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**The connection between experience and learning:  
Student perspectives on the significance of international study**

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## Abstract

Life-experience learning is a key part of adult learning as there is potential in every experience for personal growth. Learning, however, is not an automatic result of experience. The learner needs to interpret their experiences to facilitate change to their sense of self and/or capabilities. A significant learning experience impacts a person in ways that have personal value, through a meaning-making process where the person makes sense of their experiences using their unique frame of reference. This kind of learning involves the learner assigning meaning to their experiences to determine what was significant, how the experience has changed them, and why those changes matter.

This research explores the connection between experience and learning, through the construct of significance and the meaning-making process of understanding and articulating the significance of life experiences. The two dimensions of the construct of significance – personal impact and subjective value – explain *how* an experience is significant (because it has an impact on the learner) and *why* an experience is significant (because it is subjectively valued). International study was selected as the vehicle for this investigation as, outside of the formal academic component, there are endless opportunities for significant learning from living and studying in another country. There are, however, concerns in the international study community about what students are learning from study abroad and how learning is recognised and measured. There are calls to take seriously student claims that their international study experiences were valuable, and find better ways to understand what students are trying to say about those experiences.

Drawing on a constructivist research paradigm, this research uses a qualitative descriptive case study to explore the relationship between experience and significant learning in the context of international study. The single case study with embedded units design provided the researcher with 14 instances where the significance of the international study experience was described. The 14 returned study abroad students who participated in this study undertook meaning-making work to first identify the significant elements of their experience using a mind map. The participants then reflected on how and why those elements were significant. A framework that synthesises scholarly literature on meaning-making and significant learning was used to inform the students' reflections and analyse the findings to create a picture of what, how and why international study was significant to the participants.

This research found that students identified the 'ordinary' experiences of living away, studying and learning, and travelling as personally significant. These everyday experiences occurred in

extraordinary and uncomfortable circumstances, where the students could explore liminal spaces and transition to independence in a dynamic and unbounded environment. This learning environment facilitated the kinds of personal impact that the students described. They articulated that impact as realisations about self, others and the world that framed the extension of their personal capabilities and enhancement of their self-efficacy. They described why they valued their experiences and the perceived impact, using their unique frame of reference in their meaning-making work.

This study contributes to ongoing work to theorise how adults learn, using the construct of significance to bridge the gap between life experience and learning. The research provides insight into the construct, revealing that learning that changes us (i.e. has personal impact) changes our identity and our perceptions of our personal capabilities. The research reveals the influence of the learner's frame of reference on all stages of meaning-making, and how social and contextual factors underpin the learning process.

A key outcome of this study is a meaning-making protocol which consists of a framework, a mind map, and set of reflective prompt questions for supporting learners to understand and articulate the significance of experiences outside of formal learning environments. This innovative inquiry protocol has the potential to transform how universities support students to making meaning of, and recognise the impact of, their study abroad experiences. It has wider implications for how to appreciate the value of study abroad and other informal learning experiences that happen outside of classroom contexts and how to measure that value.

Application of the inquiry protocol to the study abroad experience revealed new insight into the significance of the experience to participants. The study showed that students experienced a changed sense of self and a broadened perspective on people and the world. This thesis argues that for young adults who are exploring their identities and their place in society, this learning is profound. It further argues the need to acknowledge participant claims that their study abroad experiences had an impact on their personal growth and continue to explore ways to recognise, value, and measure this growth.

## **Declaration by author**

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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### **Publications included in this thesis**

No publications included.

### **Submitted manuscripts included in this thesis**

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### **Other publications during candidature**

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### **Contributions by others to the thesis**

No contributions by others.

### **Statement of parts of the thesis submitted to qualify for the award of another degree**

No works submitted towards another degree have been included in this thesis.

### **Research involving human or animal subjects**

This study was approved by the University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee A, approval number 2017000586.

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## List of abbreviations used in the thesis

ELT	Experiential learning theory
IEAA	International Education Association of Australia
IDI	Intercultural development inventory
MPQ	Multicultural Personality Questionnaire
RQ	Research question
UQ	The University of Queensland

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Research background and problem statement

Adult learning is a lifelong practice that continues even when compulsory formal education is completed. Indeed, there are endless opportunities for learning to be found in life itself (Merriam & Clark 1993). In this study, life-experience learning is understood as being informal and unstructured, resulting from the natural opportunities for learning from everyday life (Conlon 2004), including learning that is incidental or unintentional, or a side effect of another activity (Marsick & Watkins 2018). Learning outside of formal educational is often serendipitous but always occurs when a person interacts with their environment and with others (Conlon 2004; Marsick & Watkins 2018). The connection between life experience and learning is complex (Merriam & Clark 1993). This connection has its roots in the theory of experiential learning (Kolb 1984; 2015). This theory proposes that “experience is the foundation of, and the stimulus for learning” (Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993, p. 8) but that learning only results if the experience is interpreted by the learner. The interpretation process is one of meaning-making, so that the experience ‘makes sense’ to the learner and its personal value is recognised (Merriam & Heuer 1996; Mezirow 2000; Park 2010). This process leads to new understandings of self and the world and results in a “changed or more experienced person” (Jarvis 2006, p. 13).

The research presented in this thesis investigates learning experiences that create change or growth in an individual that happen outside of a formal curriculum. These learning experiences have the potential to be significant as they can make a “difference in the behaviour, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner” (Rogers 1983, p. 20). Significant learning experiences personally affect the individual and are valued by the individual from within their frame of reference (Merriam & Clark 1993). Understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience for personal growth is a meaning-making process that involves assigning meaning to an experience and considering how the experience has changed the learner in ways that are of personal value.

Life-experience learning is a crucial part of students’ growth in the higher education (HE) context. University students are exposed to formal learning through their program of study. Curriculum-based activities that occur outside of the classroom, such as internships, field trips, and practicum and clinical placements, are purposefully designed to facilitate the development of personal and professional capabilities and meet professional accreditation requirements. These experiences are structured around a set of learning outcomes and assessment of those outcomes.

Students also often engage in a range of informal activities outside of the classroom that have learning potential (Dacre Pool & Sewell 2007; Dacre Pool 2017). These may include university-associated activities (e.g. mentoring and leadership programs) and personal, life experiences (e.g. playing sport). Informal activities and life experiences are valuable, as they often present students with complexity, challenge, and the risk of failure (Curran 2007). These types of opportunities provide a rich environment for students to enhance personal capabilities and shape their self-identity and worldview while also learning from their mistakes.

In contrast to classroom and work-integrated learning opportunities, informal activities and life experiences are unstructured and usually have no curriculum to guide the learning process (Walsh, 2014). The literature acknowledges this as a challenge (Montrose 2002; Strange & Gibson 2017), where the difficulty lies in students understanding what they have gained from an unstructured experience, how this learning contributes to their personal growth, and even what ‘counts’ as learning. Learning from life experiences is central to adult development (Merriam & Clark 1993), particularly where learning is significant and creates change in the individual. It is vital that students can interpret the significance of their experiences as part of the process of learning for personal growth. These challenges create a solid platform for the study reported in this thesis, which examines the significance of life experiences, using international study as a vehicle for the investigation.

### **1.1.1 The researcher’s positionality statement**

This research emerged out of the researcher’s history as a learning professional in curriculum and learning design in formal learning settings. It stemmed from a desire to explore a different type of learning context, that of unstructured, out-of-classroom experiences. At the inception of the project, the researcher was working on an employability project at an Australian higher education institution, investigating how to help students to make the connection between extra-curricular experiences and personal and professional growth. As part of this work, the researcher conducted workshops with returned study abroad students to unpack their experiences. These workshops revealed to the researcher that students often had difficulty understanding what they had gained from their experiences and how those gains translated into employability learning. This practice finding is echoed in the literature (Forsy, Broomhall & Davis 2012; Wong 2015). (See Chapter 3.)

As an experiential learning advocate and constructivist scholar, the researcher perceives learning as an experience and a journey, where the ultimate goal is change in the way the learner views themselves, their capabilities, and their perspective on the world and others (Jarvis 2006; Merriam &

Clark 1993). The researcher has always approached their curriculum and learning design work in higher education as if learning is a growth journey. This perspective underpinned the researcher's motivations to explore the process of making meaning from life experiences to understand and articulate the connection between such experiences and learning. The researcher hoped to make a contribution to the field of adult learning and study abroad (and international education more broadly), and to the practice of supporting students to learn from extra-curricular activities. The goal was to inform transformation of the ways universities help students to make meaning of, and understand the impact of, a range of extra-curricular experiences. The inquiry protocol that was developed for this research is a key part of that contribution.

## **1.2 Research context**

International study in the higher education context is an exemplar life experience used in this research as a mechanism for examining the significance of life experiences. International study may be considered a life experience as, outside of the formal academic component, there are endless opportunities for significant learning from living and studying in another country. Indeed, international study has long been characterised by its transformative, life-changing possibilities (Perry, Stoner & Tarrant 2012). An overseas study experience is increasingly becoming a “rite of passage” for many tertiary students (Curran 2007, p. 48). It is acknowledged as a “major life event” for students who are entering adulthood and formulating their identities in a dynamic and diverse environment (Zimmerman & Neyer 2013, p. 515). International study experiences are particularly valued by employers because of the opportunities for graduates to create global networks and develop language skills and intercultural competence (Curran 2007; Crossman & Clarke 2010; Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012).

Over the past forty years there have been a plethora of studies documenting outcomes and impacts of international study on participants, in terms of personal, academic, social, intercultural and career development (Potts 2016). Participation rates in study abroad programs have been increasing and generally students give positive feedback about their experiences, thus providing proxy measures of outcomes. There are still some concerns, however, over what students are learning and how their learning could be supported (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012). One reason for the quandary over what students learn from international study is that researchers often face surface-level responses, such as ‘it was great’, when they ask participants what they learned from their experiences (Wong 2015). There are also concerns in the literature around assessing international study outcomes, where the

transformative value of the experience is not always evidenced by pre- and post-program instruments designed to measure student growth (Wong 2015). The extant research that questions what students learn from international study supported the researcher's decision to select the experience as the vehicle for examining the significance of life experiences.

This study acknowledges the challenges students may face as they attempt to determine the significance of a life experience like international study. An Australian study found that students had difficulty specifying what they had learned from their study abroad, even when the researchers "questioned more closely" (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012, p. 135). The researchers in that study call for further investigation into how to support students to extract deeper meanings from their international study experiences (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012). This is important for such a complex and multi-dimensional experience as international study. Participants study overseas for an extended period, where they encounter many new situations in different environments (and sometimes in new languages), away from support networks, at a time in their lives when they are experiencing fundamental age-related transitions (Zimmerman & Neyer 2013). There is enormous potential for all kinds of personal growth to occur during this period, but it may be difficult for students to interpret such a broad and multi-faceted experience.

This study also recognises that, although students are often inarticulate about the details of their learning, it is reasonable to assume that it must mean *something* when they talk about their international study experiences having *changed* them (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou; Wong 2015). This idea of change, and how it may be constructed from the international study experience, provides the rationale for this research. The study investigates what students are saying about their experiences (Wong 2015) in terms of the personal significance of those experiences, or how their experiences have changed them. This study also probes the *ways in which* the significance of a life experience can be understood and articulated by the learner, to gain further insight into how adults translate life experiences into learning.

Universities continue to promote international study as a high-value educational experience, and it is critical that research enables a better understanding of students' educative gains from this costly practice. This increased understanding should help to "move beyond generic rhetoric to a greater level of engagement with the students, encouraging them to articulate a deeper understanding of the experiences" (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012, p. 136). It is vital that students can make sense of their life experiences to understand how they have grown as part of learning in adulthood.

International study is an appropriate vehicle for this research given its importance to universities and to participants. The findings may be applicable to any experience outside of formal learning structures. The framework used in the study sets out a process to making meaning of, and understanding the impact of, experiences and the reflective prompt questions allow learners to unpack those experiences.

## **1.3 Terminology clarification**

### **The construct of significance:**

The study explores the notion of significance in the context of learning from life experiences. Significance is understood as a construct that has an underlying structure with two dimensions. These dimensions are referred to as personal impact and subjective value (Merriam & Clark 1993). The dimensions explain *how* an experience is significant (because it has an impact on the learner) and *why* an experience is significant (because it is subjectively valued).

### **Significant learning:**

Significant learning (Rogers 1951) is understood as learning that changes or affects the learner in ways that are personally valued, resulting in a strengthened or enhanced sense of self.

### **Understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience:**

For a life experience to be significant (i.e. be interpreted as significant learning to facilitate personal growth), the learner needs to assign meaning to that experience. This involves the learner making sense of their experiences to understand how and why they have been personally impacted. For learners to move beyond a superficial understanding of the value of informal experiences, it means building their capacity to articulate the multi-dimensional impact of an experience on their learning.

### **International study:**

Where reference is made to international study, this relates to a period of one to two semesters of university study in an overseas institution, for transfer of academic credit. This type of experience is also referred to as study abroad.

## 1.4 Aims of the research

The primary aim of this research is to contribute to adult learning discourses by investigating the significance of life experiences. This research explores the connection between experience and learning, through the construct of significance and meaning-making for (significant) learning.

Merriam and Clark (1993) examined the adult learning experiences that were significant to their research participants. They proposed that significant experiences have an impact on the learner and that impact is of some worth to the learner based on their own frame of reference. This research investigates Merriam and Clark's theory on the significance of life experiences by applying it to an exemplar experience – international study. The aim of this investigation is to describe what significant learning and the construct of significance look like in practice. The investigation also aims to explore an approach to conceptualising life-experience learning through the lens of significance to enhance understanding of the connection between an experience and learning that leads to personal growth. Grounding the investigation in the context of international study provides an opportunity to reveal insight into the significance of that experience.

This research examines how participants understand and articulate the significance of their international study experiences using three inquiry questions:

1. What is significant about international study to participants?
2. How are these things significant?
3. Why are these things significant?

The first research question (RQ1) investigates the elements of the overall experience of international study that have personal meaning to the participants. This question provides an anchor for the participants' reflections on how and why international study is significant, given the length and complexity of the experience. The question also explores the meaning the participants assign to their international study experiences to render them coherent. The second research question (RQ2) examines how those meaningful experiences are significant, to explore the significance dimension of personal impact. The third research question (RQ3) investigates why those experiences are significant to participants to examine the significance dimension of subjective value. The research questions chart the meaning-making process of understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience. For the participants to describe what, how and why their international study experiences were significant (i.e. significant learning from their experiences), they will undertake that meaning-making process.

## **1.5 Significance of the study and expected outcomes**

Building the capacity to understand and articulate the significance of life experiences is crucial to ongoing growth throughout adulthood (Merriam & Heuer 1996). Adult learning is complex, and no single theory exists to comprehensively explain it (Merriam 2017). The expected outcome of this research is new way of exploring life experience learning and understanding of the value of unstructured learning experiences that occur outside of formal settings. This research considers how and why a given life experience has impacted an individual and how individuals make meaning from an experience to understand that impact.

There is concern in the literature about what students gain from international study (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012). This research aims to contribute to the field of international study by finding deeper meanings beyond surface-level understandings of participants' experiences, to address published concerns over the educative value of the experience. It also aims to uncover what matters to participants in terms of the contribution of the experience to their personal growth.

A key outcome of this research is the development of a meaning-making inquiry protocol that consists of a framework, a diagnostic mind map tool, and a set of reflective prompt questions. The framework sets out a meaning-making process for interpreting the significance of a life experience. The mind map and prompt questions offer a means of undertaking that meaning-making process to make sense of experiences and understand their impact. Application of the inquiry protocol to international study demonstrates how it can be used to support students to construct meaning from such a multi-dimensional experience and to recognise and measure learning from study abroad. The dual function of the protocol, as both a tool for analysing the study's data and an outcome of the research itself, has wider implications for research and practice into understanding, articulating, and recognising the value of learning from out-of-classroom experiences.

## **1.6 Thesis overview**

This thesis is divided into eight chapters:

**Chapter 1** (this chapter) provides an overview of the research background and problem statement that form the foundation and rationale for the study. Chapter 1 also outlines the research aims and the significance of the study. Terms used in the thesis are explained and an overview is given of the thesis chapters.



**Chapter 2** locates the research in the broader context of adult learning, discussing the evolution of adult learning theory. The chapter examines experiential learning theory as key theoretical basis for the study. The main focus of the chapter is the discussion of the development of the study's framework, through an exploration of the key theories that inform it. The framework is based on Peter Jarvis's (2006) concept of learning and Merriam and Clark's (1993) study on significant learning. As the study adopts a constructivist approach, theories of meaning-making for learning also underpin the framework, acknowledging the role of socio-contextual influences on learning.

**Chapter 3** discusses the context for the case, international study, and provides the rationale for selecting international study for the investigation into the significance of life experiences. The chapter explores questions in the literature around the educative value of international study and the challenges that participants often face in articulating what they have learned from their experiences.

**Chapter 4** describes the research paradigm that frames the study and explains the use of case study methodology in this study. It also discusses the data collection and analysis methods used in the research process, including a description of the data collection instrument that was developed based on the framework. The chapter also outlines the pilot study that was undertaken to test the data collection instrument.

**Chapter 5** presents the findings of the research on the significance of life experiences, in the context of international study, by exploring what was significant about the experience to the 14 participants, and how and why those things were significant. The findings are presented as individual descriptions of the meanings the participants assigned to aspects of their experiences by placing them on their mind maps and reflecting on the personal impact and value of those experiences.

**Chapter 6** provides a comparative analysis of the meanings made by the 14 participants on the significance of their international study experiences. The chapter provides a thematic picture of what, how and why those experiences were significant. It examines the participants' meaning-making work using the study's framework underpinned by the key dimensions of the construct of significance - personal impact and subjective value. The chapter also investigates the influence of the learner's meaning-making lens on what is experienced and the significance of those experiences.

**Chapter 7** discusses the research findings in light of the scholarly literature that frames the study. It discusses the findings in terms of theoretical understandings of the construct of significance and

theories of meaning-making for learning. This discussion presents the implications of the study for insight into how to understand and articulate the significance of life experiences. The chapter also discusses the implications of the findings for the international study community.

**Chapter 8** provides an overview of the research and its significance to both the field of international study and to theory around meaning-making for (significant) learning. The chapter also explains the research limitations and possibilities for future research endeavours, and provides the researcher's concluding thoughts.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the literature**

### **2.1 Introduction to the chapter**

The first chapter introduced the research problem of learning from life experiences through meaning-making and explained the methodological approach to addressing that problem. The chapter also provided the rationale for examining the problem in the context of international study. Chapter 2 provides the context and overarching framework for the study by reviewing selected scholarly literature that underpins how adults learn from life experiences. Starting with the broad theory of experiential learning, the researcher explored the idea of learning that leads to personal growth. This led to examination of the literature on *significant* learning and the process of making meaning from an experience to understand and articulate its personal significance. The first section explores the overarching theoretical context for the study. Then the chapter reviews the key theorists whose ideas informed the development of the study's framework. Given the range and variation in theories that conceptualise adult learning, an explanation of the approach adopted in this study is needed to frame the perspective from which the research problem was investigated and analysed.

### **Section 1: Theoretical context**

#### **2.2 A brief history of (adult) learning theory**

Learning is integral to human behaviour (Merriam & Clark 1993). Learning is motivation for life itself, otherwise “the human body could never transcend its biological state, nor could the individual function effectively in the wider society” (Jarvis 2006, p. 3). In most contemporary societies, formal, compulsory education shapes early childhood through to late adolescence, with learning beyond this stage considered to be life-long, to ensure continual evolution of capabilities and personal identity (Illeris 2018b). At its core, learning is more than simply *what* is learned; it is a process of *becoming* as a consequence of doing, thinking and feeling (Jarvis 2006). This means that learning is more than acquiring knowledge and skills; it is the ongoing formation of the whole person and their sense of self (Jarvis 2006). Human learning, however, is a hugely complex phenomenon and it has been argued that it is impossible to develop a comprehensive theory that explains every aspect of it (Jarvis 2006).

While acknowledging the complexity of human learning, there is a long tradition of scholarly endeavours around the development and advancement of learning theories. The role of both brain and body in learning is the fundamental issue that learning theory attempts to address (Illeris 2018a).

Modern learning theories may be broadly categorised as behaviourist, cognitive, humanist and social (Jarvis 2010). Four schools of thought from within these traditions shaped early twentieth century understandings of learning: (i) German Gestalt psychology approaches to learning as problem-solving; (ii) American behaviourism that favoured simple learning processes and mechanical understanding; (iii) Lev Vygotsky's work from the Russian activity-theoretical approach, on the capacity for learning using higher mental functions; and (iv) constructivist theory, led by Jean Piaget, which conceptualises learning as a reconstruction of the individual's mental schemes (Illeris 2018a). Both Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1966) come from the constructivist tradition, where learning is seen as the construction of meaning through experience, influenced by the learner's prior knowledge and previous experiences. Vygotsky (1978) is associated with social constructivism, which posits that meaning is constructed through a person's interactions with society. Piaget (1966) takes a developmental approach to constructivism, proposing that learning is related to the person's cognitive stage of development. Also in the constructivist tradition, philosopher and educator, John Dewey, influenced twentieth century thinking in the field, around the role of experience in learning (Merriam & Bierema 2013). Constructivist thought forms the basis of modern experiential learning theory (Fenwick 2000) and provides the theoretical foundation for this study.

The post-war years saw changes in understandings of learning through a shift away from behaviourism to developments in humanistic psychology and cognitive science (Illeris 2018a). The humanistic perspective on learning focusses on personal growth instead of mechanistic behaviour changes (Merriam 2017). It is premised on the notion that all individuals have the potential for growth and that they are free to make their own choices and determine their own behaviour (Merriam & Bierema 2013). From within the humanistic psychology tradition, American psychologist, Carl Rogers (1951), first used the term 'significant learning' to link learning to personal growth and the pursuit of a fully functioning individual (Merriam & Bierema 2013). It is these ideas that form the basis of this study.

From the 1970s onwards, there were further changes in the way that learning was understood (Illeris 2018a). These changes, largely because of global technical and economic developments, emphasised the necessity of learning for all of the world's peoples throughout their lives, for both personal and social development and as a key part of the democratic movement (UNESCO 1972). New theoretical approaches to adult learning emerged, with a focus on the self-directed and lifelong nature of learning in adulthood. Malcolm Knowles (1970) proposed that adult learning (andragogy) is different from children's learning (pedagogy), although andragogy has come to be associated with the nature of adult

learners rather than a theory of learning (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner 2007). Knowles's (1984) propositions about adult learners, however, are still considered to be key foundational theories of adult learning (Merriam 2017). The basis of this work (Knowles 1984) is that adult learners shift from dependent to self-directed learning, where their maturing readiness to learn is linked to individual perceptions of the knowledge and capabilities needed for ongoing growth to handle real-life situations. Knowles (1984) proposed that adult learners are largely internally motivated, and they need to know *why* they need to learn something. He contended that adults possess a stock of prior experiences to draw on in the learning process and these prior experiences also stimulate the intent to learn. The ideas inherent in andragogy place experience at the forefront of learning. While andragogy may not be a widely accepted term now, adult learners (irrespective of context) are distinguishable as being "mature socially responsible individuals" (Cranton 2016, p. 3) who learn through formal and informal experiences that enable them to both acquire new and build on existing capabilities, understandings, values and beliefs to enact changes to their self-identity and their perspectives on the world.

Other important developments in adult learning theory in the latter half of the twentieth century included learning for emancipation, through the work of Paulo Freire, with illiterate rural workers in Brazil. Another key contribution was Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, where changes to the learner's frame of reference occur through encountering something that does not fit with their existing perspective (Illeris 2018a). Importantly, theorists such as Albert Bandura, Peter Jarvis, and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger brought the social and contextual elements of learning to the field, thus deepening our understanding of the influences on learning beyond the internal processes within the learner (Illeris 2018a). Recent developments in adult learning theory have given rise to holistic perspectives on learning, encapsulating mind, body, and emotions (Dirkx 2001a; Merriam 2017).

This study approaches learning from the humanistic tradition and constructivist perspective, framed by the overarching principles of experiential learning theory (ELT). The researcher acknowledges that ELT does not comprehensively capture what is known about adult learning to date (Merriam 2017) but it is an attempt to conceptualise learning in a general sense (Illeris 2018a). From the foundations laid by Dewey and the proposition that all learning is experiential, David Kolb and David Boud and colleagues made significant contributions from the mid-1980s to understanding the process of learning from experiences (Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985; Boud & Walker 1990; Kolb 1984). The key ELT principles will be explored in the next part of the chapter.

## 2.3 The basic principles of experiential learning theory

As an educational philosophy, ELT is grounded in the idea that life experiences, education and work are pivotal to the learning and understanding of new knowledge and capabilities (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall 2009). Indeed, the fundamental place of experience in learning is central to understandings of adult learning (Merriam & Bierema 2013) as “experience is the adult learner’s living textbook” (Lindeman 1961, p. 7). Experiential learning theory is constructivist in nature, premised on the notion that experience is the basis of and impetus for learning (Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993) and learning is the making of meaning from experience (Merriam & Bierema 2013; Mezirow 1991; 2000). John Dewey first built on the Greek philosophical tradition of learning grounded in experience; he suggested that understanding based on experiences (rather than the pursuit of the ‘right answer’) is the goal of education (Citron & Kline 2001). Dewey posited that learning is about both the experience *and* the meaning that is constructed from it (Citron & Kline 2001). Interpreting an experience to make meaning from it turns a potential learning opportunity into *actual learning* (Boud & Walker 1990). This is the basis of life-experience learning.

The basic principle of ELT is that learning does not happen as a matter of course simply because a person has an experience (Beard & Wilson 2013). Instead, learning may result when individuals recognise what they gained from an experience and when they translate those gains into something meaningful for future thought and action (Beard 2018; Kuk & Holst 2018). Dewey’s (1963) work laid the foundations for later work on experiential learning where it is proposed that *learning* from experience is an *interaction* between the learner and their environment (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner 2007). Moreover, experiential learning “involves ‘the whole person’, through thoughts, feelings and physical activity” (Beard & Wilson 2013, p. 5). Experiential learning is at its core a “sense making process involving significant experiences that, to varying degrees, act as the source of learning” (Beard 2018, p. 32, adapted from Beard 2010).

The most widely-known model of experiential learning by Kolb (1984), given at Figure 2.1, shows that the learner engages with an experience (and there is an assumption that the learner is willing and open to new experiences), the learner observes and reflects on the experience, the learner then uses analytical skills to integrate concepts and ideas from their observations, and then applies new ideas and concepts to practice. The model takes account of Dewey’s (1963) principle of continuity, where learning from experiences should have an effect on how the learner approaches subsequent situations.

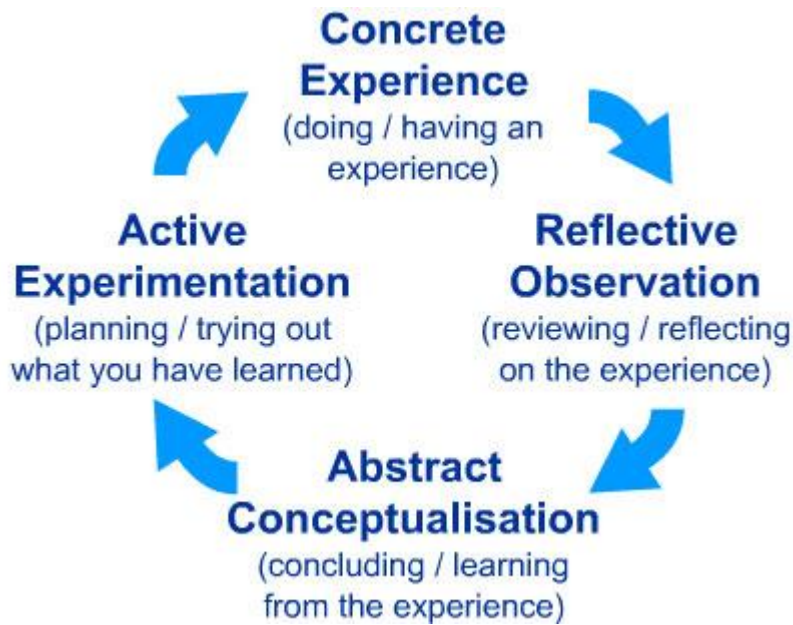


Figure 2.1: Kolb's model of experiential learning (McLeod 2017)

The cycle of experiential learning represented by Kolb's model may have become so widely-used because of its simplicity, but as Jarvis (2010, p. 77) points out, it "does not do justice to the complexity of human learning". Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007) note criticisms of the model include its lack of consideration of the social context of the learner, where experience and reflective processes seem to occur in a vacuum. They also note that the model does not take account of the influence of the learner's personal biography on the reflection process. Despite the criticisms of Kolb's model, it informs this study as it sets out the key processes in learning from experience and highlights the role of construction of meaning in transforming an experience into learning.

Constructivist theories of adult learning are the strongest influences on ELT (Fenwick 2000). The work of Piaget (1966) on cognitive constructivism and Vygotsky (1978) on social constructivism is reflected in modern experiential learning theories, based on the unifying proposition that the learner constructs their own understanding of the meaning of their experiences. Fenwick (2000, p. 249) presents a critique of the constructivist nature of ELT, contending that this perspective is "somewhat simplistic and reductionist". As noted above in other criticisms of Kolb's model, constructivism considers context as important, as it provides learning possibilities from which the learner constructs meaning and shapes the content of the experience and the process of meaning construction (Fenwick 2000). The overarching constructivist approach, however, places the construction of meaning within the 'learner's head' and tends to ignore the social processes that influence meaning-making (Fenwick

2000). This study seeks to acknowledge the key role that socio-contextual factors play in experiential learning, drawing on Vygotsky's theories of social constructivism and on Piaget's developmental approach. These ideas are discussed later in the chapter.

Life itself creates endless possibilities for learning, even if life-experience learning is often haphazard and unstructured (Marsick & Watkins 2018). Most adult learning takes place outside of formal educational settings (Boud & Walker 1990). It has been found that 75 per cent of workplace learning is informal (Richardson 2004), resulting from the natural opportunities for learning from ordinary, unstructured activities (Conlon 2004). Learning stems from these encounters where new experiences may present challenges, problems to be addressed, or an idea of a future state (Marsick & Watson 2018). Experiential learning has often been used as a single, broad term to distinguish informal and incidental learning from formal, teacher-led learning (Fenwick 2000; Illeris 2007). Fenwick (2000) suggests, however, that all learning is experiential, irrespective of the context. In this study, experiential learning is understood as learning from experience that is personally meaningful to the learner (Moon 2004) that results in personal growth.

What the many theoretical approaches to experiential learning have in common is the centrality of the experience (Beard & Wilson 2013; Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993). The notion of experience is complex but may be understood as "a continuous lifelong phenomenon rather than an episode, although there are episodic events within it" (Jarvis 2004, p. 95). Experience as awareness of a situation is cognitive, but it is also emotive and physical, where this awareness occurs through the lens of previous experiences and the social context of the situation (Jarvis 2004). This awareness may also be stimulated by something that causes learners to question their assumptions about themselves and their worlds (Merriam & Bierema 2013). The social paradigm of learning denotes the way in which understandings of an experience have been constructed through past social situations, the language used to create those understandings, and the manner in which learning is expressed (Moon 2004). Adult learning is an intensely personal activity but also one that is "shaped by the context of adult life and the society in which one lives" (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner 2007, p. 1). The social context of learning and the place of it in the study's framework will be explored later in the chapter.

Section 1 of this chapter explored the history of learning theory and the characteristics of adult learners. It has also examined experiential learning theory as the broader theoretical context for the



study. The next section of the chapter explores the key theories that informed the development of the study's framework.

## **Section 2: Development of the framework**

### **2.4 The theoretical basis for the framework**

This research explores the significance of life experiences for learning through the lens of meaning-making. A framework was developed to guide the study (see Section 2.10 for its final iteration). The framework integrates key adult learning theories around the process of making meaning from an experience to determine its personal significance, drawing on constructivist perspectives. The starting point in the development of the framework was an exploration of how learning is conceptualised, based on the work of Peter Jarvis and Knud Illeris. This led the researcher to consider the kind of learning that results in change in the individual – significant learning – first explored by Carl Rogers in the 1950s and later by Merriam and Clark in their 1993 study on what makes life-experience learning significant. Examination of significant learning then led to consideration of *how* significance is understood and articulated. To understand this process, the researcher turned to some of the seminal works on meaning-making for learning (for example, Jarvis 1987; Kegan 1982; Mezirow 1991). Further insight into meaning-making was gained by examining how the process of constructing meaning is influenced by the learner's frame of reference and the lens through which meanings are made (for example, Boud & Walker 1990; Knowles 1984; Mezirow 2000). The key theoretical underpinnings of the framework are discussed in the remaining sections of the chapter.

### **2.5 Conceptualising the learning process**

This study of the significance of life experiences is framed within the broader context of constructivist adult learning theory. The study's framework is anchored by the fundamental components of the learning process based on the work of Peter Jarvis (1987; 2006; 2018) and Knud Illeris (2018b) from within the tradition of experiential learning, as described in the previous section of the chapter.

Using an ELT perspective, Jarvis (2018) proposes that learning always starts with experiencing a social situation, where the learner interacts with their life-world. Jarvis first theorised learning as “transformation of experience into knowledge, skills and attitudes” (1987, p. 32). In a later work, Jarvis (2006) refined his ideas to regard learning as:

*The combination of processes whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) experiences a social situation, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person’s individual biography resulting in a changed (or more experienced) person.*

(Jarvis 2006, p. 13)

This expanded idea aligns with more recent work on adult learning theory that looks beyond just cognitive processes to acknowledge the place of body and mind (including emotions) in the learning process (Dirkx 2001a; Merriam 2017). It acknowledges that learning is a “transformation from a physical experience to an internal change in the individual” (Beard 2018, p. 32). Jarvis’s idea of the learner being changed by integrating the transformed content of an experience into the self acknowledges developmental psychology theories, where development is seen by some theorists as “integration of more basic, previously acquired behaviours into new, higher level structures” (Keenan, Evans & Crowley 2016, p. 2). These understandings of learning are applicable to this study as the researcher seeks to explore how experiences are translated through the learning process into knowledge, capabilities, attitudes and beliefs that change or enhance the self in some way.

Jarvis’s (2006) conceptualisation of learning informs the central part of the study’s framework, as shown in its first iteration (Figure 2.2). These expressions of learning from Jarvis (2006) are used throughout this thesis.



Figure 2.2: How learning is understood in this study

The first circle of the diagram shows that learning begins with transforming the content of an experience (Jarvis 2006). Transformation is understood to mean the learner interprets an experience by converting their bodily sensations or reactions to episodic experiences into mental meanings through thought, action or emotion or any combination of these acts (Jarvis 2006; 2018). These mental meanings help explain an experience to the learner, i.e. they help the learner make sense of the

experience and make it personally meaningful. Learners themselves are also transformed (Jarvis 2006; 2018). This happens through an awareness of an episodic experience that gives the learner a sense of consciousness about what is happening around them (Jarvis 2006).

The second circle describes how assigning value to an experience leads to change in the learner (Jarvis 2006). The ‘transformed content’ is integrated into the person’s individual biography and is drawn upon to shape future interactions with the social world. What this means is that reactions to an experience are internalised by the learner and accepted as part of the changed self. In alignment with Knowles’s (1980) concept of adult learning, Jarvis (2006) proposes that the learner comes to an experience with a history that shapes their interactions with it and facilitates certain kinds of learning, based on a gap between this history and the learner’s perception of the experience (Jarvis 2018).

The transformation and integration process results in a changed or more experienced person (Jarvis 2006), as shown in the third circle. As a result of this process, the person may achieve change in relation to (i) their sense of self, i.e. identity, self-confidence, self-efficacy, (ii) new knowledge, skills, capabilities, values or beliefs, and (iii) enhanced capacity to deal with similar situations or future problems (Jarvis 2006). Jarvis’s (2006) notion of the changed (or more experienced) person is the person who has learned from their experiences. The changes are the outcome of the learning process.

The idea of the person experiencing the world acknowledges that learners are a “whole person rather than a body or a mind; they are both material and mental” (Jarvis 2006, p. 13). What this means is that the learner is responsive to their world and the activities that happen around them through thoughts, feelings and actions (Jarvis 2006). As Dirkx (2001a) notes, emotions and feelings are deeply connected to the way learners perceive and process their experiences. These affective responses are also a product of the learner’s social world, using socially-acquired language, so that interpretations of experiences reflect that world (Jarvis 2018). The interactions between people and their worlds are at the heart of experiential learning theory, where the way the individual interprets these interactions influences learning (Boud & Walker 1990).

The researcher acknowledges the limitations on Jarvis’s definition of learning and indeed of using any single definition to capture the nuances and complexities of adult learning. As Brown (2015, p. 54) notes, all learning theories are by nature incomplete as they “examine only limited elements of the process of learning, approach the whole person from different perspectives, and are the product of particular historical, political and cultural contexts”. All learning theories endure scrutiny, and

Jarvis’s definition has been criticised for its limited treatment of socially-constructed meanings, the reactive and sequential structure of learning in his approach, and the insufficient attention given to the various elements of the learning process (Brown 2015). Despite the inadequacy of a single learning theory to define all learning, this study proposes that the constructivist perspective theorised by Jarvis (2006) has efficacy as an approach. The approach champions the place of identity in understanding learning, by conceptualising it as the construction of the learner’s individual biography. It recognises the role of thought, emotions, and actions in learning and the complex combination of these processes. Jarvis’s approach is relevant to this study, as he places the learner in their life-world, where learning stems from interactions with that world (Jarvis 2006, p. 23). This study also seeks to recognise the influence of the socio-contextual dimension of learning (discussed later in the chapter).

The conceptualisation of learning used in this study from Jarvis (2006) is informed by the work of Danish learning theorist, Knud Illeris, who sees learning as consisting of two simultaneous processes (Illeris 2018b). These processes include an *interaction* between the learner and their environment (or a situation) that gives the person some ‘impressions’, and an *acquisition* process where the learner assesses the impressions based on their content (what is learned) and the incentive to learn (using the required mental energy). The interaction and acquisition processes involve three dimensions: (i) content, which is largely cognitive, (ii) incentive i.e. engagement, interest, and motivation, which is chiefly emotional, and (iii) interaction, which is the social dimension of learning (Illeris 2018b). Illeris’s theory of learning is represented by Figure 2.3:

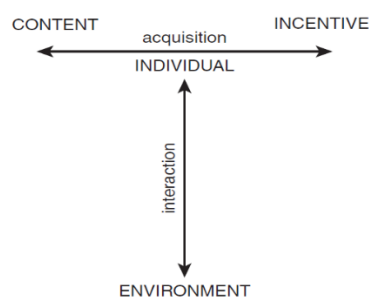


Figure 2.3: The learning process as conceptualised by Illeris (2018b)

Illeris’s theory of learning aligns with that of Peter Jarvis, where the interaction and acquisition processes are comparable to Jarvis’s concept of transforming the content of an experience and integrating that content into the learner’s biography. Both theorists acknowledge the role of the emotional dimension of learning. The social element of learning that both theorists advocate will be

explored later in the chapter.

## **Summary: Contribution to the framework**

The researcher acknowledges that learning is a complex process. While it is possible to consider the constituent elements of learning, it is unlikely that there will ever be comprehensive theory of the human process of learning (Jarvis 2006; Merriam 2017). The researcher has adopted Jarvis's (2006) theory of learning to anchor the framework, complemented by the work of Illeris (2018a; 2018b), where learning involves transforming reactions to an experience and adopting those reactions as part of the self, resulting in the changed person. Both Jarvis and Illeris emphasise the learner's interactions with their environment and the process of engaging with experiences to transform them into learning. They and other theorists (for example, Mezirow 2000) propose that learning is about change. It is change in the learner that forms the basis of the idea of significant learning, the type of learning that is of interest to the researcher.

## **2.6 Significant learning**

Learning is conceptualised in this study as resulting in a changed or more experienced person (Jarvis 2006). Moving on from this foundational idea, the researcher explored the type of learning that creates change in the learner and how a life experience may create that change. Significant learning is a concept that seeks to capture what change looks like in the learner and why change has occurred. The key theories that underpin the idea of significant learning are discussed below.

### **2.6.1 The origins of the concept of significant learning**

Carl Rogers, although a humanistic psychologist rather than an educational theorist, first introduced the idea of significant learning at a time when there was a shift away from behaviourist theories of learning. Rogers's concept of significant learning is part of the set of "far-reaching types of learning" that imply personality changes or changes to the structure of the self through a "simultaneous restructuring of whole clusters of schemes and patterns" across cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning" (Illeris 2018b, p. 7). Rogers's work focussed on self-actualisation of the learner and the idea that education should be about creating a fully functioning person (Jarvis 2010). Rogers does not provide a comprehensive theory of adult learning but coming from a humanistic tradition, his ideas champion the learner as the agent in the learning process. Rogers also conceptualises learning as stemming from the human need for self-development and self-direction (Jarvis 2010). The humanistic tradition is inherently linked to life-experience learning and its

connection to the ongoing growth of the individual throughout adulthood. It draws from theories of life-span developmental psychology which explore change in human behaviour across the lifespan and espouse the principle of lifelong development (Keenan, Evans & Crowley 2016).

Significant learning makes a difference to an individual by driving the development of a person's behaviour, attitudes, and sense of self (Rogers 1951, p. 232), where there is impact on:

*the individual's behaviour, in the course of action he [sic] chooses in the future, in his [sic] attitudes and his [sic] personality. It is a pervasive learning which is not just an accretion of knowledge, but which interpenetrates with every portion of his [sic] existence.*

Rogers (1951, p. 388) proposes that “a person *learns significantly only those things* [emphasis added] which he [sic] perceives to be involved in the maintenance of, or enhancement of, the structure of the self”. This suggests that significant learning is the kind of learning that enhances or strengthens aspects of self-identity and is personally meaningful. The idea of significance in the context of learning is explored in this research through the vehicle of international study, as a life experience with the potential for significant learning. Significance brings together the centrality of identity espoused by Jarvis (2006) and the developmental psychology lens on learning of building the self through integration of previous behaviours into new, more complex structures (Keenan, Evans & Crowley 2016).

