



WHO ARE OUR EDUCATION STUDIES (PRIMARY) CONCURRENT STUDENTS?

PRAXIS Scholarship project

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Abstract

This project sets out to respond to a significant increase in the numbers of concurrent students in the Education Studies (Primary) Q94 pathway and the growing anecdotal evidence about the nature and motivations of these students. It aims to explore the impact on students of studying at full-time equivalent intensity (studying two 60-credit modules concurrently), building on previous university-wide studies but with greater focus on the person behind the student. By focusing on the core modules in Q94 (E103, E209, E309), the project team were able access a large cohort of students, and tutors, across levels. A mixed methods and reflexive approach has been adopted, analysing quantitative and qualitative data. The analysis was then screened through various theoretical perspectives that will help achieve a richer understanding of the data and the corresponding student narratives. To ensure a fully rounded analysis the project team has been drawn from a diverse range of staff who support students, and the students themselves. The result is a multi-layered and multi-vocal analysis that can inform how we understand students and their motivations, while also challenging preconceptions that act as barriers to a more nuanced appreciation of the student experience. The project will be used to provide guidance for qualification and module teams, tutors and student support staff to support concurrent students, as well as generate tips for students embarking on concurrent study or studying two modules concurrently. At a more fundamental level, the ‘shifting stories’ of our concurrent students have the potential to challenge institutional narratives about concurrent study and the existing frameworks of support. The project team will seek opportunities to engage in presentations and workshops to share the emerging picture of our concurrent students who are demanding to be seen as “normal” full-time HE students, with the flexibility of structures, processes and interrelationships of their ‘red-brick’ counterparts.

Scholarship team

Carolyn Cooke (E103 ST)	Clare Tope (E103 MTC)	Mandy Reddin (E103 AL)
Claire Saunders (E209 ST) Roisin McPhilemy (E209 ST)	Paula Addison-Pettit (E209 MTC)	Jill Delsoldato (E209 AL)
Lore Gallastegi (E309 ST)	Fiona Henry (E309 MTC)	Lorraine Moore (E309 & E209 AL)

Project support for data collection: Shingirai Shumba, Carl Small, Gill Macmillan, Yvonne Carron (LDS)

Introduction

The Education Studies (Primary) Q94 Concurrent study project was initially conceived in response to the university-wide growth in students studying at full time equivalent intensity (studying two 60-credit modules concurrently). The Education Studies (Primary) qualification requires students to study six 60-credit modules. When the first modules launched in 2016/17, 32.9% of students studied concurrently. This proportion has grown every year with 47% of core Q94 module students now studying at high intensity. With such a significant proportion of concurrent students, there has been increasing anecdotal evidence about how tutors (Associate Lecturers) were supporting these students in a differentiated way, and has led to steps by the central team to provide additional resources (e.g. a combined study calendar for E102 and E103). During this period, some “unstructured, fragmented and embedded stories” (Gabriel and Connoll 2010: 519) began to emerge “in the course of everyday conversations” (ibid.) about the nature of these students, the challenges they faced and the challenges they created for Associate Lecturers (ALs). These stories provided an important opportunity to “make sense of experience, to invite qualification and elaboration by others, and to test different boundaries” (Gabriel and Connoll 2010: 508).

This project builds on previous studies which have explored the challenges and outcomes for students undertaking concurrent study in other faculties of the OU (Wild 2018, Penny unknown). This project seeks to examine the same theme but to broaden and deepen the scope of these studies in three ways:

- 1) By using the lens of student motivations and experiences
- 2) By exploring the perspectives of Associate Lecturers
- 3) By looking across Levels 1, 2 and 3 within a single qualification.

Therefore, the overall aim of the project was to develop a deeper and richer understanding of this important group of students in our qualification. Specifically, we aimed to:

- understand the **nature of/diversity within** the cohort of Q94 concurrent students and their study patterns and outcomes
- understand the **person behind** Q94 concurrent students’ background and reasons for choosing to study 120 credits in each academic year or presentation,
- investigate the **experience** concurrent students have had during their study
- analyse the **retention and attainment** of these students and explore the factors that impact upon them
- explore the challenges they have encountered and **how they have overcome** them.

It was intended that the project would generate:

- guidance for qualification and module teams, ALs and SRSC/SST staff to support concurrent students, and
- generate tips to share with students embarking on concurrent study or studying 2 modules concurrently.

At a more fundamental level, the project team intended to create spaces for *constructing* deeper, more nuanced stories (through writing vignettes) and *deconstructing* (as appropriate) existing narrative tropes about concurrent students, their motivations, experiences, and challenges. This was achieved in large part due to the diverse team of researchers involved in the project (ALs, Staff Tutors, Module Chairs, or Learning Designers) with everyday experiences of supporting concurrent students and ALs from different roles. The reflexivity to respond, read, analyse and discuss data through these multiple, experienced, positions as well as the inclusion of students and ALs in our data collection, enabled a 360-degree view of the narratives and lived experiences of concurrent students.

The initial plan was to collect data during the academic year 2019/20, with much of the activity in spring 2020 just as Covid-19 lockdowns started. In light of this, the project was paused until the following academic year. However, the impact of Covid-19 is threaded throughout this project, particularly in relation to increases in student numbers for 2020/21 accompanied by an increasing proportion of concurrent students. The motivations, opportunities and challenges of concurrent study are inextricably linked to Covid-19 and the learning contexts many of the students were facing.

Literature review

This project aims to further develop our understanding of the experiences and motivations of concurrent students. Implicit in this aim, is the assumption that these students are a diverse group who have a mode (distance study) and intensity of study (full-time equivalent) in common. Diversity encompasses 'language, background, ethnicity, class and financial background, age, sexuality, religion, disability, gender, previous educational experience, part-time/full-time, and so on' (Bamber et al. 2014: 152). The purpose of this literature review is to appraise the ways in which online and distance-learning students might be described. This appraisal will provide a framework for the analysis of student experiences in the particular context of 'high intensity study' on an Education Studies degree at the Open University. Literature that focuses specifically on high-intensity online distance study is very limited, but the wider literature on online and distance learning highlights three core themes that are pertinent to this study. Firstly, students are *described* in particular ways, which offer some useful frameworks for exploring high study-intensity students. Secondly, the nature of the relationships between student and tutor emerges as significant and finally, the ways in which students interact with their programmes of study provides useful insights that can be applied in our specific context.

Describing Students

Generally, students are drawn to online programmes for their flexibility and convenience (Bocchi et al., 2004, Aristeidou, 2021) and the most consistent reason for choosing to study at greater intensity is the desire to gain a qualification more quickly (Penny, unknown and Wild, 2018). However, while there appears to be some consensus in the reasons for studying multiple modules concurrently, the factors which impact on persistence in online learning tend to be unique depending on students' personal circumstances (Yanf, Baldwin and Snelson, 2017). Despite well documented evidence of diversity in student circumstances, and potential barriers to high intensity study

(Penny, unknown and Wild, 2018), there is some evidence to suggest that student dropout from distance learning is largely due to one factor, loss of the motivation to learn (Simpson, 2010). It could be argued Distance learning programmes place increased demands on student motivation as they are required to take a proactive and self-directed approach to their learning, whilst studying for the most part with only asynchronous contact with others (Roddy, et al, 2017). However, motivation is just one part of a broader description of effective study. Hurd et al. (2001) suggest that autonomy is a key to success (modules completed and passed) in distance learning.

Autonomous learners are those who have the learning skills, strategies and attitudes to work confidently on a range of tasks. Autonomous learners establish a sustainable study routine which accounts for both predictable and unpredictable distractions and in the face of adversity, they demonstrate resilience (Hurd et al, 2001). If success is predicated by autonomy, then it seems reasonable to suggest that dependency may lead to drop out or failure. Of course, there is not a dichotomous choice between autonomous and dependent learners; it is possible for students to present with good study routines for example but lack the confidence to work flexibly. Therefore, one factor that may determine whether students reach their study goals will be the extent to which they are autonomous learners.

Brown (2015) adds some further insight into student characteristics through his labels for the study approaches that a group of twenty students employed in their first term of a distance learning programme. He offers three approaches to study: active strategic, active deep and passive surface. 'Active strategic' students planned to meet specific goals that they had set for themselves. 'Active deep' students embraced the learning experience, with a deep interest in the subject area as opposed to a task-completion approach. Students described as 'passive surface' were often limited by either a tendency for procrastination or dependency. Whilst these three approaches are useful in identifying different 'types' of student, other factors have an impact on their studies. One of these is the relationship between the tutor and the student.

Describing tutor and student relationships

In a study of student perceptions of the value of a range of facilitation strategies for distance learning, Martin, Wang and Sadaf argue that there is a need for 'instructor presence', 'instructor connectedness' and strategies to support 'student engagement' (Martin, Wang and Sadaf, 2018: 56). They draw on evidence from their own study and the work of others to conclude that establishing tutor presence on an online setting is challenging but essential to the success of online courses. Instructor connectedness is summarised as behaviours that reduced perceived distance between the student and the tutor. Martin et al. (2018) again draws on a range of evidence to suggest that those who have strong connection with instructors have better learning outcomes and academic achievement. This evidence leans to the tentative conclusion that tutors have a role to play in establishing and maintaining relationships between themselves and students. Brown's (2015) study explores the same idea from the perspective of the student, focusing on how students made use of the support that was available to them. Brown labels students as either 'avid support seekers' or 'self-sufficient learners. The former typically sought support from within the online learning environment and were particularly interested in contact with tutors for reassurance, while 'self-sufficient learners' did not always attend tutorials or seek support individually. Brown does not explicitly suggest that there is a continuum between the two categories of student, but this can be implied from the descriptions he

offers of the 'lone wolf' who works without interaction with either peers or tutors at one end of the spectrum and the very 'avid support seeker' who constantly seeks contact with the tutor in particular at the other end of the spectrum (Brown, 2015: 9). While the description of 'avid support seeker' appears to align with the notion of a dependent learner there is some tension between 'self-sufficiency' and autonomy. The descriptions of self-sufficient learners do not suggest autonomy, instead they reveal a set of reasons for lack of engagement such as students' fears that their contributions would leave them exposed, lack of perceived value in tutorials or posting comments in forums and in isolated cases poor organisation which meant that tutorials were missed. This is indicative of a shared responsibility between tutors and students to develop a sense of community and belonging (Hart 2012), where a further variable in the descriptions of students working online at a distance is the extent to which 'belong' to the virtual community.

Student engagement with the programme of study

The perceived quality and relevance of distance learning programmes appear to be important factors which impact on student persistence (Meyer, Burenheide and Pouline 2009). Students' motivation to learn is more likely to be retained when they see the value and relevancy of the programme to their goals (Yang, Baldwin and Snelson 2017). The flexibility of distance learning programmes also has the potential to support students to balance work and family commitments with their studies (Müller 2008). However, Hurd et al. (2001) draw attention to what they call the 'rigidity' of distance learning programmes such as those offered by the Open University. They argue that the 'amount, rate and content of the learning programme is determined by the course team producing the materials, and not by the student' and this limits the potential for learner autonomy (ibid.:344).

Modules in the Education Studies programme are studied from October to June. The bulk of the module teaching and assessment materials are published in early September, to allow for asynchronous learning. While Hurd et al. (2001) presented this as a rigid model, unfettered access to module websites ensures much greater freedom for students to study where and when they like, compared to traditional campus-based universities (Hilliard et al. 2019). Assessed and non-assessed tasks that require shared discussion, planning and creation require synchronous and asynchronous peer interaction which may lead students to feel that their study flexibility has been reduced (Hilliard 2019). Thus, the extent to which flexibility of the programme, or the support offered by tutors is sufficiently personalised and responsive to 'make concurrent study work' (Wild, 2018, p.18) is not clear and requires further investigation. What is clear is there is variation in the extent to which students are aware of and make use of the flexibility offered to them ((Butcher and Adams 2015 and Wild, 2018).

The analysis above indicates that descriptions of students learning at a distance are multi-dimensional. Students can be described by their profile, their personal attributes, their approach to study, their interactions with peers and tutors, the value that they place on their programme of study and the ways that they work with module materials. Taken together, these features indicate the need for further exploration of the motivations and experiences of our Q94 Concurrent Students.

Methodology

The overall aim of the project was to develop a deeper and richer understanding of the students completing Q94 at high intensity (generally studying two 60-credit modules concurrently). In order to create this depth of understanding the research employed a mixed methods approach. The quantitative analysis focuses on anonymised data regarding study intensity, declaration of disability and ethnicity and module outcome for each concurrent student registered on the core qualification modules from 2018/19 to 2020/21. The qualitative methods included student and AL questionnaires, interviews and the creation of vignettes, exploring the social, political, cultural and economic forces that impact student experiences and reasons for study. Taking a mixed methods approach allowed a reflexive approach (Flyvbjerg 2013) where the richness of the data allowed us to read our findings through multiple personal and theoretical perspectives.

