# Chapter 10

# "Is There Anybody There?":
## Engaging With Open University Distance Learners

**Helen Clough**
*The Open University, UK*

**Karen Foley**
*The Open University, UK*

## ABSTRACT

*The Open University (UK) Library supports its distance-learning students with interactive, real-time events on social media. In this chapter the authors take a case study approach and concentrate on the examples of Facebook and Livestream to illustrate how live engagement events on social media have helped to build communities of learners in spaces they already occupy, raise the visibility of the library's services and resources with staff and students, and foster collaboration with other departments, while also being effective mechanisms for instruction. The chapter concludes with the library's plans for the future and recommendations for other academic libraries wishing to run live engagement events on social media.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Open University UK (OUUK) is, in terms of student numbers, the largest academic institution in the United Kingdom (UK), and the UK's only university dedicated to distance learning, with 174,000 students, most of whom are studying part-time. The vast majority of undergraduate qualifications have no prerequisite study requirements, which appeals to students who had poor experiences of secondary education, those who were not able to access higher education in early adulthood, or those who have disabilities that prevent them from studying on campus at a brick university (The Open University, 2018a).

The OUUK Library was set up at the same time as the university to support the research and teaching needs of academic staff on campus, with a physical building (shown in Figure 1) and print resources that only students who chose to travel to the campus could access. In addition to the physical library, an online library was launched in 2000. Prior to that time, OUUK students were provided with all of

the content they needed to complete their studies via television and radio broadcasts, videos and DVDs, and printed module material; there was no requirement to search for external content, and therefore no tradition of academic library use.

As a digital institution, the OUUK uses a range of online platforms to connect with students. The virtual learning environment (VLE) is the main way to access module material, and Adobe Connect is used for tutorials. Livestream, a service that allows customers to broadcast live video content through the Internet, is also used, and the OUUK is active on social media in a number of ways. Facebook and Twitter are the most used social media platforms, and in addition to the institutional accounts, some of the faculties and support services – such as the Careers and Employability Service and the Library – have their own accounts. The Library was an early adopter of social media both within the institution and across the UK higher education sector, and has a culture of experimenting with online technologies in order to reach out to students. The main driver for this is to raise the visibility of the Library and offer support and teach library skills to students in the online spaces they occupy, such as Facebook. There is an additional institutional driver of building communities of students in order to combat the isolation of distance learning and improve retention and progression. An added benefit of being innovative in order to raise the visibility of the Library with students is that this also raises the Library's profile across the institution and fosters collaboration with faculties and other professional service departments; indeed, the authors first met each other via working together on a Livestream event! Social media as a mechanism for teaching library skills is evidenced throughout this chapter; and the question about whether or not it is an effective one is identified as an area for potential future research.

The online library has opened up opportunities for embedding online library resources and information literacy skills into the OUUK curriculum. The authors touch on this aspect of the service, but the main focus of this chapter is on how the Library has had to think creatively in order to support and engage with students whose experience of the Library is as a virtual entity (if they are aware of its existence at all). It adopts a case study approach drawn from the OUUK Library's use of Facebook and involvement with the institution's Student Hub Live Livestream events, and addresses the following objectives:

- Reaching out to distance learners in spaces they occupy
- Building communities of learners
- Raising the visibility of the Library's services and resources
- Fostering collaboration with other departments.

## BACKGROUND

### The Open University UK

The Open University UK (OUUK) is the leading expert in flexible higher education (www.open.ac.uk). The university is open to all and has a commitment to widening participation. This means that anyone can study an entry-level module. The student population is diverse: young, mature, full-time, part-time, UK-based and international students choose to study with the OUUK. The university is also the largest provider of higher education for people with disabilities (23,630 students declared a disability in 2016/17). The specific nature of part-time distance learning and the associated barriers were explored by Butcher (2015) and Butcher & Rose-Adams (2015). They found that the flexibility offered by distance

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