I think having a sense of belonging is both possible and important for online learners, but I also think that how that develops is probably a little different than it is for students who are attending campus-based courses because tutors have to be more involved and proactive in fostering that sense of belonging through the way that they design course materials and also through designing activities that mean students have to interact with one another. In all the online modules I’ve studied on, we’ve had to introduce ourselves on those discussion forums, and in one of the modules we actually had to do video introductions, which were really great because it was lovely to be able to watch fellow students rather than just read what they had to say. And that helped bring to life their future posts on those discussion forums as well.

I’d say that those online discussion boards are a key way of generating a sense of community within the students because you’ve always got people posting questions and comments there. There might be questions about where to find particular bits of course material, they might be questions about deadlines, or whatever. And what’s really nice is that sometime obviously those questions are responded to by the tutors, but also sometimes the answers come from fellow students. And that’s something that really helps generate that sense of belonging, because the dialogue isn’t just between tutors and students, but it’s also very much between students and fellow students.

And I think that sense of belonging becomes even stronger over time when you’re studying a second module, a third module, or whatever. I also think the language used by tutors is an important way of fostering the community of learners. So, really thinking about the language that they use in the online course material, for example, and the tone of that. And also in the synchronous online tutorials that they run, which are a really good way of checking in on information. And also just ensuring that students don’t feel alone with their studying, because studying is so much easier and more enjoyable when you’re doing it with other people, and online learning is absolutely no different. So, I would really recommend that students make the most of any opportunity at all for synchronous activity and engagement.

I think another way that the online community develops is through engaging in group work, and in all modules I studied on, they have involved group work to some degree. And I would have to say that online group work is a real challenge, but it’s also a really good way of getting to know fellow students much better and developing really supportive relationships and support networks with them.

And all of these things are possible because they’re designed into the course, which comes back to the fact that the sense of belonging is really promoted by the tutors, but then has to be taken up by students. And, like everything to do with studying, you tend to get as much out of it as you put in. So, it really is worth putting in a little bit of effort into that sense of belonging, because it’s something that benefits everybody, staff and students.