Ethics

The project team gained the required ethics approvals to undertake research with students and ALs at the Open University. This involved approval from the OU's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), the Student Research Project Panel (SRPP) to identify Q94 concurrent students to contact for the survey and interviews, and from the Staff Survey Project Panel (SSPP) to contact E103/E209/E309 ALs. Approval was gained in January 2020 and again in September 2020 after the Covid-19 pause. All participants were made aware that they had the right to withdraw. As well as the formal processes of ethical consent, the team were attuned to the potential impacts of the project on students, ALs and the project team during a difficult time, when covid-related restrictions continued to impact on everyday life, work and study. This awareness was evident in:

- the careful timetabling of the surveys and interviews to avoid assessment deadlines and marking periods.
- a constant consideration of the impact of Covid-19 on the ability of participants to engage and respond leading to shorter and more targeted questioning.
- regular checking whether changing circumstances meant participants could continue to engage as originally intended, leading to a more iterative process of informed consent than originally anticipated (see section on interviews).

Consent was gained from participants through the invitation to complete the questionnaire which included a participant information sheet. Participants confirmed their consent at the start of the online survey. For those indicating on the questionnaire that they were willing to be contacted, a further participant information sheet and consent form were issued before the interview was conducted.

Data security was provided by using JISC online surveys and a dedicated Adobe Connect online room for the follow-up interview.

Research activities

The following sections explore the research activities that were undertaken (see table 1). These fall under three headings:

- Quantitative Data Collection
- Mixed methods questionnaires
- Interviews

Month / Year	Activity	Data / materials created
September 2019 to November 2021	Quantitative data collation	Study intensity, declaration of disability, ethnicity and module outcome.
November / December 2020	Associate Lecturer (AL) Questionnaires sent to 87 ALs	35 completed questionnaires (40% response rate)
February / March 2021	Associate Lecturer (AL) Interviews	12 Interview transcripts
February / March 2021	Student Questionnaires sent to 1319 students.	241 completed questionnaires (18% response rate)
April / May 2021	Student Interviews; 150 expressed interest; 40 contacted	25 Interview transcripts.

Table 1 Research activities

Quantitative data

Demographic and outcome data for all students registered at module start on E103, E209 and E309 in 2018, 2019 and 2020 were collated. Demographic data related to declaration of disability, ethnicity and study intensity. The focus on ethnicity and disability reflects sector-wide, OU and qualification concerns regarding equality, diversity and inclusion and awarding gaps (OU nd, Office for Students 2021).

The data were extracted from the OU data warehouse by Data Analysts in the Learning Design team using SAS EG and were collated in Microsoft Excel. Each learner was allocated a unique, anonymised student ID. Students changing their qualification prior to graduation or during module study created duplicate records, which were identified and removed.

The project team also explored the potential of collating data regarding tutorial attendance, TMA submissions and extensions, TMA and EMA results to build a more detailed quantitative picture of study behaviours and assessment outcomes. However, much of this data is stored in locations other than the OU data warehouse and extracting and combining data from different sources was outside the capacity of this

project. Furthermore, as the project evolved the focus shifted to eliciting student voice and tutor perspectives.

The data do not capture the entire study journey of student cohorts as they include those who started their OU study prior to 2018 as well as students who, in 2020, were yet to complete their degrees. Cohort numbers have been analysed in relation to numbers of students registered at the start of modules. Students have a grace period before they are liable for fees. Withdrawal rates are therefore, sometimes surprisingly high, and this also impacts of the rate of good passes and passes. Much OU data is analysed in the context of student numbers at the point at which they are liable for fees. The project team focused on student numbers registered.

Recruitment in in all three modules has consistently increased year on year. Thus, data across the three years are skewed by the outcomes and characteristics of cohorts in later presentations (Figure 1) and both 2019 and 2020 were impacted by Covid-19, with final assessments cancelled in 2019 and a range of mitigations in place in 2020.

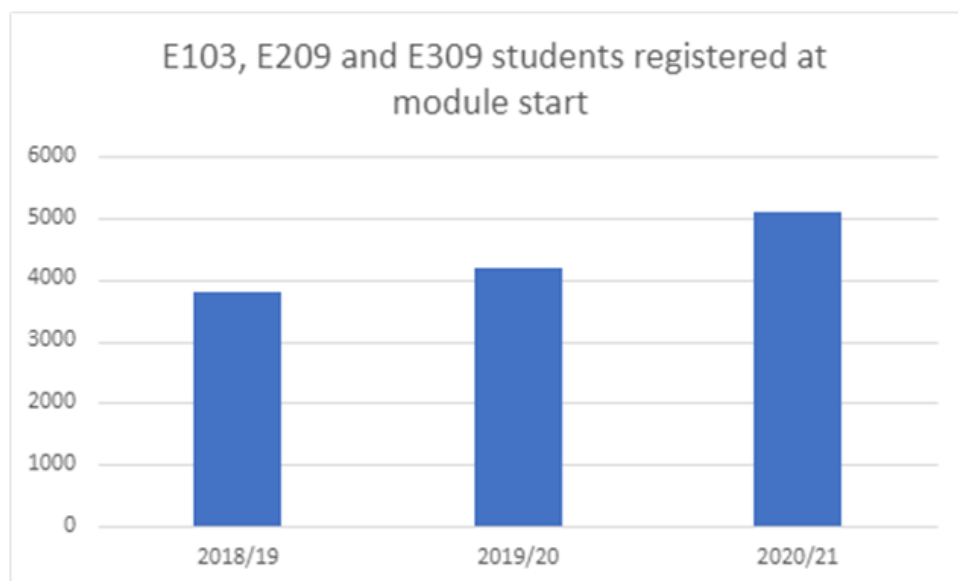


Figure 1 Combined recruitment to the three modules.

Associate Lecturer (AL) and Student Questionnaires

Both the AL and student questionnaires were presented using JISC online surveys. ALs receiving the questionnaire were identified by the SSPP using the following criteria:

- A live tutoring contract on Q94 core modules (E103, E209, or E309) for 2020/21.
- Have completed at least one complete presentation of tutoring on core Q94 modules.

Students receiving the questionnaire were identified by the SRPP using the following criteria:

- studying a Q94 core module (E103, E209 or E309) in 2020/21.
- studying at an intensity of at least 120 credits in 2020/21.
- Linked to Q94 (i.e., Open degree students or other qualification students were not included)

The questionnaires were organised into sections which created complementary responses between the ALs and students (see table 2). As a team we debated addressing Covid-19 issues through additional targeted questions in the surveys and interviews but decided the questionnaire design gave ample opportunity for sharing these impacts. This was borne out in the data.

Associate Lecturer Questionnaire sections	Student Questionnaire sections
Contextual Information	Contextual Information
Perceptions and experiences of concurrent students	Motivations for concurrent study
Supporting concurrent students	Supporting your concurrent study
Reflections on practices with concurrent students	Benefits and challenges of concurrent study
	Looking forwards

Table 2 Questionnaire sections

Both questionnaires used a mixture of closed, Likert scale and open response questions (see Appendices 1 and 3).

Associate lecturer and Student interviews

The interviews were structured around 6 key questions for the students and 3 for the ALs (see appendices 2 and 4). This was important as the interviews were conducted and analysed by different researchers. However, the interviewers had the capacity to follow the student’s story, allowing it to develop as a conversation. Taking this approach allowed interviewees to lead and for the interviewer to review, repeat or follow-up questions in order to build more complete stories (Valentine in Bennett and Shurmer-Smith 2001). These stories were “rich, detailed and multi-layered” (Burgess 1984), producing more complete narratives to compliment the questionnaire survey (Silverman 2001:15).

To avoid possible feelings of coercion or discomfort about sharing experiences, all interviewees spoke with researchers who they wouldn’t directly work with in their modules. Potential interviewees were contacted by the member of the project to establish availability, their right to withdraw, and to reinforce that the confidentiality of the process. Interviews were conducted in Adobe Connect online rooms ensuring a confidential, but also familiar space for the interviewees who use the platform for their studies. Students and ALs who participated in the interviews were each offered a £25 gift voucher to compensate them for their time.

Analysis methodology

The analysis of such a large range of data sources, proved challenging often feeling messy and iterative. However, this approach created opportunities for a *responsive, multi-layered and multi-voiced* process, allowing us to develop and enrichen our understandings through this pluralism

Quantitative data analysis

The data for the three modules combined, over the three years were filtered to identify the rates of concurrency and the outcomes for the cohorts identified in Table 3. Further filtering then enabled the same analysis for each module in turn:

Demographic group	Study intensity in one year	
	<120 credits	120 credits
All students	✓	✓
Declaring one or more disability	✓	✓
Not declaring a disability	✓	✓
Asian	✓	✓
Black	✓	✓
Mixed	✓	✓
Other	✓	✓
White	✓	✓

Table 3: Cohorts described for the qualification and modules E103, E209 and E309.

Combining the data from three years addresses some concerns regarding the small size of some student cohorts.

A significant amount of analysis for the different module outcome categories was undertaken, always calculated as a proportion of students registered at module start. With the modules having different and numerous possible outcome classifications, cross-module comparisons were established as follows:

Module(s)	Good pass outcomes	Pass outcomes	Withdrawn	Fail
E103	Distinction	Pass	Withdrawn	Fail (with no resubmission) and fail (with resubmission)
E209 and E309	Distinction (Pass 1) and Pass 2	Pass 3 and Pass 4		

Table 4: Outcome categories adopted in analysis.

Questionnaire analysis

The analysis of the questionnaires was conducted using an adapted form of thematic development. *Points of interest* were noted, alongside *key evidence* from the AL or student's comments. Sometimes, the analyser added their own comments alongside, creating a multi-voiced fragmented story (see figure 2).

'Credibility' or Identity when compared to degree experiences of peers.	Q3.a "increase the feeling of student identity , that the OU is a real university" (interesting what is meant by 'real' here) Q3 Peer pressure - because others are doing fulltime study Q4 It can increase the feeling of student identity, that the OU is a real university Q4 Students graduate within the same time frame as a brick university. 6 years feels like a long time if they are studying part time. Q4 Being able to focus on university study and get into the mindset Q4 They are completely immersed Q4 Full focus is on their studies and their goal. (Interesting links here to notions of student / university community – what does that mean for us and this group of students?)
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Figure 2: Multi-voiced points of interest

These points of interest allowed evidence from across the full breadth of the questionnaire to be brought together, not confining analysis of individual questions to a self-contained process. This was especially important in the student questionnaire where a student would often give a brief response in one question but choose one free response box to give a much more detailed account which crossed between several of the survey questions. This raises a note of tension about the questionnaire structure, where it was evident that some students had a story they wanted to tell and actively sought ways to use the questionnaire format to share that narrative, often using the free text boxes in their own way.

This wasn't a strict coding process, maintaining the pretence of a single researcher as objectively separated and data as containing truths to be excavated, but instead was a collective multi-researcher effort where the 'keyness' of a theme was not dependent on quantifiable measures alone but rather on whether it captured something important in relation to the overall research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006). Therefore, our process was a means of engaging with the research materials with specific attention to how we, as active, involved members of the qualification, responded (emotionally, professionally, narratively) to the comments. These points of interest were sometimes small fragments of stories or larger free text passages. They caught our attention either in their uniqueness against the backdrop of all the other comments, or in how they created a different or challenging counter-story to other data, or in their prominence (not only in terms of frequency of occurrence but also the nature of the writing in free text responses which communicated heightened emotional connections to the AL or student). In all these ways, particular comments or groups of comments became part of the narratives of the project.

Interview analysis

A similar process of thematic identification around points of interest was trialled in relation to analysing the transcripts of the interviews. However, some members of the research team felt they were losing the voice of the students in an attempt to fit quotes into pre-decided themes, which is a common problem associated with coding processes (Crang 2001, Butler 2001). To address this, we developed an additional approach, by developing summaries from each interview to capture their essence, and also support the process of writing the vignettes. This allowed us to go beyond noting individual words or phrases, thereby avoiding “pinning meanings down, making the complex simple and the uncertain fixed” (Valentine in Bennett and Shurmer-Smith, 2001: 252) and retain “an intactness, a wholeness, that should not be fractured during analysis” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2013:349). The summaries captured keywords and themes in bold, while still maintaining the story as told by the student. The themes identified were unique to each transcript (story) as opposed to finding common themes across transcripts (stories).

Enriching the analysis: encountering others

While above we outline the approach we took to the analysis of the questionnaire and interviews as separated processes, the reality of the lived experience was much messier. This was in large part due to the fact that the project was entangled inextricably with our day-to-day roles, events and requirements of the university. This meant that the project ideas, the data, and ourselves as a team, were constantly encountering others which had a bearing on the direction of the project. It also meant that the project involved us researching our own practices, engaging with our own stories both individually and with our colleagues, where human encounter involves simultaneously attending to our own thoughts and actions in relation to the views of others (Goffman in Counsell 2013, Etherington 2004).

A particular set of encounters involved us contributing to presentations and events about our project *during* the analysis process, which fed into our analysis of the findings. As with the questionnaire and interview analysis, these events involved small groups of the larger project team working together to create presentations and workshop activities (see table 5).

Event	Date	Audience	Main points
ECYS Associate Lecturer Professional Development workshop	04/05/2021. Online event).	Other Associate Lecturers.	Sharing key messages from the AL and student questionnaire as a basis of discussions about alignment / challenge to their experiences and thinking.
OU PRAXIS conference (scholarship centre for WELS)	17/05/2021. Online event	Mix of lecturers, staff tutors, associate lecturers and researchers.	Focused on notion of ‘shifting stories’ about concurrent students. Emphasised data which challenged commonly held assumptions or experiences of concurrent students.

