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A case study of distance education programmes administered through the University of Sunderland, investigating retention and students' sense of belonging

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Sunderland**

# Evolution of doctorate focus

**January 2024.** A case study of **flexible study routes** (Hybrid and Distance Learning) completed by students in the School of Education, University of Sunderland **investigating factors that support student retention and reduce dropout rates.**

**June 2024.** A case study of flexible study routes (hybrid and distance learning) completed by students in the School of Education, University of Sunderland **investigating student dropout rates and sense of belonging.**

**September 2024.** A case study of **distance education programmes** administered through the University of Sunderland, **investigating retention and students' sense of belonging.**

**Oct 2024 onwards...** Mixed methods instead of case study?

# Defining Distance Education. Allen and Seaman (2013)

<i>Proportion of Content Delivered Online</i>	<i>Type of Course</i>	<i>Typical Description</i>
0%	Traditional	Course where no online technology used — content is delivered in writing or orally.
1 to 29%	Web Facilitated	Course that uses web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. May use a course management system (CMS) or web pages to post the syllabus and assignments.
30 to 79%	Blended/Hybrid	Course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has a reduced number of face-to-face meetings.
80+%	Online	A course where most or all of the content is delivered online. Typically have no face-to-face meetings.



# Defining belonging

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

(Goodenow, 1993, p. 25)

# So what?

- Distance education modes of study are seeing increasing demand and are a growth area for universities (Forte et al, 2016), however retention remains an ongoing issue (Anderson & Rivera-Vargus, 2020; Hachey et al., 2022; Murphy & Stewart, 2017; Rawal & Razak, 2022), (in Jones 2023, p12).
- ‘There is extensive literature on student retention, but relatively little of it is concerned with distance learning’ (Amrane-Copper et al 2023, p30).
- Current research into sense of belonging highlights the positive correlation between sense of belonging and student success (Thomas 2012, Thomas 2015, Ahn and Davis 2020, Mahoney, Kumar and Sabsabi 2022) and students ability to ‘maintain their engagement with their studies and manage the accompanying challenges and difficulties.’ (Crawford 2022, p1) . However, this almost exclusively relates to on campus students.

# Major studies on sense of belonging

- What works? Student Retention & Success Programme (2012)
- Building Belonging in Higher Education. Recommendations for Developing an Integrated Institutional Approach (2022).



# How?

- An interpretivist paradigm using a case study methodology.
- Yin (2009) states ‘A case study is an “empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (e.g., a “case” set within its real-world context”). Yin 2009, p18).
- Cohen et al (2018) discusses how case studies can be ‘an investigation into a specific instance or phenomena in its real-life context’ (Cohen et al 2018, p292) that can ‘present and represent reality’ (Cohen et al 2018, p188).
  
- ...or...

# How?

## Phase One

- a. Questionnaire
- b. Thematic analysis and potential identification of subgroups most likely to drop out/lack sense of belonging to focus on who to interview
- c. Semi structured interviews
- d. Thematic analysis relating to belonging. Use findings as a basis for creating student voice feedback with Sunderland Online

**Product.** Structure for student voice feedback to be used across Sunderland Online modules.

# How?

## Phase Two

- a. Identify potential modules to make changes based on findings in Phase One.
- b. Repeat questionnaire
- c. Semi structured interviews
- d. Analyse dropout data to see if it has reduced and any changes in students reporting on sense of belonging

## Phase Three

- a. Repeat Phase Two twice more as an action research cycle.