

**University of York**  
**Postgraduate Distance Learners Community Building Report**  
**2023**

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## Summary

This report investigates the experiences and challenges faced by Postgraduate Distance Learners (PGDLs) at the University of York. The primary aim of this research is to gain a better understanding of how PGDLs interact and engage with the growing online community at York and provide recommendations for enhancing PGDL social experiences.

### **Key Findings:**

1. **Isolation and Integration:** A significant number of our PGDL respondents reported experiencing isolation, with the majority feeling disconnected from the academic community.
2. **Resource Challenges:** PGDLs face difficulties in accessing up-to-date online resources.
3. **Engagement Opportunities:** The research highlights a lack of inclusive online events and communication strategies.
4. **Career Development:** PGDLs often miss out on career development opportunities available to on-campus students.
5. **Intersectionality:** The research acknowledges that PGDL's challenges often intersect with those faced by other student groups. The recommendations therefore take into account the broader benefits for these communities.

### **Recommendations:**

Based upon the findings actionable recommendations were created, presented in what we have labelled the 'WIRED' framework;

1. **Wellbeing:** Establish specific mental wellbeing support, implement regular check ins, raise awareness of mental health challenges, and conduct wellbeing surveys to assess and address emotional needs.
2. **Integration:** Targeted communications, standardisation guidelines for departments, enhanced student representation, and recognition of the value of PGDLs.
3. **Resources:** Ensure timely and efficient responses to student enquiries, maintain website accessibility, provide centralised support contacts, and establish a feedback system for continuous improvement.
4. **Engagement:** Create clear communication routes for PGDLs, offer online participation options, consider their needs during event planning, and run tailored events for remote learners.
5. **Development:** Collaborate with organisations to offer virtual internships and online career fairs, promote existing career services, and provide support for students interested in academia or teaching roles.

## 1. Introduction

This report aims to address the experiences and challenges faced by Postgraduate Distance Learners (PGDLs) at the University of York. The study adopts a mixed methods approach, combining informal focus groups and a survey for feedback analysis, and goes on to develop recommendations for enhancing PGDL experiences.

As set out in the Universities strategy, there is a goal to increase the number of distance students at York to match the number of on-campus learners. At the launch of the strategy in 2021/22 distance learner numbers stood at around 1,700 compared to 21,290 on-campus learners (as reported by [HESA](#)<sup>1</sup>). This has been a significant driving factor for this research as there will need to be an increase in the provisions for PGDLs on a large scale. To achieve this goal it is important to understand the unique experiences, challenges, and needs of PGDLs. By doing so, York can better position itself to attract and support a more extensive cohort of students.

The primary aim of this research is to gain a better understanding of how PGDLs interact and engage with the growing online community at York. Based on these findings, actionable recommendations have been developed that can improve the overall experiences of PGDLs, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment. The significance of this research extends beyond the immediate concerns of PGDLs however, it highlights the broader implications of distance learner experiences and how these challenges impact various aspects of academic and personal life.

There is an increasing body of research surrounding distance education and learning, compounded by the pandemic, that focuses for the most part on evolving pedagogies and creating engaging learning environments while online. This report instead is concerned with the social engagement, provisions, and resources for PGDLs outside of their studies for which little research has been conducted. With a diverse array of over 250 societies, sports groups, and numerous networks, the university presents ample opportunities for on-campus students to actively engage, collaborate, and explore their interests outside of their studies. The collegiate system additionally supports this, providing further events, volunteering opportunities, and creative platforms on campus. This report contemplates how these on-campus offerings can be extended to encompass virtual engagement, and will explore what current PGDL students experience in terms of events, networks, and opportunities online.

While this research is centred on PGDL experiences, its recommendations have the potential to benefit a wide range of students, ensuring that York is more responsive to the diverse needs of their student body. Ultimately, this research contributes to the ongoing transformation of higher education, making it more accessible, supportive, and equitable for all.

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<sup>1</sup> We suspect the number of distance learners may now be closer to 2,500. In spite of approaching various teams across the University it has been hard to find a definitive number. At the time of writing this report we are still waiting for an update from the FOI team. This is perhaps illustrative of some of the current challenges in recognising and supporting distance learners as a distinct group.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Methods**

This research implemented a mixed methods approach. First, informal focus groups were conducted with members of the Distance and Online Student Network. Second, a survey was conducted of 68 Postgraduate Distance Learners who were primarily a mix of PhD and Masters students. The survey was advertised in the GSA newsletter and had an incentive of winning £100 in a raffle.