## **2.6.2 The relationship between life experience and significant learning**

Drawing on Rogers's earlier work, Merriam and Clark (1993) examined the relationship between life experience and significant learning. Building on Rogers's proposition that significant learning makes a difference to the individual, they considered what *determines this difference*. They also investigated why a particular experience leads to learning for one individual and not another, and how the effect of an experience might vary from person to person. They asked 400 adults to identify experiences that were especially significant and to explain why those experiences were identified as such. Analysis of their participants' significant experiences led Merriam and Clark (1993, p. 133) to conclude that “for a learning experience to be considered significant, it (i) must personally affect the learner, and (ii) be subjectively valued by the learner”. This means that significant learning impacts the learner in ways that have personal value. From this conclusion, Merriam and Clark (1993, p. 133) proposed that there is an “inner structure” to significance comprised of two dimensions: personal impact and subjective value.

The first way that a learning experience may be considered significant is through its personal impact on the individual. Personal impact is the effect of an experience on the person, where they are changed in ways that expand (or transform) the self. Impact may be understood as a continuum, where expansion may be (i) confined to one aspect of a person's life with no change in other parts, (ii) gradual change, or (iii) it may lead to a total transformation, depending on the extent of the change (Merriam & Clark 1993). One result of expansion (or transformation) of the learner's identity and their capabilities is the sense that they are better able to handle life experiences in the future (Merriam & Clark 1993). Learning experiences are varied and may impact the learner in different ways, but what they have in common is some kind of extension of personal capabilities and an enhanced self-understanding (Merriam & Clark 1993).

Merriam and Clark's (1993) study found that personal impact alone is not sufficient for an experience to be considered significant; it needs also to have subjective value to the learner. Having subjective value means the learner has placed a "personal stamp on the experience" and identified its "importance in his or her life" (Merriam & Clark 1993, p. 133). When the learner assigns value to an experience (i.e. it has subjective value), they do so using their own frame of reference (Merriam & Clark 1993). Assigning value to an experience speaks to Mezirow's (1991) theories of learning where the learner's 'frame of reference' provides "context for meaning-making" (Mezirow 2000, p. 16). This idea recognises that learning experiences may have some kind of effect on the person, but are not significant unless those experiences and their resultant impact matter to the learner (Merriam & Clark 1993).

The participants in Merriam and Clark's study all identified the significance of their experiences in "growth-enhancing" ways, even if those experiences were difficult or painful for the participants (Merriam & Clark 1993, p. 137). The researchers note it is important to consider "that a significant learning experience might also constrict a person, leading to a perspective that is more rigid and less integrative of new experience" (Merriam & Clark 1993, p. 138). As their study did not uncover any growth-restricting changes to the learner, their theory of the construct of significance is understood to mean change in the learner in growth-enhancing ways.

### **Summary: Contribution to the framework**

Theories on significant learning from the work of Rogers (1951; 1959) and Merriam and Clark (1993) provide a means of conceptualising the kind of learning that is explored in this study. The two significance dimensions (personal impact and subjective value) are inherent in Jarvis's notion of

learning. Jarvis (2006) describes the outcome of learning as the changed person; in other words, an experience has impacted the person. He also theorises that learning is a process of transforming and integrating the content of an experience into the structure of the self to create change in the person. This process aligns with the idea of subjectively valuing an experience and its impact to understand and articulate the significance of an experience. The theories of significant learning have been incorporated into the second iteration of the framework, given at Figure 2.4 in the next section of the chapter.

## **2.7 Meaning-making for (significant) learning**

Merriam and Clark's (1993) work helps us understand that for an experience to be significant, it must both have an impact on, and matter to, the learner. Their work adds another dimension to Jarvis's (2006) theories of learning by exploring what is meant by the changed or more experience person. Examination of Merriam and Clark's (1993) study prompted the researcher to consider *how* an experience might be transformed by the learner through understanding its personal impact and assigning value to it. As this study approaches learning from a constructivist perspective, it acknowledges the role of meaning-making in learning and how this act bridges the gap between experience and learning. "Meaning-making is central to learning" (Mezirow 1991 p. 11) and is fundamental to understanding adult learning theory and practice (Merriam & Bierema 2013). Key theories of meaning-making are discussed below.

### **2.7.1 The fundamentals of meaning-making**

Meaning-making is "the process by which people interpret situations, events, objects, or discourses, in the light of their previous knowledge and experience" (Zittoun & Brinkmann 2012, para. 1). In the context of learning, the individual engages in a process of sense-making and draws from their experiences of similar situations and their own social and cultural resources (Zittoun & Brinkmann 2012). Meaning-making draws heavily from the constructivist tradition, where the meaning of an experience is constructed through the learner's interaction with their world (Merriam & Heuer 1996). Meaning-making functions as "process of constructing a personal story to make sense of an event or of one's life" (Wong 2017, p. 86). Zittoun and Brinkmann (2012) note the existential level of meaning-making in learning which places learning within an individual's life course and may lead the individual to reshape their identity and perspective on the world, often stimulated by situations of uncertainty or disruption. The concept of meaning-making is acknowledged by the researcher as



underpinning the process of transforming the content of an experience through emotion, action and thought (Jarvis 2006) and interpreting the significance of an experience.

Meaning-making for learning has been explored by several learning theorists in a range of seminal works, including Daloz (1986), Jarvis (2006), Kegan (1982), Mezirow (1991; 1994) and Usher (1993). Merriam and Heuer (1996) drew four key conclusions from these original ideas on how individuals make meaning and how meaning-making shapes learning. These are discussed below, with reference to significant learning.

The first conclusion is that “an experience in and of itself does not have meaning” (Merriam & Heuer 1996, p. 247). This means that meaning does not exist on its own. The learner constructs meaning and this meaning-making work frames the learning process. Developmental psychologist, Robert Kegan (1980; 1982; 1994), proposes that human existence is premised on making meaning and that people are continually trying to translate their experiences into something coherent and *meaningful*. Individuals generally do not act randomly or unsystematically and their meaning-making work has a significant impact on thought and behaviour (Kegan 1994). Individuals make meaning in their ‘zone of mediation’, a place that sits between an experience and the person’s reactions to it, where the experience is “privately composed, made sense of, the place where it actually becomes an event for that person” (Kegan 1982, p. 2). Becoming a changed or more experience person involves the learner interpreting their experiences to understand the meaning of those experiences (Merriam & Heuer 1996). Understanding the meaning of an experience in the context of significant learning involves subjectively valuing the experience and its identified impact (Merriam & Clark 1993).

Secondly, individuals’ attribution of meaning to the same experience or event may be quite different, as people bring their values, beliefs, past experiences and knowledge accumulated over time to every new experience. The second dimension of significance, subjective value, is influenced by, and dependent on, what the individual brings to each new experience. The learner ‘names as important’ a learning experience from within their personal frame of reference (Merriam & Clark 1993). This frame of reference creates a lens through which the learner makes meaning (discussed further in Section 2.8).

Thirdly, meanings are constructed within the social world and are dependent on context. Jarvis (1987) contends that meaning is not made in a vacuum, as experiences are socially-defined. Meaning is also assigned from a particular contextual perspective (Usher 1993). Meaning-making is related to

development, as what is meaningful at one stage in life may not be relevant at another (Wong 2017). Park (2017) contends that there is situational meaning, which is the meaning of a moment in time and of an event or experience, and this influences the meaning-making process. Significant learning involves understanding the impact of an experience and its personal value and this meaning-making process happens from both individual and socio-contextual standpoints.

The fourth, and possibly most important conclusion, is that “the need to make meaning of our experiences is fundamentally human” (Merriam & Heuer 1996, p. 247). The desire to make meaning is at the heart of human experience (Wong 2017). Meaning-making plays a vital part in “organising our thinking, feeling and acting over a wide range of human functioning” (Kegan 1980, p. 380). The need to make meaning drives learning, particularly significant learning, as this type of learning is about self-identity and changes in personal capabilities. Without meaning-making there is no learning (Merriam & Clark 1993).

The basic principle of meaning-making is that individuals constantly reassess their experiences to make sense of them in ways they believe to be relevant and important to their self-identity (Merriam, Mott & Lee 1996). In other words, meaning-making involves rendering an experience coherent (Kegan, 1982; Mezirow, 2000) and determining the value or significance of the experience (Huta 2017; Park 2017). An experience takes on semiotic shape through meaning-making which makes “emotionally-laden life experiences...thinkable and communicable” (Zittoun & Brinkmann 2012, para. 8). Meaning-making requires us to utilise language to articulate our experiences, both to ourselves and to others (Mezirow 2000). These principles underpin the process of understanding and articulating the significance of an experience and of learning that facilitates the changed or more experienced person.

### **2.7.2 Experiential learning perspectives on meaning-making**

Experiential learning theory dictates that ‘doing life’ is not enough; some form of reflection on an experience is needed to transform an experience into learning (Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985; Coulson & Harvey 2013). As Dewey said in 1938:

*Activity that is not checked by observation of what follows from it may be temporarily enjoyed. But intellectually it leads nowhere. It does not provide knowledge about the situations in which action occurs nor does it lead to clarification and expansion of ideas.*

(Boydston 2008, p. 59)

Experiential learning theorists often describe the transformation process as reflection (Kolb 1984; Moon 2004), while other theorists propose that ‘critical engagement’ with an experience turns it into learning (Boud & Walker 1990; Merriam & Clark 1993). While experience infuses all kinds of learning, the value of an experience may be unrecognised or even disregarded (Beard & Wilson 2013). It is the act of reflection (or critical engagement) that allows the learner to construct a personal understanding of the experience (Fenwick 2000) and recognise its value. Conscious reflection allows for more “active and aware decisions about our learning...to lead to new understandings and appreciations” (Boud, Walker and Keogh 1985, p. 19). The act of reflection is one of meaning-making, that “involves making a new experience explicit and schematising, appropriating, and acting upon it” (Mezirow 1991, p. 11). These ideas form the basis of Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model.

It is important to consider that experiential learning theory, as a constructivist approach, “casts the individual as the central actor in a drama of personal meaning-making” and assumes the interpretation of experiences to be a conscious and rational act by “individuals with varying capacity or confidence to rely on their own constructions” (Fenwick 2000, p. 248). Meaning-making also assumes a capacity for deep approaches to learning, self-awareness and metacognition that are not inherent in everyone (Coulson & Harvey 2013; Moon 2004). Meaning-making assumes that the learner is “a stable, unitary self that is regulated through its own intellectual activity” (Fenwick 2000, p. 249). The complexity of meaning-making and the variations in people’s capacity to engage in its processes may explain why some learners need guidance on how to interpret their experiences to determine what was gained from them (Coulson & Harvey 2013). In structured, formal learning situations guidance is possible, but learning from informal, life-experience situations is in the hands of the individual. This study aims to contribute to insight into how to understand and articulate the significance of life experiences.

### **2.7.3 Contributions from the field of psychology**

Meaning-making features heavily in psychology literature, particularly in the context of bereavement and responses to traumatic events or health issues. An influential *American Psychologist* article, by Taylor (1983, p. 1161), defines meaning as:

*An effort to understand the event: why it happened and what impact it had. The search for meaning attempts to answer the question: What is the significance of the event? Meaning is also reflected in the answer to the question, what does my life mean now?*

A distinction has been made by some psychology researchers between meaning-making for significance in terms of comprehensibility (i.e. so that the experience ‘makes sense’) and in terms of determining the value or worth of something (Janoff-Bulman & McPherson-Frantz 1997). In this study, meaning-making is understood as searching for the value or worth of an experience in terms of its impact and the value placed on that impact (Merriam & Clark 1993).

Professor of Psychology, Crystal Park (2010), distinguishes between (i) ‘meaning-making efforts’, or the process of making meaning, and (ii) ‘meanings made’, or the product of the meaning-making process. Similarly, Gillies, Neimeyer and Milman (2013) describe meaning as both a process (of searching for, finding or making) and an outcome (something that one has found, encountered or constructed). ‘Meanings made’ is another way of conceptualising the personal impact of an experience that create change in the learner. It is the outcome of the construction of meaning. Park (2010, p. 261) uses the term, “perceptions of growth or positive life changes”, in her conceptualisation of meanings made. This term has been adopted in this thesis (see the green part of the framework at Figure 2.4). While the phrasing may draw from development psychology, it has value for this study and its focus on the personal growth approach to learning. This study explores significant learning as both an outcome of meaning-making (i.e. meanings made, or the impact of an experience that matters to the learner) and the meaning-making efforts the learner undertakes to understand and articulate the significance of an experience.

### **Summary: Contribution to the framework**

The framework acknowledges learning as a constructivist meaning-making process of transforming the perceived content of an experience and integrating that transformed content into the self (Jarvis 2006). The work of the theorists discussed above shows that meaning-making for learning involves interpreting (or reflecting on) an experience to learn from it. The framework is underpinned by the four key elements of meaning-making, as outlined above by Merriam and Heuer (1996). The factors that influence meaning-making will be explored later in the chapter.

The second iteration of the framework (Figure 2.4) shows the addition of theories of significant learning and meaning-making, as discussed in Sections 2.6 and 2.7. These theories frame Jarvis’s (2006) concept of learning in relation to the process of understanding and articulating the significance of an experience. The tri-coloured circle shows the learner’s meaning-making efforts to interpret their experiences by assigning meaning in three ways: (i) making the experience coherent (i.e. identifying what is significant), (ii) determining personal impact (i.e. understanding how the experience is

significant), and (iii) subjectively valuing the experience and its resultant impact (i.e. why the experience is significant). The outcome of meaning-making (significant learning) is represented by the green box. These inputs into Jarvis’s concept of learning draw on the work of Merriam and Clark (1993) and Park (2010).

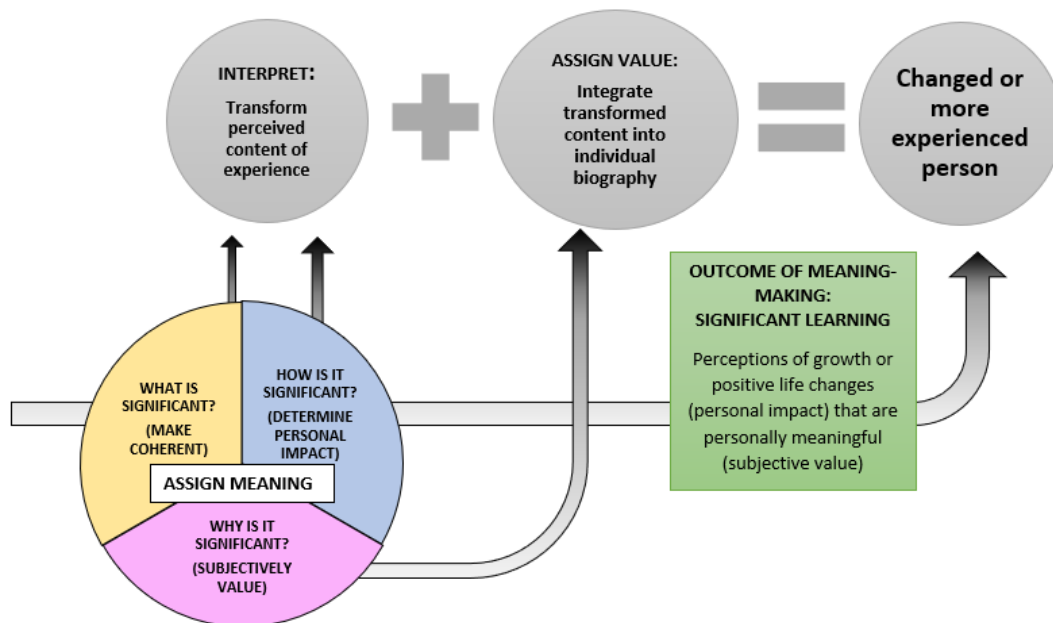


Figure 2.4: The second iteration of the framework

The framework draws on the field of psychology as a lens for expressing the type of meaning-making that facilitates learning. Park’s (2010) description of meanings made as perceptions of growth or positive life changes (personal impact) is used in the framework (the green box). It was important for the researcher to describe meanings made as *perceptions* given the subjective nature of life-experience learning, where it is the person’s *understandings* of change in themselves that generates learning. Moreover, Park’s use of the word ‘perceptions’ provides an effective way for the framework to represent the overarching idea of the changed person as a result of the meaning-making process. Use of this term also aligns with Jarvis’s proposition that the learner makes meaning by transforming the *perceived* content of an experience (i.e. their reactions to an experience) and that identity is central to learning. The idea of perceptions aligns with the constructivist perspective and the making of meaning based on prior knowledge and experiences.

As noted by Merriam and Heuer (1996), meaning-making is both an individual and socio-contextual process. Meaning-making is shaped by our own frame of reference (Mezirow 2000) which in itself is

socially-constructed. This frame of reference provides the learner with a lens through which meaning is made from experiences. This idea is discussed in the next section of the chapter.

## 2.8 The learner's meaning-making lens

To gain a deeper understanding of the meaning-making process, the researcher examined literature on the lens through which meanings are made. The learner's use of their personal lens to make meaning suggests that there is no *one truth* in learning from life experiences, but rather *our truth*, which is different for each person (Zull 2012). These constructivist ideas explain why some experiences have greater impact than others, and why individuals vary in their responses to the same experience (Merriam & Clark 1993). The notion of a personal lens underpins the second construct of significance - subjective value - as Merriam and Clark (1993) propose that significant experiences and their impact are valued using the learner's own frame of reference. In essence, whether an experience is rendered meaningful by the learner stems from their judgement about an experience within the frame of their existing understandings of the world (Jarvis 1987) and habitual expectations of what has been experienced in the past (Cranton 2016). The learner's interpretation of an experience for its coherence is influenced by the learner's meaning-making lens. The learner's meaning-making lens shapes the way they react to experiences and transform the perceived content into their sense of self (Jarvis 2006). The process to understand and articulate the significance of an experience, by subjectively valuing an experience and its resultant impact, happens through the frame of the learner's meaning-making lens.

The learner's meaning-making lens is a system of sorts, made up of constituent parts that work together to provide a frame of reference for meaning-making. Kegan (1994) describes this system as an 'order of consciousness' that is shaped both intrinsically (by the drive for growth within the individual) and extrinsically by social forces. Personal meaning systems are developmental; they progress over time as the individual matures and continues to interact with their world, thus changing their approaches to subsequent meaning-making (Jarvis 1987). Where learning is transformational rather than informational, there is epistemological change (change in *how we know*) rather than just change in *what we know* (Kegan 2018).

While meaning-making is personal and unique, there is considerable uniformity in the structure of an individual's meaning-making system (Kegan 1980). Jack Mezirow (2000), who conceptualised transformative learning theory, uses the term 'meaning structures' to represent the filter for

interpreting the meaning of experiences. He contends this filter “selectively shapes and delimits perception, cognition, feelings and disposition by predisposing our intentions, expectations, and purposes” (Mezirow 2000, p. 16). Meaning structures include (i) epistemic habits of mind or the way learners acquire and use knowledge, (ii) sociolinguistic social norms, cultural expectations and ways of using language, (iii) self-concept, needs, inhibitions, anxieties and fears, (iv) conscience and morality, (v) philosophical habits of mind, and (vi) aesthetics, including values, attitudes, tastes, judgements and standards of beauty (Cranton 2016). Mezirow (2000, p. 18) explains that our “values and sense of self are anchored in our frames of reference” and that our expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes and judgements all shape meaning-making. Mezirow’s ideas are represented in the study’s framework as the values, beliefs and assumptions element of the learner’s meaning-making lens (see Figure 2.5). Other elements of the lens that are included in the framework are discussed below.

### **2.8.1 The influence of emotions on meaning-making**

Recent developments in adult learning have recognised the place of affective learning in meaning-making. John Dirkx is a key proponent of the role of emotions in learning. Dirkx (2001a) contends that “personally significant and meaningful learning is fundamentally grounded in and derived from the adult’s emotional, imaginative connection with the self, and with the broader social world”. He also notes that meaning-making is imaginative, and emotions are integral to how learners understand themselves and their relationships with others and their social world (Dirkx 2001a). Moreover, the canvas of adult learning – life experiences – often arouses emotionally-charged images and deeply personal responses that are expressed as distinctive emotional reactions (Dirkx 2001a; Dirkx 2001b). These emotion- and imagination-charged reactions “serve to animate our thoughts and actions” through an emotional connection to the learner’s inner and outer worlds (Dirkx 2001a, p. 66). They are grounded in personal meaning and the learner’s self-identity and worldview and often reveal the inner self (Dirkx 2001b). Earlier work by Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993) on experiential learning championed the importance of attending to emotions and feelings in adult learning situations. Jarvis (2006) captures these ideas in his definition of learning, that incorporates cognitive, practical and emotional transformations of experience.

### **2.8.2 The role of prior experiences in meaning-making**

There is agreement among adult learning theorists that a person’s past experiences shape each new experience and the meanings that are made from them (Jarvis 2006; Kegan 1980; Knowles 1984; Mezirow 1997). The essence of this theory is that individuals come to an experience with their own repertoire of previous experiences to help them approach situations and make meaning from them,

and this explains why individuals who have had the same experience can interpret it differently. This is inherently a constructivist view of learning, where the individual makes meaning from each new experience based on their previous knowledge and experience, drawing on cultural and societal influences (Zittoun & Brinkmann 2012). Adult learning theorist, Malcolm Knowles (1984), explored the idea of the influence of prior experiences on learning when he proposed that adults arrive at any learning activity with more and different types of experiences than do children and adolescents. Knowles (1984, p. 44) refers to this idea as the learner's "reservoir of prior experiences" which in itself is a "rich resource for learning". Meaning-making is subjective, largely because meaning comes from a synthesis of previous knowledge and experiences and personal understandings of the current experience. This synthesis is based on the notion that adult self-identity stems from the accumulation of their unique set of experiences (Knowles 1984). Knowles's work on adult learning forms the basis of much of the current thinking on the influence of prior experiences on the learning process.

Boud and Walker (1990) conceptualise this idea of prior experiences as 'personal foundation of experience'. They contend that every individual possesses a personal foundation of experiences which they describe as:

*a way of being present to the world, which profoundly influences the way it [an experience] is experienced and will particularly influence the intellectual and emotional content of the experience and the meanings which are attributed to it.*

(Boud & Walker 1990, p. 63)

The individual's personal foundation of experience is "partly acquired from the social and cultural environment and partly forged by the learner's own awareness and effort" (Boud & Walker 1990, p. 63). Presuppositions and assumptions that have accumulated over time predispose the learner towards subsequent experiences and learners may be attuned to certain things or decide to engage in certain experiences based on their prior experiences (Boud & Walker 1990).

Importantly, the personal foundation of experience may be unconscious or unarticulated, and it may be difficult for an individual to "give an account" of it (Boud & Walker 1990, p. 63). This suggests that personal foundation of experience has an influence on meaning-making (in terms of the reactions to an experience that are based in the learner's past), but that these reactions may not be easily explained; reactions to an experience may also be unknown to the learner (Boud & Walker 1990). Moreover, consideration of thoughts, actions and feelings in reaction to an experience may give



insight into the learner's personal foundation of experience, their sense of self, their approach to learning from an experience, and their capacity to do so (Boud & Walker 1990).

### **2.8.3 The influence of learning intent, motivations and expectations on meaning-making**

People may bring learning intent to an experience (Boud & Walker 1990). Learning intent is a "personal determination which provides a particular orientation within a given situation, a rationale for why the learner comes to the particular learning event" (Boud & Walker 1990, p. 64). This element of the lens that shapes meaning-making is central to the adult learning concepts of motivation and self-direction (Jarvis 2006; Knowles 1984). Learning intent "acts to focus and intensify perception in relationship to certain parts of an experience, and at the same time play down, or eliminate others" (Boud & Walker 1990, p. 64). Even though an individual may not recognise their learning intent, it is manifested in the thoughts, feelings and actions that result from its influence on an experience and the meaning-making process of interpreting the experience for learning.

Motivations for learning may shape learning intent, as motivation is deeply connected to the learning process (Gopalan et al 2017). Intrinsic motivation, in particular, may influence the meanings made from an experience; it involves the desire "to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn" (Ryan & Deci 2000, p. 70). Expectations of an experience may also inform learning intent. Expectations speak to the kinds of learning a given experience may engender (Illeris 2017). These expectations have a socio-contextual dimension, as the learner may approach meaning-making based on what they might expect to learn from a given social situation or what they perceive the purpose and value of that experience to be. The learner's context influences expectations, as it orients the learner and their meaning-making efforts in a point in time in their personal learning journey and shapes what matters to them in terms of learning from an experience. The researcher acknowledges, however, that life experiences tend to be unplanned and somewhat haphazard, therefore learning intent may be an influence on meaning-making in certain types of life experiences. Learning intent may be relevant to meaning-making from an experience like international study, which has a structured, formal academic component but also has a myriad of opportunities for serendipitous life-experience learning.

The discussion to this point has focussed on the individual nature of meaning-making and the elements of the learner's meaning-making lens that are brought to an experience and used to make

meaning from it. The next section of the chapter will explore socio-contextual influences on meaning-making for learning.

## **2.9 The socio-contextual nature of learning**

Understanding and articulating the significance of life experiences is a meaning-making process, where the individual interprets their experiences and transforms them into learning through their personal meaning-making lens. Adult learning theory in the latter part of the twentieth century recognised the role of socio-contextual factors in the learning process (Merriam 2017), particularly from the influence of Vygotsky's work on social constructivism. Socio-contextual factors influence both the content of the experience and the learner's response to that experience (Fenwick 2000). This study recognises the interrelationship of the learner and their social world. It acknowledges that, while "the learner's meanings still exist in the learner's head" (Fenwick 2000, p. 250), these meanings are *influenced* by the situation that the learner experiences and the individual's meaning-making system that in itself is shaped by social and contextual factors. This study draws from social constructivism, which proposes that "reality takes on meaning which is formed and reformed through the social process" (Gogus 2012, para. 8), thus emphasising the role of social context in the learning process.

### **2.9.1 Social influences on meaning-making**

Learning is not simply a psychological process that happens in "splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives, but that it is intimately related to that world and affected by it" (Jarvis 1987, p. 11). Experience may be seen as "subjective and a form of thought, but these thoughts are constructed and influenced both by our biography and by the social and cultural conditions within which they occur" (Jarvis et al 2003, p. 54). This idea recognises that personal meaning systems are formed within a social context. As Jarvis (1987, p. 15) contends, "learning always occurs within a social context,...the learner is also to some extent a social construct, so that learning should be regarded as a social phenomenon as well as an individualistic one". Personal meaning systems are made up of values and beliefs and learnings from past experiences, but these things are constructed from within a socio-cultural context (Merriam & Clark 1993; Mezirow 1991). Jarvis (1987) notes that every individual is subject to socialisation processes (such as interacting with other people and exposure to different forms of media), and every individual grows and develops within a socio-cultural context. He proposes that learners themselves are to some extent a reflection of their socio-cultural context (Jarvis 1987).

As previously discussed, personal meaning systems are not static, and a person's individual biography is constantly refined in response to new experiences or interactions with the social world (Jarvis 1987). Moreover, while reactions to experiences come from within the person – using all five senses – these reactions occur within a social context and are framed by social forces, thus they may embody social expectations and cultural norms. The framework for this study recognises the social nature of learning and that interpreting an experience for its personal significance is both individually and socially framed.

### **2.9.2 Contextual influences on meaning-making**

Context is a key influence on meaning-making; outcomes of learning are shaped by individual meaning and social forces but may also be product of a particular learning context (Taylor 2007). Usher (1993, p. 170) notes that “meaning is...contextual. When we interpret ‘our’ experience, we do so from a particular context or standpoint”. This standpoint includes the learner's orientation to the experience (and at a particular point in time and in their personal growth journey) and their subjective reactions to it, but also the context of the learning environment or situation. This environment is referred to by Boud and Walker (1990, p. 66) as the ‘learning milieu’ which they define as “all those entities, human and material, which provide the context and events within which the learner operates”. The learning milieu can foster certain kinds of learning (Boud & Walker 1990). As previously noted., Park (2010; 2017) calls this ‘situational meaning’, which is meaning in the context of an occurrence in a certain type of environment, or situation. This means that outcomes of the learning process should be viewed within the context of the situation, (i.e. bereavement, changing jobs, or international study), and may be in part determined by that situation.

### **Summary: Contribution to the framework**

Section 2.8 discussed the idea that meaning-making occurs using a lens that reflects the learner's own frame of reference (Boud & Walker 1990; Dirkx 2001a; Jarvis 1987; Jarvis 2006; Kegan 1980; Mezirow 1991; 2000). It was important to include this idea in the framework so that the researcher could investigate what shapes the search for significance of a life experience, (i.e. the factors that influence personal impact and subjective value). The learner's frame of reference plays a key role in meaning-making (Meriam & Clark 1993; Mezirow 2000).

Section 2.9 discussed the socio-contextual nature of meaning-making. The constructivist approach to learning that underpins experiential learning theory has the individual as the primary instrument in the learning process (Fenwick 2000). However, the researcher acknowledges the social and

contextual influences on meaning-making, as theorised by Jarvis (1987) and Boud and Walker (1990), and in Vygotsky's theories of social constructivism, and seeks to take account of these influences on the meaning-making process. The framework recognises that meaning-making does not occur in a vacuum and that the lens through which meaning-making occurs includes individual, social and contextual forces (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner 2007).

The final iteration of the framework, given in Section 2.11 (Figure 2.5), shows the inclusion of the learner's meaning-making lens in the process of understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience.

## **2.10 The trigger for learning**

Learning has been discussed in this chapter by bringing together Jarvis's (2006) definition of learning and Merriam and Clark's (1993) study on significant learning and seminal works on meaning-making and the socio-contextual influences on learning. This research takes the approach that learning stems from experience and that experience involves the learner's interaction with their life-world (Jarvis 2006). This approach raises the issue of what happens when the learner interacts with a social situation. In other words, it questions what provides the trigger for the meaning-making process. Mezirow's (2000) theory of learning is premised on a 'disorienting dilemma', which occurs when the learner experiences a situation that does not align with their existing meaning structure or frame of reference. This misalignment causes the individual to reassess their values, beliefs and perspectives, and this reassessment also changes the learner's meaning structure (Mezirow 1991; 2000). Mezirow's understanding of adult learning suggests that changes to meaning structures have positive outcomes. Development of one's meaning perspective means that it is "more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective" (Mezirow 2000, pp. 7-8). This progression affords learners greater capacity to make sense of subsequent experiences (Merriam & Heuer 1996).

Adult development theorist, Laurent Daloz (1986, p. 149), also contends that learning is about the ongoing evolution of the way we make meaning, where "we grow through a progression of transformations in our meaning-making apparatus, from relatively narrow and self-centred filters through increasingly inclusive, differentiated and compassionate perspectives". New experiences often modify the meaning and significance of past experiences, where over time, the learner may construct new meanings to those experiences from an "older and (maybe) wiser perspective" (Greenaway 2018, p. 74). These ideas align with the theory of significant learning, where changes to

self-identity or perspectives on the world may occur through the learning process (Merriam & Clark 1993).

In alignment with other theorists' views on the trigger for learning, Jarvis (2006) proposes that learning occurs when reactions to an experience are integrated into the person's individual biography, or their sense of self, values, beliefs, and sum of previous experiences. This process is triggered by what Jarvis (2010) calls a 'disjuncture', where the situation the learner faces does not fit with their previous understanding of the world, or where the learner is presented with knowledge, beliefs, values and so on that do not align with their individual biography. The learner then decides whether to accept those things or not (Jarvis 2010). This is how an experience creates impact on the learner. If there is a complete fit with previous experiences, there may be no learning at all. In other words, if there is no disjuncture, there can be no change (Jarvis 2010). Similarly, Stephen Brookfield describes learning based on a trigger event that elicits a "sense of inner discomfort or perplexity" (Brookfield 1987, p. 26). While these theories are not explicitly shown in the framework, the researcher acknowledges that personal impact is characterised by a shift in identity and capabilities and that there must be a stimulus or trigger for this shift.

## **2.11 The final iteration of the framework**

The study explores the process of understanding and articulating the significance of life experiences. The theories that underpin this process provide the foundation for the study's framework, the final iteration of which is shown at Figure 2.5.

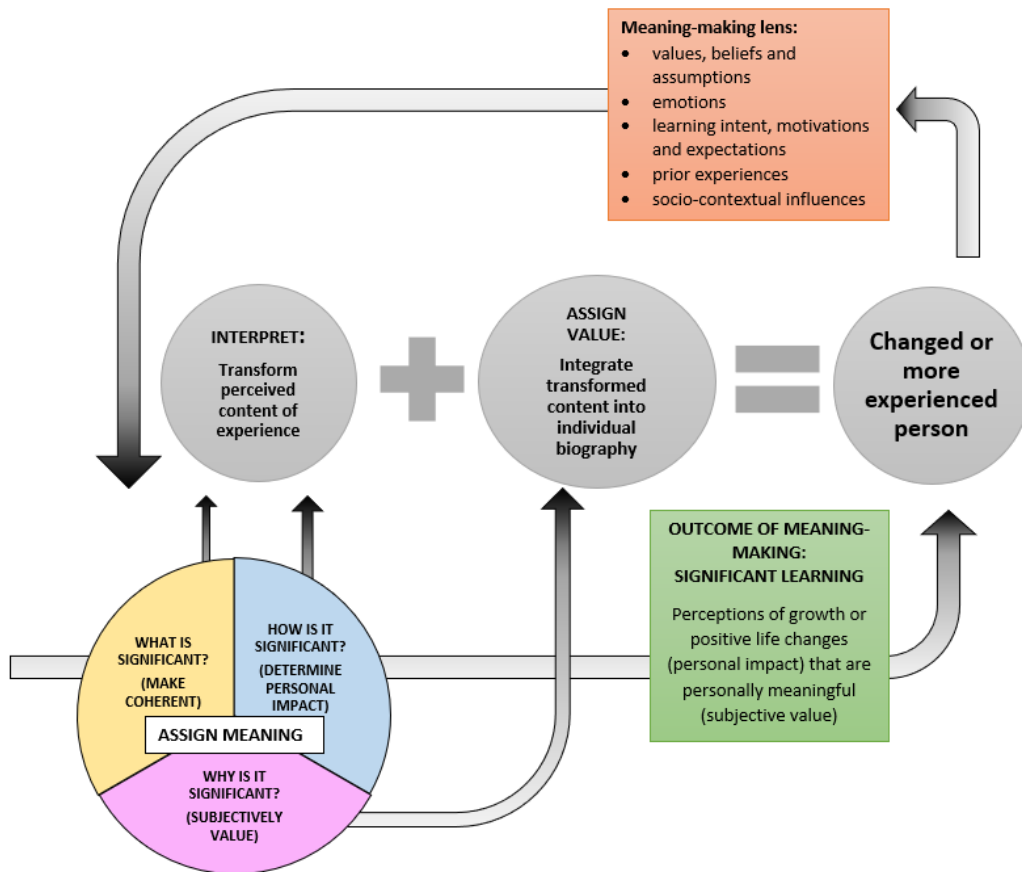


Figure 2.5: The final iteration of the study’s framework

The final iteration of the framework represents the researchers’ review of literature on adult learning, significant learning and meaning-making and the selection of key theories that inform the study to create an approach to addressing the research questions. The framework acknowledges that the learning process (and learners themselves) is extraordinarily complex but attempts to capture the key elements of learning in a way that allows for the exploration of the personal significance of life experiences. It draws largely on constructivist approaches to learning that champion the learner’s construction of meaning from experiences by interpreting them through their own lens and in the context of their prior experiences (Gogus 2012). It draws inspiration from developmental psychology and the notion of life-span development that occurs across several domains, such as social, emotional and cognitive (Keenan, Evans & Crowley 2016). The framework also serves as a means of presenting the research findings in a meaningful way. There was also a deliberate choice by the researcher to base the framework on the meaning-making process as it is essential for learning (Mezirow 2000) and it aligns with the constructivist approach adopted in the study.

The middle part of the framework (the grey circles) shows the definition of learning used in the study, by Peter Jarvis (2006). The tri-coloured circle and green box underneath explain the process of

meaning-making to understand and articulate the significance of an experience, representing the alignment between Jarvis's concept of learning and significant learning theory (Merriam & Clark 1993). This meaning-making process involves assigning meaning to an experience to render it coherent, determining the impact of the experience, and subjectively valuing the experience and its impact. Jarvis (2006) describes the outcome of assigning meaning as the changed or more experienced person. The changed person has understood the significance of their experiences by determining the kinds of impact (i.e. perceptions of growth or positive life changes, from Park 2010) that matter to them (i.e. there is subjective value in the experience). This meaning-making process is mirrored in the study's investigation of what (RQ1), how (RQ2) and why (RQ3) experiences are significant, in the context of international study. The research questions are represented by the segments in the tri-coloured circle.

The work of Kegan, Mezirow and Jarvis provide the key theoretical underpinnings for the inclusion of the learner's meaning-making lens in the framework (the orange box) as the overarching perspective from which experiences are interpreted, based on the learner's values, beliefs and assumptions (Mezirow 1991; 2000). The framework acknowledges that emotions play a key role in meaning-making, as proposed by Dirkx (2001a; 2001b). The influence of prior experiences on each new experience is well documented in the adult learning literature (Boud & Walker 1990; Knowles 1984; Jarvis 2006); this is the rationale for including prior experiences as a component of the lens. The framework also recognises that individuals may come to some informal learning experiences with learning intent, motivations and expectations (Boud & Walker 1990; Gopalan et al 2017). These ideas emphasise the complexity of the learning process and the various influences on meaning-making and highlight the subjective and self-directed nature of adult learning (Knowles 1984). Socio-contextual influences on meaning-making (Boud & Walker 1990; Jarvis 1987; Usher 1993) are also acknowledged. Inclusion of these ideas in the framework allows the researcher to explore how an individual's personal meaning system influences meaning-making, to deepen understanding of the (significant) learning process. The right-hand input arrow into the meaning-making lens box represents the developmental progression of the learner's meaning-making lens through learning from an experience. This progression has an influence on meaning-making from subsequent experiences (Kegan 1982; Mezirow 2000).

As discussed earlier in the chapter, it should be noted that the work of Dewey (1963) and Kolb (1984; 2015) and Boud and Walker (1990) provide the broader context for the study around theories of experiential learning, where experience is the basis and impetus for learning, and where the learner's

interpretation of the experience turns it from just being an experience into actual learning. The extant literature on learning is clear, too, on the elements that must always be present in any learning situation. These elements are “the person as the learner, the social situation within which the learning occurs, the experience that the learner has of that situation, the process of transforming it and storing it within the learner’s mind/biography” (Jarvis 2006, p. 198). These ideas underpin the overall construction of the framework. Learning as a meaning-making process is represented in the framework, which picks up the process after the individual has experienced a social situation. The learner then interprets that situation by transforming its perceived content and then assigning value to that content to integrate changes to the learner’s sense of self. Recognising that an experience has facilitated significant learning involves assigning meaning to an experience to render it coherent, determine its personal impact, and subjectively value it. This meaning-making work frames the way the learner interprets and assigns value to an experience as part of the learning process. The outcome of this process is a changed or more experienced person (Jarvis 2006), who understands the ways they have grown or changed where they have also attached personal value to these changes.

From this framework, a set of reflective prompt questions was developed for collecting data to address the research questions. The framework was also used to structure the data analysis process and presentation of the findings. The methodological approach to this study is discussed in Chapter 4.

### **2.11.1 A final note on learning**

It is important to note that the theories of learning proposed by Mezirow and others suggest one direction of growth, i.e. that growth-enhancing outcomes result from making meaning of experiences. These theories assume expansion, whereas it may be possible for an individual to find their meaning structure is less inclusive, open, or reflective as a result of a learning experience. Dewey (1963) called such experiences ‘mis-educative’, where they have the effect of halting or misconstruing the growth of future experiences. Other theorists (Jarvis 1987; Merriam, Mott & Lee 1996) have noted there are instances of learning that are detrimental to the person’s growth. Jarvis (1987) contends that not all change is progressive in the usual sense of the word; change can have a detrimental effect on the learner if it creates emotional responses that limit positive thought and action. Merriam, Mott and Lee’s (1996) study found that where participants’ sense of self was challenged by an experience, they responded with self-protective behaviours (e.g. blame, anger, and fear) and changed only in growth-inhibiting ways. They suggest that the core of growth-enhancing outcomes is the cognitive complexity of the learner’s meaning-making system and their ability to mitigate the damaging impact of an experience. This idea demonstrates the subjective nature of life-experience learning and how



individuals may perceive the same experience and its resulting impact in different ways. This points to the influence of the learner's meaning-making lens, where what one person may see as 'restricting' may be perceived as 'enhancing' by another. Moreover, the concept of 'positive' and 'negative' impact may be open to debate. The researcher acknowledges that these concepts may be interpreted in different ways by the learner, depending on context and culture.

For many people, life is seen as a series of isolated, unrelated events that are not always valued as triggers for personal growth (Costa & Kallick 2008). Furthermore, over time, growth-inhibiting impact may be reinterpreted by the learner to shift it to growth-enhancing, with the benefit of an advanced meaning-making system that has become more discriminating that provides a more circumspect mindset (Greenaway 2018).

## **2.12 Chapter summary**

This research is concerned with exploring the significance of life experiences. The study investigates the meaning-making process of interpreting a life experience for its significance to the learner (i.e. perceptions of personal impact of and the value that the learner places on the experience and its impact). The study also examines the lens through which the learner makes meaning and how this lens shapes the learning process.

A framework has been developed for the study to shape data collection and analysis. The framework development was an iterative process of exploring the literature on adult learning, experiential learning, the construct of significance, significant learning, and meaning-making, to determine which theories would be integrated into the study. The theories that were explored during the process of developing the framework have been discussed in this chapter. With acknowledgment that learning is complex, and no single theory exists to explain it, the framework has attempted to capture the elements of learning that are always present, as noted above, and to shape them into a conceptual understanding of learning that seeks to address the research objectives of the study. The next chapter explores the literature on the research context – international study – and provides a rationale for why the international study experience was selected as a vehicle for investigating the significance of life experiences.

