

Identity Construction Among Distance Learners at the University of Education, Winneba

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Abstract

University education is not only a pathway to academic achievement but also a vital space for constructing identity. The study examines how students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts English Language program at the University of Education, Winneba, experience a sense of belonging and construct their identities within a distance learning context. While existing literature extensively addresses identity and belonging within conventional university settings, there is a paucity of research in the context of distance education in African higher education. Utilising Wenger's (1998) theory of identity within a Community of Practice, the study adopts a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design. Twenty undergraduate distance learners, five from each year group, were purposively selected. Data were collected over a month, employing semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, which were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that students' experiences of belonging are complex and uneven, influenced by interpersonal relationships and limited institutional inclusion. A significant finding was that a strong sense of belonging among Bachelor of Arts English language distance students was often linked to receiving the same certificate as their on-campus counterparts. Additionally, students constructed multiple identities, including the Articulate and Language-Conscious Identity, the Intelligent Identity, and the Pressured Performer Identity. Another significant identity emerged, the Delegitimised Identity, reflecting students' reactions to societal perceptions and the structural realities of Distance Education. The study concludes by highlighting the necessity for more inclusive and context-sensitive practices in higher education that acknowledge and support identity construction among distance learners.

Keywords: Bachelor of Arts, belonging, distance learners, identity construction, university education

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Introduction

University education serves not only as a means of acquiring academic knowledge but also as a space where students actively construct their identities (MacFarlane, 2018). Through academic engagement, institutional experiences and peer-to-peer interactions, students develop an evolving sense of self. In this context, identity is not fixed; it is constructed through an ongoing negotiation between students and the expectations of their surrounding institutional environment (Ademilokun & Taiwo, 2023; Satardien, 2023).

For students enrolled in English Language programs, these negotiations often occur under the weight of both academic and societal assumptions (Abdelkafi et al., 2024; Khatib & Rezaei, 2013). English Language students are frequently perceived by society and within academic circles as naturally articulate, fluent, grammatically precise, and well-read. While such perceptions can elevate the status of the discipline in certain contexts, they also create expectations that shape students' self-understanding. Some may internalise these assumptions and strive to embody them, while others might struggle against or reject them. In either case, identity is actively constructed in response to both internal and external pressures (MacFarlane, 2018).

The rise of distance education adds further complexity to this process (Ademilokun & Taiwo, 2023; Borzi, 2019). Although it broadens access to university education, it also alters students' experiences. Limited access to physical academic spaces, reduced face-to-face contact with faculty, and fewer informal peer interactions can hinder distance learners' sense of belonging to the university (Krafona, 2014). Feeling included, recognised, and valued within the university community greatly influences how students perceive themselves as learners and as members of the academic world. This study, therefore, utilises Wenger's (1998) theory of identity within a Community of Practice as a foundational framework to highlight how participation, belonging, and legitimacy influence learners' evolving identities in both social and academic contexts. It specifically investigates how students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts in English Language program at the University of Education, Winneba, experience a sense of belonging and construct their identities within a weekend-based distance learning program. Two main research questions guide this study:

- a. **How does studying BA English Language by distance influence students' sense of belonging to the academic community?**
- b. **How do BA English Language students construct their identities during their academic journey?**

The subsequent section of the paper reviews the existing literature on themes of belonging in higher education and identity construction among students, followed by a discussion of the research methods employed, a presentation of findings, and a conclusion.

Literature Review

Student Belonging in Higher Education

Empirical studies have examined how students experience belonging across various higher education contexts, with a focus on how institutional practices facilitate or hinder students' experiences.

Kahu et al. (2022) examined the complexity of student belonging in higher education, concentrating on first-year students at an Australian regional university. The findings revealed that students conceptualised belonging in three interrelated dimensions: familiarity with the university environment, a sense of interpersonal connection, and academic belonging. While all these aspects were significant, academic belonging, characterised by students' perception that their university, program, and courses were the "right fit", proved especially crucial for their perseverance and engagement. The authors concluded that reducing the concept of belonging to mere social relationships fails to capture its impact on student persistence.