The focus group was held on Google Meet and provided a more informal discussion of PGDL experiences. The questions and themes explored were unstructured and followed a natural flow of conversation. Notes were taken during the meeting and there was an opportunity to write opinions in the chat box.

The survey consisted of both open and closed questions in order to gain both qualitative and quantitative data, the aim of this being to give a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by PGDLs. The survey was developed by the authors. Questions were designed to provide data that could be used to inform recommendations as well as providing current insight into the views of PGDL students. The survey was built in Google Forms and was available online for one week. Participants were provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the survey and its intended use. The data collected was confidential with an option to enter a prize draw, with personal data (email addresses) being deleted after the winner was selected..

Survey data was split into responses from students on PhD, Masters, and other courses respectively to investigate key issues that may be singular to a specific level of learning. Results were further broken down into full time and part time students to disseminate these issues further. When quoting from the feedback sections of the survey, students will only be identified by their mode and level of study, i.e Full Time PhD (FTPhD) or Part Time Masters (PTMA) or Full Time Other (FTO), so the reader can contextualise their responses better. Degree levels will not be differentiated by Master/Doctor of Arts or Sciences as it is not integral to the responses received, merely indicative of the types of courses Distance Learners favour.

### **2.2 Limitations**

The survey was unable to be targeted to all PGDL's as there is no established communication route to do so. Instead it relied on the current members of the Distance and Online Student Network, advertising in various newsletters (college, department, GSA), and word of mouth. Additionally, the survey only ran for one week due to time constraints as analysis was planned to take place before Postgraduate arrivals and freshers so that welcome events may be trialled. Lastly there is the issue of sample size, only a relatively

small cohort of students participated. It is therefore difficult with certainty to state how representative these views are of the broader PGDL population. However, we note the responses at the very least illustrate a consensus of view and concerns from a significant minority of the broader population, which we believe warrants attention in itself.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 Student Overview**

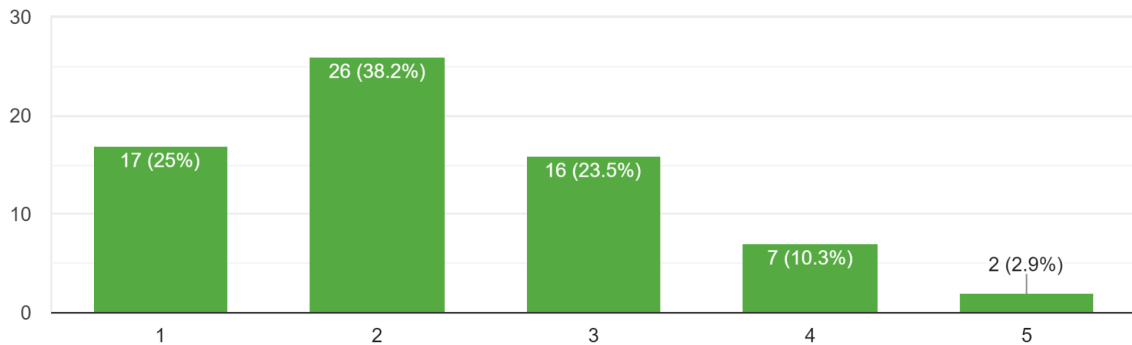
There were 68 respondents to the survey with a split of 69.1% Masters Students, 25% PhD Students, and 6% other, including 1.5% PG Cert Students. The majority of students identified as studying full time at 63.2% compared with 36.8% of part time study. There was also a majority of students who did not have caring responsibilities, 67.6% compared with 32.4% who did. There were identifiable differences in general subject areas with PhD students coming predominantly from humanities courses, History of Art in particular (5 students), and Masters students studying computer science or in the Business School (25 students).

The focus group contained three members of the Distance Student Network who regularly attend meetings and engage online. All three are PhD students, two part-time and one full-time, and all come from humanities subjects.

#### **3.2 Key themes and analysis**

59% of PhD students and 68% of Masters students responded that they felt Isolated to Very Isolated from the community at York, compared with 0% of PhD students and 15% of Masters students responding that they felt Included to Very Included. This is compounded in the qualitative feedback we received, one PTMA told us "It is isolating, I was prepared for this but I often feel as if I must be the only one finding it tough - I am sure I am not!". For some students, there has been a limitation on how they can find and connect with other PGDLs, one FTPhD student notes "It can be really isolating. I am lucky that I have made friends with two other PHD students that are remote, who have the same supervisor as me. However, it is really challenging". One FTPhD suggested that "If there is a community for the distance learners, it would be good. Because they can share their issues such as emotional and technical difficulties". At present there is the Distance and Online Students Network however it relies on students signing up to a mailing list before accessing events and chats.

