021 [cited 1 August 2022]. Available from: <https://khoros.com/blog/great-online-communities>.
12. Sfeatcu, R., Cernuşcă-Miţariu, M., Ionescu, C., Roman, M., Cernuşcă-Miţariu, S., Coldea, L., Bota, G. and Burcea, C.C. (2014). The concept of wellbeing in relation to health and quality of life. *European Journal of Science and Theology*, [online] 10(4), pp.123–128. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/298026525_The_concept_of_wellbeing_in_relation_to_health_and_quality_of_life>
13. Tov, W. (2018). Well-Being Concepts and Components. In: *Handbook of well-being*. [online] Singapore Management University. Available at: <https://www.nobascholar.com/chapters/12/download.pdf>.
14. World Health Organization (2022). *Constitution of the World Health Organization*. [online] WHO. Available at: <https://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution>.
15. Galderisi S, Heinz A, Kastrup M, Beezhold J, Sartorius N. (2015) Toward a new definition of mental health. World Psychiatry. Jun;14(2):231-3. doi: 10.1002/wps.20231. PMID: 26043341; PMCID: PMC4471980.
16. Lister K. To Fully Support Students, We Need to Embed Well-Being in Distance Learning [Internet]. Psychreg. 2021 [cited 1 August 2022]. Available from: <https://www.psychreg.org/embed-well-being-distance-learning/>
17. Strayhorn T. College students' sense of belonging. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge; 2018.
18. Brower T. Missing Your People: Why Belonging Is So Important And How To Create It [Internet]. Forbes. 2021 [cited 1 August 2022]. Available from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tracybrower/2021/01/10/missing-your-people-why-belonging-is-so-important-and-how-to-create-it/?sh=b2e49b37c436>
19. Neves J, Brown A. Student Academic Experience Survey 2022. Advance HE/ Higher Education Policy Institute; 2022.
20. Wheadon G. Combatting loneliness at your university [Internet]. United Kingdom; 2021 [cited 1 August 2022]. Available from: <https://umii.app/student-loneliness-guide/>
21. McVitty D, Jackson A, Capper G, Ramsden D. Students’ perceptions of belonging and inclusion at university [Internet]. WONKHE and Pearson; 2022 [cited 2 August 2022]. Available from: https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/02/Belonging-and-inclusion-survey-Wonkhe-Pearson-Feb-22.pdf
22. How to create an online community [Internet]. Guild blog: community building best practices, trends and insights. 2021 [cited 4 August 2022]. Available from: <https://guild.co/blog/how-to-create-an-online-community/>
23. Shea V. Netiquette [Internet]. 2004 [cited 4 August 2022]. Available from: <http://www.albion.com/netiquette/book/0963702513p59.html>
24. Preece J. Etiquette online. Communications of the ACM. 2004;47(4):56-61.
25. Thomas L. ‘I am happy just doing the work …’ Commuter student engagement in the wider higher education experience. Higher Education Quarterly. 2019;74(3):290-303.
26. Stalmirska A, Mellon V. “It feels like a job …” Understanding commuter students: Motivations, engagement, and learning experiences. Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport &amp; Tourism Education. 2022;30:100368.
27. Goddard, H. Understanding Barriers to Engagement for Commuter Students. Presentation presented at; 2018
28. Chappell A, McHugh E, Wainwright E, Gilhooly K. The Experiences of Undergraduate Commuter Students [Internet]. London: Brunel University; 2020 [cited 18 August 2022]. Available from: <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/administration/access-and-participation>
29. Cain, D. L., Marrara, C., Pitre, P. E., & Armour, S. (2003). Support services that matter: An exploration of the experiences and deeds of graduate students in a distance learning environment. Journal of Distance Education, 18(1), 42-56.
30. Lister K, Seale J, Douce C. Mental health in distance learning: a taxonomy of barriers and enablers to student mental wellbeing. Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning. 2021;:1-15.
31. Andrews T, Tynan B. Distance learners: Connected, mobile and resourceful individuals. Australasian Journal of Educational Technology. 2012;28(4).
32. Liu, X., Magjuka, R. J., Bonk, C. J., and Lee, S. (2007). Does sense of community matter? Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 8, 9–24.
33. Pike, A. (2009). Developing online communities to support distance learning in secure environments. In: 7th International Conference on Education and Information Systems, Technologies and Applications: EISTA 2009. Orlando, Florida.
34. 10 things you need to know about placements | Sheffield Hallam University [Internet]. Shu.ac.uk. 2022 [cited 25 August 2022]. Available from: <https://www.shu.ac.uk/student-placements/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-placements#:~:text=A%20placement%20is%20a%20period,the%20workplace%20in%20the%20course>.
35. Perry S. Nursing students are still dropping out in worrying numbers [Internet]. The Health Foundation. 2019 [cited 23 August 2022]. Available from: <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/news/a-quarter-of-all-nursing-students-are-dropping-out-of-their-degrees>
36. Bass J, Walters C, Toohill J, Sidebotham M. Promoting retention, enabling success: Discovering the potential of student support circles. Nurse Education in Practice. 2016; 20:109-116.
37. Bennion J, Symmons T, Shearman I, Holloway C, Kain R. PSS-STUDY: PSS-Study: An Exploration of Physiotherapy Student-Perceived Stress and the Related Coping Strategies whilst on Placement. International Journal of Practice-based Learning in Health and Social Care. 2020;8(2):68-85.
38. Stout R, Roberts S, Maxwell-Scott H, Gothard P. Necessity is the mother of invention: how the COVID-19 pandemic could change medical student placements for the better. Postgraduate Medical Journal. 2021;postgradmedj-2021-139728.
39. 100 days on my sofa: student experiences of [Internet]. Hull.ac.uk. 2022 [cited 18 August 2022]. Available from: https://www.hull.ac.uk/choose-hull/study-at-hull/teaching-academy/news/100-days-on-my-sofa-student-experiences-of-field-placements
40. Hubble S, Bolton P. Mature higher education students in England. House of Commons Library; 2021.
41. Petrie K, Keohane N. On course for success? Student retention at university [Internet]. Social Market Foundation; 2017 [cited 5 August 2022]. Available from: <https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/course-success-student-retention-university/>
42. Choosing the right digital communication tool [Internet]. Ourcambridge.admin.cam.ac.uk. 2022 [cited 2 August 2022]. Available from: <https://www.ourcambridge.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/which_communication_tool_v1.2.pdf>
43. Schalock R. Three Decades of Quality of Life. Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities. 2000;15(2):116-127.
44. Verdugo M, Schalock R, Keith K, Stancliffe R. Quality of life and its measurement: important principles and guidelines. Journal of Intellectual Disability Research. 2005;49(10):707-717.
45. Ke F, Hoadley C. How to evaluate online communities: A review of the literature. Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education [Internet]. Penn State University; 2004 [cited 10 August 2022]. Available from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258028667_How_to_evaluate_online_communities_A_review_of_the_literature>
46. Connect and Inspire: Online Communities of Practice in Education [Internet]. LINCS | Adult Education and Literacy | U.S. Department of Education. 2011 [cited 10 August 2022]. Available from: <https://lincs.ed.gov/professional-development/resource-collections/profile-706>
47. Ponce OA, Pagán-Maldonado N. Mixed Methods Research in Education: Capturing the Complexity of the Profession. IJEE [Internet]. 2015;1(1):111–35. Available from: <http://www.suagm.edu/umet/ijee/pdf/1_1/ponce_pagan_maldonado_ijee_1_1_111-135.pdf>
48. Almalki S. Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Data in Mixed Methods Research—Challenges and Benefits. Journal of Education and Learning [Internet]. 2016 Jul 12;5(3):288–96. Available from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1110464.pdf>