FIKA presentation: OU in Scotland	16/09/2021. Online event	Mix of staff tutors, registration staff, student advisers, external partnerships and funding managers.	Focused on sharing methodology and some of the findings.
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Table 5: Public encounters contributing to research

These events arguably influenced the ‘storying’ of the analysis of the project, where different presentation teams focused on different elements of the data. Inevitably, “writing cannot be separated from analysis” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2013), and each presentation created storied analyses of the data at that particular moment in time. In addition, the events also generated different and new stories of their own through engagements with the audiences who brought their own storying of concurrent students. While these stories weren’t part of the formal data collection, many of the project team attended the events as ‘participant-listeners’ (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2013), hearing and responding the directions of the conversations and their implications for readings of our findings.

These events weren’t originally considered as part of our methodology, yet they became an important part of the analysis and story making processes.

Weaving stories together

Having undertaken the initial, separated analysis of the quantitative data, questionnaires and interviews there needed to be a process of ‘bringing together’ and weaving the fragmented and more complete stories together. Through a team workshop we started to create a meta-narrative of the data around the following discussion points:

- a. critiquing the stories emerging from different data sets with others
- b. sharing the richness of the stories with each other
- c. understanding what is different (novel, unusual, of interest) about these stories?

As a result of the workshop the multi-layered, multi-voiced nature of our project became clear, where our weaving wasn’t into a neat and tidy pattern, where stories naturally fitted and complemented. Instead, it became a messy weave, where tensions, frictions (Springgay 2018) and counter-narratives were shared, making for a rich story tapestry as shown in the responses to just one of the workshop questions (figure 3).

3. Questions our project is raising about practice?

- How do we develop persistence?
- Seeing modules as distinct?
- need for ALs to be aware of the content of other modules
- how do we recognise positively other study?
- what does 'support' mean when across modules?
- Thinking about links between modules and across qualifications
- More tutorials to be recorded for full access
- Consistency of tutor message/tutorials
- do CS need any specific support?
- identifying the concurrent students easily
- what do we mean by flexibility? What sort of flexibility do concurrent students need? And do we provide it?
- synergies between modules
- How does the term 'diversity' apply to practice in this context? Is diverse practice to be encouraged/discouraged?
- Find the connections
- Positivity in tutor differences (we were never going to be carbon copies)

Figure 3: Tapestry of stories

It is these woven tapestries of stories from across the data sets which formed the basis of the project vignettes.

Writing and analysing the project generated vignettes

Our overarching research question asked, 'Who are our Q94 students?' From the outset of our project, we aimed to draw on the data collected to develop vignettes that shared the stories of the students who opted to study concurrent modules on this qualification. As we worked with the qualitative data, it became apparent that "if we are truly listening to lots of different people, we get lots of different stories, and it is often impossible—and certainly inappropriate—to assert a universalizing meta-narrative over their tales. Too much sense-making can be a real problem" (John Gillom, personal communication, August 17, 2001). It was certainly the case that multiple stories emerged from our data and the vignettes are an attempt to capture these multi-voiced stories in a form that both helps to address our research question and provides something a little more concrete to work with as we consider the implications of our study's findings.

In the first instance we worked with the student interview transcriptions, drawing on the typology of students proposed by Brown (2015). It was possible to identify characteristics that aligned with Brown's depictions of 'active strategic', 'active deep' and 'passive surface' learners. We were also able to find examples that concurred with Brown's representations of 'avid support-seeking' or 'self-sufficient' learning behaviours. However, a more complex picture of our students began to emerge. To answer our overarching research question in broad terms, we needed to identify the *reasons why* students might choose to study concurrently.

Working with the thematically coded interview data, we were able to identify the range of *reasons* that our students had opted for concurrent study, along with some rich stories about their *approaches*. Working with this data, we were able to identify five general student 'types'. To this interview data, we added further detail using the qualitative responses from the students' questionnaire data. For example, we used question 7 ('What were your

motivations to study 2 modules together this year?') which included 'to graduate as soon as possible', to identify students who would be categorised as 'career changers'. Using their questionnaire identification number, we tracked these students' responses to the other qualitative questions to add to the overall picture we were building of these students. Given the high response rate to the questionnaire, we continued this process until the level of repetition and overlap in students' responses suggested we had reached a natural saturation point. This process was repeated to identify build detailed descriptions for each of the five student 'types' we had identified.

As we worked through the process of developing the vignettes, we revisited the names we had applied to each of the five types, reviewing and revising them in the light of the data analysis process until we agreed that the five student types accurately reflected our data. These five categories were: the 'career changers' (largely students over the age of 25); the 'intentional full-timers' (who had, for various reasons, opted for concurrent OU study as an alternative to a 'brick' university); the multi-taskers; the sophisticated learners and the coper-adapters. However, we recognised that motivations and approaches to study were intertwined and overlapped in ways that made neat categorisations almost impossible. Figure 4 represents the themes that emerged from the student interview data in a form that tries to capture their interrelatedness.

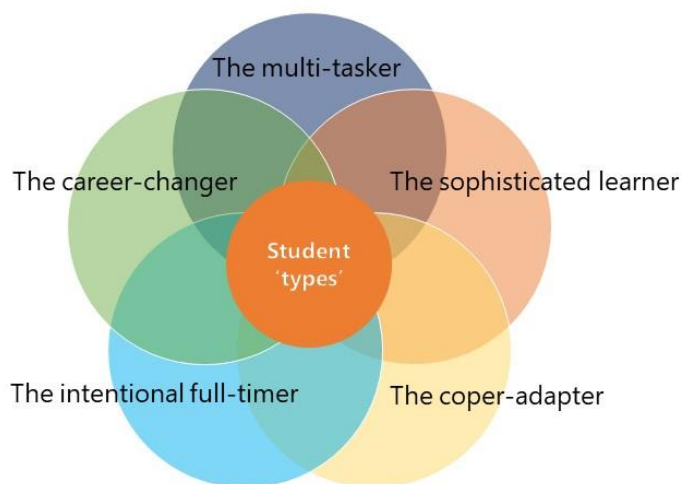


Figure 4: Themes in student vignettes

The process of categorising the data in this way resulted in rich examples of the motivations, study approaches and support needs of our Q94 students. Weaving these narratives together in the form of vignettes was necessarily the vignette-writer's particular construction of that data in a narrative form that aimed to capture the essence of each 'type' of student. In addition, whilst each vignette sets out to portray a particular 'type' of learner identified in our

data, it is important to acknowledge that in reality, each of our students will possess these characteristics in their own unique combination. The two members of the research team who drafted the vignettes peer-reviewed each other's drafts, giving an early opportunity to check that each one was consistent with the data that was used in its construction. Each vignette was then reviewed by at least one other member of the research team and any redrafting was collectively agreed.

Findings

This section is divided into two. The first section looks at the findings from the quantitative data. The second section looks at the findings from the Student and AL questionnaires and interviews.

Quantitative Data findings

The data and analysis presented in this section addresses the research aim

- to understand the **nature of/diversity within** the cohort of Q94 concurrent students and their study patterns and outcomes

The data for students who do/do not declare disability and for those declaring different ethnicities are explored in terms of likelihood of studying concurrently. Then for each cohort, good pass, pass, fail and withdrawal rates are compared.

There were 13113 student registrations on the three modules in 2018, 2019 and 2020. This is particularly valuable when analysing the study choices of and outcomes for some underrepresented and disadvantaged groups, whose numbers within one module in one year are small. At the time of data extraction 53 students were pended and these were excluded from the outcome analysis (Table 6). The total number of students included in the sample is 9892 because many learners are registered on two modules in one year at some point over the three-year period, or because some have withdrawn from one presentation and reregistered the following year. Of these 6056 (61.4%) studied 120 credits at some point in this three-year period.

Study intensity

Learners were increasingly likely to opt for concurrent study as they progressed through the modules, rising sharply from 39% on E103 to 55% in E209 and 59% in E309.

Module	Registrations at module start (excludes 53 pended students)	% studying 120 credits in one year
E103	7404	38.6
E209	3738	54.8
E309	1918	58.6
All modules	13060	46.1

Table 6: Education Studies (Primary) students studying concurrently

Declared disability and study intensity

For the three modules combined 17.4 % of students declared one or more disabilities. The proportion of students declaring a disability increases from 17 to 18.9% between Level 1 and Level 3. In E103 and E209, students declaring a disability are slightly more likely to opt to study concurrently than those who do not declare a disability (Table 7). There is a sharp rise in the proportion of students declaring one or more disabilities who concurrently study modules between E103 and E209 before a slight fall in E309. By contrast, the proportion of students not declaring a disability who study concurrently continues to rise to 59.7 % in E309.

Module	% declaring disability	% of disabled students studying 120 credits	% of students not declaring disability studying 120 credits
All modules	17.4		
E103	17.0	40.1	38.2
E209	17.5	55.4	54.6
E309	18.9	53.9	59.7

Table 7: Declaration of disability and likelihood of studying 120 credits in one year

Exploring the makeup of the overall cohort of each module in turn (Figure 5), it is evident that of the approximately one-fifth of students who declare a disability, the proportion who opt to study concurrently rises after Level 1 (7% of the E103 students and 10% of E209 and E309 students). Whilst the likelihood of disabled students studying concurrently drops between E209 and E309 (Table 7), the increase in declarations of disability means that the proportionate size of this cohort is stable. This growth in the proportion of the students who do not declare disability and study concurrently is marked and is sustained (32% in E103; 45% in E209; 48% in E309).

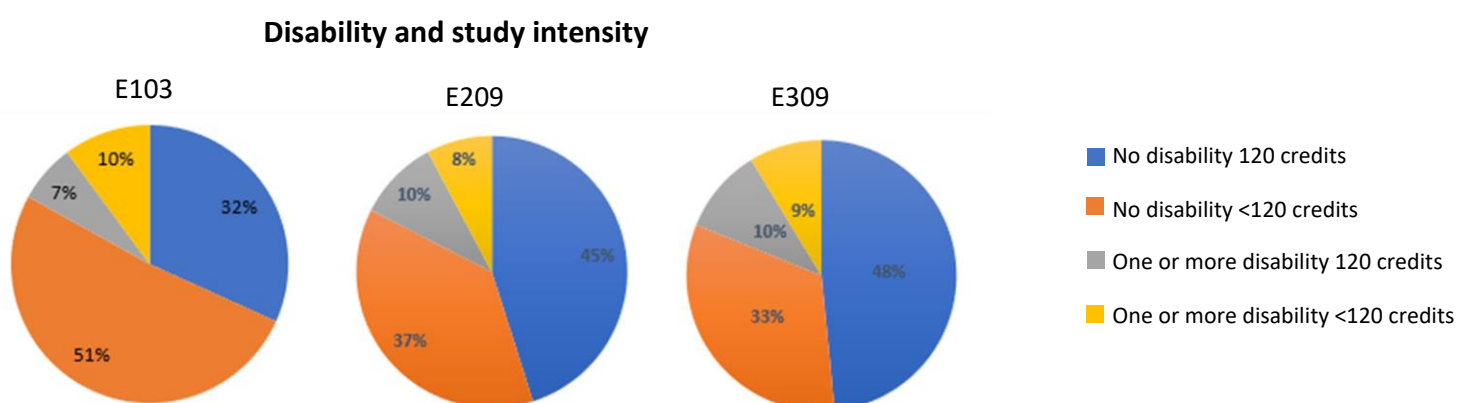


Figure 5. Proportion of overall cohort by disability declaration and study intensity.

Ethnicity and study intensity

The proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students across the qualification is low. On each of the three modules across this three-year period, at least 89% of students are white (Table 8).

Module	% White	% Asian	% Black	% Mixed	% Other
E103	90	6	1	2	1
E209	89	6	2	2	1
E309	89	7	2	1	1

Table 8: Ethnicity of E103, E209 and E309 students, 2018 to 2021 (not declared omitted)

Given the low number of BAME students across the three modules, the relative number of BAME students studying 120 credits is also low, but in all groups, they are more likely to opt to study 120 credits than their White counterparts. At level 1, 37% of white students study 120 credits, rising to just over half of all White students at levels 2 and 3. The proportion of BAME students doing the same is typically over 10% higher. The table below shows the proportion of students studying 120 credits as a proportion of the declared ethnicity and of the module.

	White 120 credits		Asian 120 credits		Black 120 credits		Mixed 120 credits		Other 120 credits	
	% of White students	% of module	% of Asian students	% of module	% of Black students	% of module	% of Mixed students	% of module	% of Other students	% of module
E103	37	34	53	3	47	<1	44	<1	45	<1
E209	53	48	65	4	67	1	65	1	62	<1
E309	52	46	63	4	59	1	58	<1	52	<1

Table 9: Proportion of learners from different ethnic backgrounds studying concurrently (2018 to 2021)

Declared disability: outcomes for students

In E103 (where the only outcome categories are distinction or pass), the best outcomes are for concurrent students who have not declared a disability (17%), there is a 9.5% good pass awarding gap for their concurrent peers who declare one or more disability. For those learners declaring a disability and only studying E103, the good pass rate is slightly higher than that of their concurrent peers (good pass awarding gap 1.4%).

