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"Life changing, transformative and poignant":

The Student Experience and the Online Pedagogy of Care

ABSTRACT

Reflecting on the quality and impact of the largest and most successful online courses in our institution was the starting point for the research reported in this study. Our project's aim was to assess the quality of our provision with reference to the lived experiences of some of our former students. We had two interrelated research questions. The first solicited information concerning the impact of our course on our students; the second sought insights into how they experienced shifts in identity and their sense of self during the course. Data was collected in the form of autobiographical essays (c. 1000 words each), guided by written questions and prompts. Fifteen narrative accounts of student journeys, written by alumni from Manchester Metropolitan University's MSc/PGDip in Psychology (Online) Conversion Award, were analysed using thematic analysis. Analysis uncovered a four-stage model of the online student journey: i) *Anticipation*, when students grapple with anxiety and uncertainty as they anticipate whether the course is right for them; ii) *Belonging, (subthemes of: online environment; staff support and peer support)* when students settle into the course and begin to find a sense of inclusivity and fellowship within a supportive community; iii) *Transformation*, involving a series of turning points and revelatory moments, and iv) *Reflection*, when students look back on their journey with newfound confidence, pride and an altered sense of identity. Our model captures the essence of the online student journey, marking a powerful evolution from uncertainty to empowered achievement. Our findings demonstrate how attending to a specifically online pedagogy of care can nurture the transformative educational experiences of online students.

KEY WORDS

Psychology Conversion, Diversity, Inclusion, Online education, Pedagogy of care, Student journey, Anticipation, Belonging, Transformation, and Reflection Model.

Introduction

The contemporary university is facing an increasingly complex array of political, economic, social, and technological pressures (Fitzgerald et al., 2023). These include the need to generate income, educate an increasingly diverse population of students, make effective use of new technology, and return value to local communities (Collini, 2018). One response to some of these drivers has been to invest in online education, a trend accelerated by the global pandemic. As Morris et al. (2020, p.15) concluded 'there is a clear expectation that online education will continue to grow and form part of the core business of universities.' Universities are competing to invest in online educational technologies, preparing for a future where students will increasingly demand greater flexibility in the modes of study available to them at all levels (Grant, 2021). The rapid expansion of online learning in higher education has prompted significant research into its impact on student engagement (e.g. Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Muir et al., 2019). While advances in internet-based technologies offer innovative approaches to teaching and learning, there is nevertheless growing evidence that online learning can lead to feelings of isolation and disempowerment among students (Yılmaz, & Karataş 2022). To address these challenges, there is clearly a need for a continual revision of online teaching practices to ensure students are supported to help them maintain a strong sense of identity within their virtual educational community.

Online Learners

Our institution's online Psychology MSc/PgDip Psychology Conversion course (which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2024 and has graduated over 1200 students at time of writing) affords graduates

from any previous undergraduate discipline the opportunity to complete the first stage of eligibility for further training to become a professional psychologist. With the option of taking the course full-time or part-time, students gain the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Graduate membership (GMBPsS) when they graduate. This gives them the same status as students who have undertaken a 3-year accredited undergraduate Psychology degree.

We designed our course in 2014 according to the best online principles at the time. In their survey of effective online education practice, Pearson Education (2016) summarised five key recommendations that account for online course success: 1. Strong level of instructor presence and expertise in online learning; 2. Opportunities for student collaboration and contact with peers; 3. Emphasis on employability; 4. Flexible self-paced learning (favoured over a traditional, rigorously scheduled approach); 5. Interactivity among peers, instructors, and platforms. Pearson Education (2016) concluded that online courses have the potential to be superior to on-campus courses, and that the quality and purpose of the content being delivered online is crucial. More recently, Farrell and Brunton (2023) established that, from the point of view of online learners themselves, success depends on: 1. An accessible formal and an informal community of learners; 2. Time management and organisational skills; 3. The availability of engaging and supportive online teachers; 4. Multiple means of interaction, in addition to discussion forums; 5. Meaningful opportunities for skill development, confidence building and self-regulation.

Since Symeonides and Childs (2015) reported that the online student experience has not received as much scholarly attention as the on-campus experience, researchers have initiated studies on the behavioural and dispositional vectors of online student success. In her study of the online learning characteristics of college students enrolled on a blended learning course, Rolé (2020) identified four key student dispositions important for success, namely, resourcefulness, resilience, reciprocity, and responsibility. These traits were crucial for developing a deep approach to learning and for catalysing

changes in the students as learners. Abe (2020) found that the most robust predictor of successful

online learning, was not 'Big 5' personality variables but rather the number of words students

contributed to the online discussions.