## **Chapter 3: Research context: international study**

### **3.1 Chapter introduction**

Chapter 2 reviewed the literature that underpins this study of the significance of life experiences. International study has been selected as the vehicle to investigate the research problem. This chapter discusses relevant extant literature on international study to provide the rationale for selecting this experience as that vehicle. The chapter gives a broad overview of the benefits of international study for participants while also examining how the value of the experience has been questioned by the research and practitioner communities. The chapter discusses the challenges that participants often face in articulating learning from international study experiences. The chapter ends with a brief overview of the international study program that has been chosen for the research context.

### **3.2 The rationale for using international study in this research**

There were several factors that shaped the rationale for selecting international study as the vehicle for exploring the significance of life experiences. One of those factors is the potential of international study for learning that leads to personal growth, thus providing a meaningful activity in which to explore the research problem. Moreover, this research is founded on the work of Merriam and Clark (1993) on the significance of life experiences which continues to be referenced (see Yang 2017) but has not yet been applied specifically to international study.

This research is conducted in the Australian context, where study abroad programs are predominantly run by universities as a “transactional exchange of academic credit” (Potts 2015, para. 6) based on partnerships between Australian universities and institutions overseas. The experience has a formal educational component (i.e. subjects studied at the host institution for degree credit), but it also provides a plethora of informal and incidental learning opportunities. This means that it is largely up to the student to determine what they have learned from their experiences in terms of other capabilities and general personal growth. This research aims to contribute insight into ways students can make meaning of, and understand the impact of, their study abroad experiences.

Another reason for selecting international study for this research is that the field has for some time probed the educative value of the experience (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012), despite claims in the literature (and in marketing of programs) of the transformative power of international study (Perry, Stoner & Tarrant 2012) and the body of research on outcomes and impacts of learning abroad (Potts

2016). The educative value of international study has been discussed for several reasons. There are assertions that pre-post program measures often fail to support participants' claims of learning (Wong 2015). Student self-reports of learning have been doubted as sufficient and appropriate evidence of outcomes (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012). It has also been found that students often offer superficial responses when asked what they have learned from their time abroad (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012; Wong 2015). These criticisms point to the need for deeper exploration of how the value (significance) of international study is understood and articulated by participants.

### **3.3 The benefits of international study**

While international study has been interrogated in terms of its educative value, there is a body of research that demonstrates the benefits of the experience. Employability development is one of those benefits (Potts 2018). Crossman and Clarke (2009) investigated stakeholder perceptions of the connection between international study and employability. They found that employers consider graduates who have international experience to be “so far ahead of the pack” that it was ‘unbelievable’” (Crossman & Clarke 2009, p. 605). Employers are looking for people who are culturally aware, adaptable, and problem-solvers, and employers believe that international study has the potential to contribute in these areas (Curran 2007). A US study by the Institute of International Education (2017) found that longer study abroad programs had a statistically significant positive influence on 11 of 15 employability skills tested, including communication skills, self-awareness, adaptability and flexibility, and problem solving (Potts 2018). International study participants perceive that the experience will give them a career advantage, provide them with a different perspective on others, and foster intercultural understanding and language learning that is important for success at work (Curran 2007).

The International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) released a report on the outcomes and impacts of learning abroad programs (Potts 2016). The report frames individual benefits as academic, intercultural competence and global citizenship, personal and social development, and employment and career direction. Selected studies of these outcomes are given below (Potts 2016).

Table 3.1: Key studies of individual international study outcomes

<b>Focus</b>	<b>Study</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Academic outcomes	Lee, Therriault and Linderholm 2012	Studying abroad supports the development of creative thinking.
	Gonyea 2008	Based on data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (US), learning abroad was shown to impact on two measures of learning: integrative and reflective learning.
	Watson and Wolfel 2015	Significant foreign language improvements were shown in programs in the target language.
Intercultural competence and global citizenship	Braskamp, Braskamp and Merrill 2009	Study abroad promotes cognitive development around understandings of cultural difference.
	Lilley, Barker and Harris 2015	Study abroad helps participants to think like global citizens.
	Salisbury 2011	Study abroad significantly affects the positive development of intercultural competence.
Personal and social development	McLeod et al 2015	Findings included enhancement in participants' internal locus of control, which is understood to be connected to problem-solving abilities, personal relationship-building, academic achievement, and the capacity to handle challenges.
	Zimmerman and Neyer 2013	Personality maturation was found to have occurred, around openness and agreeableness.
	Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2014	Findings included improved communication skills and the capacity to comprehend moral and ethical issues.
Career direction	Dwyer 2004	Studying abroad influences participants' decisions to expand or change academic majors and it stimulates an interest in career direction.
	Ingraham and Peterson 2004	The study abroad experience helps students to make career decisions and is a key factor in career choice.
	Potts 2014	Study abroad experiences are perceived as worthwhile for the development of a range of employability capabilities.

Table 3.1 provides a snapshot of the hundreds of studies that have been conducted in the field. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine these studies further. It is noted that there has been significant research conducted in the last forty years on outcomes and impacts of international study that has advanced the field of knowledge and demonstrates the value of the experience. There are complexities to this research, however, that need to be considered. These complexities will be discussed in the next section of the chapter.

### **3.4 Probing the educative value of international study**

This section of the chapter discusses discourses around the educative value of international study. It includes an examination of the complexities and limitations of the extant research, the argument that study abroad results are disappointing, the challenges that students face in articulating what they have learned, and issues of program design.

#### **3.4.1 Complexities and limitations of the international study research**

Reports like the IEAA one discussed above (Potts 2016) provide evidence of international study outcomes, therefore it may seem unwarranted to interrogate the educative value of the experience. One of the issues with the outcomes research is that it is usually undertaken with participants immediately following their return home. The research often adopts a ‘pre-post program’ approach, where the aim for researchers is to understand changes in students through participation in international study experiences (Potts 2016). This approach may not account for full realisation of such change, as it may not be understood by participants for some time after they return home (Potts 2016). This speaks to the ELT principle that over time, new experiences may work to change the meaning of past experiences to create different (and perhaps wiser) perspectives on the value of those past experiences (Greenaway 2018). Impacts research looks to examine changes beyond graduation. This is difficult to do from a practical sense (i.e. contacting former students) and from a methodological standpoint, as there are a myriad of factors that need to be considered when analysing data on impacts on participants (Potts 2016).

Intercultural competence is one area of research that has been undertaken using rigorously-designed instruments, such as the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven 2000) and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman 2003). While these measures are widely used and generally show positive results, there are methodological issues with such instruments. Deardoff (2009) contends that intercultural competency should be assessed in multiple ways using largely qualitative methods. The IDI, which is a quantitative instrument and focusses on intercultural sensitivity, does not align with Deardorff’s recommendation (Wong 2015). Moreover, as noted above, it may be ill-considered to assume that change is apparent immediately upon return from an international sojourn (Salisbury 2011). As Wong (2015, p. 126) suggests, “what study abroad students call ‘great’ may or may not be adequately visible” through the limited view of current measurements.

Impacts and outcomes of international study related to careers, employment and employability are detailed in two IEAA reports, but it is noted that there are methodological issues with the findings (Potts 2016; 2018). Di Pietro (2014, p. 1) explains that, while there is research to show that graduates who have studied abroad are more employable than those who have not, any differences “may reflect the influence of unobserved individual characteristics, such as personality”. In the IEAA report on learning abroad and employability, Potts (2018, p. 19) concludes that “causality cannot be easily demonstrated” and we need to recognise “the limitations on our ability to isolate factors from the broader context of an individual’s personal and professional development”. Despite these factors, Potts (2018) proposes that international study fosters capability development; these capabilities may be transferable to the workplace, as long as participants understand what they have gained from their experiences and how they may apply these gains beyond the international study experience.

One of the studies cited in the IEAA report on outcomes from learning abroad (Potts 2016) is the Australian research by Forsey, Broomhall and Davis (2012) that was referenced in Chapter 1 of this thesis. This study found that participants were more self-confident as a result of their international study experiences, but it also suggests that a deeper level of analysis of the experience is needed. Moreover, the researchers explain that their work highlights the “rather ordinary” learning that their research participants reported which they believe is a departure from the “lofty rhetoric” of the home institution of transformative potential of the experience (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012, p. 129). Based on the superficial responses from students to questions about what they had learned, the researchers call for further studies that focus more closely on the most effective ways to evaluate international study experiences (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012). The research reported in this thesis aims to address this call.

There is a suggestion that students may be telling people what they want or expect to hear when they report that international study has transformed them, thus displaying “social desirability bias” (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012, p. 35). This may be because international study is framed around a discourse of transformation, and every student who embarks on such a program has been told that the experience will change their lives (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012). It may be that the rhetoric around the experience is contributing to issues around its educative value.

### **3.4.2 Issues of learning and educative value**

Despite the significant body of research on international study outcomes and impact, it is still not clear what students learn from international study experiences (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich 2002;

Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012; Wong 2015). A number of questions are still being asked about what new things participants know and are able to do as a result of their experiences (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012, p. 22). These questions point to the idea of what we mean by learning from international study and what constitutes value. Stakeholders may have different perspectives on value in relation to outcomes from international study (Zull 2012). The experience has the potential to be “more than a vacation” (Perry, Stoner & Tarrant 2012, p. 679), but there still seems to be debate over its purpose and intended outcomes. “Pre-designed metrics of academic success or economic benefit” (Schroeder 2016, p. 2) may not equate with students’ perceptions of personal growth as a result of their experiences. These self-perceptions may not be seen as a sufficient outcome of the experience to meet stakeholder expectations, especially for the financial investment required from universities to offer study abroad programs.

While there are a plethora of studies that used rigorous instruments to assess learning from international study, evidence of learning is often based on student self-reports (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012). There are several critiques of these self-reports, as noted by Vande Berg, Paige and Lou (2012). They question why we would use self-reports as evidence of learning when they are not used in other domains. They propose that self-reports “give voice to the study abroad experience. But they are ultimately unique to the student and lack generalisability because there is no external criterion with which to evaluate them” (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012, p. 32). Study abroad, however, particularly in the Australian context, *is* an experience unique to the student and may be meaningful in ways that speak to the students’ individualised experiences outside of the classroom. Gemignani’s (2009) study demonstrated the individualised nature of interpretations of international study experiences. Her study also highlighted the way that the study abroad experience can be significantly impacted by unusual, unpredictable or happenstance events or situations. The educative value of international study seems to stem from its potential for learning from such events and in ways that matter to the individual participant.

The question of the validity of student self-reports points to the nature of the experience; if it is considered a life experience, then these types of experiences are not usually measured. However, there are strong expectations of outcomes from international study from all stakeholders. Questions over findings on international study outcomes suggest alternative methods of uncovering educative gains may be needed. These questions also highlight issues around the way that learning from international study and the educative value of the experience are conceptualised and measured.

### **3.5 The ‘beyond it was great’ argument**

The 2013 annual conference of the Forum on Education Abroad was organised around the theme, ‘Moving beyond it was great’, which was seen as a call for the international study community to carefully consider what students are learning and how their learning might be supported. The call was to find deeper meanings of student learning beyond ‘it was great’ (Wong 2015).

#### **3.5.1 Interrogating the ‘beyond it was great’ argument**

Wong (2015) acknowledges that students often say ‘it was great’ when asked about their international experiences. He proposes, though, that it is “reasonable that we can tentatively believe, rather than be sceptical, that students’ experiences were, in fact, ‘great’” (Wong 2015, p. 123) therefore there must be some weight attached to such claims. If this belief underpins the debate on student learning from international study, then Wong (2015) suggests that we interrogate whether (i) students in fact have nothing to say, or it is just that they are unable to say it, (ii) there is a delayed effect from international study rather than no effect, (iii) the issue may be with assessment used to measure learning rather than with the students themselves, and (iv) expectations of learning from international study are too high.

#### **Nothing to say or unable to say it?**

It may be incorrect to assume that student inarticulateness about their international study experience, or lack of substance to claims of learning, equates with no impact (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012; Wong 2015). We need to examine the claims of student learning from international study, but we also need to acknowledge the challenges that students may face in determining exactly what was ‘great’ about their time abroad (Wong 2015). When describing their learning, participants may be relating what was deeply meaningful to them (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012), even if this learning does not meet stakeholder expectations. Conceptualising learning from such a lengthy and complex experience such as international study may be difficult. Something to consider is the limitation on individual capabilities to reflect and make meaning from experiences. Relying on participants to articulate learning from international study assumes a capacity for deep approaches to learning, self-awareness, self-regulation and metacognition that are not inherent in everyone (Coulson & Harvey 2013; Moon 2004). This may be particularly relevant to international study, given the stage of development and maturity of the usual age of participants. A study by Gardner and colleagues (2008) recognised the severity and universality of the problem of inarticulateness when they saw the challenges international study participants faced in articulating the impact of their experience to employers.



### **Delayed rather than no effect**

As noted by Potts (2016) in the IEAA report on international study outcomes, one issue with measuring change in participants is that studies are usually conducted soon after students return home. It may be difficult for students to articulate the effect of their experiences at this point. Adult learning theory tells us that learning is an ongoing process, where one experience is connected to another (Dewey 1963). The lens with which we make meaning also develops as we interpret each new experience (Mezirow 2000). ‘Great’ experiences may not be fully realised until they are considered along with subsequent or related experiences (Wong 2015).

### **Limitations on the assessments rather than the students**

There are a large number of available instruments and methods for assessing learning from international study, particularly intercultural competence, but there is still no agreement from experts on the use of these instruments or indeed on what is meant by intercultural competence (Wong 2015). The questions that students are asked about their international study experiences may also be part of the problem. As an example, an Australian study asked participants ‘what did you learn from your experiences while studying abroad?’ Many found it hard to explain their experience and fell back on platitudes such as “seizing the day” (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012, p. 132). The study participants were also asked, “what was the best thing you learnt?” (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012, p. 132). In response, students referenced fun, seeing the seasons change, and going to events (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012). One student commented that “you do learn stuff about yourself, but it is more about having fun” (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012, p. 135). These responses are more indicative of ‘doing’ than of learning; they explain what students *did*, not how the experience contributed to their personal growth.

When using ‘great’ to describe international study experiences, participants may be referencing the nature of the experience (i.e. that it was intense or engaging) rather than learning from it (Wong 2015). How students are supported to articulate the meaning of their experiences in terms of personal growth is vital if we are to move beyond surface understandings. Importantly, reliance on any given instrument is risky; Wong (2015, p. 126) notes that “what study abroad students call ‘great’ may or may not be visible through this limited view”. We need to take seriously participants’ claims that international study has changed them in some way and consider how we are trying to uncover those claims.

## **High expectations**

In Wong's (2015) critique of the 'beyond it was great' argument, he explains that the argument is premised around the claim that results of learning from international study are disappointing. As noted in this chapter, while there are limitations on the extant international study research findings, generally studies have found positive effects on participants (Potts 2016; Wong 2015). The claim that results are disappointing may stem from "an implicit expectation that gains should be greater, more rapid, or more consistent" (Wong 2015, p. 123).

According to Vande Berg, Paige and Lou (2012), claims about international student learning generally proceed using the following logic: (i) students are learning effectively during international study experiences through exposure to, and immersion in, new and different experiences, (ii) student self-reports of 'transformation' are sufficient evidence of the first claim, and (iii) because the first two claims are true, the focus should be on increasing participation rather than on improvements to pedagogic practices and program design. These claims seem to suggest "an almost unquestioned assumption that study abroad is good" even though there is no assurance that students will immerse themselves in their host culture, learn the language of their host country, or interact in any meaningful way with the host country people or the culture (Katula & Threnhauser 1999, pp. 246-7). Intercultural competence, as a key outcome of international study, is not an automatic result of studying abroad, just as cross-cultural contact does not equate with intercultural learning (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012). Moreover, only a small number of students study in countries where they are likely to develop language skills (Curran 2007) and, as one study found, half the participants interacted less with people from their host country than anticipated (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012). Perhaps expectations are too high.

The 'beyond it was great' argument provides a solid platform to this research, which examines what is significant about international study to participants and how students can understand and articulate the significance of their experiences.

## **3.6 International study and experiential approaches to learning**

Experiential learning theory is based on the premise that experience is the impetus and basis for learning, but the provision of an experience in and of itself is not enough (Beard & Wilson 2013). *Learning* from that experience makes it experiential, therefore part of the 'beyond it was great' debate is focussed on the idea that intervention is needed to facilitate learning (Wong 2015). This research

is conducted in the Australian context, where study abroad consists of taking subjects in a host university for transfer of academic credit (Potts 2015). Universities support the *provision* of the experience and often the *learning* part is the responsibility of participants. Around the globe, study abroad programs differ in terms of purposeful design, ranging from credit transfer to programs that fully embrace experiential approaches in their design (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich 2002).

Experiential learning theorists contend that without purposeful experiential learning-based design of programs, students will have difficulty making meaning from their experiences (Katula & Threnhauser 1999; Montrose 2002; Peckenpaugh 2014; Perry, Stoner & Tarrant 2012). Even where there is not intentional experiential learning program design, it is argued that students need to be guided to take ownership of their role in the learning process (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich 2002). Furthermore, it has been suggested that “unmonitored study abroad experiences can be ‘mis-educative’” (Aguilar & Gingerich 2002, p. 46). Indeed, one of the main criticisms of international study is the “lack of intentionality among programmers” (Strange & Gibson 2017, p. 86). Irrespective of program design, it is crucial to appreciate how students understand their experiences so they can be supported in their learning (Ignelzi 2000). This study aims to contribute to this understanding by examining the significance of international study to participants and the process of meaning-making and .

### **3.7 The program used in this research**

The study examines the significance of life experiences in the context of international study, specifically the UQ Abroad program offered by the University of Queensland (UQ) in Australia. The study abroad program is designed around one or two semesters of study in an overseas partnership university. The UQ Abroad website lists the following benefits for students of studying abroad:

- Independence
- Challenging yourself
- Exploring the world
- Broadening your degree by enrolling in courses that are not offered at UQ
- Discovering new career opportunities
- Enhancing your employability
- Making new friends from all over the world
- Living in another culture and improving foreign language skills

The program is administered by the UQ Abroad office which is part of the university's Student Employability Centre. Only a small proportion of students study abroad each year (300-350 per semester of the 50 000 cohort). Most students go to English-speaking countries, with Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Ireland the most popular countries (60-65% participation). A major part of the program is the application process, which is a lengthy and complex as students have to "read...a lot of complex information sometimes about the rules and regulations of the university". The process involves eligibility checks, approval of study plans, and acceptance by both UQ Abroad and the host institution.

Students self-fund their time spent abroad, although scholarships, grants and loans are available for financial support. Students are required to arrange all travel and accommodation. The host institution is expected to support their exchange students while they are studying at their university. The UQ Abroad office can assist if there is a serious issue.

Most study abroad programs in Australia are focussed on administration processes, although universities often provide activities for returned students that may help them link their experiences to the outcomes that are claimed in the learning abroad literature (Potts 2016). The UQ Abroad website prompts students to reflect on their experiences and keep a journal. Participants have the opportunity to submit a testimonial of their experiences, in written or video form, which is used in promotional material for the program. Study abroad counts towards the university's employability award (with a written reflection), a program that recognises the personal and professional development gains students can make from extra-curricular activities. Other than the small group of students who attend a voluntary post-experience employability workshop offered by the university's Student Employability Centre, or those enrolled in the Bachelor of International Relations where study abroad is compulsory, it is left to the student to determine what they have learned from their experiences.

(Note that data obtained for Section 3.7 comes from personal communication and an interview with the Program Manager and publicly-available information on the UQ Abroad website.)

### **3.8 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed the literature on learning from international study to provide a rationale for selecting the experience as the vehicle for examining the significance of life experiences. Student self-reports of learning have often been used to demonstrate the success of the international study experience (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012) and pre-post program measures often fail to support these self-reports (Wong 2015). While the research and practitioner communities question the educative value of international study, it is important to take seriously student claims of the value of their experiences and find better ways to understand what they are trying to say (Wong 2015). This research is aimed at investigating how learners can understand and articulate the significance of life experiences, in the context of international study. It addresses a timely and pressing issue in higher education – how we recognise and measure learning outside of formal learning contexts. The next chapter outlines the methodological approach to achieving those aims.

## **Chapter 4: Research methodology**

### **4.1 Chapter introduction**

Chapters 2 and 3 provided the context for the study of the significance of life experiences. Chapter 2 discussed the development of the study's framework by examining the key theories that underpin the research. Chapter 3 provided the rationale for selecting international study as the context for the research. This chapter presents the research design that shapes the approach to answering the research questions. It examines the research paradigm that frames this design, then it outlines the methodology adopted to address the research questions. The chapter also provides information on a pilot study that was conducted to test and refine the data collection instrument.

### **4.2 Research paradigm**

The use of the term 'paradigm' in educational research refers to the researcher's worldview, denoting the "perspective, or thinking, or school of thought, or the set of shared beliefs, that informs the meaning or interpretation of research data" (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017, p. 26). A research paradigm is a conceptual lens framed by philosophical assumptions held by the researcher about the nature of reality (ontology) and ways of knowing (epistemology) and how these inform the methodology (Patton 2002). A research paradigm represents the researcher's perspective on the construction of meaning from the data collected for the study (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). The research paradigm, therefore, is an important influence on what is researched, how it is researched, and how the results of the research are interpreted (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017).

The main paradigms used in educational research are positivist, interpretivist/constructivist, and critical (Candy 1989). This qualitative study is concerned with the significance of life experiences, in the context of international study. It is situated within the constructivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed by people who actively participate in the research process (Mertens 2015). This paradigm was founded on the Husserlian principle of hermeneutics which is the study of interpretive meaning from a given standpoint (Mertens 2015).

The underlying premise of constructivism is "the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds" (Merriam 1998, p. 6). The main enterprise of the constructivist paradigm is the understanding of the subjective nature of human experience (Guba & Lincoln 1989). This enterprise is about understanding and interpreting the meanings that the research participants

place on the phenomenon that is being studied, to emphasise the viewpoint of those participants rather than that of the researcher (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017). This study is concerned with exploring the meanings around the significance of the international study experience from the participant perspective. The construct of significance is socially created and means different things to different people (Mertens 2015); these different meanings are explored in this study.

The relativist ontology of constructivism asserts that there is no single reality or truth, and human beings construct their own realities (Kafle 2011; Merriam 1998). The ‘Reality’ experienced is not absolute, in the sense of the natural world, but rather it is shaped by individual perception and by cultural and linguistic constructs (Patton 2002). The constructivist approach to qualitative inquiry supports the exploration of different experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon, with acknowledgement that they all warrant attention as they may all be construed as ‘real’ (Patton 2002). The researcher presents the multiple interpretations of reality (Merriam 1998) in a cohesive way to deepen understanding of the phenomenon without making judgements of which ones are more true or real (Patton 2002). In this study, the aim is not to present a “definitive capture of reality that can be generalised to a larger population” (Mertens 2015, p. 19) but rather a description of significance and of the significance of international study from the perspective of the international study participants who shared their experiences with the researcher.

The constructivist paradigm assumes a subjectivist epistemology where the researcher “makes meaning of their data through their own thinking and cognitive processing...informed by their interactions with participants” (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017, p. 33). This is a transaction of sorts, between the researcher and the participants, where the “investigator and the object of the investigation are...interactively linked so that the ‘findings’ are literally created as the investigation proceeds” (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 207). The interaction between the researcher and the participants assumes that the researcher will construct an interpretation of the world (in this case, the significance of the international study experience) as they perceive it to be (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

This research is underpinned by the belief that, despite lived experiences being complex and carrying a range of meanings, it is possible to understand people’s experiences through an analysis of the descriptions of those experiences (Sloan & Bowe 2014). The research also acknowledges that the social world cannot be understood from the perspective of a single individual, therefore it values the investigation of multiple, personal recollections of the significance of their experiences.

### 4.3 Research methodology: Case study

The researcher's choice of methodology was determined by the constructivist paradigm that frames the study, underpinned by the ontological and epistemological assumptions outlined above (Creswell 1998). Qualitative case study methodology is suitably aligned with the constructivist paradigm as its motivations stem from a desire to explore and understand the meaning of an experience (a case) from the perspective of those who have lived it (Harrison et al 2017). The case study describes the perspectives of the participants without judging the nature of those perspectives or determining whether they are true or valid; the focus of the study is on *what matters to participants* in terms of their understanding of the significance of their international study experiences.

Case study researchers do not look to test a hypothesis, but rather they search for insight, discovery, and interpretation (Merriam 2009). In this case, the researcher searched for insight into the significance of life experiences. Theory around meaning-making for learning, underpinned by the dimensions of the construct of significance (impact and value), was shaped into a conceptual framework. This theory is situated within the context of learning where there is no curriculum to guide the learning process. The context for the case – international study – added further meaning to the search for insight, as there is a debate in the literature around the educative value of the experience (Curran 2007; Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012).

A case study explores a phenomenon (in this case, the significance of life experiences) within its real-life context (in this case, international study) (Baxter & Jack 2008). This allows for “in-depth exploration and understanding of complex issues” (Zainal 2007, p. 1). Case studies may be used to investigate a phenomenon that is contemporary rather than historical. They may be used where the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear and where the researcher has little or no control over the phenomenon (Yin 2014). The phenomenon and the context in which it occurs are inherently tied together (Yin 2014). In this case, the significance of life experiences could not be explored without also exploring a life experience or experiences. The choice of case study as the methodology for this research stemmed from the researcher's aim to understand a real-world case (the significance of life experiences), where it is assumed that this understanding is “likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to your case” (Yin 2003, p. 16). In this study, this understanding pertains to both the case and the context, given that there was a rationale for selecting international study as the life experience (as outlined in Chapter 3).



It is suggested by Baxter and Jack (2008) that the case be bounded to ensure the scope is realistic and confined. In this study, the case is bounded theoretically by meaning-making and significant learning, underpinned by principles of constructivism. The learning theories present just one approach to understanding the complex process of adult learning. The case is further bounded contextually, by taking an activity and time approach to the case context (Stake 1995). The activity is a study abroad program (of one to two semesters) at a large research-intensive university in Australia. The time boundary covers 2016 and 2017 - the period when the participants studied at their international host institutions.

### **4.3.1 Case study type**

This study addresses its research aims using a single case with embedded units design (Baxter & Jack 2008). Single case studies are usually used to investigate typical experiences; they create a holistic picture of one setting through an in-depth analysis of experiences that yield rich and detailed descriptions (Yin 2009). In this research, the single case - the significance of life experiences and the meaning-making process to understand that significance - is explored in one setting, international study. Examining the case in one setting meant the researcher could better explore and illuminate the construct of significance by focussing the analysis on a single instance of a life experience (Baxter & Jack 2008). The choice of a single case study with embedded units was deliberate by the researcher, to deepen understanding of the case, given the complex nature of life-experience learning. The researcher does acknowledge, however, that this choice only allows for understanding of one context in which the case is applied.

Embedded case studies have more than one unit of analysis (Scholz & Tietje 2002). In an industry-embedded case study, Bass, Beecham and Noll (2018) explored the collaborative activities of a team of people in a medium-sized software company who work across time zones; each team member was a unit of analysis. The researchers observed and interviewed the participant team members and converged the data from the units of analysis (using the two data collection instruments) to develop a picture of the phenomenon. In this research, the units of analysis were the fourteen students who participated in the institution's study abroad program during the bounded time period. Each student represented a data source on the case in context - the significance of the international study experience. Using a single case with embedded units allowed the researcher to gain a deep understanding of individual exemplars of the case and context by analysing the units separately. It also allowed the researcher to converge the data from the embedded units (i.e. between and across the units) to create a holistic description of the case and context (Baxter & Jack 2008). As noted by

Bass, Beecham and Noll (2018), an embedded units approach allows researchers to investigate the phenomenon repeatedly, enhancing confirmability of the findings. In this study, the embedded units gave the researcher the opportunity to analyse repeated instances of Merriam and Clark's (1993) earlier findings on the significance of life experiences. The number of units used in the study was considered to provide enough data for analysis and contribution to theory within the scope of a doctoral thesis.

The purpose of the study determines the type of case study that is employed (Baxter & Jack 2008). Yin (2003) categorises case studies as explanatory, exploratory and descriptive. This research is a descriptive case study, defined as “a case study whose purpose is to describe a phenomenon (the ‘case’) in its real-world context” (Yin 2014, p. 238). The researcher's goal is to describe the data and the “natural phenomena which occur within the data in question” (Zainal 2007, p. 3). The phenomenon studied here is the connection between experience and learning. This phenomenon is explored through the investigating the significance of life experiences, what this looks like in the context of a particular life experience, and how the significance of an experience is understood and articulated by the learner. By examining the significance of life experiences in the context of international study, the research illustrates what was significant about that experience to participants and how and why it was significant. This approach provides insight into the meanings that participants made from international study and the potential of the experience to contribute to students' personal growth. These aims align with the use of a descriptive case study to provide a comprehensive reporting of the research findings to provide a “thick description” of the situation and its complexities (Merriam 1998, p. 29).

### **4.3.2 The study's propositions**

A case study's propositions (Yin 2003) are helpful for guiding the research design, particularly for developing a conceptual framework that shapes the study. Propositions function in a similar way to hypotheses, as they both “make an educated guess to the possible outcomes of the experiment/research study” (Baxter & Jack 2008, p. 552). They may arise out of the literature or from stem from personal and/or professional experiences (Baxter & Jack 2008). They give a conceptual structure to the study, bringing to focus the complexity, contextuality and issues in the case (Stake 1995). The propositions that frame this study are inherent in the research questions and in the research framework.

The key proposition in this case study is that a learning experience is significant if it has an impact on the individual and is valued by the learner. This first proposition is based on a study by Merriam and Clark (1993) on the significance of life experiences. The data collection and analysis methods in this study were guided by an examination of the two dimensions of the construct of significance - personal impact and subjective value (Merriam & Clark 1993).

The second proposition is connected to the first one as it underpins the notion of valuing an experience for it to be significant. This proposition, from the work of key adult learning theorists (for example, Boud & Walker 1990; Knowles 1984; Mezirow 2000), is that a learner's personal meaning system shapes the interpretation of each new experience. A learner's personal meaning system is comprised of elements, such values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and prior experiences, and is influenced by socio-contextual factors. Value, therefore, is ascribed to an experience through the learner's unique meaning-making lens.

The study's propositions are framed by the notion that understanding and articulating the significance of an experience to recognise how it has changed the learner in ways that are of personal value is a meaning-making process.

### **4.3.3 The research questions**

Case studies are about asking 'how' and 'why' questions that seek to explain a phenomenon or circumstance (Yin 2003). This study examined how international study participants understand and articulate the significance of their experiences, through investigating:

1. What is significant about international study to participants?
2. How are these things significant?
3. Why are these things significant?

The research questions directed the study to explore the kinds of experiences that participants in international study deem to be significant (RQ1) and how and why these things are significant, using the dimensions of personal impact (how) (RQ2) and subjective value (why) (RQ3) from Merriam and Clark's (1993) work on significant learning. Examining what is significant to participants provided an anchor for their reflections on how and why those experiences are significant, given the length and complexity of the international study experience. Investigating how and why experiences are significant also allowed the study to explore theory around the influence of personal meaning on what is significant, and the socio-cultural and contextual forces that shape meaning-making.

Ultimately, the purpose of educational qualitative research is to improve the practice of teaching and learning, and case study research design is an appropriate approach for investigating and understanding educational processes that support effective learning (Worthington 2010). Exploration of the nature of the construct of significance in the context of international study provides insight into the nature of life-experience learning and how learners can understand and articulate the significance of an experience. This insight has implications for (i) supporting participants in international study programs to make meaning and recognise the value of their experiences and (ii) how learning from international study is acknowledged and measured. This also has implications for recognising and measuring learning from experiences that occur outside of formal learning structures, particularly where there is potential for those experiences to contribute significantly to personal growth.

#### **4.3.4 The study's framework**

Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest that a framework is an important anchor for the case study and for interpreting the study's findings. A framework also serves to identify what will be included in the study and what will not, and to organise concepts, theories, or constructs into "intellectual 'bins'" (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 18). This study's framework (Figure 4.1) and the literature that underpins it were discussed in Chapter 2. The framework highlights the key elements of the theories that inform the research and the study's propositions. It also allowed the researcher to ground the study in constructivist elements of adult learning theory around meaning-making for significance. This was important for this study, given the broad and complex nature of adult learning where no single theory exists to fully describe it (Jarvis 2006).

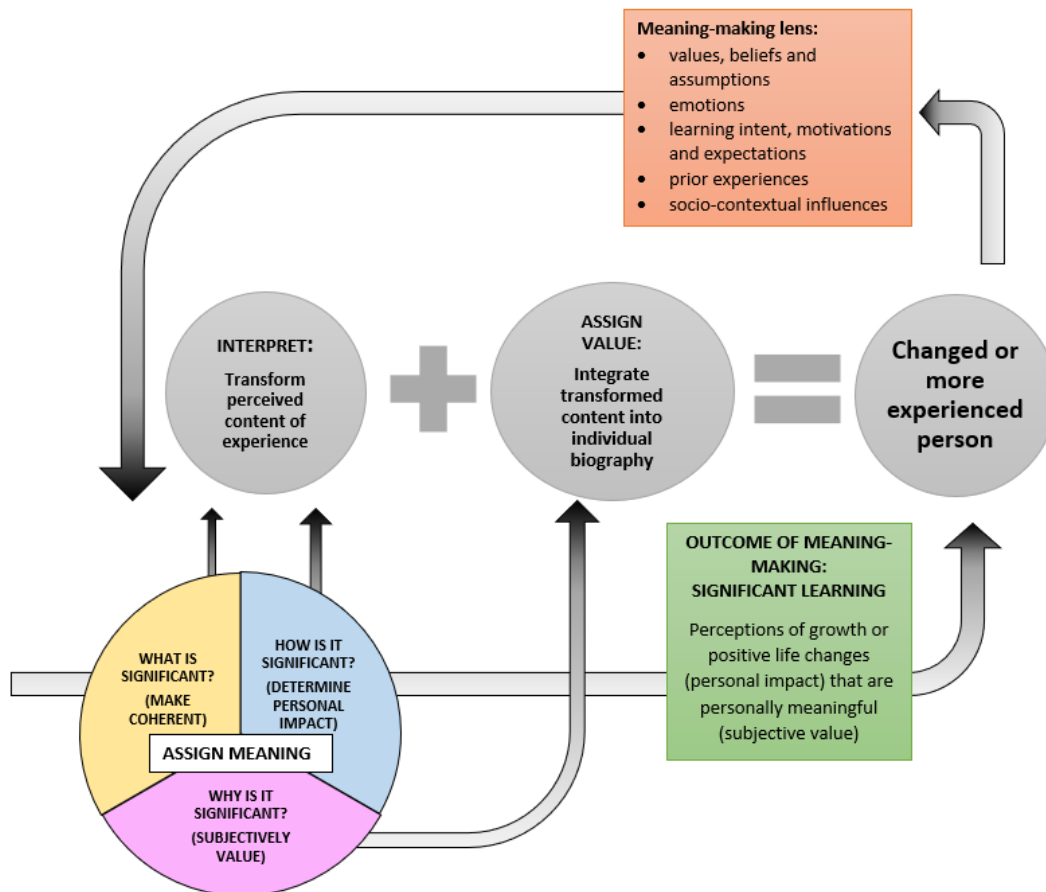


Figure 4.1: The study’s framework

Baxter and Jack (2008) provide a cautionary note around using frameworks in case studies. They note that a framework should continue to develop throughout the research process and should be completed as the study takes shape, where relationships between the constructs emerge from the data analysis. Development of the framework was an iterative process, as discussed in Chapter 2. The framework guided the formulation of data collection instruments and allowed the researcher to explore the framework concepts in depth. A pilot study was undertaken to test its theories and the data collection instruments, and the framework was modified based on the pilot. The researcher also continually returned to the framework throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Baxter and Jack (2008) also note the possible weakness in using a framework. They contend that it may place limitations on the researcher’s ability to take an inductive approach to investigating the phenomenon. They also suggest that researchers note their thoughts and decisions and review them with other researchers to avoid the framework constraining thinking. This is the approach in this research. The researcher also returned to the study’s propositions to ensure that data analysis remained within scope, as suggested by Yin (2003). As also suggested by Yin (2003), the findings, analysis and discussion chapters have been structured according to the framework.

It is important to note that this study's framework is both a tool for collecting, analysing and presenting the findings *and* an outcome of the research. The framework forms part of a newly-developed inquiry protocol for understanding and articulating the significance of an experience. Two data collection instruments (a mind map and set of reflective prompt questions) were developed from the framework. These are discussed in the next section of the chapter.

## 4.4 Data collection

Qualitative inquiries such as case studies may use a range of methodologies to explore the phenomenon of interest and may come from different ontological and epistemological standpoints. They all, however, share the objective of seeking to understand an experience from the perspective of those who have lived it (Harrison et al 2017). Typically, this objective is achieved through data collection methods such as document analysis, direct observations, and interviews, where the words spoken or written by the participants are analysed to provide a rich description of the phenomenon of study (Merriam 2009). This qualitative case study utilised mind maps and in-depth interviews as its key data collection methods. These methods are discussed in more detail in the following section of the chapter.

This case study used qualitative methods to collect data to address the research objectives. Yin (2014) contends that two or more sources of data are required for case study research, including, but not limited to, documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artefacts. A key principle of case study research is that data from multiple sources are converged, where each data source may be thought of as a piece of the 'puzzle' that as a whole facilitates a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of the study (Baxter & Jack 2008; Yin 2014). In this study, two sources of data were used:

1. mind maps drawn by the participants to chart their significant experiences
2. in-depth semi-structured interviews with the participants on how and why their study abroad experiences were significant

The choice of the two data sources was based on the research questions for the case study. The mind maps address the first research question, of *what* was significant about the participants' international study experiences. The second and third research questions, around *how* and *why* the mind-mapped experiences were significant, were addressed in the interviews. This approach gave the researcher the opportunity to converge the mind map and interview data to provide a unified picture of what, how and why international study experiences were significant to participants. As noted in Section 4.3.1,

the 14 embedded units (i.e. each participant in the study abroad program) were also considered to be individual, distinct sources of data, providing 14 instances of the phenomenon in context. Note that the two data collection methods occurred at the same time (as a two-part interview involving generating the mind map then the interview questions), but they are being treated as two distinct data sets.

#### **4.4.1 Mind maps of the participants' significant experiences**

The first research question – what is significant about the international study experience (RQ1) – needed a data-gathering tool to capture the significant elements of a multi-faceted, lengthy experience. Study abroad programs like the one in this research usually consists of one or two semesters (6-12 months) of study in an international host institution. Understanding and articulating the significance of an experience that covers a considerable period of time may be challenging, as participants may find meaning in many different parts of the overall experience. In this study, the mind map was employed as a “medium through which people come to understand more about an event and about themselves...[and] an opportunity to ‘re-see’ the significance of the experience” (Wilson, Mandich & Magalhaes 2016, p. 4). Moreover, it can be difficult for a researcher in an interview to quickly establish a conversation with the interviewees and negotiate meaning (Mojtahed et al 2014). The mind map facilitated the interview conversations and gave the participants an unstructured way to visualise the meaning of their international study experience (Davies 2011).

The rationale for using a mapping tool also came from the literature on employing different types of user-generated maps to frame experiences. A user-generated map is essentially a graphic metacognitive tool to stimulate thinking and trigger recognition (Rye & Rubba 1998). The mind maps in this study were used to “chart a way towards ‘new understanding’” (Heron, Kinchin & Medland 2018, p. 375) and encourage externalisation of the participants’ understandings of their experiences (White & Gunstone 1992). The researcher opted to take Wheeldon and Faubert’s (2009, p. 79) approach and use mapping in a broad sense as a “visual means for people to share their experiences and perspectives in new and unique ways” without challenging the participants’ mapping choices. This approach was especially important to this study, given the nature of the experience being investigated and the complexity of the process of making meaning from a life experience.

Wheeldon and Faubert (2009) note that there is definitional confusion in the research field around mapping and they argue for broader understandings and more flexible approaches to obtaining graphical representations of people’s experiences. The researcher’s intention was for the participants

to be free to conceptualise their experience in ways that made sense to them. This approach made it difficult to find a label for the type of map used in the study as nothing seemed to fit with traditionally-defined methods (see Brightman 2003). The tool used in this study has been labelled ‘mind map’ as this type of map aligns with Farrand, Hussain and Hennessy’s (2002) use of the term as a graphical representation of important key ideas associated with a topic (in this case, the topic is the significant aspects of the international experience). The researcher acknowledges, however, that the returned maps did not all adhere to traditional understandings of mind maps (i.e. a central concept with branches).

In practice, the mind map required the interviewee at the start of each interview to produce a visual representation of the significant aspects of their international study experience (on an A3 sheet paper provided by the researcher). The participants were asked to build a picture of their international study experience by placing on their maps the experiences, situations, happenings, or aspects of their overall experience that stood out to them as being valuable or significant. The researcher facilitated this exercise by explaining to the participants that the mind map would be used as a reference point for reflecting on the significance of their experiences during the interview. Mojtahed and colleagues (2014) used a similar approach in their work on the development of a decision-making map for research in the Business field, based on the original use of perceptual mapping in Marketing research. They asked the research participants to write down ideas and concepts which were then organised around the main theoretical perspectives in their study, to form a basis for discussion (Mojtahed et al 2014). In this study, the mind maps served as a starting point for the participants’ reflections on the significance of their international study experiences. This was the first step in interpreting their experiences into mental meanings that made the experience coherent (Jarvis 2006).

During the interviews, the mind maps provided an anchor for the reflective discussions which allowed the participants to focus their reflections on how and why their experiences were significant. The maps were used to construct knowledge of the significance of the experience and to elicit reflections. This was done not to measure knowledge but to create a co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and the research participants (Heron, Kinchin & Medland 2018). The mind maps were also important for the data analysis process as a product of the research process (Heron, Kinchin & Medland 2018). They allowed the researcher to identify and categorise the participants’ significant experiences to build a picture of the findings on *what* was significant about the experience. These identified experiences were then converged with the data on the *how* and *why* of significant learning (collected through the interviews) to gain deeper insight into the phenomenon. This approach aligns



with the ontological and epistemological assumptions that frame the research, around the multiple realities of the social world and the interaction between the researcher and the research participants in constructing knowledge (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017).