**Contact us**

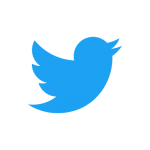
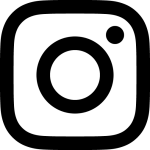
**General enquiries**

**Call:** +44 1274 232323 (University Switchboard)

**Media enquiries**

**Webpage:** <https://www.bradford.ac.uk/news/media-relations/>

**Connect with us on social media:**

[Facebook logo - Hyperlink to University of Bradford Facebook page ](https://www.facebook.com/university.bradford/) [LinkedIn logo - Hyperlink to University of Bradford LinkedIn page ](https://www.linkedin.com/school/university-of-bradford/mycompany/)[](https://twitter.com/UniofBradford?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor)[](https://www.instagram.com/universityofbradford/?hl=en)

© 2022 University of Bradford.

# 9 Appendix

Focus Groups and Surveys Findings Report

November 2022

**Report authors**: Daniela Silva Lobo, Hussain Akhtar, Paul Nyagah and Roshaan Khan

**Editor:** Sophie Jones-Tinsley

Table of contents

FOCUS GROUPS 3

General information 3

Questions and Answers 4

Knowledge-based questions 4

Experience based questions 5

Questions asked only to the student union’s focus group 13

Background based questions 13

SURVEYS 15

General information 15

Questions and Answers: Students 15

Questions and Answers: Staff 23

Questions and Answers: Students to Societies 37

# **FOCUS GROUPS**

# **General information**

* Total No of Focus groups: 5
* Total No of participants: 17
* Average No of students per

Focus group: 3.4

* Characteristics of the focus groups: 2 focus groups were constituted by 4 students, and the other 3 focus groups comprised 5, 3 and 1 student respectively.
* Characteristics of the students in the focus groups: The focus group participants belonged to diverse ethnic groups including, Black African, Asian and White British. The ratio between male and female participants in all the focus group were approximately equal. The participants were aged between 26 and 45. Besides this the participants were current students at University of Bradford and were either distance learners, mature students, commuter students or placement students.

**Additional observations:**

* The questions were reformulated after the first 2 focus groups, as these were related to the student-to-student societies, therefore answers to new questions, relating to students on courses, were not provided in the first 2 focus groups.
* Due to time constraints, focus groups could not be conducted to staff members.

# **Questions and Answers**

## **Knowledge-based questions**

1. **What's your understanding of the term 'digital community’?**

Previously this question had been merged with the next question (number 2), consequently, it was not addressed in the first focus group and the responses of 4 participants are missing.

