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# DEVELOPING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY FOR A DISTANCE LEARNING COURSE IN LAW

# CONTEXT



First full distance learning course for the Law School



Cyclical delivery of modules, 8 cohorts at any one time



Rapid increase in student numbers



Impact on staff



Lack of appreciation of varied student backgrounds and abilities

# STUDENT FEEDBACK 2018/19 ...

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Can there be some form of class interaction with the tutor where we discuss aspects of the course and can seek clarification?

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I think anything that would encourage communication between students would be extremely beneficial.

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I think if this could be built on and we could be encouraged to communicate more with fellow classmates this could improve everyone's learning.

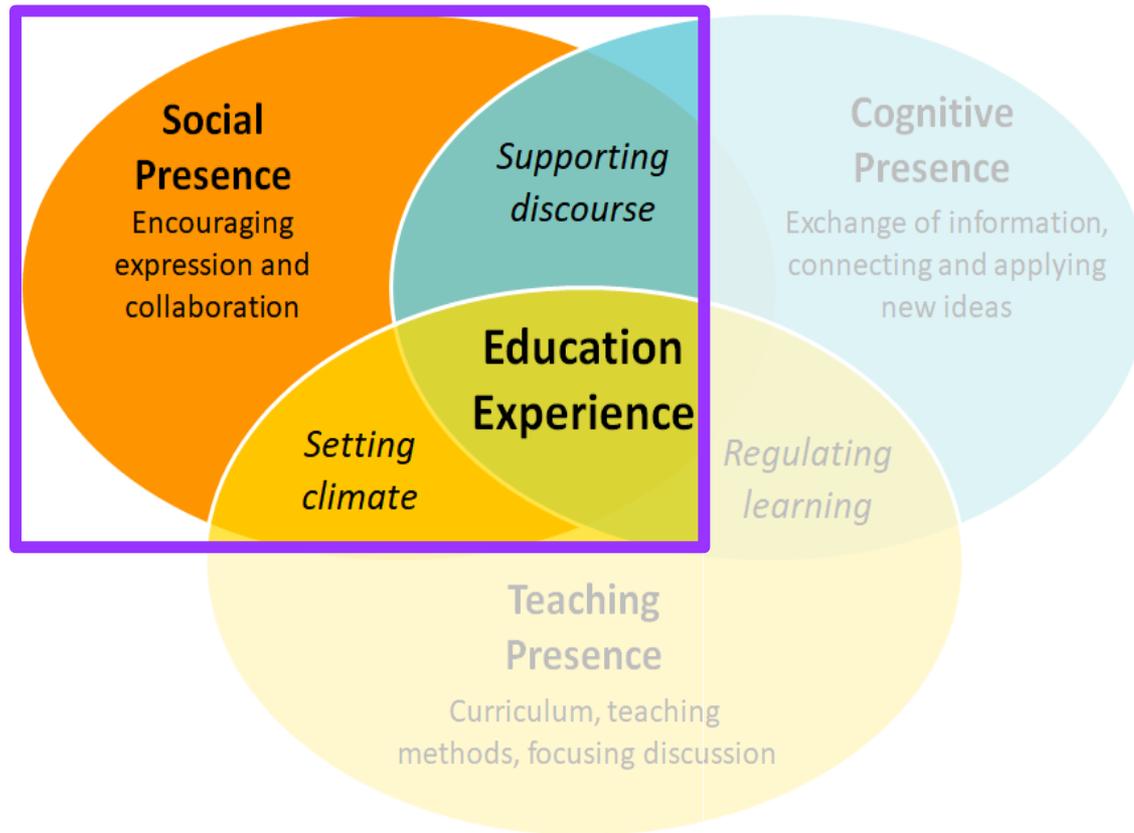
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I would request that you don't forget us distance learners ... you are without a window into our efforts and activities.

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In all honesty, I am starting to wonder if the distance learners are prioritised less. Which I understand the reasons for that yet at the same time distance learners need clarifications when asked etc because who else is there to go to?!

# COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY FRAMEWORK



Garrison *et al.* (2000) Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education.