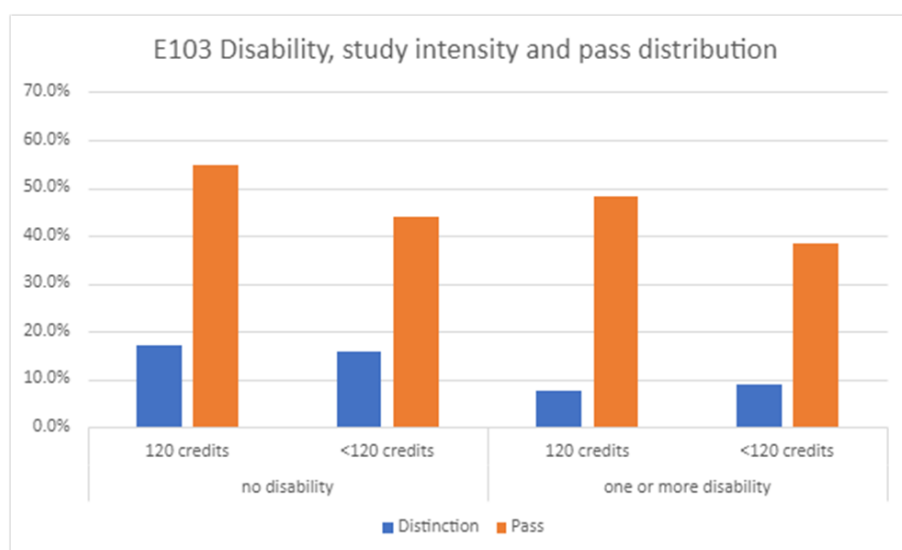


Figure 6: E103 students with good pass/pass outcomes as % of each cohort (including withdrawn students)

E209 and E309 outcomes are reported as Distinction (Pass 1), Pass, 2, Pass 3 and Pass 4. In both modules, learners not disclosing a disability and studying at high intensity have better outcomes, with a higher proportion passing and more of these gaining a good pass (Figure 7).

For those E209 students studying 120 credits and declaring a disability there is an 11 % good pass awarding gap. The awarding gap for learners not who only studied E209 and declare a disability is 7 %.

For E309, the proportion of good passes increases for all cohorts, but this is particularly marked for those studying concurrently who do not declare a disability. Thus, there is a 24 % good pass awarding gap for 120-credit students declaring a disability. The gap for <120 credit students, declaring a disability is 4 %.

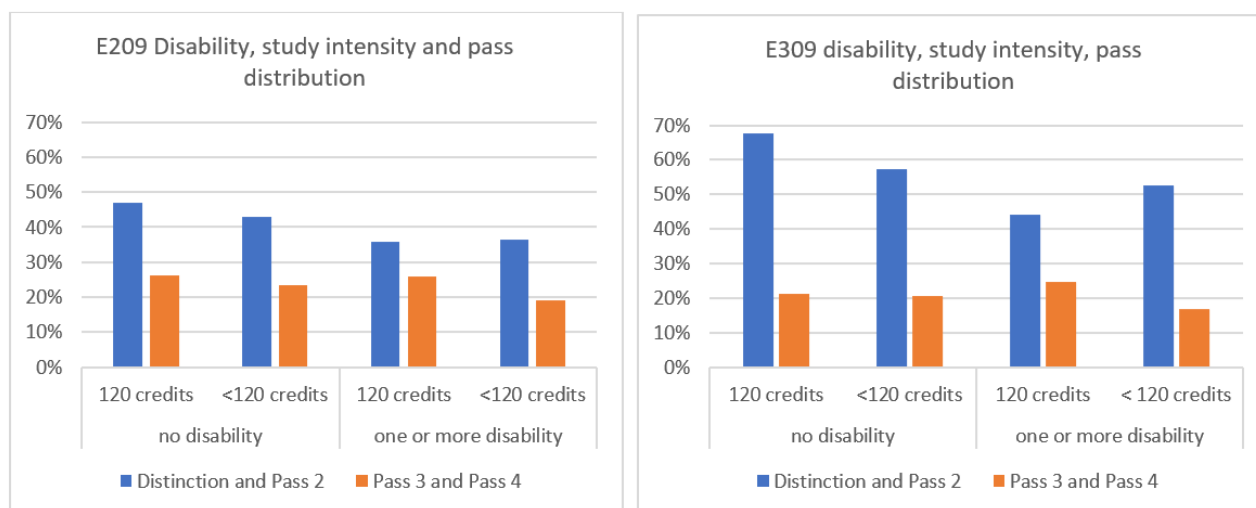


Figure 7: E209 and E309 students with good pass/pass outcomes as % of each cohort (including withdrawn students)

Declared disability: fail and withdrawal rates

For these cohorts, fail rates are relatively uniform within modules and they decline from Level 1 to Level 3 (Table 10). The significantly higher fail rates for E103 include some students who remain registered on the module who never engage (passive withdrawals). The proportion of passive withdrawals in subsequent modules is always much lower.

Just over one-fifth of all students withdraw but those studying concurrently are less likely to withdraw (16.2 %). With the exception of E209, the lowest rates of fails and withdrawal are for high intensity students who do not declare a disability.

As with fail rates, withdrawal rates decline through the levels. Over a third of students registered only for E103 or E209 who declare a disability withdraw. Students with no declared disability studying 120 credits, are far less likely to withdraw (for example 18 % in E209 and 7% in E309). Regardless of study intensity, about one-fifth of E309 students declaring a disability withdraw.

Module and outcome	No disability < 120 credits	No disability 120 credits	One or more disability < 120 credits	One or more disability 120 credits
E103 fail (with /without resit)	14 %	13 %	14%	15 %
E103 withdrawn	26 %	14%	37 %	27 %
E209 fail (with /without resit)	6 %	8 %	7 %	9 %
E209 withdrawn	27 %	18 %	36 %	26 %
E309 fail (with /without resit)	3 %	3 %	5 %	6 %
E309 withdrawn	16 %	7 %	22 %	21 %

Table 10: Module outcomes and disability

Ethnicity: Outcomes for students

Whilst the proportion of good passes for 120-credit students across the qualification varies by ethnicity, 120-credit Black students have the lowest proportion of good passes in all modules (5% on E103, 17% on E209 and 35% on E309). The good pass awarding gap for 120-credit Black students versus 120-credit White students is significant at 26% on E103, 30% on E209 and 30% on E309.

On E103 and E209, with the exception of Other and Mixed students (around 1% of students), a lower proportion of 120-credit students are awarded good passes compared to those of the same ethnicity who are studying <120 credits. However, this is not the case on E309 where a higher proportion of 120-credit students gain good passes than their <120 credit counterparts for all ethnicities except Black, where there is a 7% attainment gap.

E103

The proportion of distinctions for 120-credit students varies by ethnicity: White (16%), Asian (10%), Mixed (9%), Other (8%), and Black (5%). The largest awarding gap for White and Black students is 11%.

The awarding gaps for students studying 120 credits compared to those of the same ethnicity studying <120 credits range in size: White (-1%), Black (-4%), Asian (-7%), and Other (-12%). 120-credit Mixed students attain 21% distinctions compared to 13 % for those studying <120 credits.

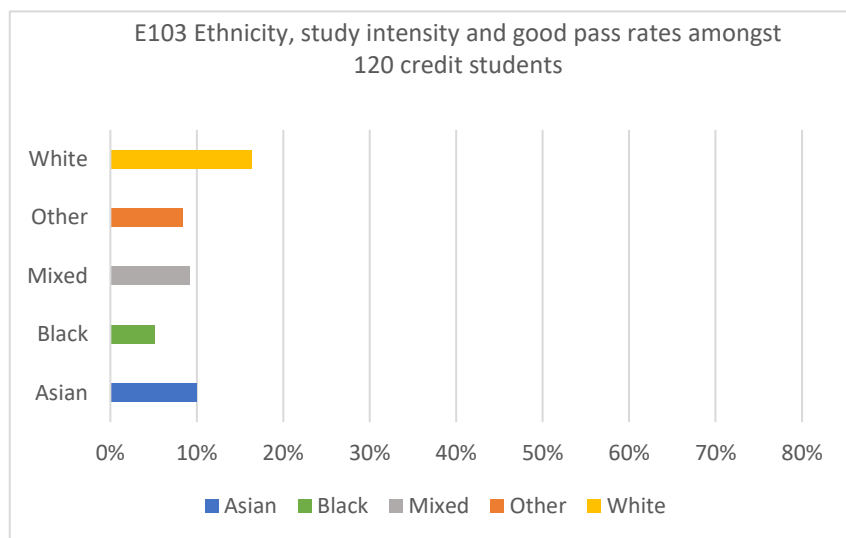


Figure 8: Good pass outcomes amongst E103 students studying 120-credits as % of each cohort (including withdrawn students)

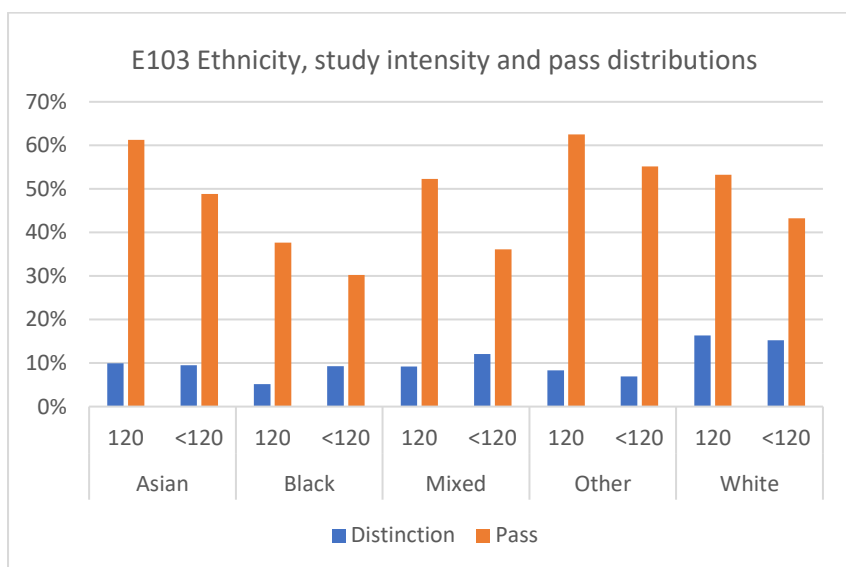


Figure 9: E103 students with good pass/pass outcomes as % of each cohort (including withdrawn students)

E209

The proportion of good passes (pass 1 and pass 2) for 120-credit E209 students varies by ethnicity: White (47%), Other (38%), Asian (36%), Mixed (35%) and Black (17%). The largest awarding gap, that of White and Black students is 30%.

White (+5%) and Other (+7%) 120-credit E209 students have a higher rate of good passes compared to those of the same ethnicity studying <120 credits. However, this is not true for 120-credit Black (-5%), Asian (-8%) and Mixed (-1%) students.

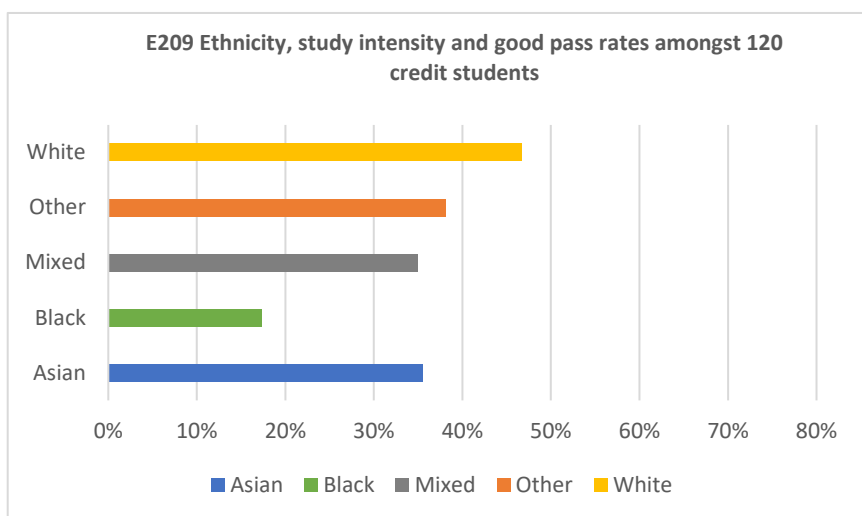


Figure 10: Good pass outcomes amongst E209 students studying 120-credits as % of each cohort (including withdrawn students)

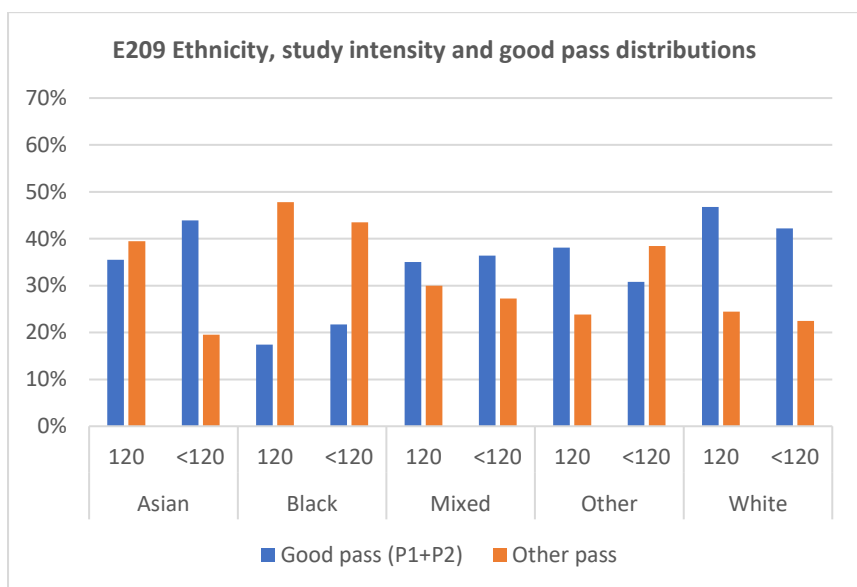


Figure 11: E209 students with good pass/pass outcomes as % of each cohort (including withdrawn students)

E309

The proportion of good passes for 120-credit students varies by ethnicity: Mixed (74%), White (65%), Other (57%), Asian (50%) and Black (35%). The largest good pass awarding gap, that of Mixed and Black students is -39%. The gap for White and Black students is 30%.