In a complementary study, focusing on full-time students, Wabike (2021) investigated students' perceptions of belonging to academic communities. Grounded in the Communities of Practice (CoP) theory, the findings indicated that membership in a learning community had a positive impact on students' learning outcomes. However, the study highlighted that active participation, rather than passive inclusion, was more significantly associated with academic engagement and achievement. Students who engaged regularly in collaborative academic endeavours reported significantly greater advantages to their learning experiences. The study concluded that in learning environments where collaboration and group work are emphasised, fostering a strong sense of community can significantly enhance both academic engagement and performance.

In Lesotho et al. (2023) investigated the sense of belonging experienced by part-time students within a higher education institution. The findings indicated that part-time students were not treated fairly by full-time students and non-academic staff during their time on campus. Additionally, part-time students lacked access to library facilities available to their full-time counterparts. However, they expressed appreciation for the support received from their lecturers. The authors concluded that higher education institutions must enhance student well-being and foster an inclusive environment that allows part-time students to feel accepted and respected.

Focusing on the Ghanaian context, Agyekum et al. (2023) explored how Distance Education (DE) students perceived their sense of community over time and identified barriers that hinder their engagement with the Learning Centre environments at two University of Ghana Learning Centres. The findings revealed a palpable lack of support from familial and institutional sources, which compounded the deficiencies observed within the Learning Centres. These centres were criticised for inadequately reflecting the ethos of distance education, offering limited facilities, restricted access to learning materials, and insufficient informational services. These shortcomings had a negative impact on students' academic and social experiences, leading to a decreased sense of belonging and well-being. The authors concluded that fostering a strong sense of community belonging within distance education spaces is essential to improving the image, effectiveness, and overall student experience of distance learning.

The studies mentioned above demonstrate that both interpersonal relationships and institutional structures shape the sense of belonging in higher education. They reveal that belonging encompasses not only social connectedness but also feelings of academic fit, recognition, and inclusion within institutional spaces. However, much of the existing research has focused primarily on full-time, on-campus students in traditional higher education settings, resulting in a limited understanding of how distance learners, specifically those enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts in English Language program at Ghanaian higher education institutions,

develop a sense of belonging within hybrid academic communities. This study aims to fill that gap.

Identity Construction Among University Students

Empirical studies have examined how University students construct or negotiate their identities within higher education settings.

Abdelkafi et al. (2024) conducted a study on identity construction among EFL students at Moulay Ismail University in Morocco, focusing on how students perceive and construct their identities across different relational learning contexts. The findings highlighted a significant discrepancy between students' private and public selves, revealing that learners often grapple with the tension between their self-perceptions and the identities they feel pressured to present in academic settings. The study concluded that students engage in differential identity displays in response to relational expectations and the identities imposed upon them in the classroom.

Similarly, Alotaibi and Abahussain (2024) investigated the influence of English language learning on students' identities at the College of Education, Majmaah University, in Saudi Arabia. The results indicated that students constructed multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities through their engagement with the English language. An instrumental identity emerged, with students viewing English as a key to employment, financial stability, and academic advancement. Additionally, a resistant identity was noted, characterised by efforts to uphold cultural values and native linguistic affiliations while acquiring English proficiency. The authors concluded that while learning English contributes to the development of students' identities, these identities are actively negotiated in tension with local cultural and societal expectations.

In another context, Mushtaque and Zaki (2018) investigated the language identity of ESL learners whose first language is Urdu (L1) and second language is English (L2) at a public university in Karachi, Pakistan. The findings indicated that students were actively negotiating between two competing language identities: a strong affiliation with Urdu, which is tied to cultural belonging and social communication, and an aspirational identity associated with English, linked to academic success, social mobility, and prestige, reflecting a hybrid identity. The study concluded that the learners' limited awareness of the distinct roles of each language hindered their ability to fully integrate these identities, underscoring the necessity for educational stakeholders to actively and critically support identity development.