# SOLUTIONS



Weekly tutor  
communications



Larger module  
teaching  
teams



Welcome  
activity

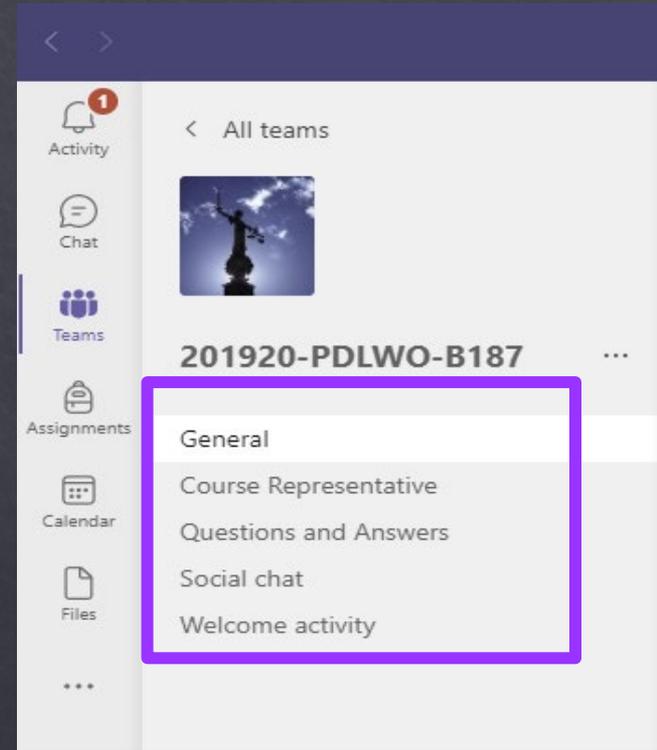
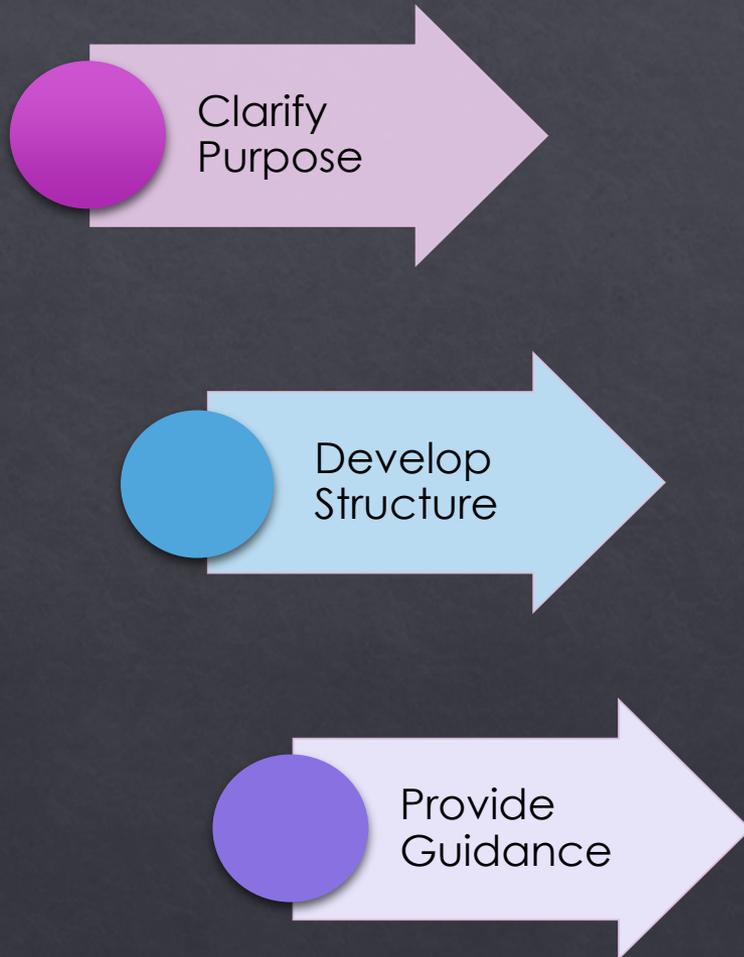


Module  
welcome videos



And... Course Community in MS Teams

# PLANNING



# INTRODUCING THE COMMUNITY

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Demo for staff

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Emails to staff and students

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Purpose and guidance outlined in the VLE, reiterated in the community itself

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Links from the VLE into the course community



## MS Teams in this Course

You will have seen that during your course you will be using Microsoft Teams. In your modules, it is used as a place to ask questions and where you will share responses to different activities. We also have a Course Community that you - and all other students on this course - are a member of.