White (+20%), Asian (+6%), Mixed (+45%) and Other (+32%) 120-credit students have a higher rate of good passes compared to those of the same ethnicity studying <120 credits. However, this is not true for 120-credit Black students. The good pass rate for these learners is 35%, compared to 50% for Black <120-credit students, an awarding gap of 15%.

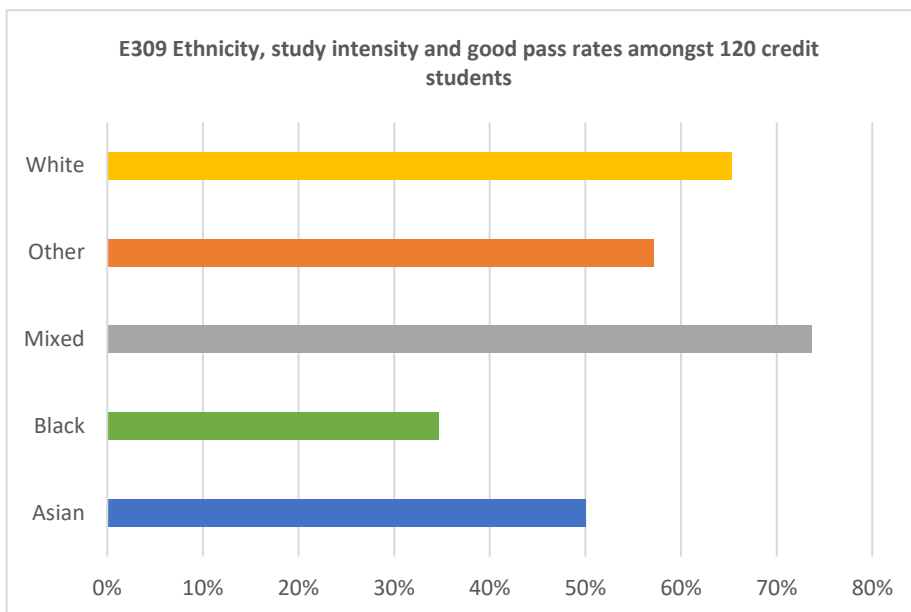


Figure 12: Good pass outcomes amongst E309 students studying 120-credits as % of each cohort (including withdrawn students)

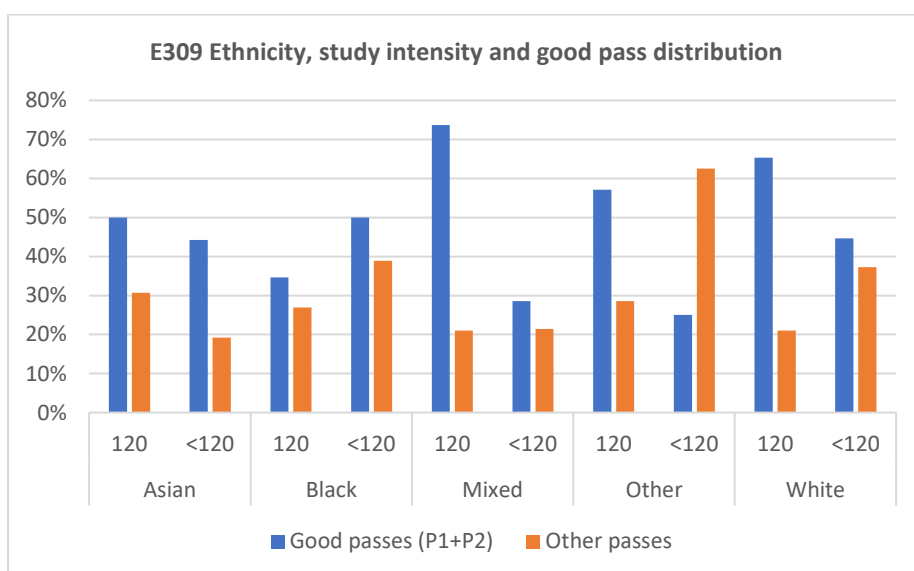


Figure 13: E309 students with good pass/pass outcomes as % of each cohort (including withdrawn students)

Ethnicity: fail and withdrawal rates

Fail rates for learners studying 120 credits are highest for Black students on all three modules (E103: 12%, E209: 13% and E309: 12%). In comparison, the fail rates for 120-credit White students are 6% on E103 (6% awarding gap), 8% on E209 (5% awarding gap) and 4% on E309 (8% awarding gap).

The withdrawal rate amongst 120-credit students is typically lower for White students than for most BAME students at each level. On E103, the withdrawal rate of White 120-credit students is 6%, compared with 7% for Asian student, 12% for Black students, 11% for Mixed students and 9% for Other students. On E209, concurrent student withdrawal rates for all ethnicities rise, but with White and Asian students continuing to have the lowest withdrawal levels. This remains true on E309. For all three modules, with the exception of E209 students from Other backgrounds and E309 Black students, there is a higher withdrawal rate for students from all ethnicities studying at lower intensity.

Ethnicity	Study intensity	E103		E209		E309	
		Fail	Withdrawn	Fail	Withdrawn	Fail	Withdrawn
Asian	120 credits	7%	7%	7%	16%	0%	13%
	<120	4	15%	5%	32%	8%	21%
Black	120 credits	12%	12%	13%	20%	12%	19%
	<120	7%	25%	0%	35%	0%	0%
Mixed	120 credits	4%	11%	8%	28%	0%	5%
	<120	10%	19%	10%	27%	7%	43%
Other	120 credits	6%	9%	0%	38%	14%	0%
	<120	11%	9%	16%	15%	0%	13%
White	120 credits	5%	6%	8%	19%	4%	9%
	<120	9%	17%	6%	28%	3%	13%

Table 11: Ethnicity and fail and withdrawal rates (2018- 2020)

As well as the data collected above, responses to the student and AL questionnaires also offered some quantitative data to note. Students and ALs were asked about the extent to which different challenges affected concurrent students. Responses were quite different with the majority of ALs identifying most aspects as *always, often or sometimes challenging*, while students identified the majority of aspects as *sometimes, rarely or never challenging*. This can be seen in the table below by the differences in percentages. Further details on students' experiences of studying two modules concurrently are detailed in the next section.

	Students		ALs	
	Poll Position	Always + Often challenging	Poll Position	Always + Often challenging
Balancing time between modules	3	51.3%	1	94.3%
Amount of reading	2	52.6%	3	81.8%
Working with two tutors	5	42%	9	22.8%
Different advice in module materials	8	30.1%	5	51.4%
Dates clashing or close together	1	60.1%	4	71.5%
Attending tutorials for both modules	9	20.1%	8	31.5%
Fitting studies around personal commitments	4	47%	2	82.8%
Getting practice experience to support studies	6	31.8%	6	48.5%
Achieving grades for future plans	7	30.8%	7	48.5%

Table 12: Challenges of concurrent study

Qualitative findings:

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data enabled us to respond to our overarching research question, ‘Who are our Q94 students?’ and the aims of the project. The findings of the thematic analysis are set out below and in the next section, we discuss the ways in which these findings can be understood in relation to the aims of the project.

From the student and AL data a significant motivation for full time study for OU students on Q94 is **“to graduate as soon as possible”**, followed by the fact that concurrent study fitted with the students’ circumstances.

With most students wanting to become a classroom teacher, student motivation for concurrent study is clearly linked to **career aspiration and /or remuneration**.

‘I didn’t want to study for 6 years as I want to get in work as soon as possible to support my family’.

Many respondents in the survey identify themselves as Teaching Assistants looking to develop their career, linked to financial benefits.

‘... Currently a TA, but the wage isn’t enough and I really don’t want to work in a different sector’.

The challenge of an additional year to gain QTS for a number of students is also a factor in wanting to study concurrently.

‘Teacher training adds another year to my timeline to gain QTS, I want to be earning as soon as I can as a Primary teacher’.

Concurrent study allows students to **manage study around their current circumstances** with students referring to this in many comments.

- *‘Fits around my work schedule and my family commitments’;*
- *‘I am 20 years old and work two or three days a week at night so I have the capacity to complete a full time degree’.*

Changes in personal circumstances also motivate students to study concurrently.

- *‘I turned 30 and felt like I needed to start my career off as soon as my youngest who is now 2 will start nursery. I have approximately 3 years to finish my degree and can then go out to work as I will have no children to look after during the day’.*
- *‘The timing was right for me due to my children reaching a certain age. I also wanted to wait for the right time in my career, to gain experience and be sure this is the career I want’*
- *‘I became redundant last year with a good paying career of 15 years. So decided to do something I had been thinking about for a few years which is to become a primary school teacher’.*

Age is mentioned specifically and frequently by respondents to the student survey, linked to a sense of **urgency arising from changed priorities**:

- *‘Due to a career change and my age of 52, I do not wish to take 6 years to obtain my degree’.*

- *'I don't want to be 26 and only finishing uni, the sooner I can get started in my dream role, the better!'*
- *'I am almost 41. I have time to study whilst a stay at home parent ...Now my children are older it was time for me to get back to work and graduating ASAP to get into teaching was best way'.*
- *'As I am an older student, if I took the 6 years, then did a PGCE or SCIIT, It would be 7-8 years before I qualify as a teacher'.*
- *'I am a mature learner, I want to graduate by the time I am 30. I feel like if I leave it any longer it will never happen'.*

The **flexibility of OU study** is linked to a **sense of autonomy** that has attracted some students:

- *'it ...provided the flexibility and it also left me in charge of my own education, so I didn't feel like I was being pressured by anyone. I didn't feel like there was a constant someone there to be like you have to do this, you have to do that. It's on my own terms which I really enjoy'*
- *'self-led learning, particularly because I could do it in my own time and keep working'.*

This sense of autonomy is recognised by ALs in questionnaires and in interviews when asked to identify who OU concurrent students are, in their experience:

- *'I would say that generally it's students that have got a very clear timeline of what they want to achieve and when they want to achieve it';*
- *'Career-focused students – often stressed, but motivated – find their way through';*
- *"this is full-time study so I'm going to be totally organised and committed, and they stay with that from the beginning".*

The OU was often compared to other 'normal full-time' universities, demonstrating that although students had chosen the OU for its flexibility, they were also looking for a comparable **Higher Education experience** to a campus-based university.

- *'I am treating this course as a normal full-time university course as it would have been had I got into xxxxx'*
- *'I was planning on studying FT at xxx...I want to complete...in a similar timescale'*
- *'so I can get the same experience as a full time university'*
- *'option to study full time like in a normal degree at a brick university'*

Time management is an important benefit of Concurrent study identified by students with the main reason for studying concurrently being to graduate as soon as possible which allows them to

- *'Get through degree faster to become a primary teacher';*
- *'study is career prospects, like looking into the future....one day it's going to happen, like 'I will be a teacher. So that's pushing me further' .*

Concurrent study allows students to **manage study around their own commitments** and their plans for the future

- *'It enables me to complete my degree in the timeframe I have available to me'.*
- *'So now we've totally changed our system around, she's going to nursery for two mornings a week and she's, Covid-19 permitting, when we're not in lockdown, she's spending a day with her grandparents, and to fund that I've taken on some part-time work around childcare with my partner. So yeah restructuring it so I'm not working in the evenings, because I've come to realise that that's the time of day that I'm just exhausted'.*

The questionnaire and interviews identified **useful strategies** students use to study, by flexibly moving across modules (studying one module at the beginning of the week, the other later), adapting the volume of study and focus on their available time, or changing study intensity from year to year.

- *'I did consider at one point deferring one module but realised that it would just slow things down and that if I relied on my personal support in the home, my partner more to take on more time with the children than he already does that I could catch up to where I needed to be. I could continue on the two modules. But because of this it's been a bit stressful, so I decided that next year I'd rather not be stressed about it, not be panicked that I've got two TMAs due within two weeks and so I've decided to do one module next year and then one module the year following.'*
- *'I am still doing the two modules next year. I've really struggled this year; however my thinking is if I do struggle next, within the first few months I then will defer one of them, which I don't want to do but I am very open to, I know that I can do that.'*
- *'Because with my first year I only studied one which was E103, and I had so much spare time around doing that module I was ahead in my studies, I was taking breaks every other week just to like slow the studying down so I could fill up the year basically. So when I realised exactly how much free time I had, [I thought] I can do two and maybe finish the degree a little bit quicker, so it's been nice to do that and not have so much free time.'*

Students identified **differences between modules and tutors** as both as a **benefit**, or a challenge. ALs recognised that modules have the potential for complementing each other if students take full advantage of all of the resources (AL Q4). For students who **thrive on the connections** between the modules, studying two modules develops in them a **deeper understanding** of the content or theories of the modules: concurrent study

- *'[Concurrent study] Broadens my knowledge';*
- *'[Concurrent study creates] deeper understanding'*
- *'[I] gained a greater understanding of key theorists'*
- *[linked topics] 'helped me to underpin the areas I was studying'*
- *'information learnt in each module can support both modules'*
- *'I was able to relate information [from each module]...and it made sense'*
- *'there was a bit of overlap between the content which was great, there was a few times that that happened. So each module was kind of solidifying the other module and that was really good when that happened'.*

It also offers students the opportunity to develop **transferrable skills** between modules:

'for my last assignments I was able to use an essay plan that I'd learnt the basics of how to write one and apply it to my TMA3 for my other module. And I found that my mark improved for both assignments'.