Figure 1: Survey response to question “Do you feel socially isolated from the community at York as a Distance Learner”

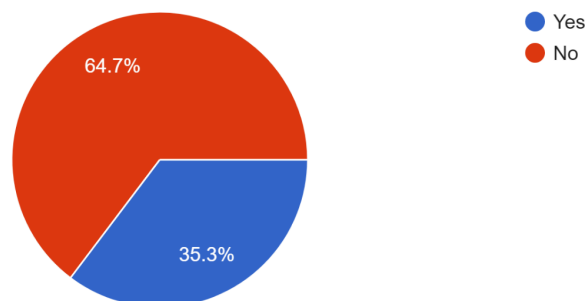


Summary of all survey respondents, with 1 being “very isolated” and 5 “very included”.

In the survey several students underline the importance of emotional and mental support and the need for more extensive resources in this area. One FTPhD expressed that “I would like more emotional and mental support for PhD students like myself as this journey can be very lonely” with another proposing “I’d like to suggest that implementing more personalised support services, such as regular check-ins with academic advisors or mentors, could enhance the overall learning journey”.

We asked students to tell us about what events they experienced during Welcome Week, either run by the University or their department. Overall, 64.7% of PGDL students did not get involved with any welcome activities compared to just 35.3% who did. A recurrent theme throughout the feedback is a lack of online engagement opportunities with one FTPhD student saying “there were none online (that were organised by the department that I was aware of. My supervisor has made a really great effort to get those of us that are remote to get to know one another online)”. There seems to be a real divide between departments and staff that make an inclusive effort, make half an effort, or those who do not include PGDLs at all.

Figure 2: Survey response to question “Were you involved in any welcome activities run by your department or the University”



There is a trend of inviting PGDLs to welcome events but not going further to address their specific needs, a FTPhD noted “I attended induction events in person however there was no



real acknowledgment of being a distance student". Similarly, we also heard from a PTMa student who attended online welcome events, they recall;

"I attended an online meet and greet just after I first started (January 2022) but it was more geared towards people on campus - I believe I was the only distance learner attending. I think it could have been better advertised, attracting more people to attend. I have not kept in touch with anybody I 'met' at the event".

There appears to be a tendency for some PGDLs to become alienated during welcome as they are not being provided with appropriate welcome materials or tailored events. The tendency for having in-person events may also account for the lack of engagement with welcome events from PGDLs, one FTMa told us that it was "difficult for online students - if there were online virtual activities that would have been great".

Alternatively we did hear some very positive feedback where welcome events had been run well, a FTMa student told us "I liked that there were welcome videos recorded by the course lecturers to make us feel welcome and provide an introduction on expectations for the course" with a FTPhD also agreeing "very welcoming and supportive - really made you feel part of the department community". The disparity in the welcome feedback indicates the need for guidelines and shared resources/ experience on how to fully include PGDLs.

More general feedback from PGDLs highlights a strong desire for greater integration and a sense of belonging at York, one PTPHD summarises they'd like "Anything that makes me feel a valued member of the university community rather than a forgotten afterthought", a sentiment echoed by many. We have been asked by one FTPhD that there are "more opportunities for distance learners to feel part of the department and university", with two PTMa students adding "I feel opportunities are wasted to make new friends as a distance learner" and "it's hard to make real connections with people".

In the feedback we received there was some reference to existing initiatives to integrate PGDLs but with predominantly negative outcomes. A PTPHD student told us;

"[My] department did a lot of introductory online events during lockdown but has stopped, and now has a few distance learning provisions but not many. This seems to be at the mercy of whether the faculty member assigned to Graduate Studies feels like running them, and it would be great if they were more systematic/administrative."