The Course Community is used to share information such as reminders of key dates, online training events and other announcements from the Course Leader. It also includes a Social Chat area. Here you'll find friendly discussions on all kinds of topics including pets, food, television shows and day to day life as a distance learning student (sharing the excitement of a new study desk, or words of encouragement at assessment time).

When you enter the Course Community you will see a number of **channels**.

- **General channel:** the Course Leader and Online Learning Tutor use this channel for sharing announcements. You will also notice occasional automatic system notifications here.
- **Course Representative channel:** your Course Rep. uses this channel to send out updates / feedback from meetings and receive and comments you wish to share.
- **Questions and Answers channel:** use this channel to ask any questions about the course.
- **Social Chat channel:** everyone can use this channel for informal conversation.
- **Welcome Activity channel:** this is the area to respond to the Welcome Activity, introducing yourself and meeting the staff and other students on the course.

Please read the University **Usage Policy** in the tab along the top of the General channel. This contains excellent non-jargon guidance that you should follow, not just in Teams but in any professional online environment.

Remember to follow the Distance Learning [Code of Conduct \(PDF\)](#) when posting in the Course Community or any module MS Teams site.

# WELCOME ACTIVITY

“Introduce yourselves and tell us why you are studying law.”

Welcome activity Posts Files + Team

← Reply

 **Brown, Donna** 09/09/2019 21:56 4  
Good evening all! I am Donna, I am the Module Leader for the Foundations of Property Law module in Semester 1 and I also lead the Equity and Trusts Law module in Semester 2. I liked Becky's 'Why law' bit so I thought I would share.  
  
It was not a traditional start for me, but more a desire for financial independence and a fondness for Ally McBeal (I associate that phrase with showing my age). I tried accounts, I enjoyed it but did not seem to bring anything and  
[See more](#)  
← Reply

10 September 2019

 **(Student)** 09/09/2019 21:21 Edited 4  
Hi everyone, I'm [redacted] from Leeds) and I am studying the GDL. I have been an English teacher/Head of English/Assistant Headteacher for the past 8 years and have a first degree in English (with a specialism in Linguistics). I loved teaching, particularly the part where I could be in the classroom and just teach without disturbance, but I am now ready for a new challenge, having accomplished all I wanted to in teaching.  
  
[See more](#)  
5 replies [redacted]  
← Reply

 **(Student)** 10/09/2019 22:58 Edited 3  
Dear all, my name is [redacted] and I am in the second semester of the GDL (part-time). I have a Masters in Political Science and International relations and an LL.M. in European Law. Regarding the reasons I decided to study law couple years ago: I worked in a small company and I realized I thrived in fighting for its rights especially in disputes with big players on the market. In my private life, I have always been passionate about consumer rights and I wanted to learn more in order to defend my rights more effectively (I saw a bit for of the EU law in this regard). Finally, I have  
  
[See more](#)  
← Reply

11 September 2019

 **Repyeuski, Pavel** 09/09/2019 21:44 5  
Hello, I am Pavel and I teach Foundations of EU Law. I am quite certain that many of you (the students) will be studying my module in the next semester (January) even if by that time UK finally manages to leave (or will decide to forever stay in) the Union:))) Equally exciting, I hope you will enjoy learning what EU Law is and how it works, as EU is a truly unique Union, love it or not. EU Law is rather different to other English common law modules you study on the PGDL  
  
[See more](#)  
5 replies [redacted]  
← Reply

 **(Student)** 11/09/2019 10:28 3  
Good morning,  
My name is [redacted] have a Masters in Medical Chemistry and one in Public Health. I have been working as a

# SOCIAL CHAT

[REDACTED] (Student) 02/05/2020, 14:02

👍 2 ❤️ 2

How is everyone doing with their projects? It feels quiet lonely sitting here working through it without a teams group to check up on! If only I could go to the library! (words I never thought I would say)

[REDACTED] (Student) 02/05/2020, 17:01

😊 1

I'm with you there, [REDACTED]. Silver lining though: at least you drink at home whilst writing (which I feel makes the writing process so much more tenable 😊) which you can't do in the library 🍷🍷🍷🍷. Every cloud and all that jazz 😊