In this question there were 2 participants who did not answer. For those who did answer, common answers were: a place for people with common interests, shared goals and similarities to get together (4 participants); a place that is accessible/for people to meet digitally to communicate (3 participants); a support system that is built together (2 participants); a place for people from different environments to meet (only 1 participant indicated this) and a place where people feel comfortable (only 1 participant mentioned this).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Answer | **Place for people with common interests, shared goals, and similarities** | **Accessible place for people to meet digitally/online to communicate** | **Something that is created together to build a support system** | **Did not answer** | **Place for people from diverse environments to meet** | **Place where people feel comfortable** |
| People | 4 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

1. **Which of these terms would you prefer: digital community, digital circle, online community, or virtual community?**

All the participants answered this question. When asked about the preferred term for digital communities, most participants (47%) opted for the online community, arguing that it was common, easy to understand and less ambiguous/self-explanatory, as one participant stated ‘‘Online Community, it gives the sense of online and we are there, where digital tells it is just gadget.’’

29% opted for digital circle because it created a feeling of safety, and it sounded both equal and inclusive. One participant stated that ‘‘I prefer the term ‘digital’ because online is less personal. The term ‘circle’ shows there is no hierarchy, so it’s more equal.’’

Only 12% mentioned digital community, with one person saying that ‘‘Digital community is a global village; people can communicate freely as we have experienced in Covid we only had these online platforms for Business communication and interaction with families.’’ and 12% did not answer.

## **Experience based questions**

1. **Are you part of any digital communities as part of your course/programme of study and what are these?**

All the participants answered this question. 13 people said that they belonged to a group/several groups, 1 did not answer, 1 said they weren’t a member of any group, and 2 said they belonged to digital communities for other purposes such as family groups.

Several of the participants that answered belonged to more than one society: a society related to their country, sport societies, mental health society, and module groups. Regarding the latter, one participant stated the following: ‘‘I always leave the groups when the module is finished but there are no rules for this so people can stay for as long as they want.’’

1. **What platforms are these digital communities on?**

All the participants answered this question. The two most used platforms were WhatsApp, due to its ease of use and popularity, and Instagram, due to its element of ‘‘pictorial communication’’ which makes it convenient. This is exemplified in a comment from 1 participants: ‘‘WhatsApp and Instagram are one of the best platforms, but there are limitations…Facebook is insecure so that is out completely.”

People want quick messages and visuals instead of long messages sent via WhatsApp which shows Instagram is more common amongst students. Microsoft Teams was deemed as official/professional. The least used platforms were Zoom, LinkedIn, Canvas (Bradford University platform), and Email. Overall accessibility issues were not mentioned for any of the platforms.

1. **How active is this digital group? (this includes how active you are in this group and how often the group communicate collectively)?**

This question was introduced after the first 2 focus groups were conducted, so answers from participants of those focus groups are missing. For unknown reasons, this question was also not addressed in another focus group therefore answers from that focus group were not recorded. Altogether, the answers that will be provided in for this question refer to 2 focus groups that were undertaken in July (4 participants in total).

Many of the participants who responded to this question agreed that the group communicates often collectively (3 participants), 2 of which said they weren’t individually active due to oversharing of information which made it overwhelming.

1 participant stated: ‘‘WhatsApp is very active because its instant. (Activity is) constant to the point that it must be muted at times. I do respond and ask questions in that group… There are many people in the group.’’. Lastly, one participant said that she was the most active individually for academic queries only – on Canvas and e-mails –, whilst other people weren’t (collectively).

1. **Who should create/lead programme based digital communities? Should it be staff, students, both, or someone else?**

This question was answered by all the participants. In this question, 8 participants agreed that digital communities should be led by both staff and students, two of which made the following observations:

“The elected student representative should pay careful attention to the group, so that in case any major issues arise, he/she will report to the staff who should be overseeing the group activity.”

“Currently there is no staff involved in the group, but they get informed about people being abused in the group. The course representative is the leader of the group.’’

1 participant suggested that staff groups should be run by staff, whilst 2 participants suggested that student groups should be run by students. 2 participants coincided that students should be leading the groups. Nobody agreed to the groups being led by staff only and 4 participants did not respond.

**Should students be the leaders of these groups, or should it be run by staff members?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Answer | **Staff and students** | **Did not respond** | **Students should run student groups** | **Student only** | **Staff should run staff groups** | **Staff only** |
| People | 8 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 |

1. **Whose responsibility is it to resolve/deal with issues or problems within the community?**

For this question, 9 participants agreed that the administrators/leaders of the groups should be responsible for dealing with issues within the community, thus referring to students’ representatives or any other member who serves as a leader or administrator of the group.

1 participant emphasised this by saying that ‘‘We should be able to resolve issues ourselves. It does not come down to the university, this should be the last resort. The leader of the group should step in more and be able to resolve the issues (removing people from group).’’