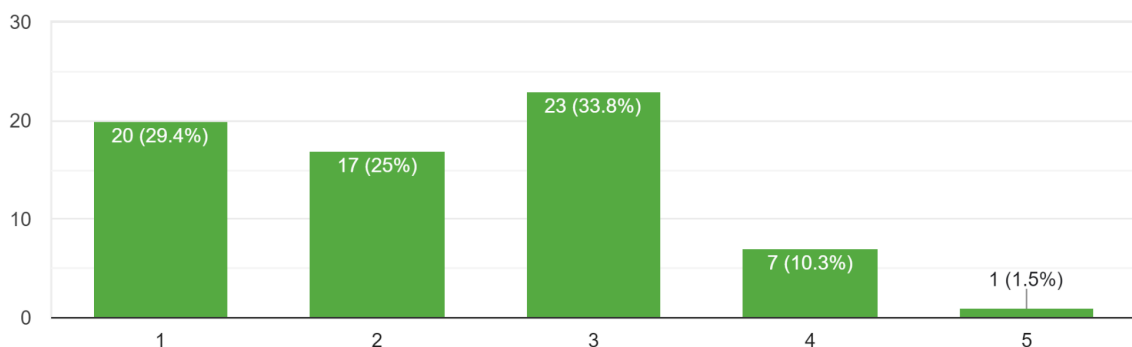
Similarly, a FTPhD student praised and criticised integration in their experience, stating a "Whats app group of phd scholars from [my] department is a nice initiative which gives a sense of belonging. But it's not enough to keep the spirit". The feedback underlined the need for the development of better integration strategies for PGDLs and a clear need for students to receive this kind of support "to create a stronger sense of community despite the distance" (FTPhD).

Several PGDL's pointed out how they have often found themselves grappling with inadequate resources despite no question prompting this. One FTPhD student emphasised the cumbersome process of problem-solving at a distance, stating "We have to solve all issues by the Internet or calling. Sometimes, we have to wait for a couple of weeks to get

answers.” PGDLs are at a disadvantage in this way, being wholly reliant on timely email responses or finding a knowledgeable person to call could lead to additional stresses and research setbacks. When the option of in-person help is removed, there is a pressure and expectancy that online resources should work as effectively to give students equal access to support. This unfortunately is not always the case, with webpages containing out of date information or getting link loops that ultimately lead nowhere. Some students spoke of their difficulty to locate resources online, with a PTMa student noting that “One of the key issues being a distant learner should not feel so distant that they do not know who to go to for advice and support”. These sentiments were echoed by a FTPhD who told us “Ensuring that online resources are easily accessible and up-to-date would greatly assist in navigating the challenges of distance learning”.

Overall 54.4% of students felt there were not enough online events or communities at York, a further 39.7% of students did not know where to look for existing online events or communities, and consequently 35.3% of students surveyed had not accessed any online events or communities. One PtMa student told us “There is no "community", you haven't built a "community"” in response to a question on participating in events.

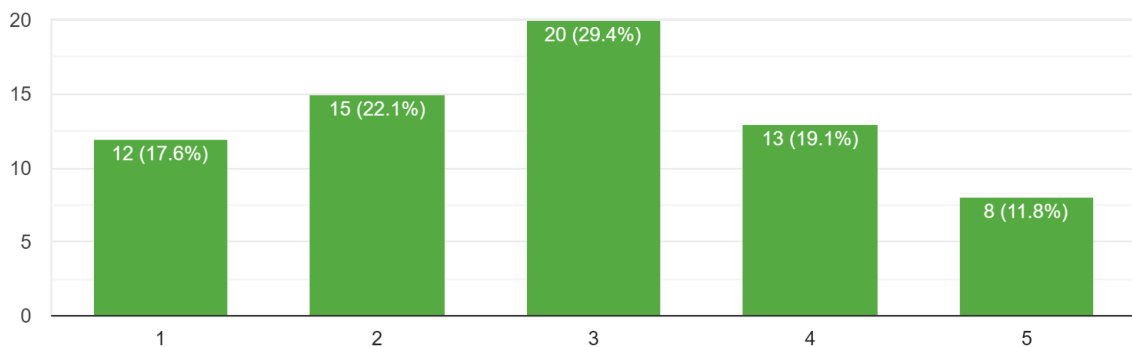
*Figure 3: Survey response to question “Do you feel there are enough online events and communities at York?”*



*Summary of all survey respondents, with 1 being “not enough” and 5 “too many”.*

Of those who did access events and communities online most found them via the GSA newsletter (42.6%) and the Wentworth Postgraduate Digest (38.2%). However, in the last year (2022/23 from October until August) the GSA advertised 123 social events of which only 3 were online or hybrid, and the Wentworth Postgraduate Digest advertised 0 online social events, compared with over 160 online academic events or workshops. Speaking on social events, one PTMa admitted “I often delete the newsletters without reading them because most of the events won't be available to me”.

Figure 4: Survey response to question “Do you know where to look for online events or communities at York?”



Summary of all survey respondents, with 1 being “definitely not” and 5 “absolutely, yes”.