In Ghana, Nyamekye et al. (2023) explored how university students at the University of Cape Coast utilised language to construct and express their identities across different social domains. The findings revealed that students employed English and their indigenous languages to signify different facets of their identities depending on the context. English was predominantly used in academic and formal settings and was perceived as a marker of intellectual identity. In contrast, indigenous languages were utilised in domestic and social contexts to affirm ethnic identity and strengthen familial or cultural ties. The study concluded that while students acknowledged the symbolic power of English in academic and public spheres, they did not regard their indigenous languages as pathways to achieving higher social status in these domains.

The reviewed studies collectively affirm that identity construction among university students is a dynamic and negotiated process influenced by institutional environments, language ideologies, and cultural expectations. These studies illustrate that students do not merely

internalise imposed academic identities; rather, they engage in complex acts of positioning and resistance as they navigate the reconciliation of their private selves with public academic expectations. However, a closer examination reveals two notable gaps. First, existing empirical research has predominantly focused on EFL or ESL learners in traditional, full-time university settings, with insufficient attention to how identity construction occurs in distance learning contexts. Also, while some studies have explored the role of language in shaping academic identity, few have investigated how students' perceptions of being English language students shape identity formation, particularly within African higher education contexts. This study aims to address these gaps by examining how BA English Language students enrolled in a distance education program at the University of Education, Winneba, construct their identities.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Wenger's (1998) theory of identity, which is situated within the broader framework of Communities of Practice. Wenger conceptualises identity as a socially constructed and evolving process that emerges from participation in shared practices and interactions with others within a particular community. Rather than perceiving identity as a fixed trait, the theory reframes it as something that is continuously shaped through the negotiation of experiences and membership.

The theory presents five key tenets. Firstly, identity is viewed as a negotiated experience, implying that individuals define themselves through their participation and by how others perceive them. Secondly, the concept of identity as community membership underscores the significance of belonging in shaping one's self-concept within a learning or social group. Thirdly, identity as a learning trajectory emphasises that identity evolves, influenced by one's progress through different stages of engagement and development. Fourthly, identity as a nexus of multimembership acknowledges that individuals belong to multiple communities and must integrate these overlapping roles. Lastly, identity is understood as a relationship between local and global contexts, considering how individuals position themselves within local practices while also responding to broader global discourses and institutional expectations.

Wenger's (1998) theory of identity informed the analysis of this study. During the data coding and interpretation process, key concepts such as participation, belonging, negotiation of meaning, and legitimacy within the academic community were carefully considered. This theory holds particular relevance in the context of distance education, where learners interact through occasional face-to-face sessions alongside mediated communication, thereby forming a hybrid learning community that integrates both physical and virtual participation. However, Wenger's traditional focus on sustained physical co-presence poses certain limitations when applied to distance learning settings, where interactions are often intermittent and partially digital. Consequently, this study seeks to build on Wenger's ideas by illustrating how identity construction and a sense of belonging can emerge within these hybrid and spatially dispersed learning environments.

Research Methods

This study utilised a qualitative approach, employing ethnography as its research design. The participants included twenty (20) undergraduate distance learners enrolled at the Kumasi Study Centre of the University of Education, Winneba. Participants were selected through purposive sampling according to specific criteria: they needed to be enrolled in the BA English Language

program at the University of Education, Winneba, actively engaged during the 2024/2025 academic year, and willing to participate and share their experiences. Efforts were also made to include both male and female students to capture a diverse range of perspectives. To ensure representation across academic levels, five (5) students were chosen from each level, 100 to 400. Three data collection instruments were utilised: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Given the limited time that distance students spend on campus, permission was sought from the Centre Manager to collect data for a month. Each academic level was interviewed on a separate weekend to minimise disruptions to their academic activities. Reflexivity was crucial in the research process. The researcher acknowledged how his academic background and disciplinary perspective could impact data interpretation. Although familiar with the subject matter, he did not share the experiences of the participants, positioning himself as a partial outsider. Through self-reflection, the researcher interrogated his assumptions, minimised bias, and ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' voices. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. A narrative-logic approach was adopted in presenting the findings, allowing the researcher to weave together participant voices and emerging themes in a coherent and meaningful way. This approach facilitated smooth transitions between examples and fostered deeper engagement with the participants' lived experiences.