1. participants agreed that issues should be solved by members of the group. The ‘‘other’’ category refers to 1 participant who considered that there should be an election to elect the responsible person for the group. Furthermore, 2 participants said that members of the group in general should be responsible, and 2 members mentioned University and module coordinators should deal with problems that emerge. Contextual aspects were also mentioned by some participants, as situations may vary/require different levels of authority to deal with issues.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Answer | **Administrators/Leaders of the group** | **Members of the group** | **University / Module coordinators** | **Other** | **Did not answer** |
| People | 9 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |

1. **What are the benefits of digital communities you have experienced? (Such as sense of belonging, freedom of speech, ease of access, time and flexibility).**

Participants from the various focus groups stated the following benefits based on first-hand experiences from digital communities they were part of:

* Digital communities provided an ideal medium for conveying and receiving information. (3 participants)
* Fostered communication with peers and course mates which promoted meaningful and helpful connections. (2 participants)
* Free exchange of ideas which enhanced the process of learning (2 participants)
* The digital communities were platforms for creating friendships (1 participant)
* Convenience- Promoted virtual collaboration of academic group tasks and meetings thus getting rid of the need to meet physically (4 participants)
* Gave a sense of belonging and reassurance (3 participants)
* Fostered diversity, as the platforms comprised of members from different backgrounds. (1 participant)
* Initiation of connections i.e., socialising, was much easier as it felt less intimidating (2 participants)
* The digital platforms provided suitable opportunities for growth resulting from interaction. (2 participants)
* Cost effective, less time and energy consuming (2 participants)

1. **Have you had any negative experiences or challenges whilst in these digital communities? If so, what are they? (Such as accessibility issues, privacy, time commitment, inappropriate or concerning behaviour, addiction).**

Participants from the focus groups expressed several negative experiences they had faced/witnessed whilst in the digital communities. Below is a summary of the challenges based on the feedback gathered from the participants:

* Cyber bullying- Manifested in form of verbal aggression, coercion/harassment and threats. Unfortunately, this was attributable to insufficient/lack of monitoring mechanisms within the digital communities. (4 participants)
* Privacy concerns- Ease of access to private information such as telephone numbers on the group platforms was of great concern and often resulted in stalking or misdialling. (3 participants)
* Disturbance- Frequent message notifications emanating from the platforms were a nuisance. As such, it often resulted to muting the platform’s notifications. Moreover, the volume of messages would oftentimes be too much to handle/catching up with the discussions. (3 participants)
* Inappropriate content- Intentional or accidental posting or sharing of explicit content on digital platforms consequently offending participants on the digital platforms (2 participants)
* Miscommunication- Messages conveyed via the digital platforms was easily misrepresented and amounted to conflict. (2 participants)
* Opaqueness- Virtual interactions amounted to a significant level of opaqueness as people hid behind their screens. (2 participants)
* Intimidation- Sharing information or communicating via the digital platforms was intimidating to an extent, thus participants preferred to assume the role of observers on the platforms. (1 participant)
* Low level of personal appeal for users such distance learners who heavily/entirely relied on digital platforms. (2 participants)
* Addiction (2 participants)

1. **Are community members informed of the potential risks and challenges before joining the group?**

All participants (100%) stated that potential risks and challenges were not presented before joining the digital platforms. In most instances, they learnt about them after joining the community. Moreover, it was assumed that prior to joining any digital platform, members should ought to be conversant with the pros and cons of the digital platforms.

1. **What would you consider to be ‘good practice’ when engaging with a digital community? What behaviours are acceptable/not acceptable?**

Below is a list of responses from a mix of participants (9) regarding good practice:

* Mutual respect- According to all members respect irrespective of differences
* Professionalism.
* Group guidelines and well-defined structures- Guidelines need to be provided to participants before someone joins a particular digital community as this will inform the do’s and don’ts of the platform.
* Empathy.
* No favouritism.

## **Questions asked only to the student union’s focus group**

## **Background based questions**

1. **What was the motivation for you joining the digital community for the society?**

From the total of 4 participants, 2 participants joined the digital community to have access to the information and staying up to date. The other 2 participants motivation for being part of the digital community was so they were aware of social events and because it was convenient to get information through WhatsApp. A common motivation for all the participants was the availability of information.

1. **Should the community creator provide handover notes or guidance for future community leaders, including challenges and issues that have occurred or the risks they’ve faced?**

All 4 of the participants of the focus group agreed that there should be handover notes that can be passed on from one leader to the other. There was a consensus that a standard rule book for society communities should be carried forward. Though believing that the society’s rulebook should be handed over to the succeeding leader, one of the participants was slightly more flexible in not bounding the leader in terms of rigid guidelines.

1. **How do you create a society/activity? Is there a set of conditions that students have to follow such as expected behaviours and setting up an online community?**

When talking about rules, 3 out of the 4 respondents wanted to have a set of rules that each society can draft on its own. But there should be guidelines/rules to ensure decorum among the members of the group. The fourth member stated there should be more freedom because each group is different and has a different purpose. In terms of how to create a society, only one member explicitly answered that question with a WhatsApp as the preference.

# **SURVEYS**

# **General information**

* Total No of surveys: 3
* Total No of participants: 47
* Characteristics of the surveys: One of the surveys targeted students, having a total of 15 participants; another one targeted students in societies, having a total of 11 participants; and the last survey focused on staff, having a total of 21 participants.

**Additional observations:** the questions differed amongst each target group, to obtain more adequate responses for the intended research. Therefore, for this section, the responses have been registered by the surveys category: students, students-societies, and staff.

# **Questions and Answers: Our student peers community (students)**

1. **What's your area of study?**

All participants answered this question. According to the answers obtained in this question, the participants belong to different areas of study, ranging from marketing and management (2) and public health (2) to more technical fields, such as engineering (1), international relations (1), cyber security (1), biology (1), radiography (1), and artificial intelligence.