Online students face qualitatively different challenges compared to their on-campus counterparts

(Jones et al., 2021). Recent research by Kotera (2023) notes that online courses recruit three times

the number of students with disabilities compared to on-campus courses, and that the obtaining of a

degree makes 'significant financial and psychological differences' (Kotrea, 2023, p.170) to their lives.

It is therefore imperative that high quality online education operationalises provision that

accommodates inclusivity and diversity (Eager et al., 2020). Educators and course providers working

with online courses need to be aware therefore that they are likely to recruit a diverse student body

with intersecting mental and physical health challenges and caring responsibilities (Lister et al.,

2021). Online and distance learning students for example are known to drop out at a higher rate

compared to their on-campus counterparts (Yilmaz and Karataş, 2022). Yilmaz and Karataş (2022)

concluded that both internal and external factors influence the decision to drop out. The underlying

motivations to study may also play a role here (Swain & Hammond, 2011). Retention rates are

particularly problematic for non-traditional students, who have chosen online study for flexibility,

but many still struggle to complete (Kish, 2023). In their study of distance education student

satisfaction, Waterhouse et al. (2020) discovered that students with children were less likely to

report satisfaction with their educational experience, even after controlling for sociodemographic

characteristics. Student satisfaction was significantly negatively associated with the experience of

work-life balance role conflict.

Asynchronously delivered online environments can address some challenges for students from low

socioeconomic status backgrounds, many of whom may be unable to attend face-to-face classes due

to employment obligations (Canty et al., 2020). As Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2020) argue, the potential of

digital technologies to afford inclusivity opportunities in the online learning environment can help

students with disabilities from diverse backgrounds to understand and contribute to knowledge

construction, engagement, and academic achievement. Kumi-Yeboah et al.'s (2020) students

reported that having a sense of control over their studies was a determining factor in mediating

several success outcomes: their decision to enrol onto a course, their academic emotional

management, and their satisfaction with their learning experience. Similar findings have also been

reported by Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) and Shea and Bidjerano (2010) who concur that

students need to feel a sense of control over their studies whilst building personal connections with

tutors and experiencing social elements of online learning.

Fitzgerald et al. (2023) summarised recent innovations of online provision in terms of the value of

developing self-efficacy in learners which in turn enables them to embrace an independent approach

to learning, if appropriately scaffolded. In their research on groupwork, identity and social learning

online, Jaber and Kennedy (2017, p.216) argued that identity is vital for understanding why social

presence has been considered so important for successful learning. When students are

geographically separated from each other, and can only meet online, it can be a challenge to achieve

the level of trust required to make the most of the opportunities groupwork offers. Nevertheless,

trustworthy social interaction is the key to supporting students' performance of identity and identity

shifts in fostering deeper social learning.

Providing online learning opportunities for diverse learners requires taking a long view of the

student experience. Such 'big picture' thinking' must start before enrolment and continue beyond

graduation. Moore and Piety (2022, p.179) argue that systemic planning for online learning should

be organised around the idea of an educational *ecosystem*: 'Just as in-person learners benefit from

an educational system, online learners similarly benefit from carefully planned educational systems.'

By incorporating multiple modalities into a coherent institutional plan for instruction, colleges and universities can provide more options for more students while also better preparing for eventualities. Attending to extracurricular systems planning and as well as institutional systems and supports for online learning supports the creation of high-quality, robust learning ecosystems that provide the flexibility and adaptability to help institutions respond to current demands and future disruptions (Moore & Piety, 2022, p.199).

Adopting this approach should allow online course providers to address the awarding gaps, as experienced by ethnic minority students for example. In their in-depth study of the awarding gap experienced by online distance learning ethnic minority students, Rai and Simpson (2023, p.149) specifically point to 'the significance of personal educational histories…within the context of distance education.' 'The disproportionately low degrees awarded to Ethnic Minority students are stark,' they conclude, 'representing an enduring challenge across the entire higher education sector including distance education.' Rai and Simpson (2023, p.149) Rai and Simpson's important work demonstrates that taking a broad and deep view of the online student journey allows us to conceptualise interrelationships between stereotype threat, 'over-efforting', possible selves, and awarding gaps. It clearly matters to have a dream, no matter how apparently wild. The portrayal of strong, hoped for possible-selves, demonstrated students' resilience and commitment in striving to attain them.