#### **4.4.2 In-depth semi-structured interviews**

Interviews are predominant in qualitative studies using the constructivist paradigm, as they presuppose that the construction of reality can only be achieved through an interaction between the researcher and the research participants (Mertens 2015). Furthermore, interviews are one of the most important sources of case study evidence (Yin 2014) given their capacity to provide the researcher with the perspectives of the people who have ‘lived the case’ using a series of interview questions and their responses (Motjahed et al 2014). These perspectives come from “direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton 2002, p. 4). The use of this instrument in the study provided rich data on the significance of life experiences through the lens of international study.

The interviews allowed the participants to reflect on how and why the items on their mind maps were significant. This meant the researcher could explore the personal impact and subjective value dimensions of significance. The researcher used the set of reflective prompt questions (given in Table 4.2 later in this chapter) that were developed for this research as part of the new inquiry protocol for understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience that was developed for the study. The protocol includes the study’s framework (see Chapter 2), the mind map discussed above, and the reflective prompt questions. The mind map and prompt questions are the tools for putting the framework into practice. Development of the prompt questions occurred through reviewing the literature on significant learning and meaning-making (Boud & Walker 1990; Jarvis 2006; Merriam & Clark 1993; Mezirow 2000). These concepts addressed the ‘how’ and ‘why’ research questions (RQ2 and RQ3) that Yin (2014) suggests are used in a case study.

A pilot study was conducted (n=4) to develop and test the interview questions prior to the main data collection. The rationale for the pilot was to determine whether the question wording would elicit useful responses from participants. The pilot was also part of the iterative development of the study’s framework. As Merriam (1998, p. 75) suggests, “the key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions...pilot interviews are crucial for trying your questions”. The process of developing and testing the interview questions through a small pilot and an analysis of findings from this study are outlined later in the chapter.

The study used semi-structured interviews which are a “mix of more or less structured questions”, where structured questions are used when specific information is required (Merriam 1998, p. 74). Structured questions were used in this instance to ascertain background information on the participants about their program of study, place of exchange, and reasons for choosing that place. The remainder of the interview questions were more open-ended; they were designed to draw out the participants’ perspectives on how and why their mind map items were significant and demonstrate what significance looks like in practice in a given experience. The interview questions were also designed to address the study’s propositions. Adams (2015) notes that semi-structured interviews are conversational in nature, using closed and open questions, where the researcher often asks ‘why’ or ‘how’ follow-up questions. This approach allowed the researcher to delve into the significance dimensions of personal impact and subjective value where needed, while still giving the participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences as a narrative of what mattered to them and why. Adams (2015, p. 494) also suggests that semi-structured interviews are useful when the researcher is examining “unchartered territory with unknown but potential momentous issues” where there is latitude to pursue areas of interest (Adams 2015, p. 494). The researcher determined this interview approach to be appropriate for the study, given the complexity of the phenomenon and the new application of theories of significant learning to international study.

#### **4.4.3 Sampling**

To examine the significance of an experience like international study, we must gain insight into the perceptions, attitudes and meanings assigned to the experience by its participants (Patton 2002). These insights were captured through in-depth interviews with those who have lived the experience, where the researcher chose a sample “from which the most can be learned” (Merriam 2009, p. 77). *Typical* purposeful sampling was used in this study because it “reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam 2009, p. 62). Typical *site* sampling was also used, which Patton (2002, p. 236) notes is where “the site is specifically selected because it is not in any major way atypical, extreme, deviant, or intensely unusual” (Patton 2002, p. 236). The program that was selected for the case context represents a standard one or two semester international study program in Australian universities that is based on exchange partnerships with other universities.

As per the study’s ethics approval, an initial recruitment email (with project information sheet and consent form) was sent by the researcher to all semester 2, 2016 study abroad participants to their university email address, after permission had been granted by the Program Manager to contact the students. Once potential participants had responded to the recruitment email, an interview time and

date was agreed upon via email. Participants signed the consent form before the mind mapping exercise and interview commenced.

The first four respondents were recruited for the pilot study (discussed later in the chapter). A further five participants were recruited for the main study. After the initial email yielded no further participants, a second email was sent to students who had studied abroad in semester 1, 2017 to ensure an appropriate sample size. The second email targeted participants who had studied in regions of the world not yet represented in the sample. Snowball sampling (Merriam 2009) was also used to complete the sample size; a further four students were recruited via the researcher's colleagues. These four students were contacted by the researcher's colleagues by email to first ascertain their interest in the project. Following confirmation of interest by those students, the standard recruitment email was sent (with the information sheet and consent form) and interviews were arranged.

Note that it is standard practice to use small samples in qualitative, interview-based research although certainly there are no 'rules' for sample size (Patton 2002). Merriam (2002, p. 26) contends that it is also difficult to ascertain how many participants to sample ahead of time. Given the researcher's aim to include a range of countries and programs of study in the sample, the original intention was for the sample to consist of 10-15 participants. This number was also based on the expected depth of the interviews and volume of data that they would generate. The final number of interviewees was 14, with an additional four students interviewed for the pilot study. The researcher reflected on the responses to the interview questions through the data collection process and began to identify themes from the interviews. While each research participant had their own story to tell, it was determined that the 14 embedded units adequately addressed the research questions in the study (Merriam 1998) and provided sufficient depth of insight into the phenomenon for the scope of a PhD study. Moreover, the embedded units study design meant that each participant was a distinct source of data. The 14 interviews generated thick data on the significance of international study – saturation was reached by asking the same questions of the 14 participants, creating a rich data set where the researcher determined that sampling more data would not be needed to address the research questions and provide a deep description of the phenomenon.

## **4.5 The pilot study**

There were two areas of concern that determined the need for a pilot study to test and refine the mind map and reflective prompt questions approach. One was the lack of previous studies using the

Merriam and Clark's (1993) work on the significance of life experiences on which to build this research. This meant that the researcher needed to devise an original interview approach by drawing on the concepts in the theory. The second concern was whether the questions would generate and articulate deep insights into the nature of significance and of the international study experience. The researcher also needed to ensure that the reflective prompt questions accurately represented the key elements of the study's framework. The pilot study allowed the researcher to address these concerns. Note that the aim of the pilot was to test the questions, therefore the findings from the interviews were not included in the final dataset. The findings did provide, however, foundational data for the case study and supplied the researcher with an emergent picture of the phenomenon.

An iterative process was used to develop, test and refine the questions. This process involved the following steps:

- (i) Reviewing the literature used in the framework to determine how to frame the study, what ideas were being explored, and what language could be used in the approach.
- (ii) Translating the appropriate theory into interview questions and determining if there were any other tools to be used (i.e. the mind map).
- (iii) Testing the questions in the pilot to determine the final set for the study; each interview was used to review and refine the question wording.
- (iv) Revisiting the literature to reframe questions when students did not understand what was being asked.
- (v) Determining a final approach for the study.

#### **4.5.1 The pilot sample**

The pilot study participants (n=4) were selected using convenience sampling of first respondents to the recruitment email. It was not deemed necessary to use a sample that represented the standard study abroad profile, as the purpose of the pilot was just to test the interview questions. Table 4.1 provides the pilot study participant profile, including the participants' program of study and host country.

Table 4.1: Pilot study participant profile

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Host country</b>
Sarah	Biomedical Science	Sweden
Harvey	Regional and Town Planning	England
Lucille	Science	Switzerland
Oliver	Engineering	Sweden

The pilot interviews took place in July 2017. After obtaining the participant’s written consent to participate, each interview was recorded using a voice recorder and was later transcribed by a professional transcriber and then checked for accuracy by the researcher. The transcripts were stored on the researcher’s password-protected computer (and deleted from the recorder) and coded according to the pseudonym that the participants selected via email correspondence with the researcher.

#### **4.5.2 Testing the mind map**

The mind map approach was first tested within the research team. We used it to map out a chosen significant experience to see what mapping an experience might look like in practice. Use of the mind map with the four pilot participants showed that it was an effective tool to frame the interviews. An example map is given at Figure 4.2. The mind maps were helpful during the interviews for the participants to identify their significant experiences from their six months spent studying abroad. The mind-mapped experiences acted as a springboard for reflections on how and why those experiences were significant. The researcher’s own professional practice had shown that students often struggled to find a starting point when they were asked to reflect on learning from an experience. After placing the significant elements of the experience on the maps, participants returned to them repeatedly as conceptual centres for their narratives by applying the question set to each mind-mapped item. The pilot study mind maps included both specific, tangible aspects of the experiences. For example, Sarah (pseudonym) placed ‘church’, ‘uni’, ‘travel’ and ‘half-marathon’ on her map. The pilot showed, however, that the participants often naturally chose and mapped abstract elements of their experiences, rather than specific events and activities. In the example below, Oliver (pseudonym) chose abstract high-level concepts for his mind map, such as ‘gap filling’ and ‘eye opening’ to represent what mattered to him.

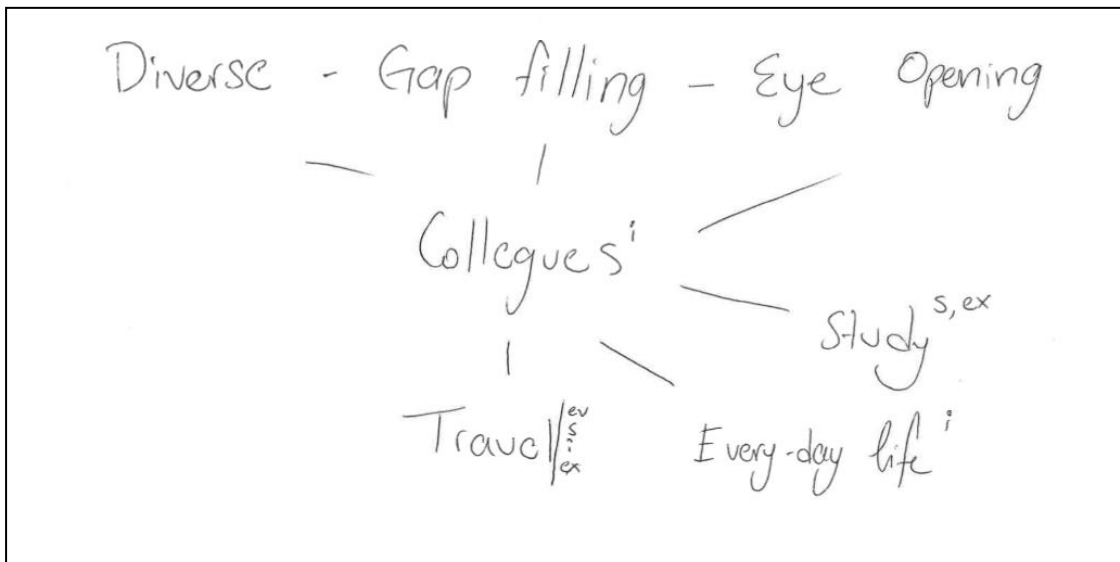


Figure 4.2: Oliver's mind map

### 4.5.3 Testing the interview approach

The interview approach was also tested within the research team, prior to the commencement of the pilot. Changes were made to the questions after this test, based on the team's responses to the questions and evaluation of the wording of the questions. Multiple changes were then made to the questions after each of the four pilot interviews, before the final version was determined (given in Table 4.2 later in this chapter). The changes were made so participants could answer questions with useful responses without having to ask for definitions of the prompt terms. One of the key changes was around the use of the word 'meaning'. In a research team meeting we initially tried reflecting on our own life experiences using 'meaning' as a prompt (e.g. 'Tell me about the meaning of your time abroad'). The research team struggled with this task and started asking each other about the meaning of 'meaning'. The team reasoned that students may struggle to understand 'meaning' as well. When participants were asked about the 'significance' or 'value' of their experiences, the students made reflective comments without pausing and asking for a definition of either term.

A series of questions was initially asked about whether the experience had challenged or affirmed the participants' existing values or beliefs, altered their understandings of the way things work, and/or disrupted their existing ways of doing things. These prompts were too complicated for participants. These three multi-faceted questions were condensed to one simple prompted question: "I'd like you to think now about the impact of your experiences. Did you experience changes in what you can do or who you are?" Most participants were able to answer this question easily, but one spoke at length about snow (which was not *obviously* linked to identity or beliefs). To help students articulate the

impact of something like weather, an additional prompt was added: “If you don’t see the impact in terms of who you are and what you can do, how do you understand this impact?”

#### **4.5.4 Researcher reflections on pilot testing the interview questions**

Significant learning theory suggests that experiences impact an individual in some way and may even lead to transformation of personal identity and capabilities (Merriam and Clark 1993). The pilot students were initially asked to choose the *most significant* part of their experience and unpack whether (or how) it had *expanded* or *transformed* them. This approach required adjustment. Students were able to speak about impact in terms of affirmation or expansion, but they seemed to struggle with the idea of transformation. When prompted to categorize the *kind of* impact the experience had, students sometimes became concerned about trying to name that impact. It was ascertained that it would be better to just have students talk about the impact and explain it in their own words, rather than asking them to classify impact. This was particularly important, because, in some cases, participants appeared to lose confidence in their expression of the impact of the experience as ‘real’ because they could not categorise it ‘correctly’ into the options that had been presented.

The researcher also realised that the initial attempt to determine the ‘most significant’ experiences was unnecessary; the students were distracted by the cognitive load required to rank the ‘significance’ of events and they struggled to focus on why, and in what ways, the experiences were significant. In addition, the language of ranking trivialises the multi-faceted nature of significance, and it undermined the study’s interest in broad ‘meaning’. Similarly, attempts to get students to consider the impact of their experiences in terms of a continuum, from expansion to transformation (Merriam and Clark 1993) were not successful. One of the students in particular tried hard to plot her experiences on a scale (and compare them to one another) and thus spent little of the interview time explaining the impacts of her experiences. The notion of a continuum or ranking of impact was abandoned to allow more space for the participants to unpack the *nature* of the impact, which seemed more valuable to the process of getting at the educative gain of international study.

It was challenging to devise interview questions that asked students directly about their personal meaning system or personal foundation of experience. It was found, however, that the students made statements that implied a personal foundation of experience. This finding aligns with Boud and Walker’s (1990) idea that the frame is unconscious or unarticulated. One of the pilot participant’s personal frame of reference was based on the gap left by his injury-affected experience of first-year university. When asked later whether his past experiences had influenced his international study

experience, he was able to articulate his motivation to ‘find something different’ from his first-year experience. His reflection suggests he understood his interest in taking up opportunities (chosen on their own merits, or to make up for other missed opportunities), and that he brought this aspect of himself to the international study experience. The researcher felt it would be valuable to include interview questions on the concept of personal foundation of experience (using language students would understand), so “Can you think of any ways that your experiences before you went on exchange may have shaped your exchange experience?” was included. Note how this prompt does not use the terms ‘personal frame of reference’ or ‘foundational experience’. The researcher tried using these terms with one participant; their response clearly indicated they did not understand the question.

In two other studies of international study learning, students are asked to consider what they have learned from their experiences, despite the research aims of these studies being framed around what was meaningful to students from their experiences (Gemignani 2009; Sherman Johnson 2016). Merriam and Clark’s (1993) work on significance provides the study with an alternative approach to uncovering the meaning of experiences. Pilot testing of the questions ensured the translation of this work into reflective prompt questions was appropriate for addressing the research questions. The pilot, therefore, was an important part of the research process, particularly given the complexity of the phenomenon. The final question set that was used in the case study, aligned to the study’s framework and the meaning-making process, is given in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: The final version of the interview questions

<b>Link to the meaning-making process (shown in the study’s framework)</b>	<b>Questions</b>
Interpret experience: Assign meaning to significant elements	Please draw a map of the experiences that you consider to be meaningful, significant or valuable. It can look however you want it to (words, images or a combination of both). 1. Why did you put those things on your map?
Determine personal impact of the experience	I’d like to you to think now about the impact of your experiences: 1. Did your experiences change what you can do or who you are? 2. If you don’t see the impact in terms of who you are and what you can do, how do you understand the impact? 3. How do you see the impact of your experiences in terms of future mindsets, perspectives, or actions? How will you take your experiences forward?



<p>Assign value to the experience and integrate into self</p> <p>(Influenced by elements of the learner’s meaning-making lens: values, beliefs and assumptions, and affective reactions/emotions)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is significant to you about the things on your map and their impact on you?</li> <li>2. Why are those things important to you?</li> <li>3. How did you feel/react when you were having those experiences?</li> </ol>
<p>Assign value to the experience and its impact and integrate into self</p> <p>(Influenced by elements of the learner’s meaning-making lens as noted)</p> <p>Note that students were also asked for their perspective on the purpose and value of study abroad and how they think study abroad compares with personal travel.</p>	<p><b>Learning intent, motivations and expectations:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What motivated you to undertake an international study program?</li> <li>2. What were you hoping to gain from it?</li> <li>3. Did you have any expectations? If so, what were they? Were they met?</li> </ol> <p><b>Prior experiences:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Can you think of any ways that your experiences before you went on exchange may have shaped what you experienced?</li> <li>2. How do you think your experiences before you went on exchange may have shaped what you got out of those experiences?</li> <li>3. How do you think you might have been attuned to certain things because of the person that you are?</li> </ol>

Note that all questions around assigning value speak to the socio-contextual influences on meaning-making.

## 4.6 Main study research participants

Participants were recruited for the main study using the sampling technique outlined in Section 4.4.3. These interviews took place between late August and October 2017, following the analysis of the pilot study findings. Each interview ran for between 60 and 90 minutes, including the process of drawing the mind map. After obtaining the participant’s written consent to participate, each interview was recorded using a voice recorder and the files were immediately downloaded to the password-protected computer used for the study and deleted from the recorder.

All participants in the study (Table 4.3) were studying at undergraduate level. (UQ Abroad is open to post-graduate students but there are restrictions.) The sample is representative of study abroad programs in Australia where almost three-quarters of participants are undergraduate students, and this reflects their proportional representation in the higher education population as a whole (Nerlich 2015). Participants were aged between 19 and 23 which is representative of both the specific program and others like it around Australia (Universities Australia 2017). All participants were domestic students, studying full time and on campus which is also representative of the program’s student profile.

Table 4.3: Main study participants

<b>Pseudonym<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Host country</b>	<b>Program timing</b>	<b>Program of enrolment</b>
Olivia	Canada	Year 3 of 4	Bachelor of Business Management/Arts
May	Japan	Year 4 of 5 (part time)	Bachelor of Arts (English Literature and Japanese)
Calvin	United States	Three semesters of overseas study, starting in year 3 of 4	Bachelor of Economics/Commerce
Gretchen	Colombia	Year 2 of 3	Bachelor of International Studies <sup>2</sup> (French, Spanish, International Relations)
Hussam	The Netherlands	Year 2 of 3	Bachelor of Arts (Political Science)
Ariel	United States	Year 4 of 4	Bachelor of Nursing/Midwifery <sup>3</sup>
Meredith	England	Year 4 of 4	Bachelor of Nursing/Midwifery <sup>3</sup>
Annie	Taiwan	Year 3 of 3	Bachelor of International Studies <sup>2</sup> (History and Chinese)
Charlie	Germany	Year 2 of 4	Bachelor of Arts (International Relations)/Journalism
Harry	England	Year 4 of 5.5	Bachelor of Engineering/Commerce
Rebecca	Germany	Year 3 of 3	Bachelor of International Studies <sup>2</sup> (Political Science and German)
Laura	Canada	Year 3 of 3	Bachelor of International Studies <sup>2</sup> (Japanese and Peace and Conflict Studies)
Charlotte	Germany	Year 3 of 3	Bachelor of International Studies <sup>2</sup> (Economics and German)
Lydia	Czech Republic	Year 4 of 5.5	Bachelor of Arts/Law

1. All names are pseudonyms.

2. Students enrolled in the Bachelor of International Studies are required to complete one semester of study abroad to graduate.

3. There are only three universities where Nursing and Midwifery students can study abroad. Their program must include clinical components.

Twelve of the fourteen main study participants studied abroad for one semester, the other two participants for two semesters. Two participants undertook a six-month internship prior to their studies. This is also reflective of the profile of the program where only a small proportion of students study for two or more semesters. The host countries in the sample are representative of the program's profile; the United States, Canada and England are the most popular destinations. Europe is also a popular destination. The sample includes five students who studied in the Netherlands, Germany (n=3) and the Czech Republic. There are also partnerships with universities in Asia; the sample includes Japan and Taiwan. Less popular is South America; however, Colombia is represented in the sample. This inclusion ensured that each continent was represented other than Africa. The range of programs offered at the selected university is represented in the sample, although five of the fourteen respondents are enrolled in the Bachelor of International Studies which has international exchange as a compulsory component to the degree. Many of the programs at the university, largely those with professional accreditations in the health sciences, do not allow students to go on exchange and therefore are not represented in the sample. (Note that the program statistical data were provided by the Program Manager.)

## **4.7 Data analysis**

Semi-structured interviews (including a diagnostic mind map) were used to collect the data required to address the research questions (see Section 4.4). At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were allocated the pseudonym of their choice. The original audio files were then renamed on the researcher's password-protected computer and thereafter the participants were referred to by their chosen pseudonym. The recordings were professionally transcribed; once returned to the researcher, they were reviewed for accuracy, particularly where the transcriber had noted instances of undiscernible word or phrases. All participants were given the opportunity to endorse their transcripts to ensure respondent validation (Bryman 2008). A copy was sent via email to each participant for approval for use in the study and to request changes if needed. Of the 14 participants, only Harry returned his interview transcript with requested changes. The changes Harry made included (i) completing the 'unintelligible' parts of the transcript (as noted by the transcriber) and (ii) clarifying or expanding on original statements in nine places in the interview. Once the transcripts had been endorsed or amended as requested, an initial edit was then undertaken to read the transcripts for general sense-making and to 'clean' the transcripts to remove any non-relevant vocalisations such as colloquialisms (e.g. 'yeah' and 'like') or repeated words or phrases or restarting of statements.

The overarching approach chosen for data analysis involved linking the data to the study's theoretical propositions (Yin 2014), as the study is inherently shaped by its theoretical propositions and framework (see Sections 4.3.2 and 4.3.4). The theoretical propositions, as Yin (2014, p. 136) suggests, "yield analytic priorities" which guide the data analysis process. The propositions provided the researcher with a holistic structure for the data analysis, based on the data derived from the participants' mind maps and their responses to the interview questions, through close alignment of the mind map tool and interview questions with the framework and propositions.

Generally, data analysis includes coding, categorising and theme generation to make sense of the data to produce findings that address the research questions and provide an understanding of the case (Simons 2009). Thematic analysis, as a foundational method for qualitative analysis, was used in this study as a means of analysing and reporting patterns (themes) from the data so that the data could be organised and described, and the core elements of the research phenomenon interpreted (Braun & Clarke 2006). Thematising data involves reducing large amounts of information down into smaller pieces with more clearly-defined meanings (Maguire & Delahunt 2017). This is a decidedly cognitive and intuitive process that is shaped by the researcher's interpretations of significant or interesting representations of the data or aspects of the research questions (Maguire & Delahunt 2017). As noted by Ely and colleagues (1997, pp. 205-6), themes "reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them". The researcher identifies patterns in the data and determines "what counts as a theme" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 10).

The thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used in this research. This approach involves four steps: (i) familiarisation with the data, (ii) code generation, (iii) searching for, reviewing, defining and naming themes, and (iv) checking and refining themes through the writing process. Themes were identified at a latent level. This involved moving beyond the semantic content of the data to identify and examine the underlying concepts that shape that semantic content to give form and meaning to the dimensions of the construct of significance (Braun & Clarke 2006). The aim of the thematic analysis was to generate a description of the dimensions of the construct of significance in the context of international study (personal impact and subjective value). The researcher looked for themes that described these dimensions. Each of the 14 participants was an embedded unit, or a distinct source of data. Converging the data from the 14 participants and converging the mind-mapped experiences with reflections on those experiences (gathered using the interview questions) provided a holistic picture of what, how and why international study experiences are significant.

The researcher followed the thematic analysis steps using Braun and Clarke’s (1996) approach, as set out in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: The analysis process

<b>Analysis step</b>	<b>Process undertaken</b>
Step 1: Familiarisation with the data	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noticing patterned responses during the interviews.</li> <li>2. Repeatedly and actively reading the interview transcripts and noted early patterns and meanings, in preparation for determining preliminary codes.</li> <li>3. Tabulating each participant’s transcript according to their mind-mapped experiences (RQ1), the perceived personal impact of those experiences (RQ2), and the subjective value of those experiences (RQ3).</li> </ol> <p>Step 3 created an initial picture for each participant of the significance of their experiences. It allowed the researcher to determine early codes for the dimensions of the construct of significance and the influences on the meaning-making process.</p>
Step 2: Code generation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Placing the data in two sets of tables: (i) by interview question and (ii) by participant significant experiences (i.e. their mind-mapped items and explanations of how and why those items were significant). This approach was taken as the interview questions were clearly aligned to the research questions and the dimensions of significant learning.</li> <li>2. Coding the findings (using colour-coded highlighting) to identify data segments that represented meaningful aspects of the phenomenon, giving full and equal attention to all data items, and identifying interesting aspects in the data that could be reorganised later into themes.</li> <li>3. Creating concept maps of each set of codes to begin the process of theme formation.</li> <li>4. Reviewing the items in each concept map to consider how different codes may combine to form a theme</li> <li>5. Entering the codes for each interview question into NVivo as nodes (theme codes for identifying emerging patterns).</li> <li>6. Transferring each participant’s significant experiences into NVivo to enable the codes (and later the themes) to be verified and revised where necessary in preparation for theme generation.</li> </ol>
Step 3: Theme work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sorting the different codes into potential themes.</li> <li>2. Collating all the relevant coded interview extracts that demonstrated the potential themes.</li> <li>3. Reviewing and refining the NVivo nodes to give meaning to the themes.</li> </ol>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Further refining the themes (and in some cases, created sub-themes), and reviewing again, based on the relevance of these themes to the theories from the study’s framework and propositions.</li> <li>5. Using theme refinement to capture the essence of the data and patterns within the data set at a deeper level (i.e. identifying what was interesting about the themes and why).</li> <li>6. Ensuring the themes cohered around a key idea or concept in a meaningful way and answered the research questions.</li> <li>7. Considering each theme in terms of its meaning in relation to the whole data set (i.e. understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience).</li> <li>8. Probing the themes to ensure the meaning of the findings was saturated, or until “no contrary findings are relevant or confirmed for the particular theory or interpretation that is developing” (Simons 2009, p. 132).</li> </ol>
<p>Step 4: Writing</p>	<p>The researcher used the writing stage to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. check and refine the themes further</li> <li>2. ensure alignment with the theories in the framework</li> <li>3. consider the framework’s application in practice</li> <li>4. keep focused on the case study proposition</li> <li>5. extract quotes from the NVivo analysis that provided evidence of the themes to support the analysis of the findings, ensuring internal validity</li> </ol>

#### 4.7.1 Data analysis process for each research question

Within steps 2 and 3 of the data analysis process, the researcher coded and thematised the results according for each of the research questions. These processes are outlined below.

##### **What is significant – descriptive categories of experience (RQ1)**

The mind maps contained a total of 62 meaningful experiences, situations, or concepts (an average of four items per participant). The researcher had to make sense of the participants’ sense-making efforts to chart their significant experiences (Paull, Boudville & Sitlington 2013) on their mind maps. The first round of coding of the 62 experiences uncovered explicit items, such as ‘travel’, or ‘living situation’, and specific experiences that were new or unique, such as couchsurfing. The researcher organised this data into first-level categorisations of what was significant to participants about their international study experiences by looking for ideas that both linked and summarised what the participants had placed on their maps. These categorisations *describe* the significance of international study.

### **What is significant – analytic categories of experience (RQ1)**

Once the researcher had identified the descriptive categories, a second round of coding was undertaken. The researcher then took an abductive approach to the second round to create higher-order interpretations (Locke 2001) of the mind-mapped findings and explicitly look for what made the descriptive experiences significant. The rationale for this analysis was to further understand the meaning of the first-level significant components, to give further coherence to those broad categories, just as the participants did when they answered the interview question on why their mind-mapped items had meaning (i.e. why they put those items on their mind maps). Following the approach adopted by Paull, Boudville and Sitlington (2013) in their management study, the researcher set aside the like elements (i.e. the descriptive categories) and clustered and re-examined the other mind map items to try to make sense of them and work out where they might fit.

By employing sense-making as a diagnostic tool and asking, ‘what is going on here?’ the researcher realised that the individual mind-mapped items (and the participants’ reasons for naming those items as significant) were complex and multi-layered. It was found that each of the mind-mapped items could be coded at both first and higher-order levels. For example, ‘travel’ was coded as a descriptive category, but the second round of coding revealed that travel was meaningful because of interactions with people, places and cultures, the chance to test capabilities, and new experiences. This second round of coding yielded *analytical* understandings of the significance of international study.

### **How experiences are significant – personal impact (RQ2)**

Impact-related statements were analysed to look for commonalities in the way that personal impact was described. The participants’ perceptions of impact were initially coded against the dimensions of personal impact from Merriam and Clark’s (1993) study, given that the study forms the foundation of this research. The initial coding was then reorganised to create three key expressions of personal impact that demonstrated the participants’ perceptions of growth or positive life changes: *realisations*, *capability extension*, and *self-efficacy*. The reorganising process involved constantly moving between the participants’ impact-related statements and the coding against Merriam and Clark’s dimensions to refine them and to check they cohered meaningfully. This approach was taken to create a clear and identifiable representation of what personal impact looks like in the context of international study. The theme of ‘realisations’ emerged from close reading of the participants’ statements on new perspectives on the self, relatedness to others, and expansion of life perspective (Merriam & Clark 1993).

### **Why experiences are significant – subjective value (RQ3)**

Participants were asked why their experiences were valued and how those experiences made them feel. The results were analysed using the individual elements of the meaning-making lens, as described in the framework, to identify which parts of the lens were used to assign value. Data on each part of the lens was coded and themes were generated that provided descriptions of how the parts of the lens functioned to shape meaning. Note, however, that because of the individual nature of values, beliefs and assumptions, the finding on this element of the lens were not coded. Instead, the researcher looked for expressions (implicit or explicit) of values, beliefs, and assumptions in the participants' explanations of why they valued their mind-mapped experiences. The participants' reflections on the purpose and value of international study (and its comparison with international study) were converged with the 'why' results. The rationale for this data convergence was that the reflections also showed why the mind-mapped experiences were significant, i.e. they informed the learning intent, expectations, and motivations elements of the meaning-making lens.

## **4.8 Trustworthiness of the research design**

Rowley (2002) suggests that it is not easy to analyse case study evidence. Smith and McGannon (2017) note the issues with commonly-used methods to demonstrate rigour and propose that qualitative researchers look for other ways to facilitate high-quality qualitative research. One such approach, as offered by Shenton (2004), is to address trustworthiness using the criteria of credibility (in preference to internal validity), transferability (in preference to external validity), dependability (in preference to reliability) and confirmability (as a form of objectivity). Shenton (2004) explains that credibility deals with issues of congruence of the findings with reality. Transferability relates to the extent to which the findings can be applied beyond the study. Dependability shows that if the analysis were to be repeated in the same situation with the same participants, the results would be the same or similar. Confirmability is concerned with objectivity. Table 4.5 sets out the criteria and shows how each one was treated in this study.

Table 4.5 Research treatment of trustworthiness (adapted from Shenton 2004)

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Treatment in this study</b>
Credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Adoption of well-established research methods (descriptive case study with embedded units).</li><li>• Triangulation of the findings from the 14 embedded units and from two data sources (mind maps and interviews).</li></ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparison of the findings with the study's initial propositions and established theory around adult learning and meaning-making for significant learning.</li> <li>• Research familiarity with the field of study abroad through extensive professional practice.</li> <li>• Honesty of informants (volunteers who were given the opportunity to decline participation to ensure they were genuinely willing to talk about their experiences frankly and were encouraged to do so at the start of each interview).</li> <li>• Participant checks of transcripts and option to edit (transcript validation).</li> <li>• Probes to elicit detailed data during the interviews and iterative questioning.</li> <li>• Debriefing sessions with researcher's supervisors throughout analysis process.</li> <li>• Peer review of the thesis.</li> </ul>
Transferability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of 'how' and 'why' research questions.</li> <li>• Treatment of each embedded unit in the same way in accordance with the framework and its theoretical underpinnings.</li> <li>• Thick description of the research phenomenon.</li> <li>• Full description of the contextual elements of the investigation of significant learning.</li> <li>• Detailed documentation of the research process.</li> <li>• Development of an inquiry protocol (see Chapter 7) for use in interpreting the significance of other life experiences.</li> </ul>
Dependability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documentation of the case study protocol and data analysis process, showing how the participants' perspectives were analysed against the framework and established theory.</li> <li>• Iterative coding discussions with research supervisors.</li> <li>• Use of 'overlapping methods', i.e. mind map and interviews.</li> <li>• Acknowledgment of the boundaries and limitations of the study.</li> </ul>
Confirmability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Triangulation of participant experiences of study abroad to reduce researcher bias.</li> <li>• Acknowledgement of research design approach and decisions made in framing this approach.</li> <li>• Use of an 'audit trail' to trace the course of the research. While NVivo was used in the thematic analysis process, the researcher kept detailed notes of their interpretive approach and used the study's framework and graphical representations of the theme work to track and check the analysis process.</li> </ul>

## **4.9 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter explained the research paradigm in which the research is situated. The chapter outlined the research design and provided the rationale for selecting case study as the methodology. Data collection methods, the sampling approach, data collection and analysis processes were also discussed. The chapter also provided detail of the pilot study that was conducted prior to the case study to develop and test the interview protocol. The next chapter presents the research findings using the methodology explained in this chapter.

# Chapter 5: Participant descriptions of the significance of their international study experiences

## 5.1 Chapter introduction

Chapter 4 examined the methodological approach that frames this case study that investigates the significance of life experiences in the context of international study. The study examined how participants in a study abroad program understand and articulate the significance of their experiences, through three inquiry questions:

1. What is significant about international study to participants? (RQ1)
2. How are these things significant? (RQ2)
3. Why are these things significant? (RQ3)

These questions were designed in alignment with the study's framework (Figure 5.1) that conceptualises the process of understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience (see Chapter 2). The tri-coloured circle in the framework represents the three research questions, as assigning meaning to an experience involves determining *what* and *how* an experience is significant (i.e. giving an experience coherence and understanding its personal impact – RQ1 and RQ2) and subjectively valuing an experience and its impact (*why* an experience is significant - RQ3). The third research question is also shown by the orange part of the framework, as subjectively valuing an experience happens from the perspective of the learner's meaning-making lens. The green box represents the outcome of the learner's meaning-making efforts to understand and articulate the significance of their experiences, i.e. perceptions of growth or positive life changes that are personally meaningful, or significant learning. The participants' responses to questions of how and why their experiences were significant represent significant learning from international study, i.e. they are perceptions of growth (personal impact) that mattered to the participants (subjective value).

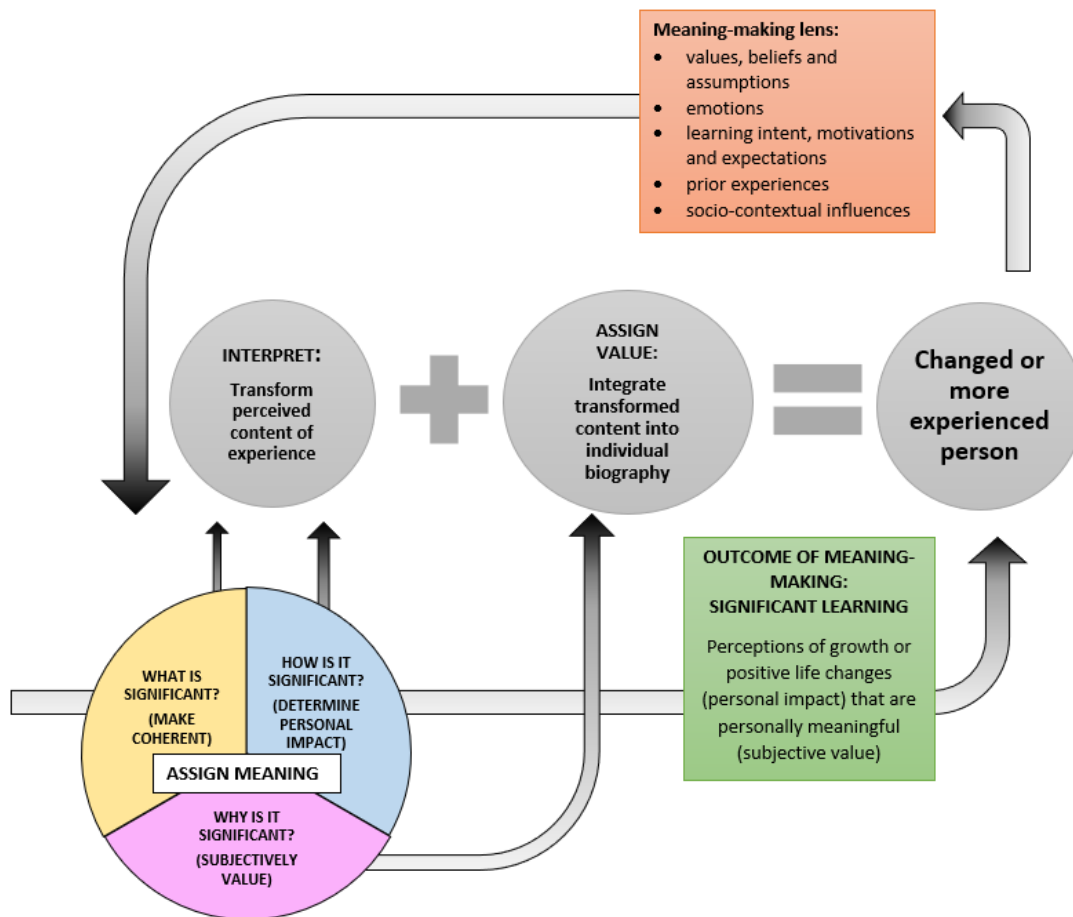


Figure 5.1: Understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience

This chapter documents each participant’s descriptions of the significance of their international study experiences using the study’s single case with embedded units design (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1). Each study abroad student represents an embedded unit (sample given in Chapter 4, Section 4.6). The students carried out meaning-making work to understand and articulate the significance of their study abroad experiences by describing what (RQ1), how (RQ2) and why (RQ3) those experiences were personally significant. The students’ meaning-making work was undertaken using a new inquiry protocol for understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience that was formulated for the study (see Chapter 4). This approach includes a mind map for identifying the significant parts of an experience and a set of reflective prompt questions for describing how and why those parts were significant (see Chapter 4, Section 4.4). The mind map and prompt questions put into practice the meaning-making process for understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience captured in the study’s framework. The *how* and *why* questions explore the two dimensions of the construct of significance - personal impact (how an experience has affected the learner) and subjective value (why an experience is valued by the learner) and represent the participants’ perceptions of growth that had personal value (i.e. significant learning from international study).

The study's propositions (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.2) also guided the investigation of the students' meaning-making work. Responses to the reflective prompt questions address the study's key proposition that a learning experience is significant if it has impact on the learner and is valued by the learner (Merriam & Clark 1993) (the green part of the framework at Figure 5.1). The responses also address the second proposition, that value is ascribed to an experience through the learner's unique meaning-making lens (Merriam & Clark 1993; Mezirow 2000) (the orange part of the framework at Figure 5.1).

## 5.2 Results for each participant

The results for each participant are presented in the following sections according to their chosen pseudonym. Each participant's mind map is given, with a brief explanation of the significance of their mind-mapped items. A table accompanies each participant's mind map. The table has three columns:

1. The participant's named significant experiences, i.e. the mind-mapped items showing *what* was significant (RQ1)
2. Descriptions of the perceived personal impact of the mind-mapped experiences, i.e. *how* the participants felt these experiences had affected or changed them (RQ2)
3. Explanations of *why* the participants valued their mind-mapped experiences and the resultant impact (RQ3). These explanations reveal how the learner's meaning-making lens shapes the value assigned to experiences, providing the rationale for why the mind-mapped experiences mattered to the participants and showing how the participants' mind-mapped experiences were valued using their individual meaning-making lens.

Each mind map and table represents the participants' meaning-making efforts to understand and articulate the significance of their experiences. These meaning-making efforts provide 14 instances of the research phenomenon (the significance of life experiences) in context (international study). The second and third columns of each table present 14 illustrations of significant learning (i.e. learning that has personal impact and is subjectively valued) from international study.

### Olivia

Olivia spent one semester in Canada, in a small university town, studying subjects that related to her Business Management degree. Olivia drew a map of the town (Figure 5.2) that gave an overall picture of her international study experience and included the things she found significant.

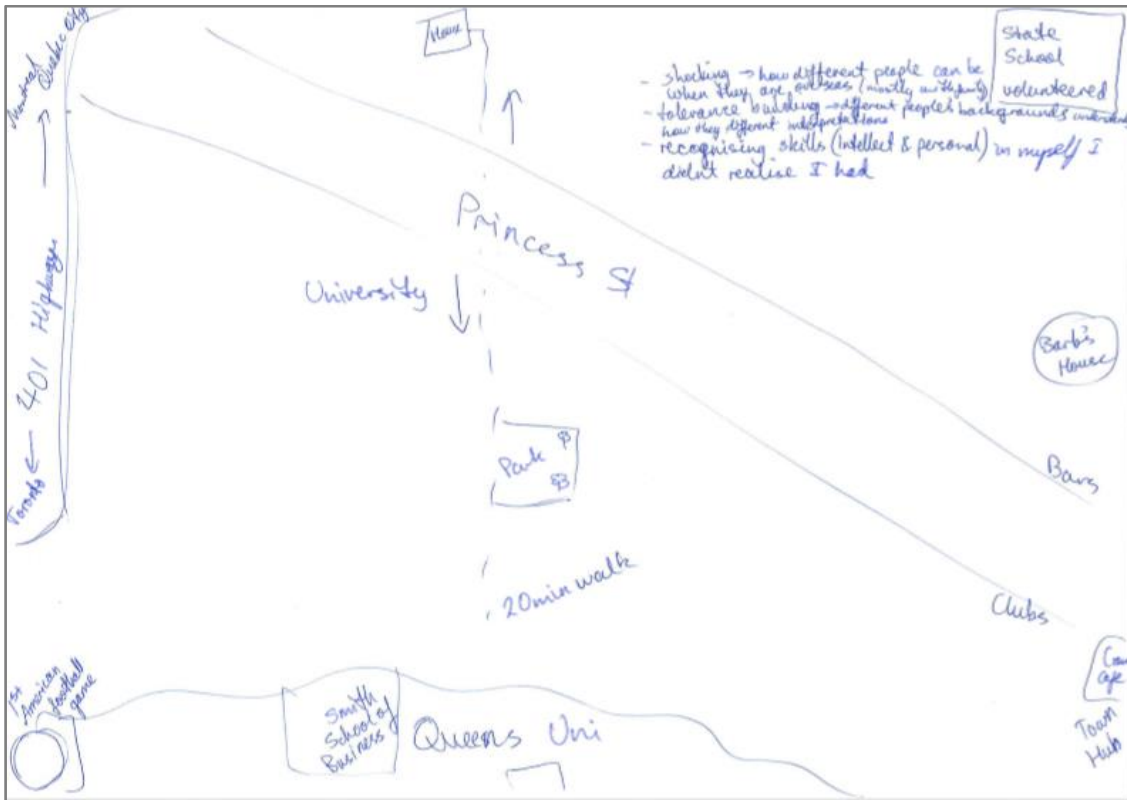


Figure 5.2: Olivia's mind map

The meaningful aspects of Olivia's experience that she described from her map were volunteering, living in a shared house with other international students, and friendships. Volunteering at the Breakfast Club (a before-school program for disadvantaged children), was meaningful to Olivia for the chance to remove herself from her advantaged position as a university student to help underprivileged children. Olivia's living situation was meaningful for the challenges she faced sharing a house with other students whom she felt were messy and intolerant of her. Olivia also described the significance of a new friend even though she did not put this person on her map.