1. **What's your understanding of a 'digital peer community'?**

All the participants answered this question. Common aspects that emerged included the following words:

* **WhatsApp** (3 participants) – ‘‘Any digital means through which peers communicate: digital devices; phone, laptop, tablets, social media; Facebook, Twitter, Mobile App; WhatsApp, WeChat.’’
* **Help** (3 participants) – ‘‘Community created to bring peers together and help achieve goals.’’
* **Online** (3 participants) – ‘‘Online interface where people can collaborate with their invited colleagues.’’
* **Network** (2 participants) – ‘‘A community where people tend to network and find interesting things about the digital space.’’
* **Common values/ideas** (1 participant) – ‘‘A community of people with the same values, ideas, and characteristics (…)’’
* **Bringing people together** (1 participant) **–** ‘‘Community created to bring peers together and help achieve goals.’’
* **Other responses** (2 participants) – ‘‘Learning to improve.’’;‘‘It is a wonderful experience to anyone who is there.’’

In general, most participants understand what a digital community represents.

1. **Are you part of any digital communities as part of your course/programme of study?**

Most of the respondents answered this question (80%), of which 53% mentioned that they do belong to digital communities as part of their course/programme of study and 27% said that they do not. 20% of respondents expressed not being aware if they are part of these communities.

1. **What are these digital communities you are part of? (list as many as you are in)**

Almost half of the respondents did not answer this question (7). 5 of the respondents that answered belonged to one or more than one group, such as: ‘‘Freshers group’’, ‘‘biomedical engineering group’’, ‘‘Cyber security’’, ‘‘International Relations as a Social Science’’, ‘‘Artificial Intelligence September group’’. It is evident that most of the groups they belong to are course related.

Furthermore, 2 of the respondents listed platforms that do not belong to digital communities, namely: ‘‘google drive’’ and ‘‘SharePoint’’, which points out to their lack of understanding of what digital communities are and/or which platforms they rely on.

1. **What platform are these digital communities on?**

8 participants answered this question. Platforms were repeated amongst those who answered this question. WhatsApp (31%), Instagram (13%) and Facebook (9%) were the platforms that were cited the most. In this question, 7 participants did not answer. This relates to the fact that they are not part of any digital community.

1. **What are the benefits of digital communities you have experienced?**

In this question, only participants who have been part of digital communities (8 in total) responded. The following benefits were raised based on their experiences from digital communities:

* **Collaboration** (1 respondent) – ‘‘fosters sense of collegiate belonging to course and university. Sharing of resources otherwise may have been undiscovered (…).’’
* **Information** (2 respondents) **–** ‘‘It makes it easy to be updated and exchange information easily.’’
* **Networking and communication** (3 respondents)
* **Experiences** (1 respondent) **–** ‘‘Recently created more interest in it. Spending more time to have more experiences.’’

1. **Have you had any negative experiences or challenges whilst in these digital communities? If so, please outline what they are.**

This question was answered by 8 of the respondents, 5 of which said that they have not had any negative experiences/challenges whilst in digital communities. The following negative points were cited by the 3 students that have had negative experiences in digital communities:

* **Spread of misinformation** (2 respondents) **–** ‘‘people with unverified information’’; ‘‘some may use our information (…) for wrong purposes like unnecessarily contacting out of the digital community’’.
* **Bullying** (1 respondent)
* **Harassment** (1 respondent)
* **Inappropriate behaviours** (1 respondent)

1. **If you have had negative experiences or challenges, please explain how these were resolved (if at all)?**

Since only 3 students reported to having had experienced challenges in digital communities, the remaining 13 did not respond. 2 of the students who responded did not seek external support, as they stated: ‘‘I always filter any information before disseminating it’’ and ‘‘there is nothing much I could do. So, simply used to block people’’.

The other participant pointed out to the fact that in their digital community they did seek external support, which led to the following: ‘‘Reps informed stage and programme leader who brought in police constable and head of school to lecture students. Told to remove ourselves from the chat and engage no further’’.

1. **Whose responsibility is it to resolve/deal with problems that may occur within the community? For example, inappropriate language or behaviour.**

All respondents answered this question. There was a tie in this question’s responses, since 27% of respondents said that it should be members of the group (students) and 27% mentioned programme leaders. 20% mentioned the group creator (student), whilst 13% mentioned the University and the other 13% referred to others.

Within the ‘‘others” classification, the following emerged ‘‘group members at first, escalation to staff and university if needed’’; and ‘‘I think the head of the group’’.

Overall, most responses point out to students as being responsible to deal with problems that may occur.

1. **Who should create/lead programme based digital communities?**

All respondents answered this question. The majority (33%) mentioned that digital communities should be created and led by students entirely, followed by 27% who mentioned that they should be created and led by staff entirely, and 20% who indicated they should be created by staff but led by students, and another 20% who stated that they should be created by students but led by staff.