Findings and Discussion

This section of the study answers the main research questions posed.

How does studying BA English Language by distance influence students' sense of belonging to the academic community?

A sense of belonging in higher education is widely acknowledged as essential for student engagement and persistence. However, for students pursuing their degrees through distance learning, this sense of belonging is often negotiated under different circumstances due to limited access to campus life, institutional resources, and sustained face-to-face interaction. Findings indicate that B.A. English Language distance learners construct their sense of belonging in diverse and often uneven ways. Two central themes emerged from the data: interpersonal relationships and restricted institutional inclusion. The following excerpts illustrate these themes:

Excerpt 1

Some lecturers are easy to reach and are active on WhatsApp. I can easily send them a message when I am confused, and they respond. That helps me feel belonging. (L1S2)

Excerpt 2

I feel a part of the university because of the study groups I have joined, where we meet and study together, especially when we are preparing for exams.

(L4S1)

Excerpt 3

Meeting lecturers and classmates in person makes me feel more involved.

(L1S2)

The excerpts demonstrate interpersonal relationships which emerge in two distinct yet interconnected ways: relationships with lecturers and relationships with fellow students. Notably, both forms of connections are primarily built and maintained outside the formal structures of the institution. Students consistently emphasised that their sense of belonging was not significantly fostered by the university system itself, but rather by the personal qualities of individual lecturers, including their empathy, accessibility, and willingness to support students. Although these interactions were often limited in duration and frequency, they provide key moments of validation, helping students feel acknowledged and included academically. This finding corroborates the observations made by Letseka-Manka et al. (2023), indicating that students in distance education (DE) generally appreciate the support they receive from their lecturers. Similarly, the bonds formed among peers through study groups and face-to-face weekend sessions contribute to a sense of mutual support and shared experience. This finding is also consistent with Kahu et al's (2022) study, which posits that DE students cultivate a sense of belonging through their interpersonal relationships with peers. Thus, these connections between lecturers and students, as well as among students, serve as compensatory mechanisms that foster a sense of academic belonging, even when strong institutional engagement is lacking.

Another theme that emerged is limited institutional inclusion, reflecting students' perceptions of being peripheral or excluded from the university's formal systems. This feeling of exclusion was not solely attributable to the nature of distance learning, but rather to how distance learners were situated within the university's broader systems. Students expressed concerns about a lack of representation in decision-making, weak structures for student leadership, and limited avenues for providing feedback, all of which undermined their sense of legitimacy within the academic community. This aligns with the findings of Letseka-Manka et al. (2023), who found that part-time students do not receive equitable treatment during their time on campus.

Excerpt 4

I don't feel a sense of belonging because the respect given to regular students is not the same as ours, in terms of being heard for our grievances.

(L2S1)

Excerpt 5

I do not feel like a full member of the university community because I feel some decisions are made without the consent of students. Again, I feel that our voices are not heard, and therefore, I think we, the distance students, are often disregarded as university students.

(L3S4)

Excerpt 6

The challenge that makes me a bit distant from the academic community is the time allocation for lectures and the absence of a vibrant forefront student leadership that addresses our issues as students.

(L3S2)

A notable finding emerged from the data. For some distance learners, their sense of belonging is closely linked to the assurance of receiving the same certificate as regular students. Rather than feeling connected through campus life, institutional engagement, or peer interaction, these students associate academic legitimacy and inclusion primarily with the attainment of a final

qualification. This suggests a more pragmatic approach to belonging, where what matters most is recognition through certification, rather than active engagement in the university community.

Excerpt 7

I feel a sense of belonging because I will be awarded the same certificate as others in the regular program. That's what matters.

(L2S1)

Excerpt 8

Distance education does not bother me; I take the same exams as regular students. I will receive the same certificate in the end. What more belonging do I need?

(L4S4)

How do BA English Language distance students construct their identities during their academic journey?