Further to this we have had feedback in both the focus group and survey that criticises the offering of free food or drinks being regularly promoted.

“Please consider how it appears to Distance learners when we see events offering free food or drink. Are we likely to be impressed with these? Wouldn't we rather see the funds spent on events that we can enjoy too, i.e. online ones?” - PTMa Student

Similarly we have heard about how the placement of event adverts affects students, with them being more difficult to find and often lower in the listings they create a sense of unimportance. There is a clear desire from many students who submitted feedback to get involved with an online community and social events as one PTMa student notes “I would really love to partake in the activities held at the University! But unfortunately distance learning means that is not possible” and another FTPhD stating “I don't participate in as many things as I might if I were on campus”.

PGDL's face exclusion from many career development opportunities that on campus students have access to and there are limited online opportunities for gaining experience that may be a crucial component of their professional development. Two FTPhD students expressed the need for creating more of these opportunities as “Offering 100% remote and online Collaborative Projects or Online Volunteering/Internships holds significant potential to enhance the engagement and learning experience of Distance students (not UK residents)”. Additionally students are unaware of the career support that is available online, with some asking specifically for career and skills sessions that are already in place. There are several inequalities we found with the difference in support for online development vs on campus. Namely the lack of virtual careers fairs or networking opportunities, but also the exclusion of online training or experiences for students wishing to enter academia or teaching roles.

During the focus group there was discussion of how equality is built into PGDL experiences, a FTPhD noted “This is a huge issue for any decolonising action in the academy. It's really important that virtual isn't a 'second-class' experience”. The same student went on to suggest that work should be done “to critically assess what worked well in lockdowns when everything was physically distant, and to take the 'best of lockdown' and rerun them as

regular events/resources etc". This was reciprocated by members of the group, all of whom agreed that access and support was far superior during lockdown when everything was online by default. On the topic of equality, it was also raised that better online access and support was also a growing need for the University to ensure that students and staff from marginalised backgrounds can participate in academia;

“Remember that distant students aren't the only ones who need virtual/remote access to the uni. Students and staff who are carers or who have chronic illness or disability (including Long Covid), or who are neurodivergent will all need such access too. Together that makes an enormous cohort in need of a virtual university... that's a huge and very silent community.” - FTPhD

There is a recognisable need for enhanced online access, resources, and support that extends beyond just PGDLs, that encompasses a broad community of students and staff who face unique challenges. From the feedback received it is evident that there is a substantial, yet often overlooked, growing community that could greatly benefit from a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to distance and online learning.

## **4. Recommendations**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This section of the report presents our recommendations for enhancing PGDL experiences at York. The WIRED framework offers actionable suggestions that have been developed in direct response to the feedback we received from our focus group and survey. Additionally, these recommendations have the potential to benefit multiple communities at York which we have outlined below.

### **4.2 WIRED Framework**

Our research and analysis has led to the creation of what we have labelled the 'WIRED' framework which focuses on five key areas for development; Wellbeing, Integration, Resources, Engagement, and Development. These recommendations are designed to address the specific and repeated challenges of PGDLs at York in order to improve their overall experience.

#### **4.2.1 Wellbeing**

1. **Mental Wellbeing Support**  
Ensure specific mental health and wellbeing provisions for Distance Learners, ensuring they are aware of support through appropriate communication strategies, and taking into account their particular needs i.e higher rates of isolation.
2. **Check Ins**  
Implement a system of regular check ins for students to access information on support and to flag where anyone may be particularly struggling. This could be in the

form of an online support group or further training could be given to pastoral supervisors and mentors.

3. Promote Awareness  
Raise awareness about the mental challenges that Distance Learners face to staff so they are better able to support their students.
4. Wellbeing Surveys  
Conduct surveys to assess the wellbeing of Distance Learners and identify trends and areas where further support could be given.

#### 4.2.2 Integration

1. Targeted Communications  
Establishment of clear targeted communications for Distance Learners, for example in the form of newsletters.
2. Standardisation Guidelines  
Develop guidelines for academic and non-academic departments in order to standardise Distance Learner experiences.
3. Student Representation  
Better advertise and support dedicated student representative positions to voice Distance Learner experiences and issues and implement further training to the role.
4. Recognition and Value  
Ensure that Distance Learners are appropriately recognised as a valuable asset to departments and are included at all times.
5. Distance Learner Orientation  
Create online orientation modules that clearly cover key topics such as resources and strategies for effective remote learning.