Towards an Online Pedagogy of Care

Our overall research objective was to investigate the relationship between the architecture of our online course and the student journey experience. We had three research aims. First, drawing on the work of Muir et al., (2019), our aim was to understand the factors influencing online student engagement and how these fluctuate over time. Muir et al. (2019) underscored the complexity of student engagement in online learning environments, explaining that engagement is dynamic,

multifaceted, and heavily influenced by external factors such as assessment deadlines, lecturer involvement, and personal responsibilities. Their findings emphasised the importance of teacher presence, course design, and flexibility in supporting online learners.

Second, we wanted to build on and augment the work of Farrell and Brunton (2020) who reported that there are very few studies providing in depth perspectives on the engagement experiences of online students. Adopting a case study approach, they followed 24 online students over an academic year. Their study's five central themes were: students' sense of community, their support networks, balancing study with life, confidence, and their learning approaches. The findings indicated that successful online student engagement was influenced by several psychosocial factors such as peer community, an engaging online teacher, and confidence, and by structural factors such as lifeload and course design.

Nel Noddings' influential work on the pedagogy of care inspired our third research aim, namely to assess the implementation a pedagogy of care in online education (Noddings, 2013). Noddings' Pedagogy of Care theory, first introduced in 1984 and expanded in her later work, centres on the idea that education should fundamentally be about fostering care and relationships, not just the transmission of knowledge. Her theory is based on an ethic of care, which she believes should underpin all educational interactions and institutional structures. This approach to education places an emphasis on the quality of relationships between teachers and students, advocating for a nurturing environment where students feel valued, heard, and supported in their learning and development. Noddings' theory emphasises the reciprocal and relational nature of caring (Noddings, 2010, 2013). The caring relationship involves both the initiator of care (the one-caring) and the recipient of care (the cared-for), with each being receptive and responsive to the other's needs. The one-caring is attentive to the situation of the other and acts accordingly, while the cared-for responds with interest or appreciation, thus completing the caring relation. This reciprocity is

essential for the sustenance of the caring relationship, whether it involves overt recognition of care, positive regard, or progress toward learning goals. Noddings' (2013) theory suggests that interactions between teaching staff and students should be characterised by understanding, responsiveness, and mutual recognition of care. Such encounters would be considered caring if they met three conditions: teaching staff respond to students' needs; students perceive their teachers as caring; and whether there are sufficient contextual continuities of duration and space. Conversely, encounters fail to be caring if these conditions are not met, highlighting the importance of attentiveness, responsiveness, and supportive environments in fostering caring relationships in online education (Noddings, 2013).

Research Questions

We have two interrelated Research Questions. The first is concerned with finding out about the impact of micro-scale interventions that operationalised our course provision. The second asks about whether and how our students experienced any macro-scale shifts in identity and their sense of self.

1. How do specific modest interventions in online course provision, such as flexible learning, peer interaction, and instructor support, contribute to fostering in depth student engagement, thereby reducing feelings of isolation among students, as identified by Farrell and Brunton (2020) and Muir et al. (2019)?

2. To what extent can Noddings' (2013) pedagogy of care account for the identity transformation of online students, particularly with respect to fostering shifts in self-perception and personal growth?

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

This was a qualitative research project where data was collected in the form of autobiographical essays (c. 1000 words each), guided by written questions and prompts. Fifteen alumni from the MSc/PGDip in Psychology (online) Conversion course participated in this study. The earliest year of matriculation of those alumni whose narratives are included here was 2017, the latest 2021. The age range of students at matriculation was 23-46. The previous degree background of the alumni subjects such as Law, English, Business Science, Film and Media, and Music. There was a mix of students who studied full time and part time, and of those who enrolled on the MSc and PG Dip routes. The data set also included alumni who completed the course after suspending their studies at some point during. Final degree classification covered the full spectrum from Pass to Distinction. There were no exclusion criteria as such, though it should be noted that the use of the term alumni in the inclusion criteria necessitated that participants must have completed the programme in full and not graduated with an interim exit award.