Working with the **two different tutors** with their own expertise and support model was also perceived by some students as an **advantage**:

- *'advantage of having two tutors offering different perspectives on how to approach the TMA, using tips from both',*
- *'I really, it's quite good having two different tutors and being able to go on different tutorials with two different, two sets of ideas for writing your TMAs for instance. I'm able to pick up little hints and tips from both and apply them to both. And I've noticed that doing that my work's really improved. Obviously the topics are different but just the general assignment writing tips and ideas, it's been really good because I've managed to improve every time with the ideas that they give.'*

However other students viewed concurrent study and **working with two tutors as a challenge**, particularly when they are encouraged to base their assessments on a specific module content, or when guidance received from ALs or within the two modules is contradictory:

- *'Having different tutors is quite hard in terms of they have different marking expectations',*
- *'even though the TMAs have the same guidance, the tutors have their own guidance within that guidance',*
- *'I've found myself having to tailor a lot of my writing style to the tutor...it was a bit stressful'.*

Studying two modules requires a considerable amount of **support** and students identified a range of sources they drew from to progress in their study. Some of these were personal and specifically linked to the OU with students drawing on study peers through forums and social media, the tutor, OU careers team or SST colleagues; others were more personal and linked to their own family or work environment, such as family, friends, work colleagues; and others took the form of OU resources such as module or online resources, and forums.

Students reached different **levels of autonomy in their study** with some being self-sufficient requiring little AL support, while others require or expect more AL pro-active support. More autonomous students took ownership of their study adapting the module requirements to their own pace of study and other commitments:

'But with the OU I can come home and do as much as I can before I have to leave to go and get [the children] again. And then if I feel like I've got more that I need to do I can obviously finish off that of an evening when they're asleep'.

Students face a number of challenges when studying two modules. Some of these relate to the **social aspect of studying** and can include isolation, loneliness, impact of social media as a distraction from study. Others however relate to the **pedagogical aspects of studying** two modules, for example the amount of resources included in both modules, keeping up with the study calendar or pace of both modules, clashing or very close TMA dates, different guidance from both modules or tutors, the required mental ability to switch between modules within short periods of time, or the need to maintain the two modules separate in assessments particularly.

As Table 12 indicates in the previous section, the main challenge for students was 'clashing TMA dates', followed by the 'amount of reading' and 'balancing time between both modules'. The latter was perceived by ALs as the main challenge for students, followed by; 'fitting studies around commitments' and 'the amount of reading'. The solutions students used to address the issue of **clashing TMA dates** often meant that students used strategies of **selective study** identifying what to focus on:

- *'it's quite difficult to balance working on the two TMAs because there's only a week between the two. So sometimes you have to be quite strict on how much you study in advance of those TMAs. Because if you focus on one TMA you miss the week of studying for the other module and then when you have the second TMA you're focusing on that so you're missing a week of learning for the other module. So effectively you've missed two weeks of learning'.*
- *'So having the access to the whole year essentially from the beginning is amazing because I can kind of dip in and out as to when I choose rather than being really behind if it was like a normal... Yeah I do feel bad because I know I'm probably not doing it in the way that I should be. I think, it's definitely not the way I'd like to do it but I guess I don't really have a choice with it just because I need to keep a full-time job just finance-wise.'*

To address the challenges posed by clashing TMA dates, some students reverted to requesting **extensions**, but recognising the impact this could have for them later in the module

- *[due to the pandemic] Which, you know, I was behind. I think three or four assignments I had to ask for extensions on which I never, I don't like to do that. But yeah I had to do that, then it obviously, the backload that follows that because you're behind.*
- *But I had a bad couple of weeks and basically it made my last two assignments I needed an extension and things so I spoke to them and both tutors, spoke to them and told them the circumstances and they were very supportive.*

The amount of reading expected in both modules was identified by many students as being *always or often challenging*. Students used selective study strategies to overcome this challenge:

'Sometimes I feel like I'm just studying to pass the assignments rather than actually learning it. So there's so much content that I'm missing because I just don't have the time to go through it all, that's...been a sad point'.

However, students are also conscious this might mean missing out on a lot of content:

'I haven't even explored half of what's on the OU site. Like the support materials and study materials because there are so many. So I think, I do think this year come September I think I will take time to just sort of try and go through everything that's there and, you know, sort of just navigate where I can get support and stuff'.

Working with two tutors was perceived as a challenge by some students while not so much by ALs. The different tutor expectations and guidance interpretations were perceived by students to be the root of difficulties linked to tutors:

- *'Having different tutors is quite hard in terms of they have different marking expectations';*
- *'a source of maybe very slight irritation is the difference between tutors' expectations'.*
- *'The feedback from them (tutors) often say kind of like the tutors preference for style...I've had kind of comments come back saying of I'd prefer it written like this. so I've found myself having to tailor a lot of my writing style to the tutor...it was a bit stressful'.*
- *'Even though the TMAs have the same guidance, the tutors have their own guidance within that guidance'.*

However, the **personalised support** offered by tutors, particularly at key and crisis times, was highlighted by many students

- *'So mostly of course in terms of my study it's mostly been my tutor. So I have been in contact like when I have questions about my assignments and that sort of thing. They usually get back to me quite quickly which is really nice and they're always very helpful.'*
- *'tutor emails me. Especially now that we're into the final three, four weeks of writing our assignment and doing that last little bit, she's personally checking in with us, which I just really love because sometimes you don't realise how long it's been since you've spoken to somebody else about it.'*
- *'my tutors I've had over the past two years have been really really good. Really responsive to things, you know, when you email you would get an email back straight away, really really quick to respond and help.'*

- *'Your tutors are there to help you, not just mark your work – make good use of them'*
- *'Keep in contact with both tutors and let them know how you're coping'*

Being able to **differentiate content** between modules is a challenge for some students who have used different strategies to overcome this:

- *'I've had to do everything this time in different coloured pens, different places. So I've got two whiteboards where I can make notes, folders and everything, just really try and keep them separate'.*
- *'I'm currently doing E209 and KE206. So even though they are completely different you can end up blurring in your mind the audio visual material from one module to the other. So I find it much easier if I study one module completely and then study the other module completely for the week'.*

Discussions on **student fora** where different guidance might be shared by students can often be a challenge for students:

'when people put up stuff about maybe different assignments or different pieces of work and if there's different answers or different ideas I find that off putting because I start to question what I'm doing and if it's right and things. So there's times I actually just have to avoid the groups all together and just focus on what I'm doing'.

Students also expressed mixed views in relation to **non-OU moderated social media** as part of or to support study as the response below indicate. Some students saw that this could hinder their focus on study, while others found it was a useful tool to overcome isolation, or when you needed quick responses.

Balancing time between both modules was also perceived by students as *a challenge*, with some students adapting their working patterns to allow for more study time:

- *'I've had to take that time off work';*
- *'I've been working quite quickly perhaps, and I've been able to use the holidays to my advantage to keep ahead, and also write my TMAs';*
- *'I choose to study late when my children are asleep'.*

'Time' is a key factor mentioned when students offer advice for students to consider before deciding to study two modules together. Students refer to challenges in terms of understanding the time it takes to study 2 modules concurrently and finding the time in the face of competing demands from other commitments:

- *'You will need to make time to study'*
- *'Have you got enough time?'*
- *'That they definitely have the spare time'*
- *'How much time they can put in'*
- *'It is a full time job if you want to cover everything properly'.*

Students use a range of means to overcome different challenges, demonstrating an autonomy of study where they adapt strategies to their own needs and circumstances. Many students identify **family and friends' support** as key to completing their studies:

- *'I did consider at one point deferring one module but realised that it would just slow things down and that if I relied on my personal support in the home, my partner more to take on more time with the children than he already does that I could catch up to where I needed to be. I could continue on the two modules';*
- *'Yeah my, just in general my family is very supportive and have been wonderful at helping me; especially family members when I've got a TMA, looking after the children and making sure they're quiet and stuff';*
- *'Yeah so my husband's my biggest supporter at the moment. So I don't have to do any cooking when I get home: dinner's always ready'.*

Linked to the support from family and friends, students recognised the **impact on those around them** concurrent study might have:

- *'Do you have the support of friends and family if you need it?'*
- *'Impact on lifestyle and support around them i.e. wife had to pick up the parenting slack whilst I (write assignment)'*
- *'Work, family, children and studying is hard'*
- *'You tend to come in at night and go straight off to study, may daughter will probably say she misses time with me'*
- *'Consider your family...does it suit studying 25-32 hours a week?'*

The need to be aware of the commitment of concurrent study is often mentioned particularly in relation to the **amount of reading** required

- *'The workload when doing both modules can be overwhelming'*
- *'Amount of reading you have to do'*
- *'The amount of work is unbearable at times'*
- *'Enjoyment of reading module materials – you will need to read double the work'*
- *'Almost impossible to keep up with the reading unless 3-4 hours dedicated each evening'*
- *'does your routine allow for a couple of hours per day to study?'*

and how this increases as they reach higher levels:

- *'the amount of reading increases each year'*
- *'...the 2nd year is a big step up in workload''*
- *'Consider the module level as level 2 content has much more reading than level 1'*
- *'the level 3 modules have more reading and the assignments are more challenging'*
- *'Two L3 modules...there is a lot of work'.*

The need for **commitment and motivation** on the part of the student is also often highlighted by responses in the survey:

- *'You need to be committed and motivated otherwise you'll be miserable'*
- *'Knowing it will take all of your spare time'*
- *'Perseverance'*
- *'Dedication and planning'*
- *'I've always wanted to be a teacher and there have been times when...I was ready to give up, but I didn't'*
- *'Accept that sacrifices will be made in other areas of personal life'*
- *'You have to be determined to put your valuable time into something this big'*
- *'Sacrifice. Can you make sacrifices?'*
- *'If you want to graduate sooner then something will have to be sacrificed'.*

Students and ALs repeatedly mentioned the importance of **understanding the commitment** required for Concurrent study before registering for 2 modules:

- *'Maybe like emphasis on starting your studies in September when the module site opens...But I think even just emphasis on that and starting sooner to keep being on top of things because it's far too easy to fall behind if you miss a day or two of studying and it's much harder to catch that up'.*
- *'I think before you start studying they could give a slightly more comprehensive breakdown of the study. Because at the moment they give you a graph and it shows the amount of time it will take, but it doesn't indicate at what point you have things like TMAs or Christmas break or Easter break'.*
- *'Talk through expectations before enrolment'*
- *'Give students TMA dates before enrol'*
- *'Advice on time and how to plan'*
- *'Release module material and website in July or August'*

Students also felt that if their tutors were aware of their Concurrent Student status from the beginning, they might be in a better position to support them, which was also a suggestion ALs made in interviews and questionnaires when asked what would help them to support concurrent students better.

The effect high intensity study can have on **Mental health and stress** is referred by students on a number of occasions:

- *'It is not for the faint hearted'*
- *'Emotional stress'*
- *'...I feel it is easy to slip behind if something were to happen'*
- *'Are they capable of coping with stress in a healthy way?'*
- *"Mental health"*
- *"Do they get easily stressed with heavy workloads?"*
- *"TMAs close together causes a lot of stress"*
- *"Mental health"*
- *"pressure"*
- *"Are you mentally ready?"*

Analysis and Discussion

Our analysis consists of two interlinked sections; firstly, the presentation of the analytical vignettes, developed through synthesising key themes and voices in our project; and secondly a critical discussion of these vignettes and our findings in relation to the literature.

Vignettes

The career changer: Joanne

I've already had ten years' experience in another career, so studying one module at a time would be a long career change. Concurrent study is challenging, but I see it as a season of sacrifice that will hopefully move me more quickly towards my career goal. The sacrifice is shared by my wider family, though. They have stepped in to help and I have taken on a part-time job so my son can go to nursery and my partner and I can share the childcare. I wouldn't be able to study if I was working full-time. However, a welcome bonus from my studies is that the modules have begun to help me with my parenting decisions and this intertwining of work and family life keeps me motivated.

I'm in a WhatsApp group chat with other students studying two modules. They have really helped; they are very informal and you can seek advice or clarity from like-minded peers. But I've also found that my tutors have been supportive and easy to contact. I've made sure to keep in touch with them, to let them know how I'm coping. Sometimes the assignment deadlines for both modules are very close together, so being able to chat with my tutors and agree some flexibility has been great. Sometimes, trying to fit my tutorials around family and work commitments has been a bit of a challenge, but when I've managed to attend, it's been helpful. If not, I've accessed them later and love the fact that I can watch tutorials by different tutors too.