Table 5.1: How and why Olivia's mind map experiences were significant

Significant experience	Description of perceived personal impact	Explanation of why the experience was valued
The overall experience of studying abroad (represented by Olivia's map of the	The experience of living in the university town changed Olivia's self-identity. Olivia said: "I just could not believe how much out of my shell I became. It wasn't just that I find it hard to communicate or I am shy. I'm not those things...I found	Olivia valued finding her potential because she had the intent to "grow up" while studying abroad. She also said: "I wanted to mould myself into the person that I actually want to be".

town and the university)	my potential when I was overseas. I found my potential as a student”.	
Volunteering at the Breakfast Club	<p>Olivia perceived the impact of volunteering as recognition of her privilege. She said: “I just have to remember that not everyone’s like me”.</p> <p>Part of privilege recognition was an improvement in Olivia’s interpersonal communication capabilities, particularly around considering people’s backgrounds when interacting with them. She said: “It’s just that acknowledging who’s in the room and who you are talking to”.</p>	<p>Olivia valued volunteering based on her prior experiences and the values those experiences taught her. She said: “I went to a small Catholic school...That whole level of selflessness was instilled in us on day one. I don’t know if it’s my upbringing or just the way I feel about volunteering. I definitely think it [volunteering] should be a part of everyone’s life...I was always involved with volunteering stuff at school...I actually became school captain for the mission side of everything...I’ve always felt that volunteering is something you can bring perspective back to...You have to remember that there are people out there who don’t have your life situation”.</p> <p>Olivia valued recognising her privilege because she did not want to lose her way in terms of her principles. She said: “You can get caught up in this world very quickly. I’m in Marketing and there’s good money in Marketing. I feel like you just get into...that privileged pattern”.</p>
Living in a shared house with other international students	<p>Olivia’s living situation experience led her to the realisation that when people “are from different countries, they have different customs or little cultural metaphors and behaviours”. She noticed differences in her flatmates’ behaviours, such as bluntness and being untidy, and these differences impacted her relationships with her housemates.</p> <p>Olivia’s realisation that “not everyone’s from the same place” impacted her in this way: “I know I communicate so much better”.</p> <p>Impact was also described by Olivia in terms of working with people from different countries in the future. She said: “Little idiosyncrasies that</p>	<p>Olivia valued her living situation because of the challenges she faced with her housemates. She said: “I wanted to be friends with them, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t just break down that barrier...That was a big challenge, that dissonance, just wanting to be friendly without being nagging”. Olivia interpreted a challenging situation in a growth-enhancing way, thus demonstrating her value system.</p>

	they would do, I wouldn't be so annoyed about but think, 'This is probably just normal for them'".	
Friendships	<p>Olivia felt her new friendships made her more prepared to try new things. She said: "I don't want to be stuck in this same realm. I want to take myself and put myself somewhere that I'm not comfortable with".</p> <p>Olivia said of one friend: "She was just so certain. I don't know if it was her culture of bluntness or it was the fact that she's just so on top of what she wants to do that made me feel like I think I'll be able to do that".</p>	<p>Olivia expressed learning intent around wanting to "do something different" as she was "feeling a bit constrained living at home, just doing day-to-day work" and not "getting the most" from her university experience. She said: "I wanted to throw myself out there". This learning intent and her life at home underpinned the value she assigned to friendships.</p>

## May

May spent two semesters in Japan as part of her Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Japanese. May's mind map (Figure 5.3) was anchored by her experience in dormitory-style accommodation for 200 students ('Tai Shogun').

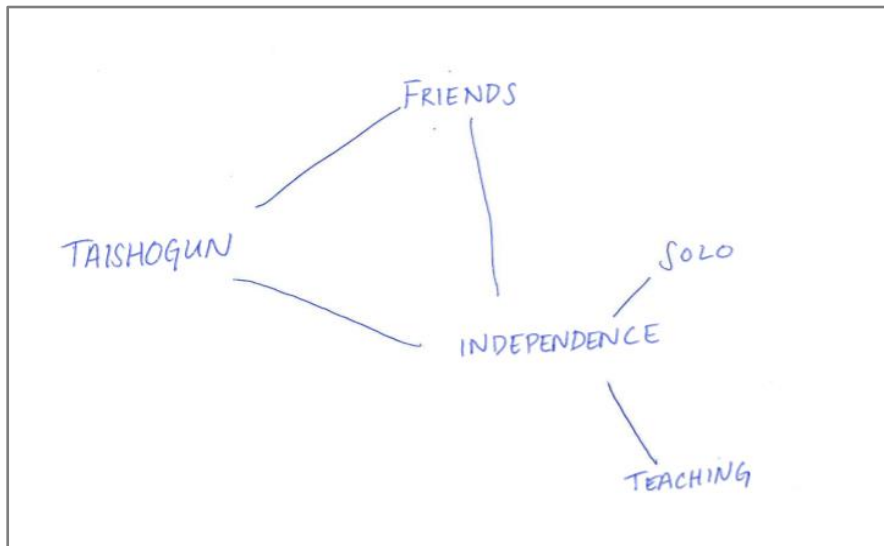


Figure 5.3: May's mind map

Tai Shogun helped May make close friendships and find comfort in her new home as her new friends shared her trepidations about living abroad. However, those friendships, and living away from usual support networks also allowed May to become more independent and take personal responsibility, and she found testing her 'adult' capabilities meaningful. May felt the desire to get a job in Japan and



the opportunity to teach English gave her insight into Japanese culture. Teaching was also part of her experience of living independently.

Table 5.2: How and why May's mind map experiences were significant

<b>Significant experience</b>	<b>Description of perceived personal impact</b>	<b>Explanation of why the experience was valued</b>
<p>Making friends and sharing the study abroad experience (‘friends’ on May’s map)</p>	<p>May’s friendships made her “more outgoing and more able to act in an extrovert way”. May felt she can “now go longer without having to recharge”.</p> <p>May described a new willingness to take up opportunities and greater confidence for meeting new people as an impact of her friendships.</p> <p>May also said: “I now more easily envision myself in another person’s shoes”.</p>	<p>May explained that she felt some apprehension about living away from home so she valued the safety net of her friendships. She said friends “were a really big part of my experience, making me feel at home, making me just feel comfortable in that country. They helped me fall in love with the country as well...It was all rather scary to me even though exchange was something I’ve been dreaming about for years...They really made the experience...not scary at all”.</p>
<p>Living independently (‘independence’ and ‘solo’ on May’s map)</p>	<p>Doing things on her own enabled May to overcome self-doubt about her ability to be independent. She felt she had proven her capabilities. May said: “I feel like I was always independent, capable of being independent. I just didn’t realise it...Being forced to do things on my own...made me aware that I could”. This new self-awareness led May to this realisation: “I can actually handle this small stuff which I consider the necessary skills to become an adult”.</p>	<p>May valued living independently because of her close relationship with her mother. She said: “My relationship with my mother was...a motivating factor...the independence that exchange offered me but within the safety net as well...because I do have a very protective mother”.</p> <p>May’s home situation shaped the meaning she assigned to living independently. She said: “I felt a bit stifled at home. I wanted to know what it was like to live on my own. I also wanted to know whether I actually could do it, whether I was actually capable”.</p> <p>The value May assigned to living independently shows the influence of prior experiences on meaning-making.</p>
<p>Teaching</p>	<p>May had been “considering a career in teaching”. Her teaching experience gave her “better insight on how to teach people”. She also gained insight into “the different</p>	<p>May valued her new teaching capabilities for the sense of accomplishment she felt. She said: “At first, I was quite nervous...I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to provide the best lesson for my</p>

	<p>kinds of people who are in Japan...[and] into the culture”.</p> <p>May’s teaching experience led her to this realisation: “I just want to get more insight into different cultures in different countries now”.</p>	<p>students. I used that nervousness as a motivation to create the best lesson that I could and become the best teacher that I could”. This shows how emotional reactions to an experience can shape meaning-making.</p> <p>May valued her firsthand experience of Japanese culture. She said: “As a student of Japanese, I have an understanding of Japanese culture, but it’s a different thing just knowing it and actually seeing it in front of your eyes...I feel like it really gave a different layer to my exchange”.</p>
<p>Living in a student dormitory (‘Tai Shogun’ on May’s map)</p>	<p>Living in Tai Shogun made May realise that she “can make home in other places”.</p> <p>May also felt that living and working overseas became “a tangible goal”.</p>	<p>May valued living in the student dormitory because it became home to her. She said: “I will always remember it fondly...as a second home – the first home that isn’t my actual home”.</p> <p>Again, this is an example of the influence of emotional reactions on meaning-making.</p>

## Calvin

Calvin undertook two consecutive international study programs at two different universities in the United States while completing a dual degree in Economics and Commerce. Calvin also did an internship while abroad and was away from Australia for almost two years, the only participant to have done this. The significant experiences that Calvin put on his map are shown in Figure 5.4.

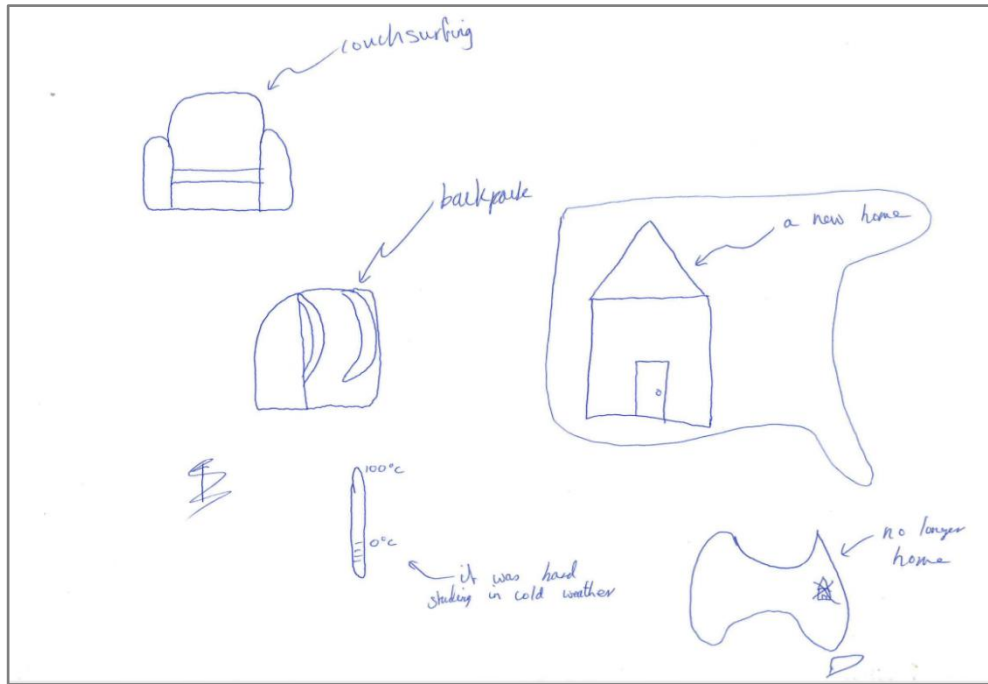


Figure 5.4: Calvin’s mind map

Calvin explained that ‘couchsurfing’ is way to source free accommodation, sleeping on the couches that people advertise on a website. This was a meaningful experience for Calvin because it allowed him to travel extensively at minimal cost. Calvin also said that the experience also felt more personal than Airbnb and he met lots of different people. The ‘backpack’ experience turned Calvin into a minimalist as he did not own more than the items he could fit into his backpack. Calvin felt that the United States had become home, even more so than Australia, which was why Calvin put ‘a new home/no longer home’ on his map. Calvin’s map also referenced the difficulties he faced studying in the cold weather.

Table 5.3: How and why Calvin’s mind map experiences were significant

Significant experience	Description of perceived personal impact	Explanation of why the experience was valued
Couchsurfing	Couchsurfing made Calvin more open-minded and tolerant. The experience eliminated previously-held prejudices. He said: “It’s just changed the way I think about other people and the way I feel about other people...It’s made me actually want to listen to others rather than just shut them down because I don’t like them”.	Calvin’s prior experiences shaped the value he placed on exploring the US by couchsurfing. He had been dating an American girl and he was not sure what to do after they separated as his girlfriend was his “sole connection” to the US. He said: “They [girlfriend and her family] were like my home base...Losing that, I was like, ‘Oh, now I have to branch out. Now I have to

		<p>explore things on my own'. That made me feel really independent".</p> <p>Calvin's relationship also shaped what couchsurfing represented to him – something with an element of risk. He had been living a more conventional life with his girlfriend. Calvin said: "The girl that I dated would never have let these kinds of things [couchsurfing and backpacking] happen. She was ultra-conservative, like couchsurfing is too dangerous...I think I didn't have the level of independence until I broke up with her... I like playing the risks. I think that certainly helped".</p>
<p>Backpacking (picture of a backpack on Calvin's map)</p>	<p>Backpacking resulted in a new self-awareness and this realisation: "I just don't really care that much about things...Life is a lot easier and simpler when you don't...accumulate this pile that you need to constantly think about".</p>	<p>Calvin explained that he used to "collect and just accumulate belongings", that he would say to himself, "that's a nice shirt, I'm going to go get that". This self-awareness shaped the value that he placed on switching to a more unencumbered approach to life.</p>
<p>Feeling at home in the US (‘a new home’ and a picture of Australia with the label, ‘no longer home’ on Calvin's map)</p>	<p>Feeling at home in the United States made Calvin realise "home is where you hang your heart, it's not a physical place" and "that shock of being in an initially new place has become zero and minuscule".</p>	<p>Calvin valued making a new home in the US as he felt it is important to be mobile and flexible. Calvin believed the experience "proves to others that you're willing to move and relocate in order to fulfil your goals". This personal capability is part of Calvin's value system.</p>
<p>Functioning in cold weather (‘it was hard studying in cold weather’ on Calvin's map)</p>	<p>Calvin said the cold weather had "very insignificant impact apart from the realisation that cold weather is hard to work in". He said: "I really have to avoid winters if I'm working".</p>	<p>Calvin said the value of the cold weather experience was that it was "striking". He said: "It just surprised me. I didn't think that the weather affected me to that extent".</p>

## Gretchen

Gretchen was studying a Bachelor of International Studies (majoring in French, Spanish and International Relations), and a Diploma of Languages. The Bachelor's program includes a compulsory semester of international study and Gretchen studied in Colombia to improve her Spanish. Gretchen's mind map had the largest number of significant experiences of all the participants (Figure 5.5).



Figure 5.5: Gretchen's mind map

Gretchen explained that 'language' and 'academic improvement' were on her mind map as language development and doing well academically were her main motivations for studying abroad. Gretchen put 'friends' on her map as she expected to make lots of meaningful connections with other students, but what turned out to be significant was the amount of time that she spent alone. Having never travelled before, Gretchen valued her 'unique experiences' (and 'great stories' that she can now tell) and 'travel -new places' (and 'amazing photos' to keep as evidence of those opportunities) as she felt very naïve prior to going to Colombia. These experiences were meaningful for the sense of accomplishment and they empowered her to inspire her siblings to travel. The experiences also made her feel as if she were part of the country and its culture as Gretchen also valued the 'feeling of belonging' that she felt and acculturating to life in Colombia. Gretchen's other mind map items,

around the freedom and independence she felt living away from her large and close family, were meaningful for being free of responsibilities and learning to rely on herself.

Table 5.4: How and why Gretchen’s mind map experiences were significant

<b>Significant experience</b>	<b>Description of perceived personal impact</b>	<b>Explanation of why the experience was valued</b>
<p>Improving Spanish and doing well academically</p> <p>(representing two related items on Gretchen’s map, ‘language’ and ‘academic improvement’)</p>	<p>Gretchen felt accomplished as a result of academic improvement and becoming bilingual.</p> <p>Gretchen felt becoming bilingual changed her personality and her identity. Gretchen said: “It’s made me...more of an interesting person...because I have a completely different personality when I speak English to when I speak Spanish...Now most of my friends are Latino...the music I listen to, the movies that I watch, even my bosses...that’s all just such a big part of my life now”.</p> <p>Gretchen also felt her new language skills made her more empathetic. She said: “I can understand where they’re [non-English speaking people] coming from and how it [speaking in a non-native language] feels”.</p>	<p>Gretchen explained that she is “someone that likes to work hard to get good grades. That’s always been part of who I am”. This part of her value system shows why language and academic improvement were significant.</p> <p>Gretchen intended to improve her language skills and this learning intent shaped the value she assigned to becoming bilingual. She said: “Even if it wasn’t part of my degree, I would have gone on exchange anyway and I probably would have gone to the same place just because I’ve really wanted to be able to perfect my Spanish. Because no matter how much you study, and how much you practise, and you’re not really going to be able to get to a certain level of proficiency unless you actually go to the country and just experience it daily. That was a major driver for me”.</p>
<p>Improving confidence</p> <p>(‘confidence’ on Gretchen’s map)</p>	<p>‘Confidence’ symbolised the way Gretchen’s experiences made her “feel good” about herself. She said: “Now I have more confidence in my choices and in my decisions and relying on who I am no matter what the situation”.</p> <p>Gretchen felt she became a more interesting candidate for employers.</p>	<p>Gretchen felt her lack of “exciting experiences” prior to studying abroad made her “naïve”. This is why she valued improving her self-confidence. She said: “I hadn’t really experienced having to put yourself out there, and be the first one to speak to someone, and ask people to come and do stuff with you because that wasn’t really part of my life beforehand”.</p>
<p>Unique experiences</p>	<p>Having ‘unique experiences’ made Gretchen feel more open</p>	<p>Gretchen’s unique experiences were valued for the sense of</p>

<p>(grouped with 'great stories' as the two items were discussed together)</p>	<p>minded and "less scared to try new things". These unique experiences impacted Gretchen's identity. She said: "Just to be able to...talk about the experiences I've had has...defined my identity [and] given me more breadth as a person".</p>	<p>accomplishment and for changes to her identity. She said: "It always just felt so amazing to have done something. No one else I know has done that. That's something that's very unique to me at this point in regard to how I see myself and how I've lived my life so far. I really wanted to be seen as exotic, and something new, and something different". This aspect of subjective value is related to emotional reactions to an experience.</p>
<p>Lack of friends ('friends' on Gretchen's map)</p>	<p>Gretchen said that she "felt lonely for a lot of the trip" as she did not make many friends. This led Gretchen to realise what and how she should differ her behaviour, She said: "I'm going to try and have the confidence in myself to take the first step".</p>	<p>Gretchen's unfulfilled expectation of making friends is why 'friends' was named as significant. She said: "One of my biggest expectations was about having an amazing group of friends because I thought I'd finally have time to have that...I was disappointed in myself. I feel like I should have taken further advantage of being there and I should have put in more effort". This reflection also shows how Gretchen values achieving her goals.</p>
<p>Feeling of belonging (grouped with two other items that had similar meaning, 'community' and 'acculturation')</p>	<p>Gretchen described the sense of accomplishment she felt at "becoming part of the culture" and the community in Colombia. She said: "Just being able to navigate well in another culture...I knew where I was going...and being able to feel comfortable communicating with just anybody...That for me, was a success".</p> <p>Gretchen also described the impact of this aspect of her experience as a reminder "of the importance of being kind to strangers". She felt understanding that "everybody has their own story and their own life" helped her feel confident about making</p>	<p>Gretchen's strong sense of community at home shaped the value she placed on feelings of belonging. She values knowing "if we need help, people will help us out".</p> <p>Gretchen's prior connections with Latin American culture and her intent to become part of that culture influenced the value she placed on belonging and acculturating. Gretchen had previously "had a few Latino boyfriends" and already felt connected to Latino culture. Gretchen said: "I really wanted to become part of the culture...I really love the Latin American culture...I really wanted to...start living life as someone from that country...I wanted to go somewhere where I</p>

	connections with people when she travels abroad again.	would be very forced to integrate myself into the culture...I'd already had close people in my life that were from all those cultures...That really helped me with getting to know the culture better and communicating with people better".
Travel to new places (and 'amazing photos' as evidence of this)	Travelling to new places made Gretchen feel "very elated and very accomplished". She said: "I've gotten this far. I've gotten here. This is just mind blowing to me".	Gretchen said: "Having the photos there really made me feel like it was a success, and that I did well, and I have proof, and I took advantage of it". This shows the value Gretchen places on accomplishment and how these values shaped her meaning-making efforts.
Feeling of accomplishment, independence and freedom (grouped together as all three items held similar value to Gretchen)	The experience of feeling accomplished and independent led Gretchen to the realisation that responsibility is part of her identity. She said: "I like responsibility and...I need it...Even though here, my life is structured and busy, it [studying abroad] makes me feel accomplished. It makes me feel good about myself".	Again, Gretchen's values around accomplishment shaped the value she assigned to all her mapped items. She said: "I felt like from the start...if I wasn't able to do those things [the other map items]...that I would have failed my exchange. I felt that if I wasn't able to integrate enough then I wouldn't have taken advantage of my experience, that I wouldn't have put in enough effort, that I was just not smart enough, that my language wasn't good enough to be able to really become part of a different culture".

## Hussam

Hussam was enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts (Political Science) and he studied in the Netherlands for one semester. Hussam's mind map (Figure 5.6) represents the value that he places on his religious beliefs and on his interest in political science and history. His map consisted of solo travelling and three abstract concepts.



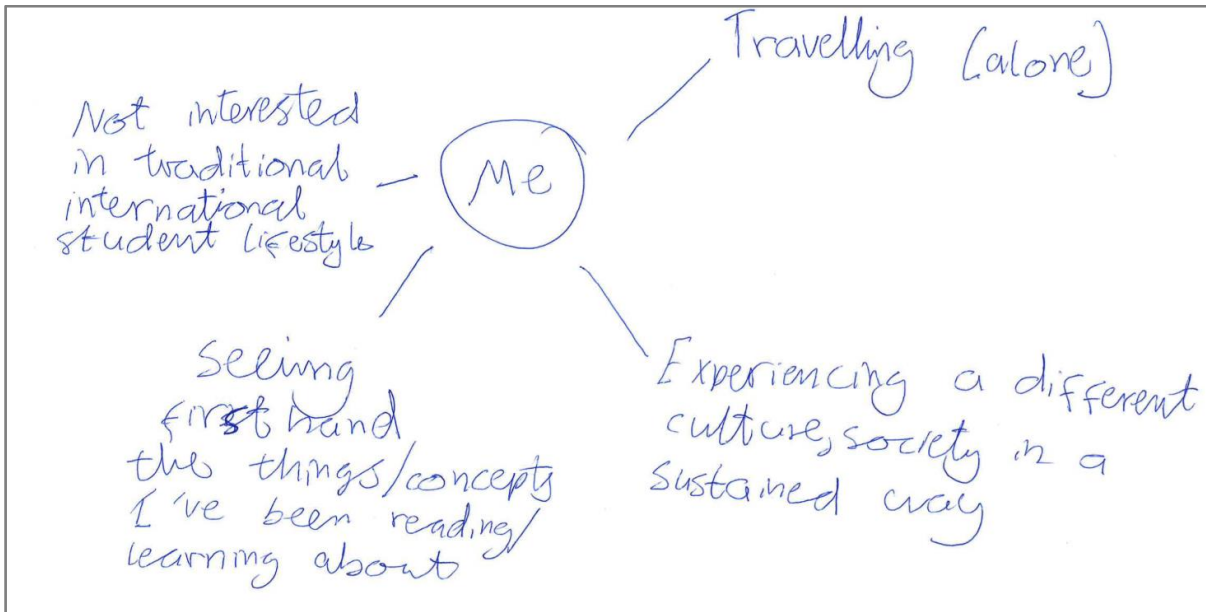


Figure 5.6: Hussam’s mind map

Much of Hussam’s experience was characterised by his lack of interest in what he described as the “traditional international student scene” in Amsterdam. This meant that he spent much of his time outside of his host city travelling on his own. Hussam assigned meaning to seeing things that were politically and historically significant (he studied political science) and that were important to his Muslim faith. Hussam found meaning in going beyond “just dipping your feet in and then leaving”. He wanted to engage with the places he visited, not just be a tourist.

Table 5.5: How and why Hussam’s mind map experiences were significant

Significant experience	Description of perceived personal impact	Explanation of why the experience was valued
Feeling disconnected from the international student culture and thus spending time travelling alone  (on Hussam’s map as two separate items, ‘not being interested in the student lifestyle’ and	Travelling alone made Hussam feel like “a responsible adult and empowered”.  Not being interested in the student lifestyle in his host city made Hussam realise “you choose where you invest your time”.	Hussam’s values shaped the significance of feeling disconnected from other students. He said: “I don’t think there’s a good international student, but I think an international student who makes the most use of their experiences, one who gets out of their bubble, and gets out of their comfort zone, and meets new people, and sees new experiences, and is exposed to different ways of thinking and doing. I’m not entirely sure that most of my companions did or could do that”.

<p>‘travelling alone’)</p>		<p>These values (and his intent to travel outside his host city) in turn shaped the meaning he assigned to travelling. Hussam said: “There were so many places I wanted to go to...I couldn’t connect to the social activities in Amsterdam...that’s why I was travelling so much”.</p>
<p>Seeing things firsthand (that Hussam had read and learnt about)</p>	<p>Hussam’s firsthand experiences of things that were meaningful to him were “invaluable” as a student of political science with an interest in history. He was able to attend the trial of “this very prominent Serbian army general who was responsible for the genocide in Srebrenica” in The Hague. Hussam said this experience was “incredibly interesting but also somewhat traumatic”.</p>	<p>Hussam expressed learning intent around visiting places of personal significance to him. He said: “I was hoping to be able to get the chance to visit a lot of the places that I’ve spent most of my life reading about or learning about...Being a Muslim, it was important to go to these countries because they’re a central part of our social, religious, psychological imagination”.</p> <p>Hussam found experiencing things firsthand personally meaningful. He said: “It’s one thing to read about something, but to go there or to interact with people who have direct knowledge or experience is something I’ve always valued”.</p>
<p>Experiencing new cultures in a sustained way</p>	<p>Experiencing cultures in a sustained way gave Hussam a stronger appreciation of cultural difference. This experience “opened his eyes” and Hussam gained a “more cosmopolitan perspective on life” where “future interactions are coloured by new knowledge and perspectives”. Hussam gave the example of how his more nuanced view of the world “comes into play” when writing an essay.</p> <p>Hussam explained that “nothing made sense” to him after his experiences abroad. He now questions his privilege. He said: “How can I exist in my</p>	<p>Hussam explained that he had “always detested superficial travel”. This is why he valued travelling in a ‘sustained way’. Hussam said: “You get to see how a different society operates. You can see how it’s better or worse than the one you’re in and you can draw lessons from that. You can either appreciate what you have, or you can see this is an ideal to work towards. Being in that place for so long kind of allows you to understand it in a much more richer [sic] way than just if you’re there for a couple of days, or a week, or something”.</p>

	comfortable space and then people are being forced to endure a far more uncomfortable space?"	
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## Ariel

Ariel studied Nursing and Midwifery. Her international study experience was undertaken in the United States at one of only three universities on offer. (The Nursing and Midwifery program at her home university is very structured and study abroad must include clinical work to meet program requirements.) Ariel drew a map of the United States (only faintly visible in Figure 5.7) and placed six significant items within it.



Figure 5.7: Ariel's mind map

Ariel explained her map as she was drawing it. She said:

*I would probably draw a map of the United States...The main thing was travel for me, so I'd write that really big in my word cloud...Then it was making lasting relationships, as well...Having a really good time, so fun. The study was important to me. Just the overall experience, I think...I'm just trying to think of a way of saying cultural emergence, so I'm just going to say culture.*

'Travel' was important to Ariel as it represents the meaning she places on being able to experience different cultures and meet different people. 'Culture' is linked to travel, as Ariel described the value she places on interacting with people from different backgrounds. Ariel acknowledged the

significance of the ‘study’ aspect for gaining a broader understanding of her nursing practice. She also emphasised that two of her mind-mapped items, ‘fun’ and ‘experience’, meant making the most of the “one-off” experience and taking herself out of her comfort zone. ‘Relationships’ were significant to Ariel because she appreciated the chance to share her experience with two friends who were also studying abroad. Together, Ariel and her two friends had an experience that they felt belonged to them, and that no one else would understand.

Table 5.6: How and why Ariel’s mind map experiences were significant

<b>Significant experience</b>	<b>Description of perceived personal impact</b>	<b>Explanation of why the experience was valued</b>
Travel	<p>Ariel now has a greater understanding of diverse perspectives. Travel made her “not so conceited, always thinking about yourself and everything that’s going on in your life”.</p> <p>Travel was also a reminder for Ariel about the need to “give back” particularly if one comes from a position of privilege.</p> <p>The experience made Ariel more thoughtful about her own healthcare and appreciative of the quality of the Australian health system.</p>	<p>Ariel described the poverty that she witnessed in the United States, particularly noting the homeless veterans. Her value system shaped the meaning of this experience. She said: “I’m one of those social justice warriors that people talk about...I’m always that person that’s standing up and fighting for people in situations that they shouldn’t be”.</p>
Enjoying the experience (‘fun’ on Ariel’s map)	<p>Ariel felt embracing the international study experience made her more open to opportunities and willing to put herself “out there”. She said: “I need to just give it a go...so that I can grow as a person and I don’t just stay the same”.</p> <p>The experience strengthened Ariel’s desire to work for Doctors without Borders.</p>	<p>Ariel’s self-identity shaped the value she assigned to ‘fun’. She explained that having fun “was really just me making sure that I said yes to opportunities that I might not normally say yes to....I am the type of person...if I’m not really comfortable doing it, I won’t... It was really important to me to let myself experience things that I probably wouldn’t just do on my own”.</p> <p>Ariel had always wanted to work for Doctors without Borders but had previously “been reserved about it”. Feeling more confident about pursuing her goals was valued by Ariel. She said: “My absolute number one career aspiration since I was young has been</p>

		to work with Doctors Without Borders...My Mum's a nurse...and her mother was kind of the village naturopath. She would just help people for free".
Experiencing different cultures (‘culture’ on Ariel’s map)	<p>Ariel felt her beliefs in equality and non-discrimination were strengthened and she is now more open to (and more tolerant of) other people’s beliefs and values.</p> <p>Ariel felt she is now more able to be an advocate. She said: “I would be the one to speak up and tell whoever’s being racist or discriminatory...that’s not appropriate”.</p>	The value Ariel places on other cultures and “learning about things” shaped the significance of ‘culture’. She said: “Not just learning your own discipline, but learning about other people’s lives, and other people’s situations about their countries, about their religions, just about their fundamental ideologies has always been something that’s ingrained in me”.
Learning new practice skills and learning about a different healthcare system (‘study’ on Ariel’s map)	<p>Ariel developed new practice skills and deepened knowledge of her profession. She said: “I continue to do full body assessments, which is something I didn’t do before”.</p> <p>The experience helped prepare Ariel to work internationally in the future.</p>	Ariel intended to use her study abroad experience to improve her practice; this is why she valued the ‘study’ element. She said: “I think it’s just being in hospitals...It always just reminds you that everything you learn, everything that you train to do is to become the best possible practitioner, or to give the best quality of care to your patients”.
Making lasting relationships (‘relationships’ on Ariel’s map)	Ariel was inspired by one friend to be a better practitioner. Ariel described this friend as having a “positive attitude” and a strong drive to be a nurse. She said: “Knowing her made me a better person”.	Ariel’s values include the importance of being “friends with people around the world” and “always having insight into new things”. This is why making lasting relationships was personally significant.
Making the most of the experience (‘experience’ on Ariel’s map)	<p>Making the most of the experience increased Ariel’s drive to “make the best of every situation”. It strengthened her self-identity. She said: “It’s just furthered who I am. It’s taken the parts of me that I see foremost in myself and has made me more passionate about those things”.</p> <p>Ariel felt she opened herself up to more opportunities. She realised that “working really hard and going after</p>	Similarly to the ‘fun’ map item, Ariel explained why making the most of the experience was important to her. She said: “I just really wanted to come out with this experience that I thought was completely one-off, that...I didn’t regret a moment...I always think you need to live your best life”.

	what you want, you can get what you want”.	
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## Meredith

Like Ariel, Meredith studied Nursing and Midwifery. Meredith’s international study experience was undertaken in England at another of the three universities currently available in her program. Meredith’s mind map was centred on her host city and five significant experiences (Figure 5.8).

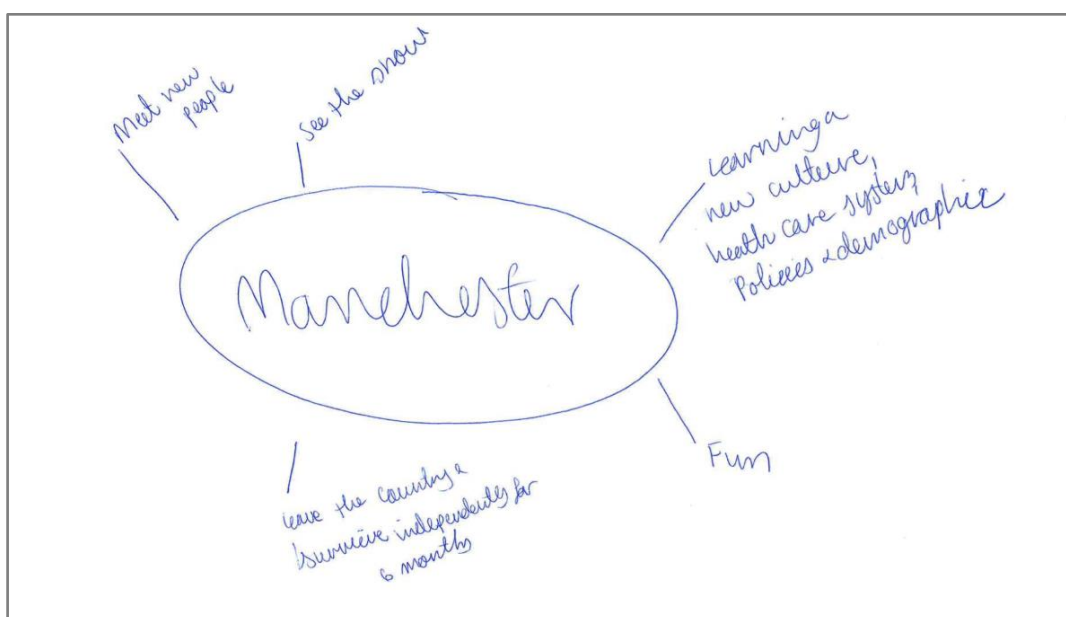


Figure 5.8: Meredith’s mind map

‘Meet new people’ was significant to Meredith because of the people she encountered while working in the emergency department during her hospital placement and the value she places on workplace relationships and the way she was treated as an equal team member. Meredith also valued the chance to experience snow and a white Christmas. Meredith assigned meaning to leaving the country for the first time and ‘surviving’ independently for the opportunity to experience being somewhere new and to manage without support networks even though she was already living out of home. ‘Fun’ was on the map as Meredith wanted the experience to be memorable. The meaning of ‘learn a new culture and healthcare system, policies and demographics’ was seeing the British National Health Service (NHS) firsthand and working with patients from a different demographic.

Table 5.7: How and why Meredith’s mind map experiences were significant

<b>Significant experience</b>	<b>Description of perceived personal impact</b>	<b>Explanation of why the experience was valued</b>
<p>Forming strong workplace relationships and being treated as a valued team member (‘meet new people’ on Meredith’s map)</p>	<p>Being treated as a valued team member changed the way Meredith views student mentorship and how she is going to “mentor students when the time comes”.</p> <p>Meredith’s confidence in her knowledge and skills increased and she decided that she knew more than she realised.</p>	<p>Being respected is important to Meredith; this is why she valued her clinical experiences. She said: “When I was...[on clinical placement], you were basically seen as an equal, as a person. Obviously, your knowledge wasn't quite as much, but if it was your patient, and you were taking care of him, the doctors would come and talk to you about it...That's why I actually felt like my skills and my knowledge were quite valuable”.</p> <p>Meredith’s clinical experiences in Australia also shaped the value she assigned to her UK experience. She said: “A lot of the midwives [in past experiences] really do respect us as students, but the doctors often don't talk to us”.</p> <p>Meredith expressed the desire to form strong workplace relationships. Meredith said: “I wanted to have lasting relationships from when I went over there...The relationships you make in your workplace are really important. You can love your job, but if you don't get along well with the team that you're with, that you're not supported, then eventually it's going to...come crashing down”.</p>
<p>See the snow</p>	<p>There was no impact in terms of personal growth of seeing the snow, but Meredith said: “There's this one photo of me... There's a massive smile on my face. I just thought it was amazing. The snow was very different from what I thought it would be”.</p>	<p>Meredith said: “I don’t know if I’ve got a reason” when asked why seeing the snow was valuable. She said: “I’ve just always wanted to [see the snow]”.</p>
<p>Leave the country and survive</p>	<p>The impact of living independently gave Meredith greater self-awareness. She said “I learned a lot about myself in the way my</p>	<p>Meredith valued the opportunity to live independently for its contribution to her personal growth. She said: “I really want to move permanently</p>

<p>independently for 6 months</p>	<p>personality works and the way that I interact with other people, like I'm quite a direct person, and quite assertive, and sometimes, a little bit blunt. I think that's okay, actually...you need that in particular roles". Meredith also realised "how to roll with that was important" to her and that "it's OK when things don't go well".</p>	<p>overseas one day, and I want to keep moving around. I think it's really important to be able to do it by yourself at times. I think there's always going to be challenges that you have that you don't necessarily have other people around for, and having emotional resilience and resourcefulness are really important skills to help you conquer those challenges".</p>
<p>Fun (enjoying the experience)</p>	<p>Meredith explained the impact of 'fun' in this way: "I learned what things I enjoy while I'm over there and how you interact with other people. I went travelling with some people that I really didn't get along with and I still managed to find enjoyment from it".</p>	<p>Meredith's learning intent shaped the significance of 'fun'. She said: "I didn't want to just go there purely for academic reasons...[as] I think your social experiences are really just as important...I really wanted to enjoy it because I want to move and travel the world. I was like, "Well, if I don't enjoy this, then what am I going to do?" You kind of have to sit back and reevaluate your whole life, really".</p>
<p>Learning about a new culture and health system (learning a new healthcare system, policies and demographics' on Meredith's map)</p>	<p>Meredith gained a new appreciation for the quality of Australia's health system. Meredith developed new skills, especially around caring for patients from different demographics. She said: "I can treat people with compassion and with empathy. I can understand...if there are things that I can do to help them".</p>	<p>Meredith's desire to visit the UK and learn a new health system shaped the significance of her placement experiences. She said: "One of the reasons was to see what the health care system is like over there, job-wise, and just to experience what it's like to live in the UK...I did want to work in another hospital and see what it was like". Meredith's values also shaped the significance of the patient aspect of her experience. She said: "I don't know if it was because I was conscious of...how terrible it was that we lived in a world where you become oblivious [to disadvantage], that's why I really didn't want that to happen... Maybe I'm just a person who notices that type of thing".</p>



## Annie

Annie, also enrolled in a Bachelor of International Studies where international study is a compulsory part of the program, studied in Taiwan (her major was History and Chinese). Annie had previously lived in Taiwan. Annie explained:

*I kind of wanted to challenge myself again. Because I remember when I was 17, it [high school exchange] was a big, life-changing thing and that I became more of a person that I am now. I kind of want to go back and see if I could grow again.*

Annie used pictures to represent her significant experiences (Figure 5.9). The pictures show five experiences: volunteering at a museum, being photographed by locals, skateboarding, her living situation, and issues with food.