[REDACTED] (Student) 02/05/2020, 17:17

😊 1

Ha-ha [REDACTED] I am certain your writing is amazing even if you are having some wine 🍷. You are one of the gifted ones 😊. I am currently on furlough so I am pleased that I have time to work on the assignments but at the same time I do have lots of jobs around the house that I never find the time to do them. I have to admit that my alcohol intake has gone up 😊😊

[See more](#)

[REDACTED] (Student) 02/05/2020, 17:48

😊 1

Thank you, [REDACTED]. You're too kind! It certainly requires quite a lot of careful proofreading the next morning, that's for sure 😊. Glad that you're finding time to get the assignments done whilst on furlough, and I know exactly what you mean about the burden of jobs that really should be getting done too. I think an increase in alcohol intake is absolutely [REDACTED] 🍷

[See more](#)

[REDACTED] (Student) 02/05/2020, 18:25

❤️ 1

Thanks [REDACTED]. I found it extremely hard to focus a couple of weeks back when I was still traveling to work so decided to do the assignments first in case of emergency and be able to submit. I'm glad I did that so now I can go back to the last modules and then refocus again on the finishing touches. We are all good so far, fingers crossed 🍷. Hope you guys stay safe too! Best wishes to everyone going through difficult times. It's not easy to stay focused.

[See more](#)

# FOSTERING THE COMMUNITY

Aim: approachable, relaxed student-facing style of course leadership

Establishing own instructor social presence:

- Friendly tone
- Photos and videos
- "Open door" approach

# ESTABLISHING INSTRUCTOR SOCIAL PRESENCE



Oglethorpe, Rebecca 08/09/2019 15:58



Hello all and a huge and friendly welcome from me, your Course Leader. I thought I would kick this off and tell you why I studied law. In my family a lot of relatives were either lawyers or teachers. When I was a teenager/young 20 yr old I didn't like children (so teaching was out) and I liked debating (stemming from arguing regularly with my siblings). The law has been good to me, I enjoyed working for a city international firm which gave me travel opportunities, but equally I have enjoyed working in smaller more specialist firms working more closely with clients. I've finally developed a love of children (well my two anyway!) and I have enjoyed watching them learn and soak up knowledge and apply themselves to problems. One of my children has a slight learning difficulty so I am always looking for different angles to facilitate the absorption and retention of his teaching. I have chosen to combine the two and now teach law. Looking back, I realise I unconsciously limited my career possibilities to those I was familiar with (teaching and law), and I applaud those who have a wider view of the world and how a legal degree can be used in so many ways to achieve career satisfaction or purely to widen your horizons. I do hope you enjoy this new journey with us. If there is one thing I can not stress enough, it is to contact us if you are struggling, we are here to help and we usually can in some way. Stay engaged and curious and you will thoroughly enjoy the course. Best wishes

# EXAMPLE POSTS: LEARNING & TEACHING



Oglethorpe, Rebecca 27/07/2020 20:50

## Final awards, module results and feedback

Dear all students

Unless you have mitigated all your assessments until the defer period in August, you will be expecting some final results very soon. Depending upon which stage you are at on this course, you are either expecting some module results: an end of year result, or a final award. There are [See more](#)



### Results Online | Assessment results are published online

Results Online is the system that Leeds Beckett University uses to publish assessment results

[www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk](http://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk)



Oglethorpe, Rebecca 28/12/2019 19:15

## January 2020 semester timetables

Hello all, please see attached timetables for next semester. Of course, it is your responsibility to make sure you are studying the right modules at the right time and sticking to the tutors' unit timetables as much as you can, but if you have any queries, please let me or PGDL@leedsbeckett.ac.uk know.

The Learning Centre

[See more](#)



Oglethorpe, Rebecca 30/03/2020 13:26

## Westlaw - extra titles

Dear all,

The Library has arranged a 2 month (so ending on 26<sup>th</sup> May) free trial for all practitioner books and text books on Westlaw UK. It is unlikely we will continue

[See more](#)



Oglethorpe, Rebecca 09/03/2020 23:12 Edited

## Consolidation week - formatives and course leader drop-in

Hello all

Today sees the start of consolidation week. You have a full week with no teaching or learning of new material, giving you some time to consolidate what you have learned in units 1-5, fill in any gaps in your knowledge and, if you are perhaps a little behind - and we are all very aware how

[See more](#)



Ogilthorpe, Rebecca 02/09/2020 20:43

2

### Dear students of colour

Hello

Despite its brevity, I think this has been one of the hardest posts to write. White people quoting Martin Luther King and displaying outrage that "it's still happening in this day and age" is both useless and unfavourably patronising. As a white woman, I simply cannot put myself fully in your shoes. See more



**LBSU STANDS WITH THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT @...**  
Leeds Beckett Students' Union would like to express our undying solidarity with people of colour across the world as well those protesting the horrific...