The construction of identity in higher education is an evolving process shaped by students' experiences, interactions, and self-perceptions (Nyamekye, Anani, & Kuttin, 2023). For distance learners in the BA English Language program, this process is mostly influenced by academic and societal expectations. Guided by Wenger's (1998) theory of identity within a Community of Practice, the data reveal three core identities that distance students construct: the Articulate and Language-Conscious Identity, Intelligent Identity and Pressured Performer Identity. These identities are illustrated through excerpts from the data.

Excerpt 9

I take greater care in how I express myself, both in speech and writing.

(L3S3)

Excerpt 10

I have become more conscious of the language, and I give it all the needed attention, especially when it comes to the way I speak and write the language.

(L1S1)

Excerpt 11

People expect me to speak very well or always write perfect English. I try my best, but ...

(L2S2)

The excerpts from the data highlight a significant identity constructed by BA English Language students: an articulate and language-conscious identity. This identity is grounded in the students' heightened awareness of their language use and the belief that, as English majors, they are expected to demonstrate fluency, precision, and correctness in both speech and writing. Their conscious efforts to speak and write "correctly" arise not only from personal development but also from an increasing sense of belonging to an academic community. Through this association, they internalise the responsibility of representing this community effectively,

positioning themselves as credible and competent users of the English language. However, this identity is not solely shaped within academic spaces; it is also influenced by the diverse social environments that distance students navigate. In these contexts, being an English Language student carries specific assumptions, and there is often an expectation for them to consistently communicate articulately. This identity aligns with what Wenger (1998) describes as identity shaped by negotiated experience, community membership, and identity as a nexus of multiple memberships.

English Language distance learners also construct an Intelligent Identity. This identity emerges as students respond to external perceptions of their academic program and how these perceptions influence their sense of self. For many students, the prevailing notion that studying English is particularly challenging fosters a self-concept characterised by intelligence and academic respect. As noted by a third-year student:

Excerpt 12

People see the English Language as a difficult subject; so, they see me as an intelligent person to read English. (L3S1)

The belief that English language students possess a higher level of academic capability is also reinforced by peers and social circles. One student remarked:

Excerpt 13

Some friends say I am well-read if I am studying English. (L2S2)

Another added,

Excerpt 14

It is funny sometimes when they pick words somewhere and bring them to me to explain. They say I am doing English, so I should know all the words.

(L4S3)

These excerpts demonstrate how identity is shaped through what Wenger (1998) refers to as identity as negotiated experience. When others regard B.A. English language students as intelligent, they begin to internalise these perceptions and, at times, actively embody them. This supports Nyamekye et al.'s (2023) assertion that English is predominantly viewed as a marker of intellectual identity. Moreover, although these distance students do not participate in daily academic interactions on campus, their occasional attendance at weekend face-to-face sessions allows them to be part of a loosely defined academic community. Beyond formal academic environments, they are also symbolically positioned as members of an imagined community of intellectual "experts." Their field of study, English Language, serves as a social marker of competence, leading others to treat them as authorities in language use.

An additional identity that emerges from the data is the Pressured Performer Identity. This identity is influenced by both external expectations imposed on students and their internalised pressure to meet those standards. BA English Language distance students express a continuous need to perform, particularly in their speaking and writing, due to being perceived as language experts. A second-year student noted:

Excerpt 15

People expect me to speak fluently or always write perfect English. I try my best, but I know learning is a process. Honestly, it gives me pressure.

(L2S2)

Excerpt 16

I feel pressured to speak and write English correctly to the expectations of the people around me. There are times when I am forced to change my accent to speak like a British.