1. **What would you consider to be 'good practice' when engaging with a digital community? E.g., what behaviours are acceptable/not acceptable?**

All the respondents answered this question. The points below were considered as being good practice in digital communities:

* **Respect** (3 respondents)– ‘‘Being respectful of yourself and others. Not offering advice or information if unqualified.’’
* **Following rules and regulations** (3 respondents)– ‘‘Behaviours are acceptable based on the set-out rules and regulations.’’
* **Listening to everyone** (1 respondent)
* **Avoid spamming** (1 respondent)
* **Honesty and openness** (1 respondent)
* **Positive behaviours** (1 respondent)
* **Maintaining good behaviours** (3 respondents)
* **Being social and considerate with others** (1 respondent) – **‘**‘Being social and exchanging information having a good faith (…) one should not break fine line of personal space or do something to affect someone mentally and emotionally.’’

1. **Would guidance on how to and how not to behave in a digital community be useful?**

All the respondents answered this question. The majority (87%) of respondents agree that guidance on how to and how not to behave in a digital community would be helpful, whilst 13% are unsure about that.

# **Questions and Answers: Our programme community (staff to students)**

1. **What's your area of study?**

All participants responded this question. Most of the participants work in the department of health studies (11), followed by Life sciences (5), Professional services (3), and Management, Law, and Social Sciences (2). Overall, the participants work within different areas of the University.

1. **What's your understanding of a 'digital community'?**

All the participants answered this question. Common aspects that emerged included the following words:

* **Communication** (8 participants) **–** ‘‘A "space" where people/staff/students can "gather" to discuss/communicate with one another.’’
* **Online** (4 participants) – ‘‘A group of people who share an online space.’’; ‘‘group of people who communicate (primarily) online.’’.
* **Digital** (3 participants) **–** ‘‘A group of people who work digitally with minimal F2F contact.’’.
* **Shared interests (**2 participants**) –** ‘’An online community for a group or groups of people with shared interests.’’
* **Sharing experiences/ideas** (2 participant) – ‘‘A community that shares experience online but may not or never meet in real life.’’
* **Collaboration** (1 participant) – ‘‘collaborating through digital platforms.’’
* **Support network** (1 participant) – ‘‘A network of support (social, emotional, educational) built and maintained using digital technologies (…).’’
* **Virtual (1 participant) –** ‘‘a group who meet virtually.’’
* **Other (1 participant) –** ‘‘People who share groups of overlapping messages? I.e., LinkedIn Group, SharePoint Website, Twitter followers.’’

Overall, most participants understand what a digital community conveys, with only 1 participant expressing their lack of knowledge about digital communities, saying:

‘‘It is the first time I have seen the phrase; my interpretation is people coming together in a digital platform or setting.’’

Interestingly, there was one participant who opposed the idea of digital communities, stating the following negative aspects of these communities:

‘‘(…) It's used to spotlight yourself for the attention of others and results in **poor mental health** and **bullying** for having views that are other to those who respond and perceive written intentions incorrectly (…) it **is full of misinformation**, **spreading of fake news** and **does not encourage sincerity when mistakes are made** (…) it is often a **contributor to disruption** **of real in person community** due to the above.’’

1. **Please tick which of the statements apply to you:** **"I have set up a digital community with students"; "I have set up a digital community for students"; "I have been involved in a digital community with students"; "I have been involved in a digital community for students"; "I have never been involved in a digital community with or for students"; "Other".**

All the participants answered this question. 25% of participants agree to having been involved in a digital community with students and 25% of participants agreed to have been involved in a digital community for students.

19% of participants mentioned that they have set up a digital community for students, whilst 16% said they have set up a digital community with students and 12% have never been involved in a digital community with or for students.

The remaining 3% who selected others as an option cited the following: ‘‘I feel that canvas and discussion boards could be seen as a digital community however do not feel that discussion boards are often used.’’

1. **If you answered no to the above question, would you use these if you knew how to set one up?**

This question was answered by the participants who have never been involved in a digital community with or for students (4 participants).

Of those who responded, 2 mentioned that they would utilize digital communities if they knew how to set them up, with 1 participant stating that:

‘‘I have used them outside the University. Yes, I probably would if students showed interest.’’

Of the remaining 2 participants, 1 mentioned that:

‘‘Students on my programme do not seem engaged to start a community. They want the material in as simplified form as possible because of its complexity.’’ The last participant expressed that they would not utilise one even if they knew how to set it up.

1. **Which platforms have you used for creating a digital community?**

All the participants answered these questions. The most used platform is Canvas (26%), followed by Teams (19%), Other (17%), WhatsApp (12%), Twitter (10%), None of the above (7%), Yammer (5%), Instagram (2%), Facebook (2%) and all of the above (2%).

1. **Please specify which platform if you selected 'Other'**

The participants who stated "other" referred to the following platforms: YouTube, telegram, poppulo, LinkedIn, blogs and padlet; and one participant mentioned that they used ‘‘an independent website that was set up by student midwives for student midwives (no longer exists).’’ 1 of the participants mentioned SharePoint, which doesn’t correspond to a digital community platform.

1. **Which platforms would you use for creating a digital community?**

All the participants answered this question. Most participants selected Teams as their preferred platform. 22% of participants opted for Canvas, 20% for WhatsApp, 9% for other, 7% for Twitter, 5% for Facebook, 4% for Instagram, 2% for all of the above, 2% for None of the above and 2% for Yammer.