[www.leedsbeckettsu.co.uk](http://www.leedsbeckettsu.co.uk)

3 replies



Ogilthorpe, Rebecca 17/09/2020 22:57

3

### How are you?

Hello everyone! This week is National Mental Health Awareness Week, with the theme of Kindness as its focus.

In my view, kindness has been and will continue to be a crucial part of this pandemic. Yes, the media is littered with awful stats and data, but what I like to see shining through are the... See more



**Mental Health Awareness Week**  
All you need to know for Mental Health Awareness Week 2020

[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

10 replies



Ogilthorpe, Rebecca 19/04/2020 18:17

2

### Inclusivity

Hello folks! It's been a while since I posted my Happy Easter message that I have been unintentionally but still inexcusably unaware of all the different festivals and religious milestones everyone on our distance learning course celebrates. I myself am agnostic, and only aware of those festivals that affect my sons' school terms. I hope my "status" does not offend anyone, I just want to respect those who have faith and have that support... See more

2 replies

# EXAMPLE POSTS: INCLUSIVITY & WELLBEING

# EXAMPLE POSTS: SUPPORT & MOTIVATION



To all taking the Public Law exam tomorrow, best wishes from the whole team!



# EVALUATION

## Sources:

Feedback survey to staff and students

Student comments in mid-module and end of module reviews

Interactions observed in the course community

Interactions observed in the module piloting MS Teams for discussion activities

# STUDENT FEEDBACK 2019/20

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A real sense of community has been created ... I liked the use of Teams as that made me feel involved and easy to communicate with others.

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The use of MS teams was really useful. It encouraged other interactions with fellow distance leaning students.

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... there was lots of student interactions on the MS teams platform. As a distance learner, I found this interaction encouraging, valuable and made me feel more connected and supported.

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detailed and frequent feedback on Teams throughout the module was extremely helpful. I really appreciate you taking the time to do this.

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I found it hard to use and it was difficult to see posts. Sometimes the end of a discussion might show but not the beginning.

# INCREASED STUDENT:STUDENT INTERACTION AND PEER SUPPORT

[Redacted] (Student) 01/10/2019 19:21 👍 2 ❤️ 1 😊 1  
My anxiety has dropped a lot because of this thread Nice to know I'm not alone studying and working FT! Goodbye social life for one year 😊

[Redacted] (Student) 01/10/2019 20:07 👍 2  
I'm up for helping everyone where I can 🙋 We're all in this together 😊

[Redacted] (Student) 01/10/2019 20:15 👍 2 😊 1  
Likewise. Me too happy to help wherever I can 'No man is an island' and all that jazz 😂.

[Redacted] (Student) 01/10/2019 20:21 Edited 👍 3  
Guys i'm also pleased you are willing to help. i also work full time as a soldier and also trying to do the GDL full time, i sometimes used to think i made the wrong decision

[Redacted] (Student) 02/10/2019 20:09 👍 4 😊 2  
Wowzers!! FT work and FT course... i am FT work and PT course and halfway through the first semester i had to double check i'd not inadvertently signed onto the FT course by mistake! nope... i am definitely on the PT option but as mentioned somewhere earlier it feels FT most of the time Best of luck to all though 😊

"There was none of this support or feeling of belonging to something last semester."