I've found that as the years progress, the workload does too and I need a lot of motivation if I am going to do my assignments justice. I've made sure to choose modules that have some things in common and that I'm really interested in. I find that although I need to do all the reading and research thoroughly, it can help me to make links between the modules and to understand some of the content better. And then it's a lot about perseverance and self-motivation. I try to look at all the different parts of my life and create a schedule that leaves me time to study. I set daily, not weekly, goals so I feel as though I am making progress. What keeps me going is the thought that I am heading towards my goal: changing my career to something more rewarding.

The intentional full-timer: Shari

I thought about going to a brick university, but there were all kinds of reasons why that wouldn't have worked for me. My partner is in the forces and we move around a lot, so I needed something different. We also have children and I need to do a part-time job. I didn't want to lose the security of working. I work in a primary school, so the way I saw The Open University was almost like an apprenticeship. I've found a job that I really enjoy and I didn't want to give that up. The Open University lets me juggle both.

It's a lot because I have a family and a job and I'm now studying full-time. But the OU is so flexible that I can make it work. It is self-led learning, so I can study at my own pace, whenever and wherever I can. That just fits in really well

with me and I'm really committed to doing it. It was important, though, that I could keep my studying within the timeframe that it would have been if I had attended another university full-time. I know that I could do it over a longer time, but I want to qualify as a teacher within four years, just like I could somewhere else, so I'm prepared to put the time in.

The flexibility is probably the thing that appeals the most. I love that you can record tutorials, so even if you can't attend them, you can still watch them back. I don't really feel like I have missed out on the university experience because my tutors have been really supportive and have responded quickly to any worries or questions I've had. Also, I've still been able to discuss things with other students. Knowing that, if you're a bit behind or a little unsure about something, you can discuss it with your peers has been good. We've used Facebook and WhatsApp groups and they have been a good support.

I will finish my degree this year and I have a place on a SCITT programme all lined up for next year. This means that I will have achieved my goal of qualifying as a teacher within four years, which is the same as if I had been to a brick university. But with the OU, I've been able to work around all my other commitments and keep earning while I learned, which was really important. Studying two modules each year has been a challenge, but I'm glad that I did it!

The multi-tasker: Mel

I have two children and am a carer for a family member. I had my first experience of teaching in the army cadets. After working in the classroom, I realised I might want to do this. I started off as a parent helper and I'm currently a HLTA. After studying A levels intensively, I decided to go for the OU. It was time to focus on myself again.

I chose to study two modules as the OU gave me the flexibility to study and keep working. I could study from home at a time and pace that suited my lifestyle. I also have the school holidays to help. I recently dropped one of my days to meet the increasing demands of study, work and family.

I am systematic and organize my time, socially, academically, and professionally along the lines of a 'tight ship'. This is necessary for me to stay on track. I try to keep the modules separate. It's easy to slip behind, particularly when TMAs may be due a few days apart. I always aim to get everything done early so that if anything pops up then I'm covered.

I enjoy the accountability of working with others. It really pushes you to stay focused.

Tutorials have been the most helpful for asking questions, solidifying each block and reminding you you're not alone. If you ask a question in the forum, within hours you've got an answer from tutors or other students. The study skills and resources page on the OU website is very beneficial too. And I could open the OU app on my phone and read a chapter whilst I was out and about. The OU study skills pages, OpenLearn and my tutors' feedback have all been helpful for me to improve my academic writing. My tutors have been great response-wise.

I have had great support from my colleagues at work. Being able to discuss the content of my modules with friends who are teachers has also helped me. I have buddied up with two students who live close by, and we quite often do study sessions. Family have been a great help too.

In my downtime, I go on social media. You've got to be careful about misinformation. Some people put up encouraging posts, or talk about a particular topic, or see how everybody is finding their studies so far, which is motivating.

I was adamant I would do my degree within the four years. I'm doing my Biology GCSE for my PGCE as well. At times, I wish I could have combined study from the modules rather than keeping them so separate. Having the whole module material available at the beginning has been an incredible help.

One thing that has kept me going is still making time for myself. It's tempting when there's a lot going on socially to say 'no' but, you need to do things, like see your friends.

I plan to start my PGCE in September and I've been accepted depending on my results of my degree.

The sophisticated learner: Nya

I think the most important thing to remember is that studying with the OU is about independent study – that's what you're signing up for. I know a lot of people sort of yearn for a tutor to be there all the time, providing support, but you have to remember that this is different. So I've learned that I have to do some stuff on my own, to support my own learning.

Sometimes I've found that tutors' expectations and approaches can differ slightly. I've learned that this is ok – it's actually good to have different perspectives on things. I think that having two different tutors can be an advantage. It's especially helpful when tutors are aware that you're studying two modules and take the time to explain some of the differences – both in module content and TMA requirements – so that you can make sense of these and not be confused!

The overlap between module content is a real advantage – learning something on one module and then encountering it on another helps to solidify what I've learned. So, one of the modules I'm studying is more sociology-based and the other one is a bit more focused on psychology. I've found it useful to use both modules to try to learn the different theories and sometimes a case study in one module can help me to better understand a theory in the other. And, if I'm still confused, I'll try to do a bit of my own research online to see if I can make sense of it that way.

I've used learning from both modules in my assignments too. So, on one module there was some guidance on how to make an essay plan and I used that to help me with the assignment in the other module too. I found that my mark improved on both assignments. That's helped me to get more confident as I've gone along and the fact that the assignments really build on each other has been helpful. Also, going to the tutorials after the assignment and talking through the feedback has really helped me understand the feedback and how to apply that to the next assignment.

I've grown in confidence in my practice too. I think I've been able to grasp some of the theories and ideas better because I have practical examples from my own experience to relate them too. At the same time, I've reflected on my practice in light of some of the theory I've learned and been able to see ways to develop it as a result. Seeing the links between what I'm studying and what I'm doing in my job every day is really exciting!

The copier-adapter: Ali

I found returning to study overwhelming as I hadn't studied for a long time. My family didn't believe in education; once you left school, you had to get out and work. Until my daughter left home for uni, I knew nothing about the OU and didn't realise I could study from home-

Initially, I tried to be really structured about my study but once I got the OU App on my phone, I could access everything when I had a moment to spare. I struggled to start writing essays again but overcame this by speaking with my tutors for guidance.-In the first year there was a lot of hand holding which is very supportive.

I started with a Level 1 module which helped me get used to the level of working. However, as it doesn't count towards classification, I thought I'd do two together in my second year. Being on Maternity leave at the time it helped have time to study. This year I am again doing 2 modules, but I quit my job to do it as my grades are important for my future career.-I considered deferring one module, but it would just slow things down. If I relied on my family support with childcare, I could continue.

This year I have also adapted my working patterns. I had planned to study every evening but was too tired. There's a marked difference from the second to third levels in terms of academic language, the assignments, and the amount of reading. To cope, I've had to skip different bits of content.

My mental health and wellbeing this year have been shot to pieces because I haven't had any time for myself. I'm forever feeling guilty that I've not been with my children. The Student Support Team were good, organising a support session with my tutor.-I wish I'd phoned them sooner because my last two TMA results have improved.

I prefer to attend my own Tutor's tutorials. This isn't always possible but there tends to be one recorded version.

Discussing problems with other students helps. I sometimes do this on the Forum, but WhatsApp groups offer a great deal of support. If you're stuck, you always get numerous answers and sometimes they summarise a tutorial if you can't attend. However, I find them off-putting when people put up different answers or ideas. I start to question what I'm doing. The Forum is useful to check references when a TMA is due and my tutor explains things, but I personally don't find them as motivating as social media.

My approach to study is focussed on trying not to get the work mixed up. It's tricky when you have TMAs due at the same time. I struggle at times where I could refer to materials in my other module, but we've been advised against that, especially between the levels.

It's important to remember it is independent study you are signing up to. It's very challenging, but you just find something that works for you.

Discussion

The development of our analytical vignettes, synthesising and analysing our data findings (both quantitative and qualitative), highlights some key areas for discussion that have emerged from this project.

1. The legacy of institutional narratives about concurrent study

As an institution the Open University has traditionally focused on offering part-time study, concurrent study was unusual and sometimes actively discouraged. The legacy of these positions was still evident in our project in three distinct ways; the ways in which institutional narratives of stand-alone module study were being recycled, a continued deficit view of concurrent study and a legacy narrative about the awarding gap.

Firstly, there was evidence, albeit in lesser frequency than we might have predicted, that some ALs still narrate concurrent study as a mode of study which was difficult to manage and which **caused additional challenges** for both tutor and student (e.g., in the prioritising of one module over another, in using extensions as a way of managing student workload, in creating confusion and therefore difficulties in support where different module content or requirements were used in the 'wrong' assignment). This narrative is not inaccurate, but we have shown that it develops from and responds to two aspects of the lived experience of ALs and their concurrent students. The first aspect is that concurrent students and ALs are 'living' a single, stand-alone module system.

This legacy OU model of 'stand-alone module' study, in the context of larger numbers of concurrent students is creating significant issues for a large proportion of our students in Q94 (percentage of concurrent students across the qualification in 20/21 was 44/6% and 47% in 21/22). Increased concurrent study is raising questions about the scheduling of workload (e.g. reading / assignments / tutorials) and the separation of module materials, processes and advice (e.g., key theorists and themes, referencing systems, assignment requirements, academic skills advice). Our findings suggest students therefore constantly **mediate existing narratives** about how to study and what to do to be successful, whereby stand-alone module study is seen as the norm and concurrent as a form of 'othering' as a secondary, rather than principal pathway. Our study builds on the work of Wild (2018) and Penny's (unknown) work on OU concurrent students, by deepening our understandings of how concurrent students are finding their own innovative, creative and sometimes deviant ways of working *around and between OU* processes and module structures. This raises the question as to how far shifting attention from individual modules to qualification level curriculum planning might result in less need for students to individually mediate the content and processes in this way.

The second aspect which contributes to the legacy narratives of concurrent study as challenging and difficult to manage are the lived experiences of our ALs who both expressed in interviews and questionnaire that they didn't

always know who concurrent students were (page 34). At the same time, they reported that balancing time between the modules and fitting study around personal circumstances were significant challenges for concurrent students. In contrast, students reported these same issues as substantially less significant than ALs reported (see table 12). This difference in perception, combined with the absence of OU markers to identify concurrent students for ALs, indicates that tutors are more likely to know of concurrent students when they require additional or specific support. This ongoing 'lived experience' of tutors as associating concurrent study with high need (because those are the concurrent students, they are likely to have more significant dealings with), therefore recycles the view that it is the concurrent study itself which is challenging and difficult. From our study we have identified significant counter-evidence to this view, where a proportion of concurrent students have presented as high achieving, independent and autonomous, and creative problem-solvers (see sophisticated learner vignette). For example, E309 concurrent students have a higher good pass rate (figure 7) and across the modules fail and withdrawal rates are lower for concurrent cohorts (table 10). This difference between AL and student experiences of concurrent study, we would argue, results in significant part from tutors not having details of who is studying concurrently, and therefore are unaware on occasions of the full spectrum of concurrent successes.

These lived experiences, of concurrent study as 'other' than the norm and where ALs are more likely to engage intensively with struggling concurrent students, leads to a recycling of a 'deficit view' of concurrent study. This **'deficit view' of concurrent study** was accompanied by evidence from our broader experiences of discussing these issues with different people around the university in a number of encounter sessions (see table 5), where there is still a persistent minority view that concurrent study leads to poorer outcomes for the students. However, our project, focusing on Q94, shows clearly that outcomes for many groups of concurrent study are good. For example, E209 concurrent students who identify as White and those identifying as Other have a higher good pass rate (+5 and +7 %) than those studying one module. However, this is not consistent across the different ethnic groups, those concurrent E209 students identifying as Black have a good pass awarding gap (-5 %) compared with their peers who study 60 credits (Figure 11). The good pass awarding gap between those who declare a disability and those who don't is greater for 120-credit students (Figure 7). It should be remembered that not all students' learning goals include 'good pass' results, some prioritise completing the qualification more quickly. In this qualification, with its career-oriented students and an increasing number of concurrent students, this legacy narrative of a **negative awarding gap** must be challenged with clear statistical data for ALs and course teams to show the full picture of successes as well as challenges. The quantitative data also identify that varying proportions of students from different groups opt to study concurrently, for example in E209 and E309 students who identify as Black, Asian, Mixed or Other are more likely to study concurrently than those who identify as White (Table 9).

As indicated by our literature review framework, how concurrent students are described, and how they describe themselves *in relation to a different model of OU study*, is important in shaping their perception of their choices but also of how they are perceived by others in the institution. As noted by Wild (2018) some concurrent students use 'full-time student' as a definition of themselves, aligning with our own findings that equivalence of Higher Education experience and a sense of comparative engagement as would have been the case had they attended a brick

university, was important to them (page 28 and intentional full-timer vignette). Therefore, these institutional narratives of concurrent study, particularly where they are out of sync with the lived experiences and narrations of the concurrent students themselves, must be addressed.