Procedure

Following ethical approval granted by the University's Ethics committee, alumni (identified through a database supplied by our institution) were invited to participate via e-mail. The initial e-mail contained brief standardised text detailing the project, asking recipients to reply if they were interested in finding out more. If the alumnus responded favourably, they were sent a more detailed follow up e-mail containing the Participant Information Sheet (PIS), a Consent Form, and a question prompt document to guide their autobiographical accounts. Forty-eight e-mails were sent out at first, resulting in 33 (69%) respondents agreeing to participate. Participants had two weeks to

complete their narratives before returning them to the second author (CJ), by e-mail attachment. As per the instructions in the PIS they had to reply to the original e-mail that was sent to them, to minimise the risk of a data breach. Upon receipt of the contract, Consent Forms, and the written narratives, the data was transferred to the University's Research Data Storage (RDS) system and the e-mails were deleted. The resulting 15 autobiographical narratives used for the thematic analysis were copied into a secure sub folder on the RDS. Personal names were removed from the narratives and line numbers added. Whilst we recognise that it was not possible to truly anonymise the data, given our personal relationships with our former students, there were very few narratives where both of us would have identified the alumni so anonymisation was still worthwhile.

Ethical Considerations

Institutional ethical approval for this research was obtained prior to the recruitment of participants and the collection of data. The right to withdraw their data for up to two weeks post receipt was clearly communicated to participants. It was made clear that, in accordance with methodological imperatives, direct quotations would be used in the research. No competing interests influenced the study design, research conduct, or data reporting. Because we exclusively recruited course alumni, not current students, there were no implicit pressures to participate.

Researcher Positionality

As Programme Leads on the Conversion Course, (GB since 2014 and CJ since 2018), we conducted this qualitative research project to study the course's impact on our former students and to explore their accounts of their educational journeys in detail. Alumni were fully aware that we would be conducting the research and that we would be reading and interpreting the narrative data. From our perspectives we view our intimate knowledge of the programme as a strength in that it enhanced

our analytic power. Although we are emotionally invested in the wellbeing of our students and are therefore affectively positioned with respect to the interpretation of the data that have provided to us, we no longer occupy formal leadership roles on the programme.

Data Analysis Approach

The autobiographical essays were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis. At the heart of this approach is the ambition to 'search across a qualitative dataset in order to identify repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2006: p.15). According to Braun and Clarke (2019, p.591), thematic analysis is 'creative, reflexive and subjective, with researcher subjectivity understood as a resource'. Qualitative research is therefore context-bound, positioned, and situated. Braun and Clarke's (2019) emphasis on interpreting, creating, and telling stories makes theirs an appropriate methodology for our project. The process of analysis starts from familiarisation with the data and ends with the production of the written report. It should be noted that to ensure rigour and trustworthiness, the two principal researchers (GB and CJ) worked independently on the first four stages of analysis, only collaborating on the final analysis. This meant that data familiarisation, generation of provisional codes and initial themes, and the thematic review was conducted independently. By Stage 5, the principal researchers had essentially agreed on the elicited themes. They then worked together to refine, define, and name the themes, and to select the quotations used to evidence them.

Analysis and Discussion

Thematic analysis generated four sequential themes: Anticipation, Belonging, Transformation, and Reflection. This model captures the parameters of the online student journey, marking a transformative evolution from uncertainty to empowerment.

Stage 1: Anticipation

The first stage of the online student journey evidences the initial uncertainties and hesitations of prospective students, juxtaposed with their determination to succeed despite self-doubt and concerns over academic ability. Students often grapple with anxiety and uncertainty at the beginning of their studies, wondering if the course is right for them. As succinctly stated by one of our alumni this stage is characterised by wondering "Can I really do this?" (N4, 73, p.3).

"It was from these early experiences I always felt incapable of studying something as important and academic as Psychology" (N6, 5-7, p.1).

"I didn't think I was smart enough. I never felt that I was good enough" (N3, 4-5 p.1).

Our data evidences the doubts our prospective students had and the ways in which they fought against these contrasting tensions between their worries over feelings of inauthenticity on the one hand, and their determination to succeed on the other. This stage is characterised by seeking reassurance, questioning one's capabilities, and cautiously stepping into the unknown with a blend of excitement and trepidation.

"Believing that I could do it became easier with each successful assignment, but it took a while to shake off the imposter feeling and self-doubt in my ability" (N11, 62-63, p.2).

This stage highlights the importance of supporting students with a pedagogy of care (Noddings, 2013) during the early stages of their educational journey and by ensuring that as educators we are

addressing their fears and supporting them to develop their sense of self-efficacy and self-determination (Stone et al., 2009).

Stage 2: Belonging – Subthemes of: the online environment; staff support and peer support.

As students settled into the course, they began to find a sense of inclusivity and fellowship within a supportive community. Stage 2 encompasses three distinct but interconnected subthemes of belonging: the online environment, staff support and peer support.