One of the participants who stated all of the above made the following remark:

‘‘(…) my problem with WhatsApp is that the students can see my telephone number. This is a private mobile as my workplace do not provide work mobiles.’’.

The participant that selected others mentioned TikTok, YouTube, blogs, and LinkedIn as their preferred platforms.

1. **What are the benefits of digital communities for both students and you?**

All the participants answered this question. The following benefits were intimated:

* **Support** (3 participants) – ‘‘Wider reach, creates participation, peer-to-peer support (…)’’
* **Freedom of expression** (1 participant)
* **Time effectiveness** (3 participants) – ‘‘Quick and easy to have questions answered and work together.’’
* **Sharing issues, ideas** (3 participants) – ‘‘The ability to share issues, experiences, and victories at the time they happen (…)’’
* **Accessibility** (3 participants) – ‘‘Instant access -short messages that reach their target audience.’’
* **Promoting learning** (2 participants) – ‘‘Digital communities are a familiar format of communication for students and can encourages peer-learning. Can reduce email traffic for the tutor.’’
* **Making new friends / networking** (2 participants) – ‘‘Potential to make friends when previously in isolation and encouragement to participate in activities that would otherwise feel unachievable.’’
* **Enabling extra interest groups** (1 participant) – ‘‘Enabling extra interest groups (so, for students with a particular interest beyond the planned for curriculum).’’
* **More suitable form of communication for students** (1 participant – ‘‘Better aligns with the way our students communicate, this will be more successful than emails?’’
* **Not intrusive** (1 participant)

Furthermore, one participant expressed being ‘‘unsure’’ about the benefits of digital communities, whilst another one stated that:

‘‘I prefer not to use the ones above, to keep my down time work free. I have not yet found a platform that works well with students where they respond/participate.’’

1. **What are the challenges of digital communities for both students and you?**

All participants answered this question. Common aspects that emerged from the challenges for digital communities included the following:

* **Low levels of participation/engagement** (5 participants) – ‘‘Engagement is often very low. People need a reason to click - their time is short/competition for their time is high (…).’’
* **Crossing people’s boundaries** (3 participants) – ‘‘Boundaries. Communication can only happen within the limits of the working day (…)’’
* **Time consuming** (3 participants) – ‘‘(…) knowing when this is not appropriate and when to switch off. Overuse can be a distraction (…).’’
* **Technology difficulties** (3 participants) – ‘‘Differing levels of digital literacies, skills. Differing access to digital devices (…)’’
* **Inappropriate conversations** (2 participants) – ‘‘Constant and pervasive, not filtered.’’
* **Messaging at inappropriate hours** (1 participant) –‘‘(…) sending of messages outside of working time.’’
* **Bullying** (1 participant) – ‘‘(…) often go off topic and have strayed into "unprofessional behaviour/bullying".’’
* **Isolation** (1 participant) – ‘‘Feeling isolated when the friendly chat dies down, (…) the ones seeking communication from isolation are ignored for all to witness (…)’’
* **Privacy** (1 participant) – ‘‘Monitoring content.’’

Additionally, one participant mentioned that they are unsure about the challenges of digital communities for students/themselves.

1. **Who should create/lead programme-based or work-based digital communities?**

All the participants answered this question. Most participants (71%) agree that programme/work-based digital communities should be created by staff but led by students. 19% say that they should be created and led by students entirely, whilst only 5% say that they should be created by students but led by staff, and 5% agree that they should be created and led by staff entirely.

1. **Whose responsibility is it to resolve/deal with issues or problems within the community?**

All the participants answered this question. Common aspects that surfaced included the following:

* **Staff** (4 participants)
* **Unsure** (3 participants) – ‘‘Unsure... on one level, everyone is responsible, but there are people appointed into roles that are designed to deal with such things specifically... in that case, I would also include them.’’
* **The person who creates/leads the community** (3 participants) – ‘‘Whoever manages the sites but in collaboration with students.’’
* **Joint between staff and students** (2 participants)
* **Moderators** (2 participants)
* **The community** (2 participants) – ‘‘(…) it should belong to the community but would need to be agreed for a named person/people otherwise it may get missed not dealt with?’’
* **Students** (1 participant)
* **Everyone** (1 participant)
* **Other** (2 participants) – ‘‘Have to set up 'ground rules' in advance and this should be easy to resolve.’’
* **Depends on the situation** (1 participant) – ‘‘It depends on the issue - moderation in terms of professionalism and guiding this principle can be led both by students and staff. Maybe initially by staff, but once established senior students can lead this. However, I would want to ensure that students are not being overwhelmed with moderating their communities and this distracting from their studies. Staff are best placed to have a general oversight (…)’’

1. **Have you come across any safeguarding issues? Do you know how these have been resolved?**

In this question, 10 participants responded that they have had safeguarding issue, whilst 10 said they haven’t and 1 said they were unsure. Of the ones that have had issues, they stated the following:

* **Privacy concerns** (1 participant)

**Issue:** ‘‘WhatsApp is a security risk, it ID's people’s personal numbers and can lead to unapproved contact and stalking (as happened to me from a temporary one night only group for staff and students that would be deleted on the night (it wasn't).’’