#### 4.2.3 Resources

1. Enhance Online Support  
Ensure that emails are answered promptly and efficiently. There could be a dedicated chat service where students would be able to quickly get answers or be signposted to the correct place.
2. Website Accessibility  
Regularly update online resources to ensure they are accurate and up to date.  
Ensure all pages clearly indicate where to find support and information on who/ how to contact.
3. Central Support Contact

Create a centralised support contact for distance learners including an email address, phone number, and online availability times inclusive of those in different time zones.

4. Feedback

Design a feedback system where distance learners can report issues with online resources and use this to continually improve the quality of support.

4.2.4 Engagement

1. Communication

Create a clear communication route to target information directly at Distance Learners, for example an email group.

2. Online Participation Options

Ensure that events are held hybrid by default or offer an online alternative. Where possible live-stream events on campus, something easily possible with the current recording capabilities in lecture theatres and seminar rooms.

3. Inclusive Event Planning

Ensure events consider the needs of Distance Learners during event creation. Avoid the promotion of exclusive on campus offers to distance learners, such as free food.

4. Tailored Events

Run online events tailored to Distance Learners such as welcome or information fairs.

4.2.5 Development

1. Virtual Internships and Volunteering Opportunities

Collaborate with organisations to create more online opportunities that are accessible to distance students.

2. Online Career Fairs and Virtual Networking Events

Host online events where distance learners can connect to potential employers, industry professionals, and other students.

3. Advertisement of Career Services

Promote the resources and appointments that Career Services can offer online such as CV workshops and mock interviews.

4.3 Wider Benefit

Preliminary results of this report were discussed with multiple Student Officers, course/year reps, and postgraduate students at York to discuss the potential wider benefit of these recommendations and their impact on the larger student body. What follows is a short summary of the groups who would benefit most, in no particular order.

#### 4.3.1 Mature Students

Mature students, due to home life commitments and commuting, have expressed the need for more online and virtual events to engage with learning, socialising, and extracurricular activities. The boost to online access ensures that Mature students could fully participate in their University experience while balancing their various responsibilities.

#### 4.3.2 Disabled students

The benefits to Disabled students primarily revolve around meeting assessed needs and allowing flexibility. Online events remove the physical barriers that can stop students with mobility issues attending, as well as providing captioning and compatibility with screen readers for ease of communication. Students with fatigue symptoms may have increased options for engagement as they wouldn't have to choose between travelling to socialise and preserving their energy levels. Students with mental health conditions similarly may not need to experience additional stress or anxiety that could stem from travelling, being around large groups, or not having a fast and easy exit strategy. Those with anxiety additionally could benefit from being able to access support from the comfort of their home.

#### 4.3.3 Low Income Students

During the cost of living crisis students on low income or from a low income household have been hit hardest. These students may have to choose between the price of transport and the cost of food, a ticket for an event or paying their bills. Online events can help reach these students to feel included without the financial impact that on campus events may incur.

#### 4.3.4 Commuting Students

Commuting to University costs time and money. Moving more events and support online reduces transportation costs including fuel, bus or rail fare, and parking (including permits). It also reduces the strain on University parking. Students who can attend from home save time which can be better spent on coursework or creating a better work life balance. Lessening the number of commuting students helps create a more environmentally friendly and sustainable campus while also enhancing the safety of students who may have to commute in the dark or from remote places. Online access can additionally help to reduce stress in commuter students who could better manage their responsibilities at university and at home.

#### 4.3.5 LGBTQ+ Students

Online events can create a safe and inclusive environment for students that provide a level of privacy and anonymity that can be vital for those not 'out' to everyone in their lives. Support can be accessed discreetly without fear of discrimination or prejudice, which may benefit those who feel uncomfortable attending in-person events.

#### 4.3.6 Students with Different Learning Styles

Although this report is concerned with the social community surrounding distance and online learners, as many current online events are education focussed we spoke with students about why they like or prefer online sessions. The main reasons we heard were that students liked that they could engage in a way that suited them best, either listening in to a talk as a podcast, having reduced distractions, being able to focus on the information on a smaller personal screen rather than up on a projection, asking questions via a chat opposed to in a large lecture hall or classroom, and being able to pause, speed up, or slow down recorded events to engage better with the material. Accessibility features, such as having closed captioning, were also mentioned as a reason to favour online events.

#### 4.3.7 Intersectionality

While all the Students we spoke to gave benefits for those based in York, it is important to remember the intersectionality of the postgraduate distance and online student community, some of whom will also face one or more of the challenges outlined above.

### **Background Research**

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