The Online Environment

A key component of this theme is necessity of the online environment in enabling these students to undertake and complete the MSc. The flexibility of the online environment meant that barriers to traditional education caused by family commitments, employment and disability were removed for our students.

"I searched for some time to find a suitable course as I knew that realistically for me to be able to do any course then an online, distance learning course would be the only possible route" (N6, 13-15, p.1).

"I had found studying online was a life saver, it allowed me to manage my family life, and I could continue working" (N1, 55-56 p.2).

"Having lectures and a vast number of materials so easily accessible meant I could utilise any free time. Personally, as someone who is Dyslexic the benefit of being able to continually revisit

recourses without time restraints removed a lot of the competitive and embarrassing aspects I'd previously encountered in traditional education" (N7, 48-451, p.2).

Our data therefore clearly supports the previous research literature on the importance of online environments for student engagement (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Muir et al., 2019; Morris et al. 2020). This is particularly the case for students with disabilities (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020); Lister et al., 2021) employment (Canty, 2020) and caring responsibilities (Runacres & Herron, 2022).

Staff support

There was a plethora of evidence concerning the impact our staff had on the students. This included staff at every level from programme leads, unit leads, dissertation supervisors, personal tutors, and support tutors.

"I would argue that the most invaluable element of MMU's Conversion course was the team who delivered it – all Conversion staff were knowledgeable and passionate about their areas" (N14, 56-58, p.2).

"Without the unwavering academic and emotional support, I would not have been able to complete this course...they cheered me on from the sidelines until the very end" (N6, 56-60, p.2).

"I found [my tutor] asked me questions and joined with my answers in a way that was attentive and gave me the sense of feeling heard" (N4, 75-77, p3).

"He picked up on things I hadn't and encouraged me to call a domestic abuse helpline for advice" (N5, 54-55, p.2).

Peer Support

Students expressed gratitude for the sense of community fostered by the course leaders through online forums, personal and professional development (PPD) groups, and the specialist interest groups that we set up across a whole range of different interests reflective of our diverse student body.

"These forums were pivotal in bringing together students from diverse backgrounds…This sense of community was instrumental in ensuring that I never felt isolated, and I've forged friendships from the course that remain strong to this day" (N9, 50-53, p.2).

"The best part of my MMU Psychology Conversion course journey was that I made meaningful connections, felt part of a community, and was able to engage in extracurricular activities (all things I was not expecting from a 100% online course)" (N14, 69-72, p.2).

"The group was very supportive…There was lots of humour and camaraderie…this network contributed to the success of everybody completing the course" (N1, 61-66, p.2).

Stage 2, Belonging illustrates the critical role of creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Our data provides support for the Higher Education Policy Institute's definition of belonging which incorporates three interconnected themes of "belonging in one's self; belonging in one's immediate environment and belonging in society and culture" (HEPI, 2022, p.2).

The appreciation shown by students regarding the support that they received both from staff directly and from the peer networks that were implemented and facilitated by the staff is evidentiary of the importance of organising learning around the educational ecosystem that More and Piety (2022) promote and of the need to adhere to the five key recommendations set out by Pearson Education (2016). This data provided by our students shows that for them, not only is the online environment not a barrier to belonging, but that the online environment, because it was designed within the framework of a pedagogy of care (Noddings, 2013), is what enabled them to have a sense of community and belonging, which alleviated feelings of isolation and provided both emotional and academic support. This sense of belonging was vital to maintaining student engagement, underscoring the importance of fostering peer interaction and flexible learning options in online education, as highlighted by Farrell and Brunton (2020) and Muir et al. (2019). This was particular of note for our students with disabilities (Kumi-Yeoboah et al., 2020), which follows on from the online course fitting within a widening participation agenda (Kotrea, 2023).

Stage 3: Transformation

This stage represented a series of turning points and revelatory moments, inflected with anxiety. Students experienced personal breakthroughs—transformative realisations that they can indeed succeed. These moments of self-realisation and triumph signified not just academic progress, but also profound personal growth. The shift in perspective empowered students to see their potential more clearly and fuelled their continued momentum, as one student stated, their journey on the Conversion was "life-changing, transformative and poignant" (N10, 135, p.3).

"Recalling the most memorable moment is easy. It was the one that changed so many things, that was 'meeting' the [course lead....who] would hold these monthly conversations.... If only people knew how terrified I was as I unmuted [my mic] and spoke" (N3, 41-47, p.1).