**Solution:** ‘‘I resolved it by blocking but had uncomfortable feelings that remained and made me feel unsafe on campus, this has never been resolved, nor with me seeking advice before blocking, no-one knew how to handle this appropriately.’’

* **Other** (3 participants) – ‘‘Yes - by discussing issues separately with those involved. If using social media platforms e.g., WhatsApp/Telegram, allowing people to only join if their full name is displayed helps.’’
* **Inappropriate content sharing** (1 participant) – ‘‘Sharing of inappropriate information.’’
* **Bullying/harassment** (1 participant) – ‘‘Yes, one of the student-led WhatsApp groups had some issues that breached confidentiality and also led to claims of bullying and harassment.’’
* **Unprofessionalism** (2 participants) – ‘‘Students have their own WhatsApp year groups. There are often reported issues of poor professional communication (...)’’

1. **Would guidance, discussing how to set up digital communities, be useful for you and your programme/services?**

All participants answered this question. Most participants (71%) believe that guidance on how to set up digital communities would be helpful for them/their programme services. 24% responded maybe, and only 5% said that it would not be useful.

1. **Please explain your answer to the above question (Q13) Would guidance, discussing how to set up digital communities, be useful for you and your programme/services?**

All participants answered this question. However, 2 responded negatively, and 2 others stated that they were unsure/did not know. The following relevant aspects were mentioned by 16 participants who agreed that it would be useful:

* **Information about establishing safeguarding measurements** (3 participants) – ‘‘(…) I would want to know the safeguarding, how to set ground rules and how to enforce them (…) to benefit their wellbeing.’’
* **Guidance on regulations/community management** (3 participants)
* **Information about the purpose/benefits of digital communities** (2 participants) - ‘‘Opportunity to learn more about digital communities, how we can use them more and when it would be good to use them.’’
* **Oher** (4 participants) - ‘‘Fresh ideas.’’
* **Information discussing ethical issues** (2 participants) – ‘‘To discuss the potential ethical issues that may arise and responsibility.’’
* **Supporting evidence/literature would be useful** (1 participant) – ‘‘It's always good to see what works and doesn't work for other people. If this is backed up by evidence/literature, it would be really interesting to hear.’’

Moreover, 1 participant stated that since they have limited knowledge on digital communities: ‘‘(…) additional guidance would be most useful and improve student experience.’’

# **Questions and Answers: Our student interest community (students to societies)**

1. **Which society or societies are you part of?**

All participants answered this question. Some participants were part of multiple societies whereas only 1 participant (9%) were not part of any society. 27% of the participants are part of societies which represents their home country, 63% of the participants are in societies which represents their degree program and few of the participants among them are also part of religious societies.

1. **Does your society or societies have a digital community?**

All participants responded this question. 100% said “Yes” to this question which states that all the communities and societies use a digital platform for communication.

1. **What platform is used for this digital community? For example, Instagram, WhatsApp, Yammer, Teams etc.**

All participants answered this question. Most of the participants described more than one platform of communication used by digital communities. However, Instagram is one of the most popular platforms with 73% of the participants selecting it. After Instagram, WhatsApp is the second most common platform selected by 54% participants. Only 36% selected Facebook. Twitter and Telegram were selected by 18% and 9% of the participants, respectively.

1. **Who set up this digital community?**

All the participants answered this question. However, 4 out of 11 (36%) responses said that the digital community was setup by people who were execs of societies and they had inherited the society. On the other hand, 4 participants (36%) say they are execs of society and they themselves set them up. 1 participant (9%) answered that another member of society set up the digital community, whereas 2 participants (18%) did not inherited it.

1. **How active is this digital group? (this includes how active you are in this group and how often the group communicate collectively)?**

55% of the participants (6 participants) had weekly interactions with the societies and groups, while 27% (3 participants) interacted with their community on a daily basis. We had 1 participant who interacted with the digital group monthly, and 1 who interacted only when events were occurring. This shows that digital communities are mostly interacted with on a weekly basis.

1. **Do you like being part of a digital community?**

91% of the participants said “Yes” only 9% were (1 participant) unsure about this. This may show that people like being part of the digital communities.

1. **What are the benefits for you, for being part of these digital communities?**

All the participants answered this. There are several responses with several varied reasons but the most common reason for being part of a digital community was communication and keeping them updated with news and events.

45% of the participants specifically used the word “events” in their answer, which could show that students are part of societies for the events. 54% of the participants believe that communication and building connections are the key aspects in a society. One participant mentioned communication and interaction with other people as a major reason for being part of a society community: “*Connection to a larger audience and greater network*.”

1. **What are the challenges for you, for being part of these digital communities?**

All the participants answered this. The responses are elaborated in detail below.

* **Communication**

63% of the participants stated communication is one of the biggest challenges in a digital community. Most of the participants had several concerns linked to it. For example, “*Too many messages*”, “*Controlling the comments*,” “*Not everyone reads messages*”, “C*ommunication gap*”,” *Connecting to students and making them engage*”.

* **Other**

The remaining 37% of the participants described several other challenges including handling social media, internet accessibility, lack of understanding a digital community, getting responses from the members and inactive digital community. Another important response was relating to the lack of time management, which is between the execs and members.

1. Reiss, S. (2012). Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation. Teaching of Psychology, 39(2), 152–156. https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628312437704 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)