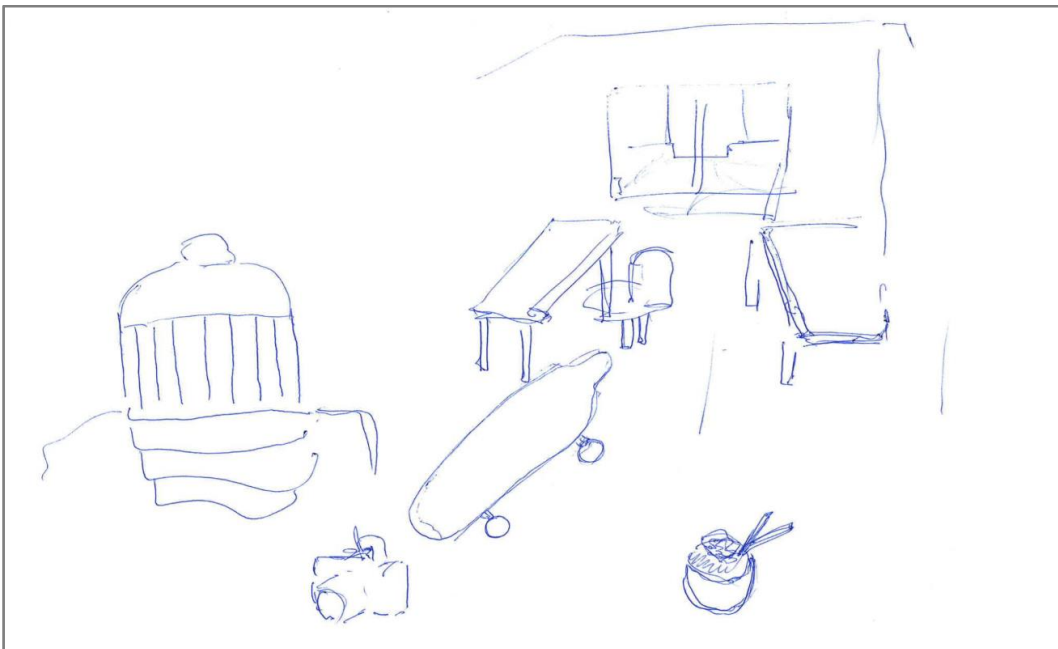


Figure 5.9: Annie's mind map

Volunteering was meaningful to Annie for the opportunity to conduct museum tours and meet new people. She had always been interested in museum work. Annie found meaning in her living situation (and the food aspect of it) as she did not enjoy her small room in a dormitory without cooking facilities. Annie drew a camera on her mind map which represents the discomfort that she experienced being constantly photographed by local people. Learning to ride a skateboard had meaning for Annie as a “kind of cool” experience. It was also part of her desire to try new things while she was overseas.

Table 5.8: How and why Annie’s mind map experiences were significant

<b>Significant experience</b>	<b>Description of perceived personal impact</b>	<b>Explanation of why the experience was valued</b>
Volunteering at a museum	<p>Annie now sees herself much more as a historian. She said she “learned a lot more about history” than she expected to. This new knowledge “formed a basis of new study” for Annie.</p> <p>Annie would “love to work again in that type of international culture...and just meet with other people”.</p>	<p>Annie’s inability to volunteer at home is why she valued her museum experience. She said: “When I’m only back here at home, I’d always have work as just a hinder. I can’t have spare time because of that. Because I didn’t have work, I was like, ‘Well, I’d volunteer. It’s like working so I’ll go for it’...It gave me the chance to pull history into everyday life”.</p>
Living situation	<p>Annie realised that she is introverted and prefers to keep her “personal circle quite close”. She said: “[living in a dormitory] showed me what I need personally and my space, what I valued in having around me”.</p>	<p>Annie self-identity and lack of experience with shared living shaped the significance of her living situation experience. She said: “It was my first time in a dorm...there’s just people everywhere and there’s always people around. I’d hang out with people a lot, I enjoy hanging out with them, but I just need time by myself...I was always just kind of not feeling recharged because I was just in such a not so pleasant area...I tried to give my energy to people, but I just couldn’t do it”.</p>
Issues with food	<p>Issues with food impacted Annie only during her time abroad. She said she would “get really irritated” when she could not find anything she “wanted to eat”.</p>	<p>The value assigned to food was connected to Annie’s experience of living in the student dormitory.</p>
Being photographed by locals	<p>Annie “expected attention” as she had previously lived in Taiwan in a rural area. The constant photographing, however, gave her insight into life in the city. She said: “I kind of built it [Taipei] up in my head as this massive multicultural hub, but it turns out...it isn’t really at that level yet”. She realised that she “will never fit in in this country”.</p>	<p>Annie’s self-identity framed the significance of being photographed. She said: “I went over...being a very confident person but...struggling with some anxiety and some mental issues...I get very conscious of people staring and that’s always made me feel uncomfortable...Aggression comes through a lot when I feel like people are paying so much attention...It’s a quick reflex in response to the feeling of</p>

		uncomfortableness [that]...there's a risk".
Skateboarding	The impact of skateboarding was tied to the discomfort Annie felt from being photographed by locals. Annie said: "When you're skating you just kind of fly past people. You don't have to worry too much. They're looking because you're skating. You don't literally feel that they're looking because you stand out so much".	Annie valued skateboarding because she said her mind "was set on doing something new and doing as much new stuff" as possible. Skateboarding was valued as a means of proving Annie could go out of her "comfort zone". She said: "I could prove that even dealing with all that anxiety I've been going through or trying to adjust to Taiwan didn't mean I had to stop going on adventures".

## Charlie

Charlie completed his international study semester in Germany as he was studying a Diploma of Languages in German and a dual Bachelor of Arts (International Relations) and Bachelor of Journalism. The significant experiences that Charlie placed on his mind map (Figure 5.10) were based around making new friends, studying, travelling, being able to take a break from home, and new insights into his career direction.

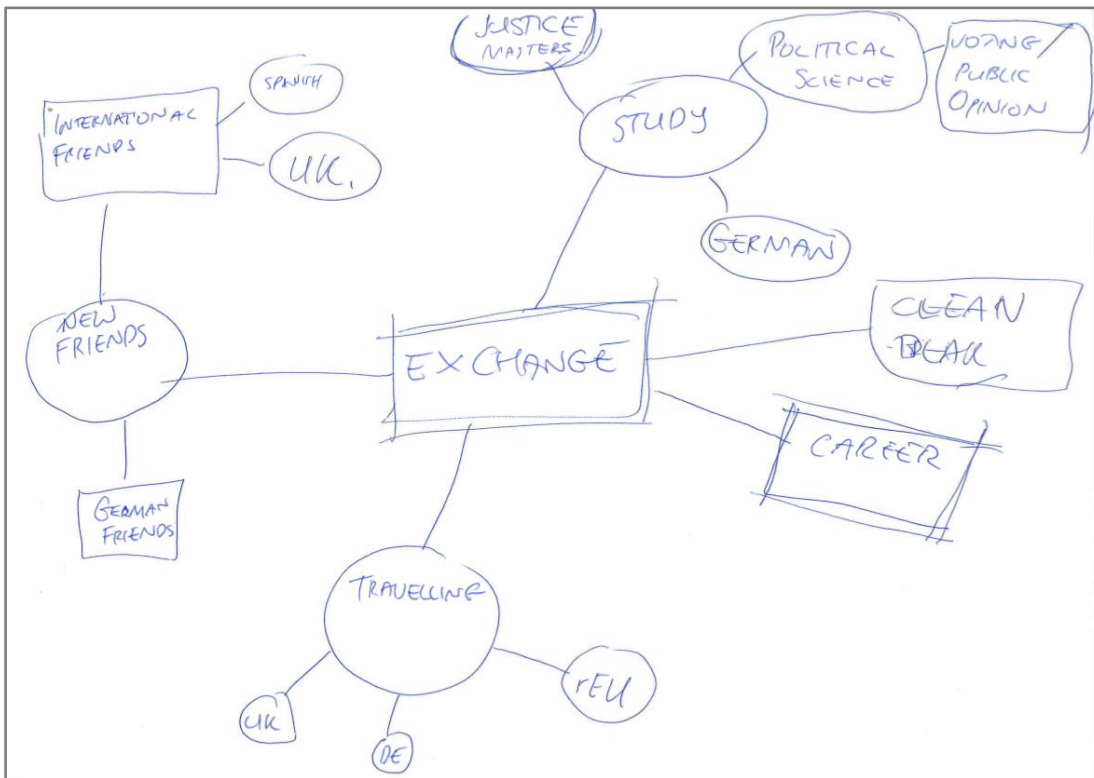


Figure 5.10: Charlie's mind map

Charlie placed ‘new friends’ on his map as he found meaning in the pride he felt in having formed new relationships. ‘Travelling’ was also a significant element of Charlie’s international study experience for the chance to explore Europe as he had not been there before, and for the opportunity to be somewhere different. Similarly, ‘clean break’ was meaningful to Charlie because he had the chance to take stock, move away from his usual routine and consider his career future. For these reasons, Charlie also put ‘career’ on his map. Charlie explained that ‘study’ was on his mind map because he felt it was the main reason for undertaking an international study program and he was pushed academically by the challenge of the different teaching style in Germany.

Table 5.9: How and why Charlie’s mind map experiences were significant

<b>Significant experience</b>	<b>Description of perceived personal impact</b>	<b>Explanation of why the experience was valued</b>
Travelling	Charlie felt that travelling increased his sense of self-worth. He is now better equipped to deal with future travel experiences. Referencing “travelling around a continent alone”, he said: “This was something which I earned...that I paid for... that was really something important to me that I put that time to good use”.	Charlie had the intent to travel. He said: “The one expectation was that I would visit a few countries when I was over there...I felt like I’d better go and see the world...I shouldn’t really be sitting around, just expecting things to happen to me. I should be going out there making them happen”.  Charlie further explained why travel was significant. He said: “Exploring new things really does help me feel better”.
(Making) new friends	Making friends made Charlie more aware of others and more “respectful to how different people are from different backgrounds”.  Making friends also made Charlie prouder of his Australian identity. He said: “I...realise now there’s a lot which is unique about myself”.	Charlie wanted to make friends and this expectation shaped meaning-making. He said: “If I went over on exchange and just spent the whole time by myself...and made no new meaningful connection with people, it would have been a very miserable time”.
New career insights and the chance to have a ‘clean break’	Charlie secured a Journalism job when he returned home. This happened because of the new career insights he gained while studying abroad. Charlie said: “I didn’t get a career in Germany, but...I did realise what was important when it came to career”.	Charlie’s situation at the time shaped the meaning he assigned to new career insights. He said: “I was third, almost fourth year uni. when I was over there and I felt like, ‘career’, that was something which I completely missed”.  How Charlie felt about his life at home shaped the value of ‘clean break’. He

<p>(‘career’ and ‘clean break’ on Charlie’s map)</p>	<p>‘Clean break’ meant Charlie had “time to make new friends, and study, and travel” and reflect “on what do I want”.</p>	<p>explained this as “things which were happening with my friends and also, just the general feeling of stuckness [sic] that I had when I was in Australia, before I went away”. Charlie “wanted to get rid of that”. He also said: “[I wanted] to make sure that when I went on exchange, that I didn’t end up just falling into the same trap of negativity that I’d find myself in with my social, and academic, and life in general beforehand. That, I think, really defined my exchange, was also moving on from that”.</p>
<p>Studying subjects in a different learning context (‘study’ on Charlie’s map)</p>	<p>Charlie said of the study experience that “it kicked me up a gear” in relation to approaching study in the future. Charlie also felt he was better able to handle his studies and that he had improved his language skills.  Gaining a new perspective on what good teaching looks like gave him “open-mindedness towards the fact that things can be taught differently”.</p>	<p>Valuing study came from Charlie’s approach to study abroad. He said study “is the reason we’re supposed be going on exchange”.</p>

## Harry

Harry was undertaking a dual Bachelor of Engineering and Commerce when he studied in England for one semester. He studied subjects that contributed to his degree, including some that were not offered at his home university. Harry’s mind map was the most detailed of the participants. He had four broad headings on his map, but they all had several elements to them (Figure 5.11):

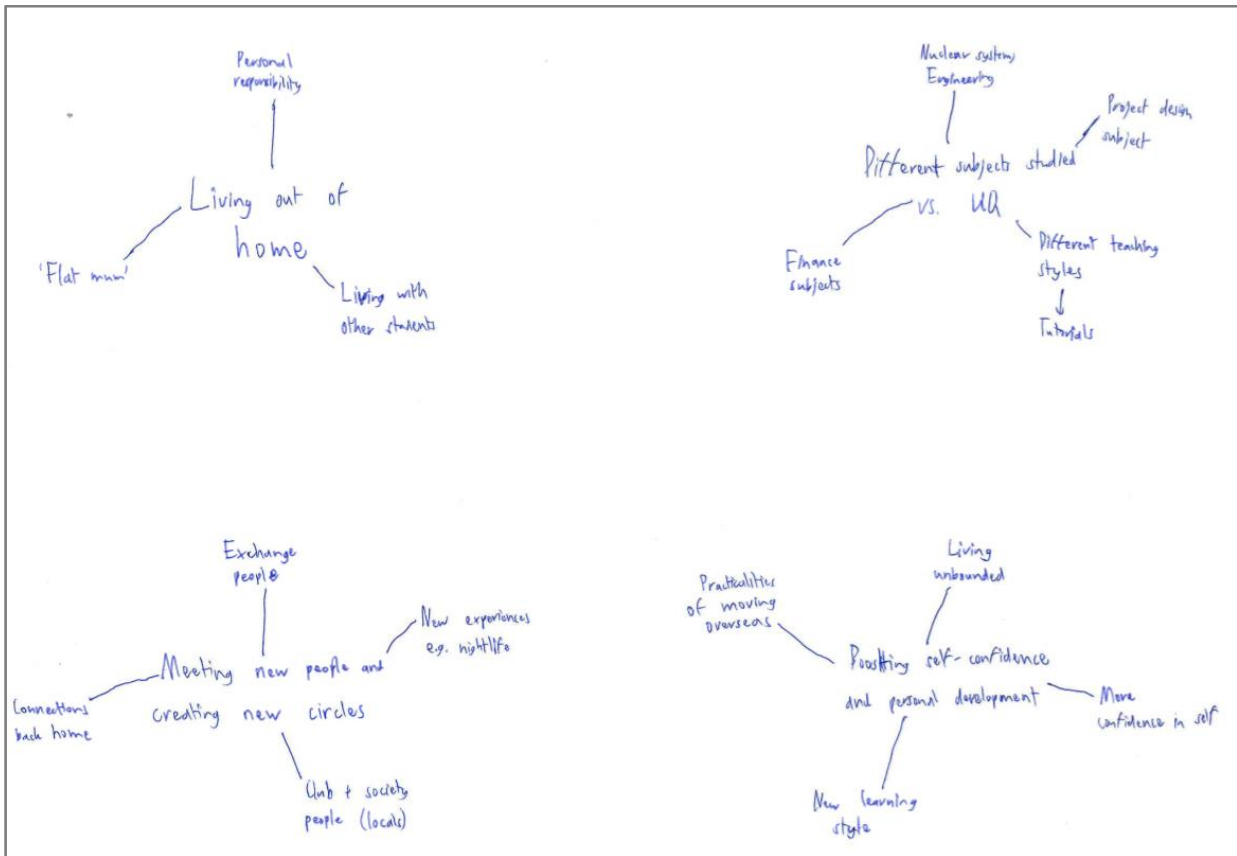


Figure 5.11: Harry’s mind map

Harry assigned meaning to ‘living out of home’ for the chance to be out of his comfort zone. Living out of home for the first time gave him the responsibility of keeping the flat running smoothly (being ‘flat Mum’), managing on his own and dealing with living with first year students (whom Harry felt were less mature than him). ‘Meeting new people’ was also significant to Harry; he valued the chance to meet people from all over the world. He also joined local clubs and societies to better understand what “ordinary life in the UK is like”. Harry also found meaning in the opportunity to study subjects that were not available to him at home.

Harry’s final significant experience – ‘boosting self-confidence and personal development’ – was also multi-dimensional. Harry first described this experience in terms of developing a new learning style - self-directed learning. ‘Living unbounded’ was something Harry saw as being part of the overall experience, where he found meaning in living without expectations and preconceptions about his identity; this had the effect of allowing Harry to be himself and do whatever he wanted. Living overseas was also significant as Harry felt he began to understand the practicalities of taking only essential things with him when he moves.

Table 5.10: How and why Harry’s mind map experiences were significant

<b>Significant experience</b>	<b>Description of perceived personal impact</b>	<b>Explanation of why the experience was valued</b>
<p>Living out of home</p>	<p>Harry feel better prepared to live on his own from living out of home. He said: “If for some reason my circumstances had to suddenly shift, I still have that ability to stay upright”.</p> <p>Harry realised “how to manage...relationships with other people” and “how to pick your battles”.</p> <p>Harry appreciated the benefit of being involved in a community when moving somewhere new. He also understood “the practicalities of moving and how you create new social networks if you were to move”.</p>	<p>Harry’s living situation at home shaped the value he placed on living abroad. He said: “I’ve always lived with my parents. I’ve always lived in Brisbane...Living out of home and moving to a totally different dynamic”.</p> <p>Harry also viewed study abroad as the chance to be challenged and this perspective shaped the value of the new experience of living out of home. He said: “Going on exchange is not about being comfortable living like you are at home, it’s about putting yourself out there”.</p>
<p>Embracing life in Manchester (‘meeting new people and creating new circles’ on Harry’s map)</p>	<p>Harry perceived the impact of embracing life in Manchester as moving beyond his “personal bubble”. This encouraged Harry to learn to socialise. Harry gained insight into everyday life (“life on the weekends”), which was “more valuable than just hanging out with exchange people all the time”.</p>	<p>The value Harry placed on immersion shaped the significance of living like a local. He said: “I feel it’s not enough just to go somewhere, study for four and a half months, and leave again. You don’t get a feel for what the country is like. You don’t really understand what’s it like to live in Britain. You don’t understand what it would be like just to live in a different city. Exchange people, they get into this bubble where they all do things together. They don’t necessarily really talk to the locals”.</p>
<p>Different subjects studied</p>	<p>Studying overseas gave Harry new motivation to study. He said: “That was the time for something totally different, [to] get everything out of your system and come back and re-focus”.</p> <p>Studying different subjects gave Harry exposure to things he was not otherwise able to learn and</p>	<p>Harry had planned his exchange to be “valuable and contribute towards” his “educational experience”. This is why study was valuable to him. He said: “If I’d just been doing random subjects, I probably would’ve lost interest and be like, ‘Why am I here?’ I could’ve just lived overseas six months and decided to work in a pub”.</p>

	allowed him to develop new work skills.	
Boosting self-confidence and personal development	<p>Harry explained what the personal development aspect of study abroad meant to him. He said: “I could do whatever I want. I didn't have to worry about what my parents think or worry about what my friends would think. You could just get away from it all and live the life the way you wanted to live your life”.</p> <p>Harry’s boosted self-confidence meant he increased his capacity to deal with changes in people. He felt “more resourceful”. The experience allowed him to “realise that...you’re not always going to have people there saying, ‘you’re doing the right job’”. Harry also said that he developed more confidence in his own abilities “to go ahead”.</p>	<p>Harry said: “I felt all through my life that there are specific boxes that I need to fit into. Moving overseas meant that I no longer needed to fit into those boxes. I could be more myself”. This self-awareness shaped the significance of the personal development he gained.</p>

## Rebecca

Rebecca studied in Germany to fulfil the compulsory component of her Bachelor of International Studies and to improve her German language skills. Rebecca’s significant experiences are shown in Figure 5.12.



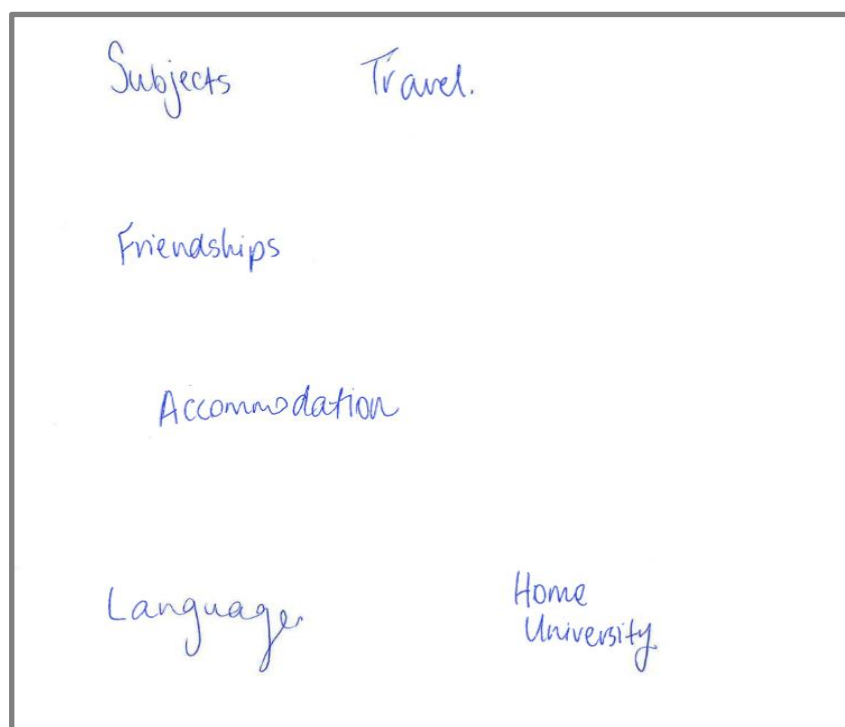


Figure 5.12: Rebecca’s mind map

Rebecca felt that ‘subjects and home university’ were significant as the difficulties she experienced when trying to sign up for her classes and the lack of support she received from her home university caused her initial stress. ‘Travel’ was on her map as she found meaning in the opportunity to spend time in two other countries and learn about how other people lived, which enhanced her whole experience. Rebecca placed her living situation on her map for the challenges that she faced in that situation due to lack of confidence in her German language skills and how living with German students influenced the friendship-making process. Rebecca put ‘language’ on her map as the support that she received to improve her German in a pre-program language class was meaningful.

Table 5.11: How and why Rebecca’s mind map experiences were significant

Significant experience	Description of perceived personal impact	Explanation of why the experience was valued
Enrolling in subjects and lack of support from her home university (‘subjects’ and ‘home university’)	Rebecca felt that the difficulties she faced enrolling in subjects in Germany and the lack of support from her home university made her understand the value of “learning from negative experiences and to be more appreciative of when it goes well”.	Rebecca said she could not see the value in a stressful experience at the time. However, she said: “Now I understand that you need to have that in order to throw yourself off-guard a bit. If everything had run smoothly throughout the whole experience, I would’ve looked back and thought,

<p>on Rebecca's map).</p>		<p>'That was all right, a bit mediocre'. You have to have those highs and lows in order to accentuate the ups and downs". This realisation shaped the value of this experience.</p>
<p>Travelling</p>	<p>The impact of travelling came from touring with people Rebecca did not know very well. She said: "It enhanced some friendships and broke some others". This experience led Rebecca to this realisation: "I'm capable of being in uncomfortable situations with people that I don't know very well and getting through it". She also had this realisation: "I will travel more and probably more alone than with other people".</p>	<p>The desire to be self-reliant and the realisation that "it's OK to be alone" shaped the value Rebecca assigning to travelling. She said: "I think it's a very important skill to learn [how to be alone]...and to enjoy that time rather than constantly needing other people's company...I needed to learn that skill to be more comfortable in foreign countries...It's so easy to be in contact with other people constantly...People aren't learning how to be alone...It's important because you only know who you are if you're alone and in these unfamiliar situations. I think it helps you grow as a person".</p>
<p>Dealing with nervousness around speaking German to housemates (accommodation' on Rebecca's map)</p>	<p>Overcoming initial nervousness about speaking German enhanced Rebecca's self-belief. She said if she was in the same situation again, she "wouldn't feel quite so scared about it". This led her to realise that: "I just need to try...and put myself out there a bit more".</p>	<p>Rebecca's desire to improve her German shaped the value of overcoming the trepidations of speaking German to her housemates. She said: "I can speak it [German] to my boyfriend...but I feel nervous whenever I was talking to his parents, or somebody at a shop, or something like that. I wanted to be able to no longer feel those nerves and know that I could speak in any conversation".</p>
<p>Friendships</p>	<p>Rebecca's friends lived in another building but she realised that she was better to be away from the "hub" to avoid the "cracks that started to show in the friendship group". This led Rebecca to the realisation: "I made better friends with the exchange students by not living with them, which is not what I expected".</p>	<p>Rebecca expressed the intent to make new international friends. She said: "I wanted to make more connections around the world to different people who live in different countries".</p>

Support received from pre-program language class (‘language’ on Rebecca’s map)	‘Language’ represents to Rebecca the positive experience of her pre-program language class. She said: “I didn’t really learn anything from the situation because it went well”.	Because Rebecca experienced initial difficulties with subject sign-on, she valued the pre-program language class as it “reduced the uneasiness...of the initial exchange experience”.
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**Laura**

Laura studied abroad to fulfil the compulsory component of her program, the Bachelor of International Studies. However, unlike many of the other participants who chose host countries based on their majors, Laura opted to study in Canada, despite majoring in Japanese (and Peace and Conflict Studies). Laura’s mind map (Figure 5.13) included four significant experiences.

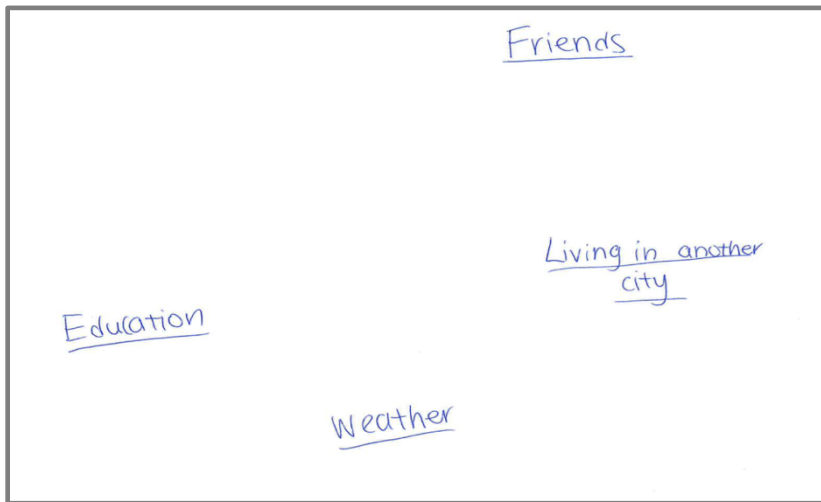


Figure 5.13: Laura’s mind map

‘Friends’ were significant to Laura as felt that there was an expectation to make friends from the experience. However, the friends that Laura made were closer to her than she expected. The study part of Laura’s experience was not meaningful for the subject matter; instead, she felt that exposure to new teaching styles and new ways of learning were meaningful. Laura chose to put ‘weather’ on her map because of the meaning she attached to experiencing snow and the contrast with the mild winters of her home city. Laura had already moved out of home but living in another city gave her a new appreciation for how to manage on her own. She also found meaning in doing something different and seeing how things work differently in other countries.

Table 5.12: How and why Laura’s mind map experiences were significant

<b>Significant experience</b>	<b>Description of perceived personal impact</b>	<b>Explanation of why the experience was valued</b>
Making friends	<p>Laura developed a greater appreciation of the international student experience. She felt she is now more prepared to make new friends.</p> <p>Laura travelled with her new friends after the completion of her study abroad program. As a result, she said: “I felt so comfortable with approaching people and talking to them...and more willing to express myself”.</p>	<p>Laura assigned value to making friends as friendships were an expectation of study abroad. She said: “You're on exchange, you kind of have the pressure. You're like, ‘Oh, my gosh. I have to make so many friends’”.</p> <p>Value was also assigned to making friends as Laura said she “holds friends very close to my heart”. She said: “The people that I met on my exchange, I'm probably closer to than my friends back home...These friends almost became like a part of my family. That's why it's really important”.</p>
Studying in a different learning environment  (‘education’ on Laura’s map)	<p>Studying in Canada led Laura to this realisation: “When I'm in the workplace and in my career, I can think differently, not just the one way”. She said: “I learned different ways of researching and writing over there that I've kind of drawn it into my learning here.”</p> <p>Laura also said she “learned to use subheadings in my essays when it’s appropriate”.</p>	<p>Laura valued the challenge of studying in a different learning culture. She said: “It challenged me and woke me up”.</p>
Experiencing cold weather  (‘weather’ on Laura’s map)	<p>Laura developed a new appreciation for the cold. She realised that she is “not a summer person”.</p>	<p>Laura said she valued the experience of the cold weather “because it's just so different. It's nothing like what we get to experience back home”.</p>
Living in another city	<p>Laura felt more independent after living abroad and more mature. She said: “It really makes you able to deal with things by yourself”. She would like to work overseas in the future. She also said: “I know I’m a lot more sensitive to people in</p>	<p>Laura values independence and this is why living in another city was significant. She said: “Independence shapes the way that you act in the world...You can really tell those apart as to...who is independent and has done things for themselves and</p>

	<p>terms of where they're from and what they do".</p>	<p>those who have really been coddled and relied on their parents. There's nothing wrong with relying on your parents, but..."</p> <p>Laura valued living in a new place as she said: "I love moving on to new places. I feel like if I stay in the one place for too long...I get a bit bored. I found that moving there was exciting".</p>
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### Charlotte

As Charlotte was majoring in German, she selected a German university and chose her host city for its Economics program, the second of her majors. She studied abroad as part of the compulsory component of her Bachelor of International Studies.

Charlotte's mind map (Figure 5.14) was divided into the two parts of her experience: (i) the three-month internship she completed in Leipzig prior to her exchange semester (the left image on Figure 5.14) and (ii) the study program itself in southern Germany (the right image).

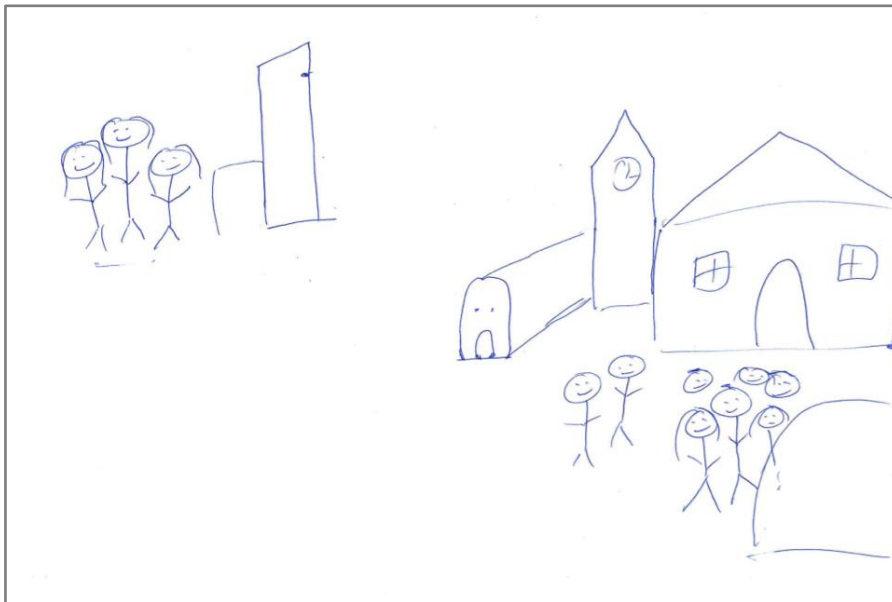


Figure 5.14: Charlotte's mind map

The internship was significant to Charlotte because of the role she had in a small tourism and marketing company and her living situation in Leipzig. Charlotte described the meaning she attached to gaining new insights through the internship into the type of job and organisation that best suits her.

Charlotte also formed strong connections with her housemates and found meaning in the experience of meeting new people.

Charlotte also made friends while at university in Germany. Charlotte connected with other international students through her German classes which were only taken by non-German-speaking students. Charlotte was exposed to the way that some of her international student classmates were treated that was different to her experience. These were the meaningful aspects of her study experience.

Table 5.13: How and why Charlotte’s mind map experiences were significant

<b>Significant experience</b>	<b>Description of perceived personal impact</b>	<b>Explanation of why the experience was valued</b>
Internship experience	<p>Charlotte’s internship experience was characterised by several job-related realisations:</p> <p>(i) A career in marketing and tourism is not something she would like to pursue.</p> <p>(ii) Travel for work is not as good as it seems. She said: “I’d much rather have a job where I can earn whatever money, and then travel, and enjoy being there, not working there”.</p> <p>(iii) In her field, there is a need “to be confident in your ability to have relationships and form good connections with other people”.</p> <p>(iv) Charlotte questioned her capabilities. She asked herself: “Am I as capable as I think I am?” She also realised she needs to “communicate more”.</p>	Charlotte assigned value to her internship as she believed that learning by experience is helpful. She said: “You learn to look at what other people are doing and see it that’s what you would like to do”.
Friendships with housemates during internships	Charlotte did not feel the impact of friendships in terms of personal growth, but was happy to have made friends and to have gotten along with her housemates.	Charlotte assigned value to making friends because of the lack of time to do so at home. She said: “I wanted to work on spending time with friends because...I don’t have much of a social life and that was something that I wanted to improve on and that was something I could do going on exchange”.

<p>Study experience</p>	<p>Charlotte was affected by the racism her friends experienced. She said: “They [Chinese friends] had a horrible experience...People would call out to them on the street and taunt them...My German teacher...would laugh when she was saying their names and not even try and get their names right...That was something I struggled with...In Australia, we’re a little bit more multicultural”.</p> <p>Charlotte also developed a greater understanding of the experience of being an exchange student. She realised that “people aren’t black and white and good and bad and that if everyone had compassion...and took that into consideration when they are...dealing with people and building relationships...it would make a huge difference”.</p> <p>Charlotte’s study experience made her understand the need to act with more compassion. She said in the future: “I will take it [compassion] into consideration when I’m making friends and dealing with people”.</p>	<p>In relation to the racism her friends experienced, Charlotte said: “Thinking that those same people who helped me wouldn’t have helped my friend is...a confusing experience...There’s not much that you can do...The only thing I could do was reassure my friends...hold true to my own values, don’t be influenced by the ones that I don’t agree with. At the same time, if you’re talking to an old person who’s set in their ways, you’re not going to change their mind”. This part of Charlotte’s value system explains why the racism experience was significant.</p>
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## Lydia

Lydia was studying a Bachelor of Arts (Laws) and she completed her international study program in the Czech Republic where she used electives in her degree to study Czech law subjects to learn about a different legal system. Lydia’s mind map items (Figure 5.15), represent the significance of her international study experiences in a more abstract sense; they symbolise the narrative arc of her overall experience.

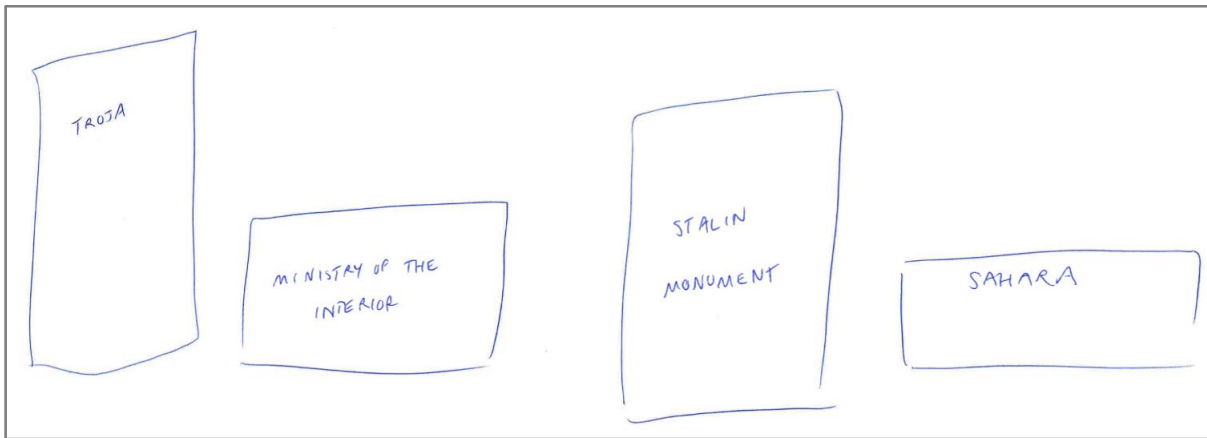


Figure 5.15: Lydia’s mind map

Lydia found the student accommodation (Troja) extremely basic and uncomfortable but felt that dealing with this aspect of her experience was a huge source of personal development. Lydia placed ‘the Ministry of the Interior’ on her map as it represented the confusing experience of dealing with early visa issues and her confrontational encounters with Czech officials. ‘The Stalin Monument’ was meaningful to Lydia as it symbolised a turning point in her Czech Republic experience and it became her favourite place in the city. The ‘Sahara’, representative of Lydia’s post-program travel to Morocco, was another meaningful challenging experience.

Table 5.14: How and why Lydia’s mind map experiences were significant

<b>Significant experience</b>	<b>Description of perceived personal impact</b>	<b>Explanation of why the experience was valued</b>
Overcoming the challenges of living in the student dormitory ('Troja' on Lydia's map)	Dealing with accommodation difficulties made Lydia feel more capable. She said: "I feel much more independent, and I feel much more able to do really anything I set my mind to...just the knowledge that if you move somewhere where you don't know anybody, it's really quite easy to meet people. I think that's opened up a lot of opportunities for me... I feel more worldly...just a bit more understanding of life, a bit more life experienced".	Lydia's self-awareness that she previously "led a very comfortable life" shaped the value of her accommodation experiences.  Lydia's values were inherent in the significance of the accommodation experience. She said: "I've always had it instilled in me that you finish what you start. It was like, 'This is a six-month commitment. You're going to stay here and you're going to do this whole thing'".  Lydia also expressed the desire to challenge herself. She said: "I just wanted to do something challenging, go and live somewhere new, see if I



		could handle it, and just throw myself into a completely new environment”.
Dealing with the Ministry of the Interior	That Lydia handled encounters with Ministry of the Interior made her feel that she could “manage most things” in the future. She said: “I’m more capable of dealing with hostility, and confrontation, and not just folding over in pieces when someone yells at you”.	Again, Lydia’s desire to challenge herself shaped the significance of this experience. She said: “I think I probably would’ve ascribed the same narrative to any constituent parts because it was what I was looking for at the outset, was through this process of difficulty or challenge, to come away from it more resilient and more self-assured”. This learning intent also shows how Lydia values challenges as a source of growth.
The symbolism of the Stalin Monument	The Monument symbolised the new sense of independence Lydia gained from the challenges she faced in her host country. As a result, Lydia said she had “sureness” about her identity. The experience led Lydia to this realisation: “Things get better. Don’t stress too much when it seems like things aren’t going the right way because things usually work out. Pay attention to the arc and not the details”.	The Stalin Monument was valued as the “turning point” of Lydia’s experience, “when the sun finally came out in about March or April after just miserable weather”. Lydia said: “As it was happening, I had nominated it for myself as...a ‘significant moment’”. Lydia explained the reason for this nomination. She said: “It had been such a hard struggle to start and to sit there with this new sense of independence....in that amazing setting with all these new people...it made the unfamiliar comprehensible and just wonderful”.
The challenges of travelling to Morocco (‘Sahara’ on Lydia’s map)	Lydia gained a broader perspective on the world from her Moroccan travels. The trip contributed to her enhanced resilience. She said: “I got touched a lot. That was not nice...That was another ‘pay attention to the arc of the thing’ lesson for me because the Sahara made the whole thing worthwhile”.  Lydia also realised the extent of her naivety. She said: “I’m probably a bit too trusting in a lot of situations”.	Lydia valued her Moroccan trip because she was hoping to be challenged and become more self-confident as a result. She said: “I was hoping to come away a bit more assertive, a bit more independent, and self-confident”.

### **5.3 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter examined how the participants describe the significance of their international study experiences, showing what, how and why these experiences were significant. The chapter highlighted the meaningful elements of the international study experience taken from the items on the participants' mind maps. The chapter showed how the mind map items impacted the participants personally, or how the participants felt they had changed as a result of their experiences. The chapter also discussed why the mind map experiences and their impact were valued by the participants. These research results demonstrate the perspective (i.e. their individual meaning-making lens) from which the participants made meaning of their experiences.

The participants' reflections on their international study experiences exemplify the process of understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience as shown in the study's framework (Figure 5.1). They provide 14 instances of the research phenomenon (the significance of life experience) in context (international study). The next chapter provides an analysis of the findings on the significance of international study.

# Chapter 6: Findings on the significance of international study experiences

## 6.1 Chapter introduction

Chapter 5 presented the results of the student descriptions of the significance of their international study experiences, showing what (RQ1), how (RQ2) and why (RQ3) their experiences were personally significant. These results represent each participant’s meaning-making work to understand and articulate the significance of their international study experiences, as set out in the study’s framework (Figure 6.1).

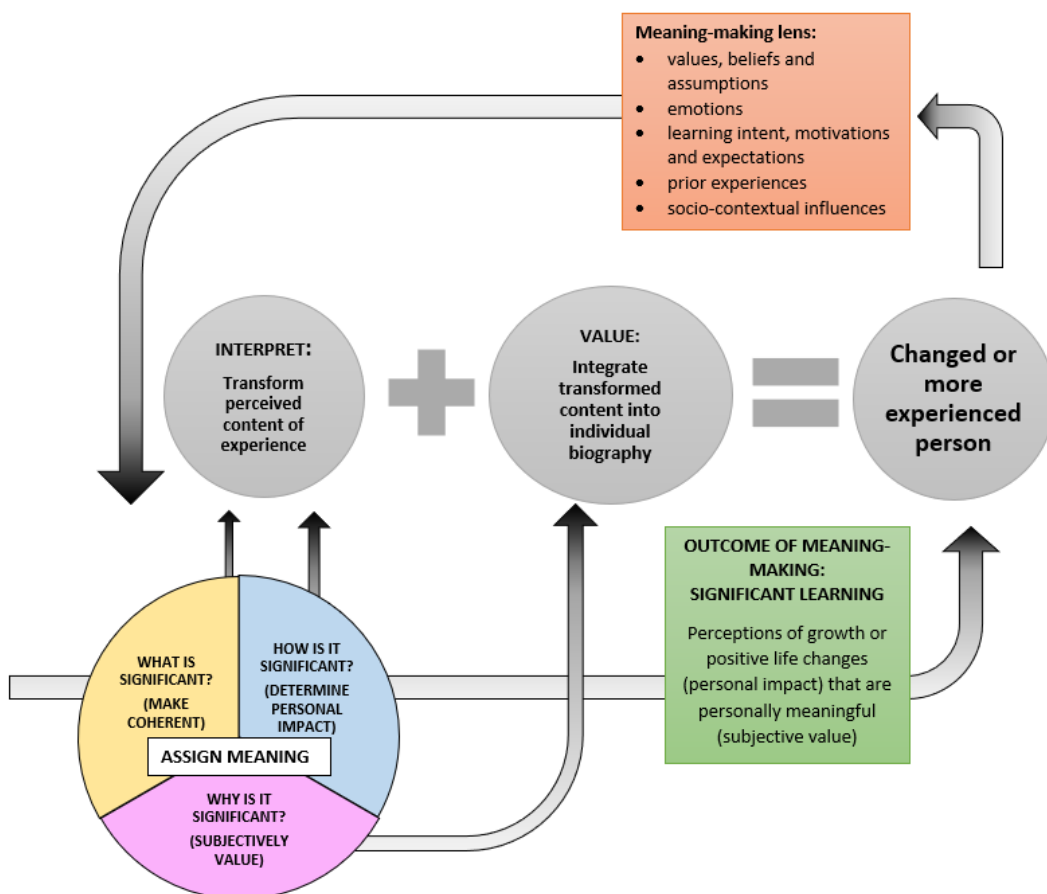


Figure 6.1: The study’s framework for understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience

This chapter presents a comparative analysis of the research results, providing a holistic picture of the significance of the international study experience and rich descriptions (Yin 2009) of the participants’ meaning-making efforts to understand and articulate the significance of their experiences. The study’s framework and its propositions (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.2) were used to

comparatively analyse the results from the 14 embedded units in the case. The comparative analysis offers the researcher’s insights, discovery and interpretations (Merriam 2009) of the research phenomenon (the significance of life experiences) in context (international study). These insights add to the depth of understanding of the two dimensions of the construct of significance (personal impact and subjective value), meaning-making for understanding and articulating the significance of an experience, and significant learning from international study. They address the study’s propositions that a learning experience is significant if it has personal impact and is valued by the learner using the learner’s meaning-making lens (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 explains the presentation of the findings in this chapter. The findings are given in three sections (column 1), to align with the research questions. These sections follow the process of understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience (column 2) set out in the study’s framework (Figure 6.1). The sections provide rich descriptions of the results, aligned with the study’s propositions (column 3).