2. Tensions between Flexibility, Rigidity and Autonomy as generative

The findings of our study align with evidence cited by Bocchi et al. (2004) and Aristeidou (2021), that students are generally drawn to online programmes for their flexibility and convenience. Much of the evidence about who our concurrent students are demonstrates the unique circumstances of each student in their reasons for using the flexibility of OU study with and around their lives (see all vignettes). One notable element of this flexibility in relation to concurrent study is the ability of students to shift modes of study during the academic year to respond to module requirements but also throughout their qualification, with some starting as concurrent and indicating that they would change to single-module study in following years, and others indicating they have moved between concurrent study and single module study across the years (Page 28 and coper-adapter vignette). Whilst 46.1 % of all students on the three modules in this three-year period is recorded as concurrent (table 6), 61% of the students on these modules studied concurrently at some point in this window and the proportion of students opting for concurrent study rose as they progressed through their studies.

However, this project shows that what is perceived as significant flexibility in OU study, was not enough to make concurrent study 'work', mirroring Wild's (2018) findings. As noted in our literature review framework, *how students interact* with the programme of study matters. The inherent flexibility of the OU offer in terms of timing and intensity of study and how students use study materials is accompanied by a rigidity of systems and processes including assessment deadlines, weekly course mapping structures, and the 'silo-ing' of materials from other modules. We found evidence that the autonomy required of concurrent students to manage the tensions between different requirements and their time has led to generative ways of interacting, requiring both students and tutors to creatively manipulate *how to be in a concurrent study world*.

Most notably, we have identified how concurrent students and their tutors are actively making **concurrent pedagogies**. These pedagogies have been devised without institutional frameworks or specific support, but instead they have emerged in response to the needs and experiences of students and their relationships with the module materials and structure. While Hurd et al. (2001) highlight the 'rigidity' of distance learning materials, with their pre-decided content and rate of engagement, our project highlights the innovative ways in which students and tutors are finding 'give' in how to manage these materials in pedagogical relationships. This has included evidence of selective study strategies and the use of extensions to manage assignment submissions (page 30 and the coper-adapter vignette), the strategic choice of related modules to support concurrent study (see Career changer vignette), the strategic re-reading of case studies as useful to both modules (see Sophisticated learner vignette), and the bringing together of academic skills development across modules to support their development in both (see Sophisticated learner vignette and page 29)

In addition to these very practical pedagogical acts, there was the beginnings of evidence that some concurrent students were developing a **meta-awareness** of how they had to learn to be a concurrent student. This requires a sophisticated application of the strategies for learning included in Hurd et al.'s (2001) definition of autonomous learners. This meta-learning is most evident in the sophisticated learner vignette, where the student statements around '*learning*' to manage two different tutors' advice' and '*learning*' to be more independent, suggested that effective concurrent students developed a different way of being an OU student. It isn't therefore a completely additive situation, whereby OU concurrent students are an OU student x2, but for some it is a **different way of being an OU student**. At the centre of these concurrent pedagogies was a re-seeing of the two modules not as separated silos, but as part of a bigger 'whole', moving away from a 'stand-alone module' stance, to **one of parallels, connections and links, and cycles** of deepening learning and understanding. These innovative pedagogies are arguably developing high-level academic skills, which raises questions about how we can promote and celebrate these currently 'hidden' skills, and perhaps shift our own thinking towards 'parallels, connections, links and cycles'.

However, there were challenges to these concurrent pedagogies which were articulated by students and ALs. One such challenge was where different advice, different perspectives or different module requirements were seen as problematic, causing confusion and dangers of 'getting mixed up' (see coper-adapter and multi-tasker vignettes). Our report supports these same findings by Penny (unknown), where some students deliberately kept the modules very separate to avoid confusion. For some students (and tutors) **maintaining the rigidity of separation** between the two modules became a coping mechanism (Page 32), where instead of feeling empowered to manipulate they felt bounded by the requirements of the individual modules (see multi-tasker vignette). A significant factor in such management strategies was time, where the workload of concurrent study was seen to have reduced the opportunities for making significant cross-module learning for some of the students we talked with. This again hints at a difference between students who saw concurrent study as 1+1=2 modules, doubling the workload, whereas others saw studying two modules as part of a more integrated, holistic process, but arguably needed the skills and confidence to manipulate the pedagogy and systems more to achieve this. Where this integrated criticality and synthesis across modules did occur, it was clearly impactful (see sophisticated learner), but we also found that students that did manipulate the rigidity of the structures by selective study and use of extensions, often felt emotional tension between what the expectations of the module were and the practical decisions they had to take to make concurrent study work for them. This raises questions about how to create the spaces, scaffolds and content to encourage and develop these important academic skills further in concurrent students. Spaces for such discussions and thinking was less evident in reference to module materials and processes but was more evident in relation to tutorials and informal learning spaces.

3. The OU H.E. experience as a concurrent student

As well as wanting and therefore creating spaces for cross-module pedagogies it is clear from our student questionnaires and interviews that for some students there was a strong narrative of students using 'full time student' as a definition of themselves (Wild, 2018), and wanting an equivalence to other Higher Education

experiences (page 28). Two particular words were used which highlighted this focus on equivalent experiences, one was the word 'normal' (e.g. wanting to progress at a 'normal full-time rate' or treating the course as a 'normal full-time university course') and the other word was 'same' or 'similar' (e.g. wanting the 'same experience' as full-time H.E. or wanting to complete in a 'similar timescale'). Both these terms, and the ways they were used in questionnaire and interview responses, again challenges the legacy institutional narrative of concurrent students as studying two modules (of 1 module + 1 module = 2 modules), to a story of students wanting a different type of experience (where 1 module + 1 module = an **immersive**, fully engaging H.E. experience).

The term immersion is interesting and significant in our study. This is an immersion, not only in the content of the module(s), as a concentrated, all-engaging form of study (which arguably is a 'lived' immersion for many of our students who work in schools or settings alongside study), but it's also immersion in the concept of being at university. Implied in the student conversations and descriptions is a sense of being full time as occupying a different sense of 'belonging', whereby their identity as an OU student is an important intrinsic motivator. This develops the idea of intrinsic motivation from Wild's (2018) survey, which offered different types of intrinsic motivations, but not one related to this sense of being at university. Hart's (2012) argument that a sense of 'belonging to the virtual community' is an important factor in distance learning therefore raises questions about how we build a sense of belonging for these concurrent students. There are many initiatives in the OU, school of ECYS, qualification and module to engage students with each other, and with their tutors and module team, and there have been specific initiatives to develop forum spaces just for concurrent students (McLachlan et al., 2017). However, our study asks some more fundamental questions about what it means for OU students to feel they 'belong'? What signals, signs, identifiers do OU students use to demonstrate their 'belongingness'? And who is involved in creating this sense of belonging?

4. The importance and challenges of relationships and informal learning spaces

Our study provides a partial response to the question 'who is involved in creating a sense of belonging?'. A strong theme that came across throughout the project is that concurrent pedagogies have been made through and in **networks of relationships**. These networks of relationships involved not only ALs (as would be expected through the mandatory role they have in the module systems), but also relationships with family and friends (page 33 and career changer vignette), and arguably most interestingly with peers (coper-adaptor vignette).

While the mandatory relationships with ALs mainly served functions aligned with the 'stand-alone module' processes, there was evidence of ALs working around the concurrent students' issues to provide additional targeted support. Examples included helping students' time management to understand the intensity of concurrent study, suggesting key sections to support students' selective study, alerting students to particular deadlines, or explaining differences between modules. This aligns with Martin et al.'s (2018) findings that tutors are taking specific actions to make themselves present to and connected to their concurrent students. A key argument in Martin et al.'s paper is

that reducing perceived distances between tutor and student is key to perceptions of success. However, as noted before, there are significant challenges for tutors to identify concurrent student in their groups, and therefore arguably, there is a dual perspective of distance for concurrent students, between themselves and one tutor within a module and then a secondary distance between themselves and both their tutors as a concurrent student. This aligns with student responses about the attentiveness of individual tutors (page 31), and at the same time difficulties in managing different advice or approaches between tutors (page 31). Therefore, between connecting with concurrent students and taking actions, there are questions about how far tutors' abilities are still highly framed around 'stand-alone module' modes of interactions. This issue of **dual-distance, and dual connectedness** in concurrent tutor-student relationships, raises questions about how we can shift expectations and processes of working with two tutors towards a concurrent tutoring relationship.

Other significant relationships involved in enabling concurrent study were those of friends and family. These relationships were frequently cited throughout our different research activities (see career changer vignette). A strong theme that emerged was that these relationships weren't just enabling students to participate (in terms of time, study space, childcare etc.) but that the **intertwining** of work, study and family created generative and motivating spaces which enriched engagement and learning (see the career changer and sophisticated learner vignettes). This aligns with the findings of Müller(2008) and Wild (2018) that OU concurrent students report that they have strong intrinsic motivations for studying at a higher intensity, including being an example, and making others proud of them. However, this is arguably a stronger feature in Q94, where many students also work or volunteer in schools or education settings. Thus, this intertwining also involves daily experiences of their study themes, and discussions with colleagues about issues that occur in the modules. This is well supported by the module materials and assessment processes, whereby lived experiences are a key part of reflective activities, underpinning substantial sections of learning. However, this intertwining may be less prominent in other qualifications and need more explicit exploration to form understandings of how these impacts on concurrent student learning.

Another example of this intertwining was the creation of **informal peer support** beyond OU systems (e.g., in addition to the module forums and tutorials). Connecting via social media was discussed as both an opportunity and a challenge and was reflected in responses from ALs (ECYS ALSPD event, May 2021). For some, connecting with other students was a motivator (particularly when the content of discussions was focused on motivational messaging and positive reinforcement, and a sense of belonging (Hart, 2012)). For others, social media created spaces for yet more differing opinions and advice, which created more difficulties than solutions (see the coper-adapter vignette). However, there was evidence of informal 'buddying'. While it is unclear whether such buddying was organised around a group who were all concurrent students, the reporting of such informal spaces as important to managing concurrent study is notable. While there is a potential opportunity to 'formalise' informal activities, the informal nature of the relationship may be key, and therefore requires further investigation.

While all of these relationships and spaces indicate the levels of support required *beyond as well as through* the modules for concurrent students, it also hints towards the difference in experience of Higher Education that some concurrent students desire.

Conclusion: So, who are our Q94 concurrent students?

The heterogeneity of the concurrent cohort in Q94 is apparent in the quantitative data. The proportion of students opting to study concurrently, their retention and outcomes vary across levels and across sub-cohorts. While Brown's (2015) characterisation of approaches to study of distance learners (avid support seekers, self-sufficient learners, active-strategic approach, active deep approach or passive-surface approach) resonates with the data we have collected and analysed, our reading of concurrent students on Q94 has revealed a more nuanced set of characteristics, which not only include approaches to study and support, but also students' abilities to create pedagogies (through relationships, spaces and materials) which supports them to actively manage their learning. Our vignettes (Career changer, Intentional full-timer, Multi-tasker, Sophisticated learner and Coper-adaptor vignettes) all speak to the complexities and interchangeability of concurrent student identities. They illustrate some of the challenges and opportunities that concurrent study creates and ask questions as to how we can best support our increasing numbers of concurrent students. Our study suggests that a significant part of addressing these challenges is being more transparent in explaining what concurrent study entails for students to understand the commitment required before registering in 2 modules. However, our study also highlighted the difficulties of providing such guidance due to the range of stories of concurrent ways of studying that have emerged.

Our study also highlights a need to shift institutionally recycled narratives of concurrent students and study. This is difficult to accomplish, where systems and processes can inadvertently 'feed' existing tropes. However, it seems highly important in the context of concurrent students' own stories and expressed desires to 'belong' as full-time H.E. students, that we find ways to align better their motivations, successes and challenges with our collective view. This study provides evidence to understand what it would take to make such a shift, and who needs to be involved. The essential relationships between a concurrent student and their 2 ALs, in this 3-way relationship, is vital in taking some initial steps to address these challenges, but ALs' abilities to develop innovative solutions with their students, will always be framed by the systems in which they work in each module.

Having said which, this project has collated evidence of the hugely positive impact of concurrent study for some students. Across the five vignettes we have found evidence that for many concurrent students to differing degrees, their resilience, creativity and ability to critically engage with H.E. pedagogy is testimony to their motivation, perseverance and the level of support they receive from across the university system and their own surroundings. It also highlights the potential for embracing concurrent modes of study, with evidence of significant academic, personal and professional gains that can be made.

Recommendations:

1. Strengthen the pre-registration information and guidance to ensure enquirers considering concurrent study understand the commitments expected, particularly TMA dates and other module-specific aspects that might inform students' decisions
2. Continue to progress the shift from stand-alone module thinking to qualification level curriculum planning and processes, particularly around assessment and reference to key theorists and ideas.
3. Develop OU systems to allow tutors to identify concurrent students in a tutor group, and which parallel module is being studied.
4. Integrate data on concurrent students within module / qualification reporting processes to make explicit the most recent narratives about their achievements and any awarding gaps that arise.
5. Challenge legacy narratives about concurrent students in all forums.
6. Devise ways within and across modules (and assessments) to promote and celebrate 'hidden' cross-module pedagogical skills, particularly those which develop critical appraisal, synthesis and reflection on practice.
7. Create spaces for module teams, students and student support staff within and between modules for cross-module thinking and reflection.
8. Consider ways of moving towards concurrent dual-tutoring relationship, as a three-way interaction with the student across and between modules.
9. Continue to embed awareness of and acknowledgement of learning that emerges through daily relationships with friends, family, colleagues and peers.
10. Further investigate practices of informal peer support.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: AL Questionnaire

Appendix 2: AL interview questions

Appendix 3: Student Questionnaire

Appendix 4: Student interview