[Redacted] (Student) 20/09/2019, 04:12 Edited 👍 1  
Hello all, Photos of pets are much better than the discussion boards and nice to finally feel like there is a community of us out there rather than just me and my computer! I am in Southampton and live with my husband, our two children 6

[Redacted] (Student) 22/11/2019, 21:33 👍 6  
George thank you for helping us all to know we are not alone. I really appreciated reading all of your thoughts on the studying. The merits of distance learning is no doubt known to us all, and for those of us slightly more mature students(!), it works fabulously with family life and other responsibilities, but it is LONELY! I feel, like there is never enough time in the day and it is becoming my life. (has become already actually)

# INCREASED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

[REDACTED] (Student) 29/11/2019 13:51 👍 1  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45510662>



**Snowden surveillance powers ruled unlawful**  
 The UK's bulk surveillance exposed by the whistleblower are found to be illegal.  
[www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

[REDACTED] (Student) 29/11/2019 14:17  
 I would like to start a very interesting topic. Does the EU law come under the jurisdiction of ECtHR?

[REDACTED] (Student) 29/11/2019 14:27 👍 1 ❤️ 1

Hi Simeon, No, it doesn't because the EU has 28 Member States, whilst the ECHR is part of the Council of Europe which has 47 Member States. They are two completely different legal systems, with different members (albeit there is some crossover, e.g. the UK being part of both). Also, whilst the member states of the EU have to abide by EU law (e.g. s 4(2) European Communities Act 1972), not all rights/protocols have to be abided by under the ECHR - e.g. the UK hasn't signed Protocol 13. as Agata said in her lecture for Unit 7, the ECHR is not directly enforceable; it imposes, but does not oblige, the courts to act in a certain way. Having said that though, the EU and Council of Europe systems are intertwined and much of the ECHR lies behind lots of the general principles of the EU law. That's my take on it anyway!

[See less](#)

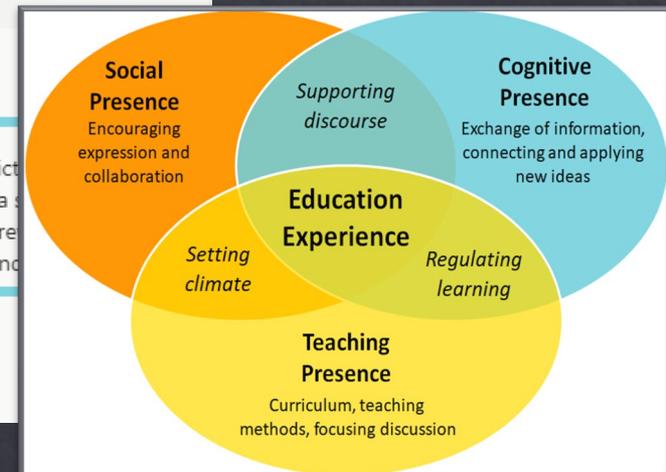
**Fijalkowski, Agata** 29/11/2019 14:34  
 Thank you [REDACTED] 😊

[REDACTED] (Student) 29/11/2019 14:36

Hi James, I found an interesting case which settles that issue to some extent. There is a conflict between ECHR and EU has its own Charter. The European Court of Human Rights has arrived at a decision in a case of *Bosphorus Hava Yollari Turizm v Ireland* (2006) 42 EHRR 1, that the role of the ECJ in relation to human rights protection provided 'equivalent protection' as available under the ECHR and...

[See more](#)

**Fijalkowski, Agata** 29/11/2019 14:40  
 This is a good question for your EU Law module next semester!



# TUTOR FEEDBACK

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I would say it has revolutionised [the course] by bringing together distance learners as a vibrant student body, with its own peculiar energy. The past two cohorts have made connections between themselves, with the course team, and also use the space to think about revision and for many it has made them more confident about their understanding of the subject.

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I feel much more interconnected with students and like we have a fostered a strong community that both staff and students can be a part of if they wish. I hope this can be sustained in the years to come.

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I think the online PGDL community has really flourished this year. The welcome activity, where students (and tutors) were asked to introduce themselves was a great ice breaking tool, which also allowed students to learn more about each other (and they do come from all possible walks of life), as well as for tutors to have a better sense of the student body.

# IMPACTS



Deeper engagement in modules



Fewer non-submissions  
and withdrawals



Higher pass rates, more  
commendations and distinctions



More applications to become  
course reps



Greater participation in  
enrichment activities



Alumni

# CONCLUSION

Takes continued time and effort, but worth it.

Don't skip the planning stage!

Remember you can start small - instructor social presence, welcome activities and opportunities for students to interact

Engagement will change with time of year and from cohort to cohort – don't be disheartened

# REFERENCES

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