Table 6.1: Presentation of the findings in chapter 6

<b>Section of Chapter 6</b>	<b>The process of understanding and articulating the significance of the international study experience described in each section</b>	<b>Findings presented in each section</b>
Section 1: What was significant about international study (RQ1)	The students gave coherence to their international study experience by naming the parts of the experience that had personal meaning (on their mind maps).  (The yellow segment and the green part of the framework.)	Description of what is significant about international study to participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• two perspectives on the significant experiences (descriptive and analytic)</li> </ul>
Section 2: How experiences were significant: Personal impact (RQ2)	The students determined the personal impact of the parts of the experience named on their mind maps.  (The blue segment and the green part of the framework.)	Description of what the construct of personal impact looks like in the context of international study: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• discussion of the three dimensions of personal impact identified from the results</li> <li>• findings on the overall impact of the experience.</li> <li>• description of instances where participants described negative</li> </ul>

		<p>impact from their experiences or there was no impact</p> <p>(Case study proposition: a learning experience is significant if it impacts the learner.)</p>
<p>Section 3: Why experiences were significant: Subjective value (RQ3)</p>	<p>The students described why they valued the significant parts of their experience and the resultant impact, using their personal meaning-making lens</p> <p>(The pink segment and the orange and green parts of the framework.)</p>	<p>Description of what the construct of subjective value looks like in the context of international study:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• discussion of why the participants valued their mind-mapped experiences, demonstrating how they assigned value to these experiences</li> <li>• the discussion shows how the learners assigned value using their individual meaning-making lens</li> </ul> <p>(Case study proposition: a learning experience is significant if it has value to the learner, assigned from the perspective of the learner's meaning-making lens.)</p>

The chapter concludes with a synthesis of the elements of significant learning, summarising what, how and why international study is significant to participants.

## Section 1: What was significant about international study

This section explores the findings that resulted from the analysis of the participants' meaning-making efforts to name the parts of their international study experiences that were personally significant. These findings represent the yellow segment in the study's framework (Figure 6.2).

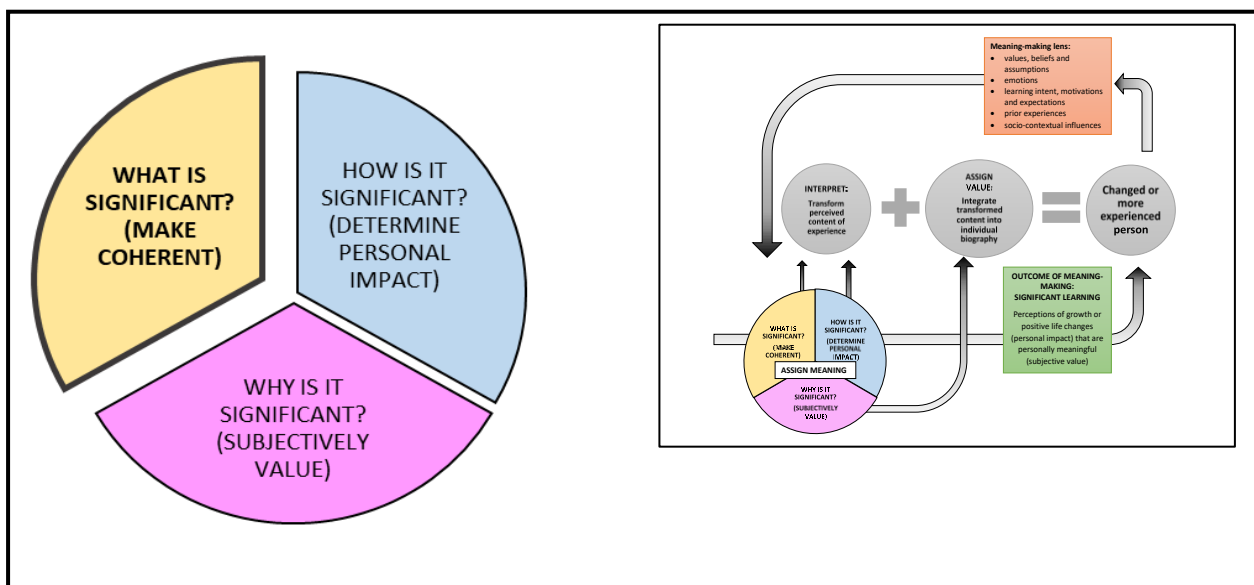


Figure 6.2: The part of the framework explored in Section 1

These findings come from an analysis of the mind map results, answering RQ1 (what was significant about the international study experience to participants). Given that most participants were abroad for at least six months, it was important to be able to bring some clarity to such a complex experience. The mind map provided the participants with a tool to give coherence to their time abroad. The map also provided a frame of reference for the participants' reflections on how and why their experiences were significant.

The researcher analysed the 62 mind-mapped items from the 14 participants and identified two perspectives on the significant experiences (see Chapter 4, Section 4.7 for data analysis process). These perspectives offer descriptive and analytic categorisations of the significant parts of the participants' international study experiences. They show how the participants transformed their experiences into "mental meanings" that explain those experiences, as part of the act of interpreting their experiences. Section 6.2 discusses the descriptive categories; Section 6.3 discusses the analytic categories.

## 6.2 Descriptive categories of significant experiences

First-level of analysis of the results provided a descriptive perspective on the significant experiences, named as *living away*, *studying and learning*, and *travelling*. These descriptive categories give a broad-level perspective on the significance of the international study experience. They are discussed below.

### 6.2.1 Living away

The first descriptive category is *living away*. This category broadly encompasses the participants' overall experience of living overseas in a new environment, away from their usual surroundings and support structures. Participants described the environment of the host city, a new living situation, or living out of home for the first time. Participants also had map items that indicate experiences (e.g. snowy weather) that they could not have in Australia.

The students' living situations were found to be a key element of living away. Nine of the 14 participants placed a living situation item on their maps. These participants lived in either dormitory or shared, flat-style housing with other international students, either on campus or in off-campus accommodation precincts designated for international students. The participants' living situations created significant experiences for them around interactions with house- or dorm-mates and dealing with the challenges of the facilities. For example, Lydia found the basic facilities in the Czech Republic challenging. She said:

*I was sharing a room for six months. The water would intermittently not run or run red or yellow. My room that I was sharing was half the size of this [the small office where the interview took place]. The kitchen that we were cooking in was basically just one rusted hot plate, no kettle, or fridge... just being such a world away from what I was used to, and getting there in the winter as well, in those conditions. Also, the windows didn't close, so that was uncomfortable in the winter.*

Another example of challenging living situations include a lack of cooking facilities. This was the case in Annie's dormitory, where she said: "all my life was in this bedroom and bathroom". Both Rebecca and Olivia also felt some discomfort in their living situations which forced them to spend time in other places. Rebecca explained that "for the first month...I hardly cooked anything because I was so scared about having to talk to the other people that lived in that place". For Olivia, discomfort came from the perception that her housemates "were just a little intolerant of me being on exchange,

like nothing was ever good enough” and that they were “messy” and did not stick to the agreed cleaning schedule. This meant that Olivia did not like going home. She said:

*I got to university at 8 o'clock in the morning and I didn't leave until about 10 o'clock...I wouldn't talk to anyone and I would go to sleep. I didn't have friendship with my housemates. I didn't know what it was, it was just really strange, really odd.*

Living away from home for the first time was a significant experience for other participants. May found having her own space meaningful and she made new friends. She said her large student dormitory became “home”, explaining that: “You would think being in such a big dormitory, we wouldn't be as close...maybe not with every single one of the 200 persons, but we were still really close”. Harry found meaning in living with first-year students, taking on the role of “flat Mum”, and being placed out of his comfort zone by managing on his own (he lived with his parents in Australia). He said that study abroad meant:

*looking after your own space, cleaning your own things, setting up a routine...Living with first years, it has its challenges at times...Not to sound too aloof, but I've grown out of some of the things they've done. I became the 'flat Mum', so I became the person to clean up after people and make sure everything was in order.*

Other expressions of the significance of living away came from Ariel and Charlie. The significance of living away for Ariel was represented in her putting ‘relationships’ on her map, which explained the meaning she found in living with two students from her home university whom she felt “helped me throughout my time away”. Charlie wrote ‘clean break’ on his map as he found meaning in being able to refresh himself by being somewhere new.

The students who did not directly name ‘living situation’ as significant still found meaning in some aspect of living abroad. Calvin assigned meaning to staying on people’s couches and living with minimal possessions while he travelled around the United States, where he explained that he “did not own more than what I could fit inside a backpack”. Hussam did not feel connected to student life in Amsterdam. This disconnect prompted him to travel a lot on his own which he found significant. Meredith and Laura both spoke about the significance of living independently in another country, where Meredith explained the meaning she found in the implications of going “to the other side of the world and not have anybody that I knew over there to start with”. May said living away was a chance to “do whatever I wanted...I was responsible for doing my laundry and cleaning and all that stuff”.



## 6.2.2 Studying and learning

The second descriptive category is *studying and learning*. Studying and learning experiences were significant to participants, in terms of the value of new knowledge and skills gained through the international study. Participants found significance in learning about culture (through teaching English to local people), developing language fluency, understanding different ways of university teaching and learning, and studying subjects that were not available at their home institution.

Some students recounted significant experiences related to their language skills. Gretchen chose to study in Colombia to improve her Spanish. She said: “It [language] was one of the main reasons I chose to go”. Gretchen assigned meaning to reaching a high level of Spanish fluency and achieving good results in her studies. She said: “I really wanted to do really well in my classes”. Rebecca described improvements to her German language capabilities through speaking with her German housemates.

The break from UQ and the experience of a new learning culture reinvigorated some students’ commitment to study. It also gave them new perspectives on their career choices or workplace readiness. Charlie explained that: “The assignment tasks were 6000 words...which was massive, bigger than anything I’ve ever done in Australia”. This experience enhanced Charlie’s approach to his studies. Charlotte’s international internship was significant because she changed her mind about her intended career choice. She said: “I found out...that it’s not what I want to do. I don’t want to work in a company like that”.

Studying and learning was also significant for its value to the participants’ academic programs. Annie described the significance of her volunteering work at a museum in Taiwan which ignited her passion for history. She also said she “worked with some really cool people” and enjoyed “running museum tours and meeting with the curators and staff and just chatting about it”. Hussam noted significance in activities that were relevant to his studies of political science. He said:

*being a political science student and then being interested in history, going to Amsterdam was fantastic. Every inch of the city was covered in layers of history...I got to go to places that meant a lot to me.*

Others took the opportunity to learn new things. As an example, Harry was able to study subjects not available at his home university. He said:

*I found Nuclear Systems Engineering to be really interesting...Obviously, there's no nuclear power plants in Australia, so it's not something that's totally relevant, but it was still really good to do as an elective. I got the opportunity to learn AutoCAD while I was studying over there.*

The two Nursing/Midwifery student participants (Meredith and Ariel) attributed significance to study because they gained knowledge of a different healthcare system and enhanced their clinical practice through placements. Ariel articulated the meaning she made from her clinical experiences thus:

*In the future for my career, with wanting to work...as a nurse or midwife internationally and for different organisations, I just thought, it's better to just take whatever I can from different practices so that my practice is very diverse and...the...very best practice that it can be.*

It is important to consider the participants' programs of enrolment as influences on their understanding of the significance of the study and learning aspect of their experiences. Of the 14 research participants in the study, five were enrolled in the Bachelor of International Studies, where one semester abroad is a compulsory component of their program. All these students placed some aspect of study on their mind maps. Moreover, all but one of the five students chose a location for the study abroad program that was related to their degree, largely related to their language studies. Two of the 14 participants studied Nursing/Midwifery, where clinical experiences are a prerequisite for transfer of credit and only three universities worldwide are available to these students. As stated above, they both mind-mapped items that related to clinical skill development and practising in a different healthcare system. Of the four students who did not place a study-related item on their map, May found meaning in teaching Japanese to local students (Japanese was one of her majors).

### **6.2.3 Travelling**

The third descriptive category is *travelling*. Travelling was named as a significant experience for most participants, although only five participants specifically put 'travel' on their mind maps. The significance of travel came from the opportunities to explore places outside of host cities and countries, experience new cultures and meet new people, and from the sense of accomplishment of having managed (sometimes challenging) travel independently.

Charlie and Rebecca found the travel opportunities that came from studying in Europe to be meaningful. Charlie articulated that he was "happy with...just how much I got to see". Rebecca described the significance of travel in this way:

*Being so close to other countries in Europe really made my exchange experience better. I think no matter where you go, you're clearly going to travel...For me, being able to not only just see German culture, but I went to Amsterdam, I went to the United Kingdom, so I was able to see...the ways that other people lived, not just in Germany. By experiencing that, I feel like I got almost three exchanges in one.*

Similarly, Gretchen found significance in the ease of access to different countries. She said: "The idea that I could jump on a bus and go to a different country was just so amazing to me that I just had to do it". This is an interesting point given that the participants live in Australia which, although is a large land mass, is just the one country, and it is a long flight to travel to most other parts of the world. As Gretchen noted, being so close to other countries "was such a phenomenal experience. It was such a strange concept because obviously, in Australia you can't do that".

Some participants found the exposure to and immersion in different cultures significant. Ariel said: "I just feel that experiencing different cultures, different foods, meeting different people, it just enriches your life so much". Hussam found meaning in visiting places that were of religious and political value to him, and being able to engage meaningfully with the places he was visiting.

In terms of managing travel independently, Charlie found meaning in having saved and paid for his experiences. Lydia explained that she chose "difficult places to travel...It [trip to Morocco] was just another moment of great significance, that whole experience, because it was again so challenging". Calvin found significance in travel through couchsurfing (staying and living for free with people who put their couches online). These opportunities helped him experience different parts of the United States independently (and with an element of risk) and meet a range of diverse people. He said, "I spent a month and a half only couchsurfing. Every three or four days, I went and slept on a new person's couch in a new city".

Only Harry and May did not have any travel-related items on their maps. Harry, however, did focus on getting to know his host city, and he joined clubs and societies so that he could interact with local people. He said, "I thought that was probably the most valuable thing because you see what ordinary life in the UK is like". Clearly, he could not have had such an experience if he had not been travelling for an extended period of time.

## **6.2.4 Summary of the descriptive categories of significant experiences**

Descriptive categorisation of the 62 mind map items as *living away*, *studying and learning*, and *travelling* reveals that participants found meaning in the everyday parts of living and studying in a foreign country and travelling in their host country and further afield. In other words, what made sense to the participants in terms of the personal significance of international study were things within the realm of everyday experiences. These findings point to the potential for learning from the seemingly mundane situations that characterise normal life, thus demonstrating the power of life-experience learning. In the case of international study, however, this ‘normal life’ is happening in a learning environment that is ‘abnormal’ (and hence stimulating) for international study participants. The next section of the chapter explores the second perspective on experience that emerged from the analysis of the mind-mapped items.

## **6.3 The analytic categories of significant experiences**

The analytic categories offer a second perspective on the participants’ significant experiences and a more abstract representation of the experience of international study (see Chapter 4, Section 4.7 for data analysis process). The analytic categories represent the idea that the significance of living, studying and travelling was framed by (i) connections with others and with language, culture and environments, by (ii) new and unique experiences, and by (iii) managing challenging situations without usual support networks. The analytic descriptions *explain why* living away, studying and learning, and travelling had meaning to the participants and have been named as: *interactions*, *immersion in novelty*, and *independence*. The next section of the chapter will explore these categories.

### **6.3.1 Interactions**

Interactions with people, culture and places were significant to all participants. Meaning was found in the living, studying and travelling aspects of studying abroad, by meeting new people and developing relationships. These interactions occurred through socialising, living, or travelling with new friends, or working together in study or job contexts. Participants also found meaning in connecting to their host city or country and to other new places (through living, studying, travelling, or working part time). This idea of interactions, or connectedness, was also tied to the ‘success’ of the experience for some of the participants. They cited achievements they valued like making friends, acquiring language skills, and feelings of acculturation or comfort in a new place.

The significance of interactions with friends and housemates came from several perspectives. Participants felt supported by their new friends in a time of need, they developed international networks and saw this as both advantageous and enjoyable, and they gained an understanding of different perspectives by connecting with new people. Charlotte found significance in the relationships that she developed with her housemates both during her internship and her study experience. Charlotte explained that “it’s really nice to have been able to make friends because I don’t believe it’s the case in every household when you have three people who don’t know each other”. Referring to her housemates while studying, Charlotte said:

*My housemates were also really supportive. I had very good luck. We all got along really well and did lots of things together. I really enjoyed living with other people. It’s nice to have someone around.*

Ariel, too, found meaning in supportive relationships, of being in the United States with two girls from her home university which she described thus:

*Living with them and having their support throughout that time. I wanted to really forge that bond... forever make it permanent, and really make the most out of our experience away together and knowing that I’m always going to share something with these girls that no one else would ever understand.*

For May, friendships represented both the sense of feeling supported and her desire to make friends while she was abroad. She said:

*It’s probably a cliché, but the friends I made on exchange really became family to me because we were all similar and we were all on the same boat... We were all a bit scared about going on exchange and living abroad in such a different country. There was that trepidation and we all shared the same want to make friends.*

Harry described the significance of making connections with new people from around the world:

*They’re people from all across the world. Inevitably, there is this little exchange bubble that forms through all the people on exchange talking to other people from exchange. I found that really enjoyable because you get to meet people from all across the world and you develop friends all across the world.*

Laura spoke about the importance of making friends in terms of the ‘success’ of her experience; Charlie explained that he was “proud” of having made new friends. Rebecca’s comment about the significance of making friends provides some insight into the expectations of study abroad:

*I feel like there's a bit of expectations with exchange... "You're going to make so many friends." I thought, "Oh, my gosh. I have to make so many friends. If I don't make friends, people are going to be like... 'What did you do on your exchange?'"*

Other participants had meaningful interactions in different ways. For Calvin, there was meaning in the range of interactions he had with people while couchsurfing. He said:

*I went and stayed with a Kurdish family for a week. I went and stayed at this old lawyer's house. I went and stayed at one guy who was living in an abandoned house that he just found. Radically different people and all of them I saw a bit of myself in. It made me realise that we're all very similar.*

Meredith had meaningful interactions with her colleagues in the emergency department during her clinical placement work. She said:

*I made a lot of really good friends with the nurses. I'm still friends with them now...I really enjoyed that aspect. I've never felt more part of a clinical team than what I did when I was there. I didn't feel like a student. I often find when I go on to clinical placement [in Australia], you're the student, so people don't really talk to you very much.*

The notion of interactions or connectedness was also related to experiences around culture and language that occurred through living, studying and travelling. All 14 participants had one or more items on their mind maps that spoke to the significance of culture and language interactions. As an example, Gretchen described the significance of connecting with local people:

*I was really good friends [with two of the guards in the apartment building]. They'd always watch out for me or...if I was ever going on a date and a boy came in, they'd always quiz him first. Sometimes, I'd buy them food and we'd eat together at night. They'd tell me about their lives, I'd tell them about my life. Then with the shopkeepers...they remember you, you remember them, and you have conversations. You ask each other about each other's lives. Even with some of the taxi drivers and with some people in the restaurants.*

Calvin, too, felt a strong connection to the US during his exchange. May had a job as an English teacher in Japan, which enabled her to interact with local people where she "got a really different insight into the working culture in Japan". Ariel assigned meaning to cultural immersion and her new experience of meeting people who practised a different religion to hers: "I interacted with a lot of people who were Jewish...I had never met anyone who was Jewish before". Olivia volunteered in a program for underprivileged children that involved making the children healthy breakfasts and

lunches and reading to them. This experience was meaningful to Olivia for the chance to take her “out of that ‘I’m-so-good-at-everything’” space as she sensed the privilege that many people experienced in the university town where she was studying, herself included.

Some interactions with people and culture were challenging for students. Lydia had a difficult time in the Czech Republic and her interactions with local officials over visa issues were “nightmarish”. Hussam felt disconnected from the international student lifestyle in Amsterdam and his meaningful interactions were with places of significance to him, based on his studies of political science and his Muslim faith. Similarly, some living situations were challenging in terms of interactions with housemates. This was the case for Olivia and Rebecca, in terms of different ways of approaching shared living and language barriers.

The experiences that are represented by the interactions analytic category are linked by the participants’ meaningful connections with people and places that allowed them to better understand themselves and others. These connections provided both a sense of familiarity and comfort. They also provided the opportunity to learn about people and the world from different perspectives, often due to differences in the way people live and interact. This idea of difference, or ‘newness’ in the participants’ interactions, links this principle to the second principle – immersion in novelty. Moreover, the interactions, while largely positive, were also sometimes quite challenging for the students, which connects to the third analytic category of independence.

### **6.3.2 Immersion in novelty**

The second analytic category represents the notion of experiencing and being immersed in *novel* activities and environments. This sense of *newness* was largely related to experiences that occurred while interacting with new places and doing new things, but also to meeting new people and learning new things. Participants consistently noted the significance of travelling and living somewhere new and the opportunities for personal growth that came from new experiences and removing themselves from the familiar.

New living situations were significant to some participants. The students who lived in dormitories found meaning in the newness of this situation, as did students who had not lived out of home before. These experiences were meaningful for the chance to see how different people live and to test capabilities. Calvin described the new travel experience of backpacking and travelling with few

possessions. Harry, too, lived in a minimalist way while he was studying abroad, explaining that he “lived out of a suitcase and a carry-on for six and a half months”.

Some participants found significance in trying new things, in part because of the participants’ perspectives on the purpose and value of the international study experience. Having never travelled before, ‘unique experiences’ in South America were significant to Gretchen because of their newness. She said: “I went bungee jumping, and I was in a canoe in the Amazon River”. For Annie, skateboarding was a new activity. She said:

*I never skated before I went to Taiwan but when I was there, when my friends had one, I thought it was kind of cool...I bought a skateboard for no other reason...My mind was set on doing something new and doing as much new stuff as I could.*

Immersion in novelty was also about studying in a different environment. Harry, Charlie and Laura found meaning in experiencing new approaches to teaching and learning at their host universities. Harry spoke about the significance of embracing new ‘learning styles’ where he was forced to become a more independent learner. Laura found that exposure to “different ways of researching and writing” made her adjust and she has “kind of drawn it into my learning here”. Charlie found meaning in having to write much longer assignments that he was used to and changed the way he approached his studies at home.

Immersion in novelty was characterised by the chance to experience different environments in what Hussam described as a “more meaningful way” than as a tourist. Hussam explained the significance of immersion as:

*Not just dipping your feet in and then leaving. I’ve always been annoyed by the concept of just going to the fanciest tourist destinations, and staying in the fanciest hotel, and just not really engaging with the society or culture that you’re visiting.*

Laura spoke about the value to her of living in a different city around the concept of novelty. She said:

*We see the same people, the same things [at home], whereas, being in a different city, in a different country...you see how other people work and how other people value things. You just see a completely different side of the world and how they work rather than just Australia.*

Some participants found meaning in new weather experiences. The weather was significant for Meredith and Laura who spoke about their excitement at experiencing snow for the first time, and for



Calvin, who had difficulty coping in those conditions. This is significant to the participants in the study as they live in a state in Australia with a very mild climate where it never snows. Meredith explained that:

*I've always wanted a white Christmas and I just love the snow... That was another reason why I picked the UK. I went to Switzerland and it snowed there, so that was fun. That was my main thing, to see the snow.*

Generally, the analytic category of immersion in novelty is tied to the participants' ideas of making the most of the international study experience. Ariel's explanation of the 'fun' item on her mind map sums up this idea. Ariel said:

*That's what the fun was about, was putting myself in situations that may be outside of my comfort zone, but to experience something that I would really enjoy and remember that I may not have done if I had just been my normal anti-social self that didn't want to do anything that was too far out of my comfort zone.*

Making the most of the experience seems to be about the perception that the experience is unique and short-term; there was inherent meaning in the transience of the experience. Charlie placed 'clean break' on his mind map which represented "going somewhere new...leaving all those things [that had built up over time] behind". Immersion in novelty for some participants meant "hitting the restart button" and using a new environment as an opportunity to reflect on who they are and their future direction. It was also about relishing the chance to be out of normal routine and experiencing things that were not available to them at home. Students also enjoyed the sense that they were not simply tourists and the value they gained from living in another place.

There are links between the idea of being somewhere new and the new interactions that it promotes, and that these new experiences were undertaken while taking personal responsibility and handling challenging situation (the third analytic category of independence). The participants also valued the idea they could be a new person and take different risks in their new environment. This idea is explored in the next section.

### **6.3.3 Independence**

The third analytic category represents managing without usual support networks and dealing with the challenges of living, studying and travelling in new environments. Independence was a new experience for many of the participants, even those who had already left home. Freedom and

independence were interconnected, as many participants described the significance of being able to live without the judgement of people who had known them for some time. Freedom also meant a break from normal routines and responsibilities and the confidence and freedom to pursue interests. Gretchen described the meaning she attached to independence and freedom:

*When I'm here [in Australia], I have so many responsibilities. Whereas over there, all I had to do was attend my classes and everything else was up to me. I was going to get out what I made of it, but there were no restrictions besides the ones that I put on myself. I think that really shaped the whole idea of the experience and what I actually did.*

For Harry, independence and freedom meant “living unbounded”. He explained that when you study abroad, “all those expectations are gone. You can be whoever you want, whatever you want to do. Nobody has any preconceptions about you”. Similarly, May said: “When I was abroad, I could do whatever I wanted”.

Independence meant taking personal responsibility. May acknowledged that she lived in a dormitory, but she said: “It was like I had my own space”. May found meaning in being responsible for her “laundry and cleaning”. This was significant as May explained: “While I do help out at home, I usually don't have to worry about that kind of thing because my Mum will help me”. Laura found meaning in living independently even though she had already left her hometown to attend university. She said:

*Moving out of my parents' house, my parents were still an hour and a half drive away, so if I needed anything, I could just drive...In Canada, if I needed anything, I couldn't just get on a 26-hour flight home. It really makes you able to deal with things by yourself and not be like, "Mum, Dad, what do I do?"*

This idea of being far away from usual support mechanisms also meant removing participants from close family ties at home. Gretchen explained that:

*I'm very close...with my whole family and going somewhere where there was no one like that was very, well it was very shocking, I guess, for me. And it also helped me learn a lot about myself and what I do in times of need when there's no one else to rely on.*

Independence was also significant as it meant dealing with challenging situations. Rebecca, Olivia, Lydia and Annie described the significance of the difficulties they experienced in their living situations. Rebecca's nervousness she felt about speaking German influenced her living situation. She said:

*For the first month, month and a half, I hardly cooked anything because I was so scared about having to talk to the other people that lived in that place. I hated cooking in my kitchen. I would always try and go to one of my friends' houses who lived near me and cook there so I didn't have to be forced to speak German with these people because I was still so nervous about it.*

The sense of being 'other' to the culture was also a significant element of independence. Hussam placed 'not interested in the international student lifestyle' on his map as he arrived in Amsterdam to find that student life was "all just focussed around drinking and partying" which did not align with his faith. Hussam was disappointed that he did not connect better with the other international students. He said:

*The saddest thing about the exchange is I spent more time outside of the Netherlands than I did inside. I was in the absurd situation where I would be traveling all over Europe, which was great, but I wouldn't be spending enough time in my own city. Part of me kind of regrets that.*

Although he did not feel connected to the other students, Hussam asserted his individuality by mostly travelling alone which gave him the freedom to explore places of personal significance. Annie's cultural interactions caused her some anxiety, as they were at odds with her understanding of how people normally behave. Annie assigned meaning to 'being photographed by locals' because:

*People took photos of me a lot and it made me very uncomfortable and it gave me a lot of issues. I could tell that they were taking sneaky photos of me without me looking. There's even a word in Chinese for it that literally means, 'Taking a stolen photo of someone'.*

The participants' reflections suggest that they found significance in the chance to experience adulthood in a new or different way. They often sought comfort in forming relationships and making their new environment seem like home while, at the same time, they found value in taking personal responsibility and living in different situations to those they were used to at home. In all cases, independence meant handling situations, even if they were unpleasant. Lydia's entire international study experience was shaped by facing challenges, particularly her living situations which she said was "one of the biggest sources of personal development". This idea of enhancing capabilities or becoming more confident from handling challenging situations will be explored later in the chapter, in the analysis of the findings on the personal impact of the mind map items.

### **6.3.4 Summary of the analytic categories of significant experiences**

The analytic categories of the significance of international study – *interactions, immersion in novelty,* and *independence* – demonstrate that participants found meaning in connecting to people, places and

cultures, and doing new things, and living without their usual support networks. The analytic categories provide a second perspective on the international study experience. They underpin the descriptive categorisations of the mind-mapped experiences (Section 6.2), revealing why living away, studying and learning, and travelling were significant. The analytic categories also exemplify the context of international study and how it creates the circumstances for particular kinds of learning possibilities (Illeris 2005). Interactions with people and cultures, immersion in new and unique experiences, and living independently facilitated the kinds of impact that the participants felt from their time spent abroad (as discussed in Section 2).

## **6.4 Summary of what was significant about international study**

The findings presented in Section 1 demonstrate the ways in which the participants interpreted their experiences (assigned meaning) to make those experiences coherent. This meaning-making work represents one part of the first step in the learning process to transform the perceived content of an experience (Jarvis 2006). These findings address the research question around *what* was significant about international study. They reveal insight into the potential of international study for significant learning, based on the meanings the participants made from interactions with people, places and cultures, immersion in novelty, and independent living. The next section of the chapter presents an analysis of the findings on *personal impact*, exploring *how* the mind map experiences were significant to participants.

## Section 2: How experiences were significant: personal impact

This section presents a comparative analysis of how the mind map experiences changed or affected the participants, answering the question of *how* international study experiences were significant to participants (RQ2). Section 1 discussed the participants' meaning-making work to render their experiences coherent by writing what was significant on their mind maps. The participants continued their meaning-making work by determining the personal impact of their mind-mapped experiences.

The analysis in this section reveals the types of impact expressed by the participants. It provides insight into the second dimension of the construct of significance (personal impact) and the study's key proposition, that an experience must personally affect the learner to be significant (Merriam & Clark 1993). The analysis represents understandings of the participants' efforts to determine the personal impact of an experience as they interpreted (assigned meaning to) their mind-mapped experiences as part of the process of transforming the perceived content of those experiences (the blue segment in the framework, at Figure 6.3). The analysis also demonstrates the outcomes of meaning-making, i.e. the participants' perceptions of growth or positive life changes (the green part of the framework at Figure 6.3).

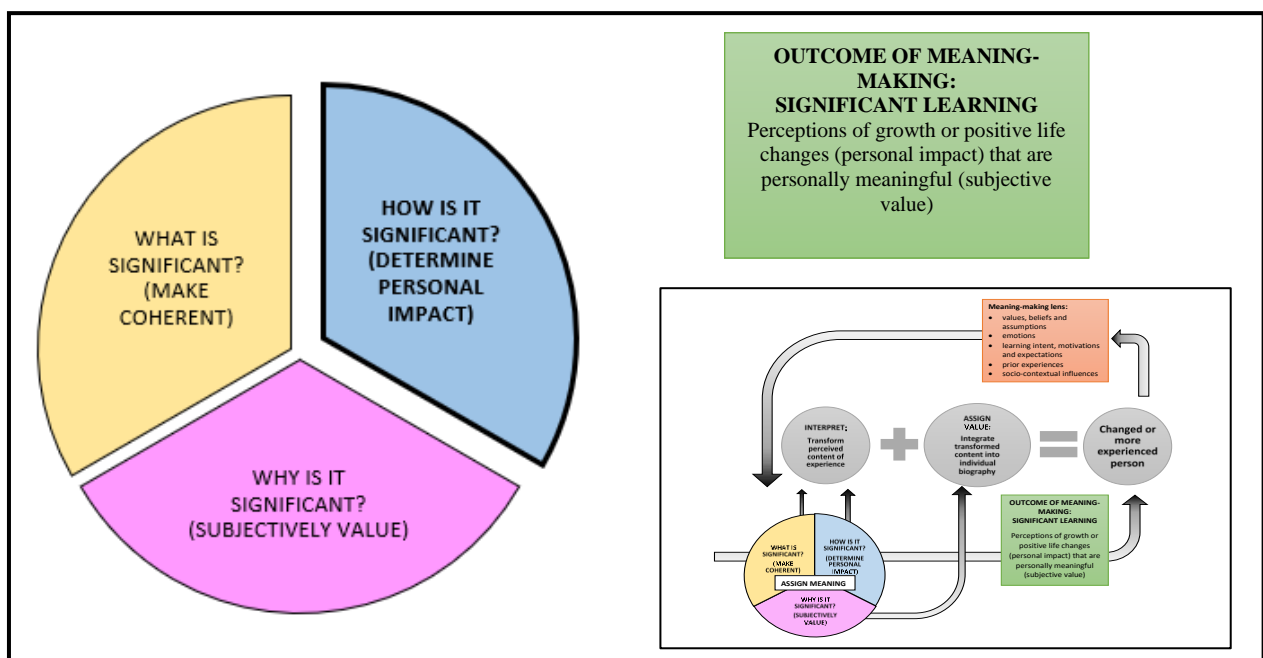


Figure 6.3: The parts of the framework explored in Section 2

## 6.5 Expressions of personal impact

Participants in this study were asked to articulate the impact of their mind-mapped experiences (see Chapter 5). Analysis of participant perceptions of personal impact identified commonalities in the nature of the effects or changes felt from their experiences (i.e. how they described perceptions of growth or positive life changes, from Park 2010). Three expressions of personal impact were identified (see Chapter 4, Section 4.7 for data analysis process). These expressions demonstrate the participants' perceptions of growth or positive life changes, described as *realisations*, *capability extension*, and *enhanced self-efficacy*. They show *how* the international study experience impacted the participants and what impact *looks like* in the context of a given student's experience.

*Realisations* reflect impact in terms of what the participants realised about themselves and about the world. These realisations stimulated changes to self-identity and laid the foundations for new understandings of their capabilities (the expression of *capability extension*). These understandings of extended capabilities meant that participants saw themselves in new ways, by feeling more capable or more resilient. New understandings of self, others and the world and of personal capabilities created a stronger sense of *self-efficacy* (the third expression of impact) as participants felt they were more self-assured in terms of future direction, interactions with people, and in their ability to handle subsequent challenging experiences. The three expressions of personal impact are explored below. Note that there were some instances of perceptions of negative or no impact. These will be discussed later in the chapter.

### 6.5.1 Realisations

As the participants described the impacts of their experiences, they frequently used the term 'realise' to articulate the impact of understandings of self, others and the world. Participants used phrases such as "it made me realise...", "it showed me that...", or "I feel like it...". They understood the personal impact of their significant experiences in terms of realisations of their sense of self-identity (including how they behave) or a new or different perspective on people and society. These realisations allowed them to form new observations about themselves, the people with whom they had formed connections, and the situations in which they found themselves. In some cases they saw these two things (perspectives of self and perspectives of others) as separate dimensions, but often the two were intermingled. This makes sense, as a change in one's self is likely to change one's perception of others. Realisations were found to be a key part of the perceptions of growth and positive life changes (Park 2010) that characterise significant learning (the green part of the framework at Figure 6.3).

Participants reported realisations that gave them a better understanding of their personalities, their capabilities and their overall sense of self. These understandings included their own risk tolerance, capacity for empathy, social justice focus, and level of independence. They also experienced changes in their levels of personal refinement and understanding of nuance, as well as a strengthened Australian identity. Gretchen wrote ‘feelings of accomplishment, independence and freedom’ on her mind map and noted how her international study experience made her realise how much she craves responsibility because it makes her feel accomplished. Annie’s living situation, where she felt trapped in her small dormitory bedroom, led to this realisation about herself and her needs:

*I was definitely very lonely...even though literally on either side of me and around me are all these people... but I needed time to shut away from them...At the end of the day...I’m not a social person. I’m going to live with this. I’m going to keep my personal circle quite close.*

Calvin spoke of realisations around his changed perspective on accumulating things. Calvin explained this change was about developing a sense of minimalism and a broader conception of home. He said: “Now I feel like home is wherever I can carry my backpack and put my shoes on”. Harry had a similar realisation about his needs and possessions. He explained that living abroad “makes you realise that a lot of the stuff you have at home is not essential”.

Some participants’ realisations about their perspectives on people and the world helped them understand that people are quite similar (in terms of their fundamental needs). Hussam and Calvin described their realisation that people coexist, despite their differences. From Hussam’s experience of travelling in “a more sustained way”, he realised that:

*You’re just doing your thing, and you have your space, and then you are transplanted to somewhere else and you realise, “Wow, there are people everywhere else in the world also doing their own thing in their own space and we’re all just coexisting at the same time”. It’s so interesting. You break out of your myopia.*

Realisations about people and the world also related to understanding diversity. Ariel’s travel encouraged her to reflect on “the good things about your country...the things about our country that work really well”. She also described a broadening of her perspective, saying “it makes you understand that there’s more going on in the world than just what’s happening in your own backyard”. Similarly, Hussam felt that he gained a more “cosmopolitan perspective on life”. From experiencing foreign cultures in a sustained way, he felt more “nuanced, refined, or wiser”. Calvin, who described himself as politically active, felt that meeting a range of people was “philosophically eye opening”;

he discovered that people are actually quite similar. He said that this realisation made him “love other people in a much deeper way because if I see me in everyone around me, then how could I hate them?” Calvin also said:

*I think everyone has this one desire in life...At the end of the day, no matter how different our views are, we all want the exact same thing and that's prosperity. I am yet to come across someone who does not want that.*

Some participants described realisations about their (privileged) place in the world and their increased understanding of injustice. This impact came from experiences with other international students, living situations, clinical placements, and travelling. Laura's recognition came from comparing Australia to her host country and from travelling to Cuba. She noted her host country has a \$9 per hour minimum wage, “whereas back here, as an 18-year-old, I was getting paid \$19 to \$20 an hour. It just makes you so much more grateful. It makes you appreciate other people's work”. She also noted:

*Going to Cuba... that was like a step back 50 years. It just makes you so grateful for the things that you have back home...They don't even have proper housing, proper food... I'm so grateful to be living here.*

Charlotte described how some of her international (Chinese and Fijian) student friends were treated by local people and how this treatment made her realise:

*I am very privileged, the luckiest person in the world...It definitely opened my eyes up to thinking, “I'm so lucky”. Also, I feel horrible for my friend who's had to deal with that their whole life, so much so that it's become normal. That's a realisation.*

Meredith and Ariel, both Nursing students who undertook clinical placements while studying overseas, recognised their privilege through witnessing homelessness, gaining a better understanding of the value of Australia's healthcare system, and caring for patients from disadvantaged backgrounds. Meredith said: “It made me quite grateful for the healthcare system that we have here”. Olivia realised her privilege through volunteering for disadvantaged children. She explained that “it gave me great perspective that we are in a great university but there are other people out there that need to be helped”.



## 6.5.2 Capability extension

As the participants described their realisations, they also described an associated change in the understanding of their capabilities. Often perceptions of change (expressed as realisations) and the resulting extension of capabilities were intertwined. This makes sense, given that meanings made from experiences are about perceptions of positive life changes (Park 2010). This section of the chapter explores the capabilities that participants recognised as having been extended by their significant experiences.

In the work described in this thesis, participants described the new or different understandings (realisations) about themselves and the world around them that shaped their perceptions of an extension of a range of capabilities. Analysis of capability-extended statements led the researcher to categorise this expression of personal impact in three ways:

- Increased capability to interact with people
- Enhanced independence, self-confidence, or resilience
- Improvement in workplace or study capability

### **Increased capability to interact with people**

The participants described greater capacity to interact with people, which was shaped by their realisations about self-identity, others and the world. This increased capability was described as ‘adaptability’; they made quick friendships, managed personal relationships, interacted with diverse people and forged deeper connections with people through being more empathetic. Ariel, who felt that her international travel experiences made her recognise empathy in herself, perceived impact around her social justice approach:

*I think for me it will just be continuing and furthering my own beliefs, and always fighting for equality, and never letting any kind of discrimination happen in front of me.*

Similarly, Gretchen, who said she felt more open-minded after her experiences, described being reminded of “the importance of being kind to strangers”. She believed her future interactions would be shaped by understanding that “everybody has their own story”. Gretchen also described the impact of acculturation. She expressed being more comfortable interacting with people from Colombia. She said, “I feel like I did acculturate well and...even now, whenever I meet someone from Colombia, I can start having a conversation straight away and I feel very comfortable in it”. Laura described feeling more comfortable talking to new people and making friends and becoming more “sensitive to people in terms of where they’re from and what they do”. Charlie articulated personal impact around

feeling more “aware and also respectful to how different people are from different backgrounds”. He felt he could interact with a wide group of people after his international study experience because he had developed “a better grasp of where the potential pitfalls might be” in inter-cultural discussions. Charlotte described having a deeper understanding of people with a different mindset to hers and how understanding this affects the ways she makes friends and deals with people. Olivia explained that, after recognising her privilege as a result of volunteering, she now stops before she speaks and tries to acknowledge the life circumstances of her conversational partner.