(L2S5)

The excerpts demonstrate that students do not passively accept labels; rather, they actively negotiate their identities in response to how others perceive them. The pressure to meet these expectations shapes not only how students present themselves but also how they navigate their academic and personal lives. This supports the assertion made by Abdelkafi et al. (2024) that a discrepancy exists between students' private and public selves, highlighting the struggle that distance learners face as they contend with the tension between their self-perceptions and the identities they feel compelled to construct. Furthermore, the expectation for DE students to speak with a certain "accent" illustrates how global ideologies regarding language, particularly the prestige associated with native-speaker norms, permeate local expectations. This aligns with Alotaibi and Abahussain's (2024) study, which suggests that the identities of English language students are actively negotiated amid tensions with societal norms. This further reinforces Wenger's (1998) argument that identity is constructed not only through direct participation in communities but also by the influence of broader discourses.

Another notable finding is a Delegitimised Identity. While English Language students are generally perceived as intelligent and articulate, many of their experiences tell a different story. For these DE students, their choice of study often encounters scepticism or indifference. Their academic pursuits are frequently questioned, and their programs are viewed as lacking value. As a result, they feel compelled to defend the relevance of their studies and validate their legitimacy as students.

Excerpt 17

Some close friends are of the view that I am wasting time and money because they think the English Language does not have opportunities in the job market.

(L2S1)

Excerpt 18

The question people ask me often is What am I going to use the English Language for? I am spending a lot of money to study English at the tertiary level, so people do not see the need for me to have pursued English.

(L1S1)

The findings collectively highlight how distance learners develop their sense of belonging and construct their identities. However, it is important to note that the study did not differentiate experiences based on gender or socioeconomic status. The data did not reveal any consistent differences in identity pressures associated with these factors.

Conclusion

This study investigated how distance learners in the BA English Language program at the University of Education, Winneba (Kumasi Study Centre), experience a sense of belonging and construct their identities within the academic community. The findings suggest that experiences of belonging are inconsistent, influenced by interpersonal relationships, and limited by institutional exclusion. Notably, the study found that some students' sense of belonging is strengthened by the assurance of receiving the same certificate as their on-campus peers. The study identified multiple identities, including the Articulate and Language-Conscious Identity, the Intelligent Identity, and the Pressured Performer Identity. Additionally, a new identity emerged: the Delegitimised Identity. These findings expand the theoretical applications of Wenger's (1998) theory of identity within communities of practice by grounding it in the realities of distance education. They also emphasise the need for universities to adopt more inclusive practices that acknowledge and support the construction of identity among non-traditional students. Specifically, the study contributes to our understanding by demonstrating that distance learners actively negotiate their legitimacy and self-worth within academic communities. This reveals identity formation as a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent process, rather than merely a deficit or detached experience. Future research should examine how identity construction among distance learners can inform more responsive educational policies and pedagogical approaches that foster inclusion, belonging, and success across diverse academic disciplines and learning environments.

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AI Statement

This document has been enhanced through the use of Grammarly which was employed to refine its linguistic style and correct grammar and spelling. While the incorporation of these technologies may introduce some AI-generated linguistic patterns, it is important to note that the core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusions presented are entirely the work of the author.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

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Appendices

Appendix A

Identity Construction and Academic Belonging among Distance Learners

Section A: Background Information

1. What year are you in the BA English Language program?
2. Why did you choose the distance education mode?

1.1.1 Section B: Belonging to the Academic Community

3. Do you feel like a full member of the university's academic community? Why or why not?
4. How connected do you feel to your lecturers?
5. How connected do you feel to your fellow students?
6. Do the weekend face-to-face sessions help you feel more included or still distant?
7. Are there any challenges that make it hard for you to feel part of the academic community?
8. What (if anything) helps you feel more connected or involved?

1.2 Section C: Identity Construction

9. How would you describe yourself now as an English Language student?
10. Has studying the English Language **through distance learning** shaped how you see yourself? If yes, how?
11. Do you feel different from students who attend full-time (regular) classes? In what ways?
12. How do other people (friends, family, co-workers) view you because you're studying the English Language, and because you're doing it by distance?
13. Do you feel any pressure to meet certain expectations (e.g. speaking or writing perfectly) because of your course?
14. What does it mean to *you* to be an English Language student, especially as a distance learner?
15. How has your identity or self-perception changed as you've moved from one level to the next in the program?
16. How has your identity or self-perception changed as you've moved from one semester to the next in the program?