"I feel my commitment and determination growing ever stronger and it's drawing on an inner strength that could only have been achieved by my journey so far and through the support I received on the conversion course" (N4, 108-111, p.4).

"It helped me get through a big life change...turning the adversity I've faced into something positive." (N13, 3-5, p.1)

These moments of self-realisation were key to their personal growth and academic success, demonstrating how Noddings' (2013) pedagogy of care facilitates shifts in self-perception, personal identity (Jaber & Kennedy, 2017) and self-efficacy (Fitzgerald et al., 2023). The empathetic support from instructors helped students navigate challenges, leading to a deep sense of accomplishment, this supports findings from previous research, such as Garrison and Cleaveland-Innes (2005) and Shea and Bidjerano (2010).

Stage 4: Reflection

In the final stage, students looked back on their journey with newfound confidence and pride. Reflection allowed them to see both their past and their future with fresh clarity. Having navigated challenges and embraced transformative moments, they now felt empowered, and ready to take on new opportunities with a strong sense of achievement and self-assurance. This forward-facing vision was rooted in the personal and academic growth they had experienced. The transformative educational experience provided by the course was celebrated by our alumni as they reflected on their achievements and newfound confidence and acknowledged the course's impact on their personal and professional lives.

"The process of researching and writing that essay was such a turning point for me. It feels poignant to look back now....and see how much that crystallised the path I continue to walk today" (N2, 45-47, p.2).

"My friends and family have noticed a real transformation in me...This whole course was life changing" (N10, 150, p.4 & 274-275, p.7).

"It was exactly what I needed to send me on a new trajectory...I don't know what is next on my path, but I am excited about whatever it is." (N3, 37-38, p.1 & 75-76, p.2).

"I literally could not believe that I achieved that result, and it finally silenced the noise in my head that I was not good enough" (N10, 139-141, p.3).

In this final stage of reflection students looked back on their journey with newfound confidence and pride. The course's transformative impact enabled them to approach their personal and professional lives with clarity and purpose. This final stage therefore demonstrates how designing effective online courses (e.g. Pearson Education, 2006; Muir et al, 2009), underpinned by a pedagogy of care (Noddings (2013), can, as we hoped, produce macro-scale shifts in our student's identity (Jaber & Kennedy, 2017) and sense of self (Stone et al., 2009).

Conclusions

Our analysis of the lived experiences of graduates from the MSc/PgDip in Psychology (Online) Conversion Award, has produced a four-stage online student journey model – Anticipation, Belonging, Transformation, and Reflection – that encapsulates the evolution of student subjectivity

from initial uncertainty to empowered achievement. The findings of this study emphasise the transformative impact of online education when guided by an intentional pedagogy of care, as theorised by Noddings (2013). Our research reveals that a thoughtfully designed online course, supported by attentive instructors and a nurturing learning environment, can foster both personal and academic growth.

In response to our first research question, we conclude that specific interventions in course design—such as flexible learning, peer interaction, and instructor support—were crucial in fostering deep engagement and reducing feelings of isolation. These elements helped students overcome the challenges typically associated with online learning, allowing them to thrive in a supportive academic environment. The findings confirm and extend previous research, such as Farrell and Brunton (2020) that creating spaces where students can form meaningful connections and receive timely feedback is essential for success in online education.

Regarding our second research question, we demonstrated that Noddings' (2013) pedagogy of care accounted for the significant identity transformations experienced by students. The caring relationships developed between students and instructors played a pivotal role in fostering self-confidence and personal growth. This shift from self-doubt to empowerment highlights the transformative potential of education when delivered with care.

In conclusion, both structural and relational factors are critical in creating a meaningful online educational experience. By prioritising flexibility, interaction, and support, online programs can foster engagement and facilitate personal transformation. An online pedagogy of care not only equips students with academic knowledge but also nurtures their resilience, growth, and achievement. This study reinforces the need for institutions to design online programs that attend to

students' diverse needs, fostering an environment where every learner can thrive both academically and personally.

Reflexivity

This research project has been a journey for us as researchers, one whose seeds were sown several years ago when we were discussing just how incredible our diverse student body was and how their stories deserved to be told. With our recent departure from the leadership of the Conversion course, (handing over our leadership to the colleagues we have mentored, thus ensuring the sustainability of the course) we decided that now was the right time to record the voices of our alumni. Reading their narratives has been a real privilege. We have found it rather emotional at times. We thank our participants for sharing their transformative learning journeys with us.

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