Lydia summed up the impact she felt from her challenging international study experiences in terms of enhanced empathy and tolerance. She felt this impact enhanced her ability to interact with people:

*So much of how you interact with people is your own interpretation. When you go to a social interaction, both parties are taking their own understanding of the world. A lot of the time, when someone is appearing hostile or rude, they're not trying to be whatsoever, they're just operating from a different worldview, or they might be shy, or frightened and uncomfortable in some other way.*

### **Enhanced independence, self-confidence, or resilience**

Some participants described specific forms of capability extension, such as increased independence, self-confidence, self-worth, and resilience. Charlie felt he had developed a stronger sense of self-worth from making friends. This realisation, “I actually made a few friends while I was over there in Europe”, led to that change. Gretchen named ‘confidence’ as a significant experience and described herself as more secure and with greater self-worth as a result of her experiences and realisations of the enormity of what she had done. She felt that her experience “affirms my belief in myself and my confidence...now I’m a much more secure person”. Charlotte noted that “I felt like I grew up just a little bit. It definitely helped me to be more independent”. Laura said, “it’s made me a little bit more independent...I can’t think of living off my parents forever”. Lydia articulated impact as “being resilient, and also being able to be assertive when someone is being confrontational”.

Meredith explained personal impact around feeling more emotionally resilient and resourceful about her approach to new or challenging situations. She said:

*I think it's really important to be able to do it by yourself at times. I think there's always going to be challenges that you have that you don't necessarily have other people around for, and having emotional resilience and resourcefulness are really important skills to help you conquer from those challenges. Doing this, I learned a lot about the way that I think, a lot about how I*

*deal with things and cope with different problems. I think that's really important things to know about yourself for the future.*

### **Improvement in workplace or study capability**

Participants also described specific capability extensions that related to work and study skills. Charlie and Gretchen described this type of impact in terms of second language development. Gretchen also felt her second language capabilities had increased her confidence in job-searching because of the added dimension to her skill set. Harry felt his workplace capabilities were enhanced by the new knowledge and skills he gained from studying subjects not available at home.

Meredith and Ariel enhanced their clinical practice with specific skill development from their nursing placement activities. Ariel explained that “I do full-body assessments on my patients, which is something I didn’t do before”. Charlotte acknowledged that she made mistakes while on her internship and noted her resultant improved understanding of workplace practices. For Laura, Charlie and Harry, increased capability also related to study skills, such as confidence to tackle difficult assessment tasks. Harry said, “It encouraged me to...direct my learning a lot more. It made me less reliant on lectures and tutors”. This capability development often came from recognition of different ways of doing things or of realisations of how things work differently in other countries.

### **6.5.3 Enhanced self-efficacy**

Merriam and Clark (1993) contend that enhancement of some aspect of self (i.e. personal impact) results in being better able to handle future life experiences. This idea suggests there is an ‘impact of impact’. To explore this idea, participants were asked to consider the impact of their mind-mapped experiences in terms of future attitudes, perspectives or actions. The participants’ impact-related statements on realisations and capability extension were analysed to identify how these dimensions of personal impact may influence subsequent thought and action. This comparative analysis showed that participants described:

- A greater desire to take up opportunities
- Preparedness for future challenges and capacity to deal with them
- Clarity around future direction

The impacts participants described on their capacity to handle subsequent experiences have been categorised in this study as changes in self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) describes self-efficacy as fundamental to human agency and the individual’s belief that they are capable of acting in particular

ways in future situations to produce desired results. The below discussion explores the ways that participants articulated self-efficacy based on realisations and capability extension.

### **A great desire to take up opportunities**

Self-efficacy was described by some participants as an increased desire to take up new opportunities. Ariel described herself as “really open” to opportunities as a result of putting herself “out there” while studying abroad. May said the experience of making friends in Japan made her “more open to trying new things, not being afraid of meeting new people”. May said that, as a result of her success in making friends, she developed the attitude that “if there are new opportunities, I should go for them”. Gretchen, too, expressed increased confidence to try new things from her time in South America. She said that, in the future:

*I'll be a lot less scared to try new things and...different things. It's also good because they're [feelings of accomplishment] always in the back of my mind whenever I have confidence issues.....I feel "I've already done this", so...I shouldn't doubt myself in doing other things.*

### **Preparedness for future challenges and capacity to deal with them**

Most participants described being better prepared for future challenging situations as a result of realisations or capability extensions. Ariel articulated this idea as being able to get through difficult times because she had developed a greater understanding of the challenges that other people face. Charlie realised that he was underprepared when he travelled to Germany, but he felt he would be better equipped for future travel experiences. Similarly for Gretchen, who was planning to spend time in France following the interview, travelling in South America had prepared her for her planned journey. She said: “Going to France, I’m not as afraid as I would have been if I hadn’t gone to Colombia”. Charlotte described being better prepared for future work from her internship experience and realisations about how the world of work operates. Generally, the participants’ realisations and capability enhancements were framed by a preparedness for future challenges and feeling confident to handle those challenges. The idea of being ‘more capable’ was inherently tied to self-efficacy.

### **Clarity around future direction**

Participants also described increased clarity around future direction, based on extension of capabilities or having had the time to consider their long terms plans while they were away from home. Some participants described this clarity in terms of career direction. Annie’s identity as an historian was enhanced as a result of her experience volunteering in a museum; she is now keen to undertake further study in this area. Ariel’s aspirations to work for Doctors Without Borders were

confirmed by exposure to different cultures, and she felt she developed the confidence to work in challenging places as well. She said:

*I always wanted to work with Doctors Without Borders...I've always been reserved about it, not telling people about it, because I was always afraid that I wouldn't be able to do it because it's such a confronting kind of organisation to work for...I was afraid that if I said I wanted to go...I'd back out because I was too afraid to go. I think it's now definitely made me want to do that more. It's worth it to put yourself out there for these experiences.*

Charlie put 'career' on his mind map, and he understood from his international study experience "what was important when it came to career". Charlotte's internship exposed her to the realities of working in her field and of workplace travel. Olivia's experience of volunteering gave her clarity about her goals. She said: "I hope that in my next couple of years of working full time when I graduate, I will actually be able to do something more with volunteering...with kids".

Other participants articulated impact in terms of a desire to travel or work overseas in the future. May explained that she had always wanted to live and work overseas, but her international study experience meant that working internationally in the future is possible. She said: "I could make it work if I wanted to". Harry also realised that after living abroad, working overseas is possible for him. He said:

*Moving overseas is something I've considered in my career...You always think about all these things that you leave behind if you take that plunge or if you make that move. Now, I've had this experience, I think I would know what to expect, and I know how long I would want to make a move for, and where I would want to make a move to as well.*

Olivia connected with a fellow international student who inspired her to pursue an international career. She said:

*[Olivia's friend] definitely had that...impact on me [interest in working overseas] because I'd always had the thought, but it wasn't really cemented, and it wasn't a thing for me until I really made friends with her.*

From living away from her home city, Laura realised that "I don't really like being back in Australia. I love to just be elsewhere and exploring" and felt the impact of this realisation thus: "It's made me more inclined to, maybe, move overseas and work overseas for a couple of years".

While the research participants had a variety of experiences while studying overseas, all 14 perceived

that they had enhanced their personal capabilities as a result of significant learning from their experiences. These perceptions of growth and positive life changes stemmed from realisations about themselves, others and the world. They are also the valued outcomes from the significant aspects of the participants' international study experiences that were integrated into their sense of self, resulting in changes to their identities (Jarvis 2006; Merriam & Clark 1993). The changed self is also about an enhanced capacity to deal with subsequent life experiences (Jarvis 2006; Merriam & Clark 1993). The participants' self-realizations and improved personal capabilities gave clarity over future direction, a sense of being better able to handle future challenges, and the confidence to take up new opportunities.

There was a small number of instances where participants could not articulate impact or they felt that the impact of their significant experiences was not positive. The next sections of the chapter will explore the ideas of experiences that have no impact, or negative impact.

## **6.6 No impact**

For an experience to be significant, it must have an impact on the individual that is tied to personal growth, and the experience must be valued by the individual (Merriam & Clark 1993). Of the 61 experiences that the participants identified (with an average of four each), there were only six occasions where the participants *could not* articulate personal impact. Of those five instances, three were connected to cold weather. Although the participants could not identify an impact from the experience, two still valued the cold as a key part of the novelty of the study abroad experience. (Note that the participants live in a hot climate where it never snows.) One participant, for example, described snow as "amazing", "very different to what I thought it would be" and "really crunchy".

Of the other two apparently non-impactful experiences, one was related to food. Annie said that, while in Taiwan, "I would...get really irritated when I couldn't find something I wanted to eat". In the second example, Rebecca named her pre-program language class as significant because it was a positive experience. She did not, however, articulate any personal impact from this aspect of her experience.

Although these experiences may not have been significant in terms of the participants' *learning* (Merriam & Clark 1993), they did generally enhance the participants' understanding of living in a different place. Jarvis (1987) notes that if there is no disjuncture between the person's existing understanding of the world and the situation the person faces, no learning will occur. The finding that

three participants wrote weather-related items on their mind maps speaks to the novelty of the experience – this may be seen as a form of disjuncture. It is possible that, later, the participants may be able to articulate an effect that these experiences had on their personal growth.

## **6.7 Making meaning from challenging experiences in growth-enhancing ways**

The expressions of personal impact discussed in this chapter often stemmed from challenging experiences, however the participants meaning-making work led them to construct growth-enhancing meanings from these experiences. The researcher acknowledges that perceptions of positive or detrimental outcomes (growth versus restriction) may be dependent on culture and context and other factors such as personality, self-image, and cognitive capacity (Merriam, Mott & Lee 1996). Adult learning literature (especially in the Western context) presents a largely positive image of learning from life experiences, where growth-enhancing outcomes are the norm (Merriam, Mott & Lee 1996). This research found that the participants made sense of their experiences, even if they were challenging, in growth-enhancing ways. There were, however, three instances where participants found the experience challenging. They articulated potentially-detrimental outcomes from their meaning-making work such as aggression, disappointment, and frustration, but still saw impact in growth-enhancing ways. For example, Annie described feelings of aggression because she was uncomfortable with being photographed by locals in Taiwan. She explained the immediate personal impact as:

*It could very quickly turn an ‘all right’ day into a ‘terrible’ day because since I’m just there, it’s like, ‘I can’t stand this!’ It was very frustrating that even in Taipei, in an area that’s populated by so many exchange students, I could just feel like I stood out so much.*

While this experience impacted the enjoyment of her time in Taiwan, Annie described a long-term positive impact of the experience - it motivated her to seek counselling to learn to “let things go”. Gretchen named ‘friends’ as significant because she was disappointed she did not make many friends. As a result, Gretchen realised she should have made more effort to approach people. Gretchen described a new, more confident approach to “forcing” herself to take the first step during an interaction with another person”. Rebecca had problems with subject choice and sign on that affected how she felt about her early experience and her ability to settle into a new environment. When asked if she could see growth-creating value in a challenging experience, Rebecca answered:

*Not at that time, but now I understand that you need [challenge] to throw yourself off-guard a bit. If everything had run smoothly, I would've looked back and thought, "That was all right, a bit mediocre". You have to have those highs and lows in order to accentuate the ups and downs.*

These perspectives align with Lydia's approach to the challenges that she faced. The Stalin Monument came to symbolise the achievement of dealing with the Ministry of Interior over visa problems and also the challenge of the lack of heating and warm water in her student housing. Lydia perceived these challenges as growth-enhancing. She said:

*What I decided is that for me, the challenging aspect of it was good and it definitely drove more growth than I would have otherwise had from going somewhere that was really comfortable.*

The expressions of personal impact discussed in this chapter show that many of the participants experienced growth-enhancing impacts from dealing with difficult or challenging situations. This suggests that the participants possessed the cognitive complexity to mitigate the impact of challenging experiences and make meaning in growth-enhancing ways. As noted earlier in the chapter, many participants linked the act of dealing with difficult situations to the development of independence in novel situations. This finding aligns with the theory that discomfort or disjuncture creates learning (Brookfield 1987; Jarvis 1987; Mezirow 2000). It indicates that the disjuncture the participants experienced was not too great as to inhibit growth (Mezirow 2000). Moreover, the lens through which meanings are made, including values and beliefs and learning intent, influences the outcome of challenging experiences. The lens that the participants used to make meaning shaped their personal growth through the way they constructed meaning from challenges. These ideas will be further explored in the next section of the chapter.

This concludes the analysis of the impact that the specific mind-mapped items had on the participants. The next section of the chapter discusses the overall impact of the international study experience.

## **6.8 The overall impact of the international study experience**

After the participants reflected on the impact of their mind map items, they were also asked to consider the overall impact of their entire international study experience. Selected quotes from the participants (Table 6.2) demonstrate the ways in which they articulated the impact of their experience holistically, or how they felt the sum of their experiences had impacted them.



Table 6.2: Participant reflections on the overall impact of the international study experience

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Perspectives on the overall impact of international study</b>
Olivia	<i>Tolerance-building... Understanding how...they [people from different backgrounds] would interpret things and how I would interpret things. Recognising skills in myself that I didn't even know I had.</i>
May	<i>I do have a clearer image of where I want to go from here in my career path. I have a better idea of what my abilities and capabilities as a person are. The new me is more able to consider things from another perspective...I'm more sure of myself and...I am more able to look at things from other people's perspective.</i>
Calvin	<i>It's made me really confident in life. My identity has shaped in a way that it's made me more tolerant and open to other people and...more compassionate towards other people.</i>
Gretchen	<i>Who I am is very linked now to the Latin culture...That's really made me more of a dual person. I feel more comfortable in myself, and in my decisions...Next time when I travel... I feel like I will be able to handle myself well and I trust enough in myself to be able to know what to do and if I don't know, to find out. They've [the study abroad experiences] made me feel really good about myself and they've made me think about what I need to work on...I think I've realised I need to have...maybe not less expectations but maybe different expectations.</i>
Hussam	<i>In my expression of ideas, or ideals, or concepts...the experiences I had have made me far more measured or far more nuanced. When you come back home...you feel like you marvel perhaps at the myopia of those you left behind. You are dissatisfied with how things were before...You come back with more knowledge, and more experience, and you see the world in more shades of grey, and it colours all your interactions back home.</i>
Ariel	<i>It has taken the parts of me that I see most foremost in myself and it's made me more passionate about those things. You can achieve everything that you want to achieve if you really keep at it.</i>
Meredith	<i>I just know now that...I'm a quite an adaptive person. It's made me...have a love for going outside of my comfort zone...because I think you just learn so much. I was pretty confident before I went because you grow as you have new experiences, but it made me a lot more confident just in who I am [and] affirmed the way that I interact with patients.</i>
Annie	<i>I went over...being a very confident person but...struggling with some anxiety and some mental issues. I think when I got there...I realised that those are things I need to work on internally for myself...gave me a push to realise I need to focus more on myself as a person.</i>

Charlie	<i>I can't really pick a thing about me and say, "Yes, that completely changed me". I will say that I'm a lot more positive nowadays...Just the feeling of accomplishment and also, the fact that I made new friends made me feel like, "Oh yes, I can do things again".</i>
Harry	<i>I see myself as someone who's got a better perspective of the world. I see myself as somebody who's more open to the idea of travelling and moving around.</i>
Rebecca	<i>I can do the things that I'm scared about. I feel like I can push through the bad situations now. Stress is still not in my vocabulary...I have a more appreciative view of what I have here.</i>
Laura	<i>I'm a lot more comfortable with uncertainty...Willingness to meet people and how much more open I am...I feel like I'm just much more mature and sensitive to other people... because I've just seen how other people work. It just makes you much more appreciative of the things that we have back here that other people don't have access to.</i>
Charlotte	<i>It made me feel like there's so much that I don't know about myself, about other people...Doing this type of experience...helps you realise what you don't know.</i>  <i>It makes me feel more like a global citizen...While I was away...I connected very much with my being Australian and I was excited to come home because when you're somewhere else, you realise what you miss in the other place.</i>
Lydia	<i>I just feel like a completely different person now. I suppose I've elected to be a completely different person now. I feel so much more capable. I feel...like I understand much more.</i>

The findings on the 'overall impact' reflections adds depth to our understandings of the nature of personal impact and what it looks like in the context of international study. The participants' reflections (Table 6.2) align with the findings on the impact of the individual mind map experiences. Generally, the participants described some form of extended self, in terms of what they can now do and how they see themselves and others. They also explained how their changed understandings were going to shape their future interpersonal interactions. Overall, the participants' responses suggest they recognised new and strengthened capabilities in themselves, while also pinpointing areas in which they could grow.

## 6.9 Summary of personal impact

This study proposes that for an experience to be significant, it must have impacted the learner (Merriam & Clark 1993). To describe what this proposition looks like in practice and in the context of international study, this research investigated the personal impact dimension of the construct of

significance. This investigation represents the blue segment of the study's framework (Figure 6.3). This segment shows that understanding and articulating the significance of an experience involves determining its impact as part of interpreting an experience (i.e. transforming the perceived content of that experience). The participants described the personal impact of their mind-mapped experiences (what was significant to them).

The study found that the participants described the impact of their mind-mapped experiences as realisations (about themselves, others and the world), capability extension, and enhanced self-efficacy. These expressions of personal impact show how living away, studying and learning, and travelling impacted the participants, through interactions with people and culture, immersion in novelty, and being independent. The findings address the research question of *how* international study was significant to participants and they represent an outcome of the meaning-making process to understand and articulate the significance of an experience, or perceptions of growth or positive life changes (the green part of the framework). The next section of the chapter presents an analysis of the findings on *subjective value*, exploring *why* the mind map experiences and their resultant impact were significant to participants.

### Section 3: Why experiences were significant: subjective value

Section 1 of this chapter discussed what was significant about international study to the participants (RQ1), from an analysis of the findings on participants’ meaning-making work to render their experience coherent (i.e. their mind-mapped items). Section 2 discussed the participants’ perceptions of the personal impact of their mind-mapped experiences (i.e. *how* their experiences were significant – RQ2). Section 3 presents a comparative analysis of the findings on *why* the participants’ mind-mapped experiences were significant (RQ3). This analysis provides insight into the second dimension of the construct of significance (subjective value) (the pink segment of the framework, at Figure 6.4). Subjectively valuing an experience is the part of the learning process where the learner assigns value to the perceived content of an experience and integrates the impact of an experience into their personal biography (Jarvis 2006). The analysis in this section addresses the study’s key proposition, that an experience and its impact must be valued by the learner to be significant (Merriam & Clark 1993). The green box in the framework (Figure 6.4) shows that significant learning (the outcome of meaning-making) results from the impact of an experience on the learner in ways that have personal value.

The analysis also shows how the constituent parts of the learner’s meaning-making lens function to influence subjective value (the orange box at Figure 6.4) and what this looked like in the context of the understanding and articulating the significance of international study experiences.

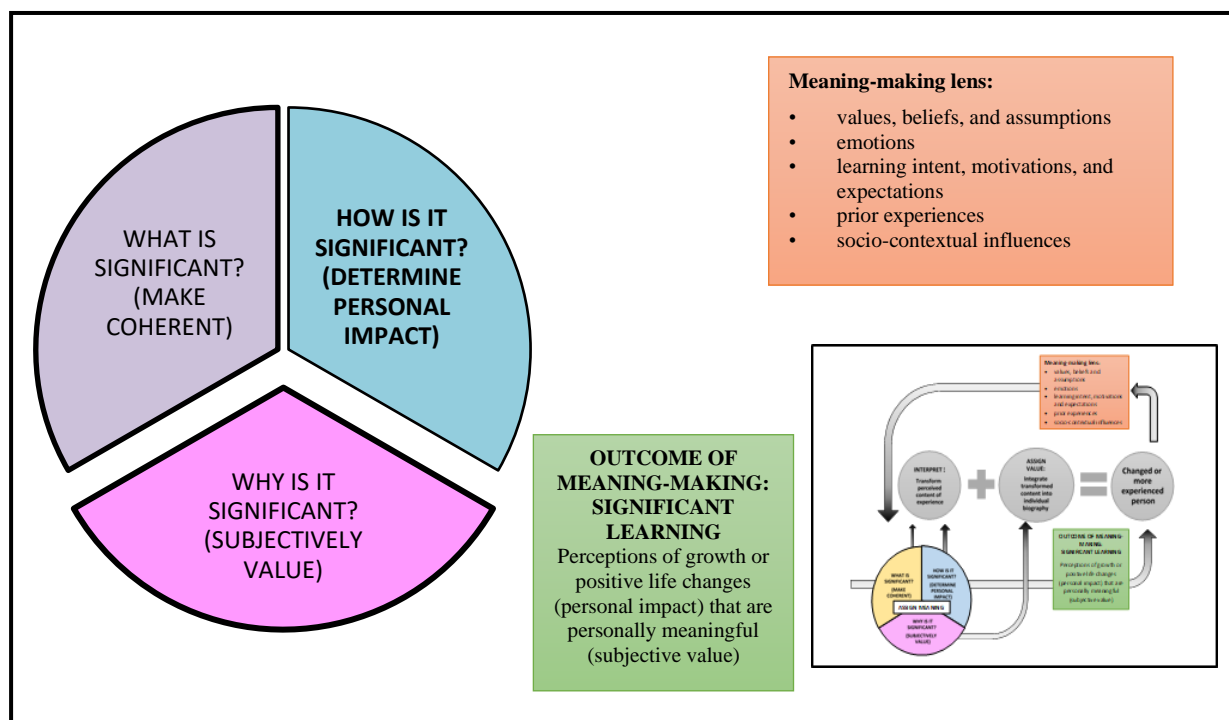


Figure 6.4: The parts of the framework explored in Section 3

## 6.10 Subjectively valuing experiences using the learner's meaning-making lens

To explore the significance dimension of subjective value, the researcher asked the participants to reflect on *why they valued* their mind map experiences and the resultant impact. The researcher used the responses to this question to look for how values, beliefs, and assumptions were manifested in the participants' understandings of the significance of their experiences and how affective responses to those experiences may have shaped meaning-making. These elements of the learner's meaning-making lens are part of the learner's personal meaning system (Dirkx 2001; Kegan 1982; Mezirow 2000).

The participants were also asked to consider how prior experiences and learning intent (and motivations) may have influenced the meaning of their international study experiences. These two elements of the learner's meaning-making lens represent key propositions by adult learning theorists that individuals bring a reservoir of knowledge and experience to each new experience (Knowles 1984). This reservoir provides both a rationale for what is experienced and a perspective from which meaning is made (Boud & Walker 1990). Adult learners are also internally motivated and use their reservoir of knowledge and experiences to bring learning intent to a learning experience (Boud & Walker 1990; Knowles 1984). The influence of learning intent was explored in this research as international study, while providing opportunities for life-experience learning, has some formal structure to it and is a planned activity.

Participants were also asked to consider the purpose and value of international study and how the experience may differ from personal travel. The rationale for asking these questions was to examine how expectations of the experience may have shaped meaning-making. These questions also speak to the socio-contextual influences on the act of subjectively valuing an experience.

The findings on why experiences were valued were analysed using the individual elements of the meaning-making lens, as described in the framework, to demonstrate how the parts of the lens were used to assign value and how this lens functioned to shape meaning (see Chapter 4, Section 4.7 for data analysis process). The following sections outline the findings, according to each element of the meaning-making lens (shown in the orange part of the framework).

### **6.10.1 Values, beliefs and assumptions**

Values, beliefs and assumptions about the self, others and the world were found to be a key element of the lens through which the participants made meaning. Because of the individual nature of this element of the lens, these findings were not coded, but rather the researcher looked for expressions (implicit or explicit) of values, beliefs and assumptions in the participants' explanations of why they valued their mind-mapped experiences. For example, May explained that "friends are a big part of my life. They hold a lot of meaning to me" when she reflected on why she elected to put friendships on her mind map. May found meaning in the shared dormitory experience of living away because of her belief in the importance of friendships. As a result of these friendships, May felt her empathy for others was strengthened. May said that "empathy is valuable because it's a very human trait. It allows you to understand other people, it gets rid of hate, which usually stems from misunderstanding, ignorance of thought". This reflection on empathy is indicative of May's values; it reveals why she assigned value to becoming more empathetic through the friendships she developed while studying abroad. Hussam's religious beliefs were evident in his meaning-making efforts as the disconnect he felt from student life in his host country stemmed largely from his Muslim faith. Hussam's faith also influenced why visiting sites of religious importance were significant. Charlotte's anti-discrimination values, beliefs and assumptions underpinned why she found her friends' experiences of racism while studying abroad confronting. Gretchen's values include working hard and accomplishing things. These values influenced the meaning she assigned to all her mind-mapped experiences; they represented her dedication to achieving fluency in Spanish and the sense of accomplishment she felt from acculturating in Colombia and having "unique experiences".

Expressions of the participants' values, beliefs and assumptions were *implicit in all statements* about what and how their experiences were significant and why they valued their experiences and the resultant impact. Values, beliefs and assumptions created a rationale for how and why experiences were significant and they underpinned the other elements of the learner's meaning-making lens. They represent the participants' attitudes towards, and motivations for, what they experienced while studying abroad and what was meaningful to them.

### **6.10.2 Affective responses (emotions)**

The act of subjectively valuing an experience and its impact suggests that the learner reacts or responds in some way to an experience to infuse it with personal meaning. The findings revealed the key role that affective responses played in how and why the participants' mind-mapped experiences were subjectively valued. These responses were tied to how the experiences and their resulting impact

made the participants *feel* about their identity, their capabilities, and their actions. This finding aligns with Dirkx's (2001a) proposition that emotions are integral to how learners make sense of their social world. Life experiences often engender emotionally-charged and quite personal responses that are expressed as emotional reactions (Dirkx 2001; Dirkx 2001b).

This study found affective responses such as a sense of accomplishment, and feelings of comfort, happiness or contentment shaped meaning-making. The study also found that affective responses included feeling that the experience helped the participants deal with particular (and often challenging) situations. Lydia valued all her mind-map experiences for the sense of accomplishment she felt from overcoming challenging situations. Meredith felt respected as part of a team during her Nursing placement and this feeling is why she valued her clinical placement experiences. Participants often described the value of friendships for feelings of comfort that they created, largely due to the shared experience of living away. Conversely, reactions also included sensations of discomfort, challenge or difficulty. Rebecca experienced discomfort due to a lack of confidence to speak to her German housemates and this discomfort framed the value she placed on pushing herself to speak German and increase social interactions with her housemates.

### **6.10.3 Prior experiences**

It has been proposed that adults come to each experience with a reservoir of prior knowledge and experiences that shape the value that they assign when they make meaning of new experiences (Boud & Walker 1990; Knowles 1984). Prior experiences shaped what mattered to the participants in this study. These experiences included previous travel or language experiences, established friends and community, former or current relationships, and specific experiences such as volunteering. For example, Calvin's previous relationship with an American woman whom he described as "ultraconservative" shaped his desire to explore the US by couchsurfing which in turn made him value the impact of this experience in terms of tolerance for difference and an enhanced capacity to listen to others.

A lack of prior experiences also influenced the subjective value, particularly for those participants who lived at home and thus valued the chance to experience living with others and the sense of independence that the experience created. Other examples of a lack of prior experiences shaping subjective value included lack of time to socialise at home and an absence of challenge or discomfort, i.e. the participants had not had to test their capabilities or had not been placed in challenging situations. Gretchen had not travelled outside of Australia before and she said she felt "naïve" prior to studying

abroad. She valued the enhanced self-confidence she gained from her travel experiences in South America and because for Gretchen, “it was such a big, defining moment to be able to go over to another country and just have all these different experiences which no one in my family has ever had before”. Generally, they felt a need for a break from routine, to learn to be independent and to be challenged were all part of the prior experiences component of the participants’ meaning-making lenses. This felt need shaped much of what was valued by the participants.

#### **6.10.4 Learning intent (and motivations)**

Learning intent (and motivations) provides a rationale for what is experienced and the value that is assigned to those chosen experiences (Boud & Walker 1990). This element of the learner’s meaning-making lens was explored in this study because outside of the formal academic component, international study fits with understandings of informal and incidental learning (Conlon 2004), which is largely serendipitous. While participants may not be able to predict what will happen when they study abroad, their motivations for undertaking an international sojourn, such as career development, language competence, and the opportunity to experience another culture and travel, are documented in the literature (Daly 2011). These motivations may shape learning intent and the meaning-making process.

The following themes emerged from the analysis of participants’ descriptions of their learning intent. These themes represent the participants’ intent to:

- be challenged
- experience something different
- travel and learn about other cultures
- “refresh”
- build on personal capabilities (including study or career-related aspects)
- be independent
- make friends

These expressions of learning intent were manifested in the types of impact that the participants articulated from their experiences, as discussed in Section 2 of this chapter. For example, Charlie expressed learning intent around a desire to make friends and to explore Europe beyond his host country. This learning intent shaped the value Charlie assigned to friendships and “the sheer amount of experiences” he had while travelling. Learning intent also shaped the felt impact of these



experiences, where friendships made Charlie more aware of his identity and “respectful” of difference and travelling made him feel “better equipped” for future travel experiences.

The participants’ desire to make the most out of the international study opportunity shaped learning intent, and this desire was often shaped by past experiences, or an absence of them. Mind-mapped experiences such as language development, clarity over future career direction, and extension of specific personal, study or work capabilities were named as significant because these aspects of personal growth mattered to the participants. They saw international study as a chance to grow in these ways, particularly since they may not have had the opportunity to do so at home. Participants also took advantage of travel opportunities and have “fun” and do what Ariel described as live “your best life”, as well as immerse themselves in the culture of their host countries and gain new understandings of the world and other people. All four of Harry’s significant experiences were valued by him from the perspective of making the most of the opportunity – of experiencing life out of home and taking on the role of ‘flat Mum’, of electing to study subjects that he could not do at home, of taking advantage of joining clubs to learn about local life, and understanding the practical side of moving overseas. Moreover, inherent in the value placed on making the most of the international study opportunity was the *felt need* to grow, to test personal capabilities and learn to live without support networks. This felt need often stemmed from not having had the chance to test capabilities at home.

Learning intent also influenced the choice of host country for some participants and engagement in particular activities and the value placed on these experiences and the impact they generated. Gretchen’s primary reason for studying abroad in South America was to improve her language skills; she valued becoming bilingual as a result. Ariel wanted to improve her clinical skills; this is why she valued her placement activities and the resulting enhancements to her Nursing practice. Annie chose to try skateboarding for the first time as her “mind was set on doing something new” and “doing as much stuff” as she could. Annie valued the chance to move out of her “comfort zone” that skateboarding afforded and proving to herself that she could “go on adventures” even when dealing with the anxiety that other parts of her experience caused.

### **6.10.5 Expectations**

Expectations also shape meaning-making, in terms of the standpoint from which the learner approaches each experience and the value they assign to it (Usher 1993). The participants were asked to consider the overall purpose and value of study abroad and how international study may differ from

personal travel. Key themes emerged from analysis of this data and the two data sets showed alignment (Table 6.3). These findings provide a picture of the participants’ expectations of international study and their understanding of the experience as a learning opportunity. Interestingly, the participants’ perspectives on the overall purpose and value of study abroad broadly aligned with their individual learning intent. The participants’ expectations, motivations and learning intent, therefore, provided an overarching rationale for the value they assigned to their mind-mapped experiences. Table 6.3 shows the key themes from each data set and the way these themes aligned.

Table 6.3: Themes on expectations and understandings of study abroad as a learning opportunity

	<b>How international study differs from personal travel</b>	<b>Perspectives on the purpose and value of study abroad</b>
<b>Theme 1</b>	International study is more than just a ‘dip in the pond’.	International study is different, new, and immersive.  International study allows students to interact and build meaningful relationships with people.
<b>Theme 2</b>	There are challenges in living away for an extended period.	International study is an opportunity to be challenged, test capabilities and grow as a result.
<b>Theme 3</b>	Living and studying internationally equates with living unbounded.	International study allows you to explore your identity.

Interestingly, these themes align with the analytic categories of significant experiences - *interactions*, *immersion in novelty*, and *independence* (see Section 6.3). The themes on the purpose and value of study abroad and its comparison with personal travel, therefore, strengthen the findings on what and how international study was significant to participants. They show how expectations of the experience (and expectations of its learning potential) informed why the challenges of living away and being independent, immersive interactions with people and cultures, and exploration of self-identity were meaningful to the participants. These expectations and understandings facilitated the types of personal impact discussed in Section 2. The aligned themes are discussed below.

### **More than just a ‘dip in the pond’**

Immersion characterised the participants’ perspectives on the value of international study and its difference from personal travel. Ariel noted that her experience “wasn’t just a small dip in the pond”. She said: “I jumped in the pool and I was completely immersed in a different country...I was really

there...experiencing their food and their lifestyle”. Hussam compared international study to personal travel and said: “to be a traveller is another thing, but to actually live in a place is the pinnacle of trying to understand a different culture or society”. Gretchen noted the value of international study as a “deeper experience [than personal travel] as you’re confronted with everyday situations which...is a good way to get to know another culture”.

The participants described the value of international study as a ‘different’ or ‘new’ experience, which May said meant living in a different environment and learning to “understand a different mindset, different culture, and different people”. The participants expected to be immersed in situations they had not experienced before and they saw the value of this as an opportunity to gain an insider perspective and make strong connections with diverse people. Calvin felt that since international study lasted longer than personal travel, he developed “more meaningful relationships”. Similarly, Harry noted the chance for “deeper, long-lasting connections” than holiday travel afforded.

Participants described learning through comparing themselves and their beliefs with others. Hussam noted the value of learning by comparison, where “you can see how much things are better or worse than in your home arena”. Annie described the significance of “juxtaposing yourself against other people or other cultures”. She felt this act makes “you look inwardly, naturally”. Similarly, Lydia said, “your understanding is entirely constructed from what you’re exposed to. I know that every time I’m exposed to something new, I feel like I know a little bit more”. Calvin saw immersion as learning through personal, practical experiences. He described how people who have not been immersed in a culture may understand that culture (from the outside):

*It’s like having someone describe chocolate to you rather than actually eating chocolate. They [the outsiders] are only hearing what other people think about it. They never actually get to live that experience themselves. Their perspective is always going to be through someone else’s lens. You become a local rather than a tourist. It moves you from an outsider’s perspective to an insider perspective.*

The participants’ ideas on the immersive opportunities that international study affords show how their expectations and understandings of the learning potential of international study framed their meaning-making efforts. These expectations shaped the impact of international study in terms of realisations about themselves and others and their enhanced appreciation of diversity (see Section 6.3). They also shaped the value the participants assigned to having made friends and gained a deeper understanding of different ways of doing things.

### **The challenge of living away for an extended period**

Participants felt that international study provides more opportunity to experience challenge than does personal travel, largely due to the extended time spent abroad. They felt that the opportunity to be challenged and grow as a result characterises international study as a learning opportunity. This challenge is about the inescapability of the experience. In part, they tied the challenge to their independence – they needed to budget, to plan their travel and to generally construct their lives and identity away from the lives and identities they had established at home.

Some participants used the term ‘out of comfort zone’ when describing their expectations of international study. Harry explained this meant: “When you’re thrown into the deep end, you’ve got to reconstruct your life from ground zero. That really makes you understand resourcefulness”. May felt that international study allows for testing “your limits”. Olivia commented on the financial pressure of budgeting for six months of overseas study. She perceived “learning how to fall back on yourself” as a key differentiator from personal travel and that the purpose of international study is to put “yourself completely out there”. Charlotte said that international study “puts you in situations that you’re uncomfortable with”. Hussam noted the value of being in uncomfortable situations as “you need independence. You need to sort yourself out”.

Participants valued the opportunity to manage on their own for an extended period. All participants, even those who had already moved out of home, perceived international study as the chance to test capabilities. Rebecca said: “being away from where you are normally and out of the familiar, you are able to grow more as a person”. She felt growth happens because “it’s hard...being away from regular things...with other people who don’t know you”. Calvin noted that international study is the chance to “prove you can actually live in another city” which he felt is important for potential employers.

The expectation of international study as an opportunity to be challenged and be independent and the understanding of the experience as the chance to grow as a result framed the participants’ meaning-making efforts. All participants described the impact of international study in terms of their ability to relocate and start again, extension of personal capabilities, including self-confidence and resilience, and enhanced self-efficacy.

### **Living unbounded**

Participants felt that the purpose and value of international study lies in the opportunity to explore self-identity, largely by being away for an extended time from support networks and familiar

situations. Harry used the term 'living unbounded' to express the meaning of this aspect of international study, which he described as being away from usual commitments and avoiding having to fit into "specific boxes". Similarly, Hussam said: "you've lost all your social capital and you have to rebuild everything in this new arena".

The idea of living unbounded aligns with the analytic category of independence, and the sense of freedom that allowed participants to grow more than they would have during a personal travel experience. As Charlotte observed, "people aren't expecting you to come back the same". She did, however, note that she chose what success meant to her. Charlie believed that international study "changes the way you think, and it also makes you question things which were previously unquestionable". Charlotte explained her sense of freedom during international study, saying:

*You can be whoever you want to be. It's a chance to improve yourself in an environment that doesn't have the judgement that you have back home...[International study] is a catalyst for that - it gives you a chance to go to develop yourself, to try something new with new people and things. It's kind of like a cheat card or something. Personality and identity, in my opinion, is a very malleable thing. If you want to try something, then you should be able to.*

Calvin felt that international study "gives you a feeling of being able to reset". Olivia felt that taking part in study abroad meant she had to "develop this sense of...how am I going to succeed?" Rebecca felt that international study was a chance to "explore different things" as at home, she experienced a strong focus on studying and working and had no time for such exploration. Similarly, Harry said: "There are things that you simply can't learn in Australia like confidence in yourself, independence, how to cope in different situations".

The perspective on international study as an opportunity to explore self-identity with time for self-reflection framed the realisations the participants described from their mind-mapped experiences. Charlotte said: "personality and identity...is a very malleable thing. If you want to try something, then you should be able to". She felt that international study allows for testing of identity because students are not subject to judgement from people who know them well. Ariel felt that feeling comfortable in her new environment allowed her to "reflect on what's going on". She described being able to "take a moment to be completely yourself"; she also described an extraordinary sense of clarity, saying "[you] know what you're doing and thinking about anything". This idea of experimenting with self-identity characterised their expectations of the experience and the meanings they made from immersion in new situations and interactions with different people and cultures.

The findings presented in this section on expectations reveal insight into the participants' expectations of study abroad and how those expectations shaped the value they assigned to their mind-mapped experiences and the impact they generated. The participants' expectations are also reflective of the social situation of study abroad and the learning opportunities it presents, and the contextual factors of the participants themselves. These ideas are discussed in the next section.

### **6.10.6 Socio-contextual influences**

The socio-contextual component of the meaning-making lens is partly representative in this study of where the participants were at in their developmental journey. The participants were at a stage in life where there was a desire to branch out on their own and move away from the safety net of parents and other support networks. Most participants expressed the desire to prove they were capable of living on their own. These contextual factors influenced the value that participants assigned to extending personal capabilities and becoming more independent. The socio-contextual nature of the international study experience, and the living away, studying and learning and travelling aspects of it, provided opportunities for enhancements to personal capabilities.

Similarly, because learning happens through experiencing a social situation and learners themselves are social constructs (Jarvis 1987), social influences on meaning-making were apparent in the findings. These influences were evident in what, how and why experiences were significant as significant learning happens through the learner's response to a social situation and the socio-cultural milieu in which the experience takes place provides the stimulus for interpreting that experience (Jarvis 1987). Meaning-making is also framed by social expectations of an experience. For example, Charlotte explained that she felt like she gained a "better understanding of other people...that means they have different experiences and different lifestyles". This reflection shows how value may have been assigned in response to the social expectations of international study around global citizenship. While Charlotte's meaning-making lens included her own values and beliefs about appreciating difference, these values and beliefs are socially-constructed.

The participants' perspectives on the purpose and value of study abroad and their understanding of how the experience differs from personal travel (discussed above) in part reflect the social construction of meaning. These elements of the learner's meaning-making lens demonstrate the socio-cultural milieu of international study and how it creates certain conditions for learning (Boud & Walker 1990; Illeris 2017) and how meaning-making efforts are framed by the learner's responses to that milieu. The learner's values and beliefs, learning intent and reservoir of prior experiences are

shaped by social forces and by interactions with the social world. These ideas will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **6.10.7 The interconnectedness of the learner's meaning-making lens**

This study's framework shows that there are constituent parts to the learner's meaning-making lens and the findings given in Section 3 demonstrated the influence of those parts on meaning-making. The constituent parts of the lens, however, seem to be interconnected. For example, prior experiences often shaped learning intent, where participants expressed the desire to do certain things because of what they had done before, or in some cases had not done. The lens also seemed to be a holistic influencer on meaning-making, where multiple parts of the lens shaped the act of subjectively valuing an experience. This finding aligns with some learning theorists' perspective that individuals possess a meaning-making system that filters their experiences and shapes the construction of meaning.

An illustration of the interconnectedness of the lens is where value was assigned to building meaningful relationships and the resulting enhancements to self-confidence, interpersonal capabilities and understanding of difference. Value in this instance was assigned because of (i) the learner's intent to meet new people, (ii) the value of meaningful connections with people (values and beliefs), (iii) lack of opportunity at home to socialise (prior experiences), and (iv) the perceived purpose and value of study abroad around making new and diverse friendships (expectations). This example demonstrates the social influence on subjective value, i.e. international study as a learning environment where new connections may be made and the rhetoric of building international networks that surrounds the experience. The example also shows how the learner's context may influence meaning-making, as the age of the participants suggests friendships and building new networks may matter to them.

The idea of a personal lens shaping meaning-making is described in the adult learning literature as a frame of reference or a personal meaning system (Merriam & Clark 1993; Mezirow 2000). While this study's framework shows that the learner's lens has parts to it that influence meaning-making in different ways, this study's findings showed that these parts are interconnected. The interconnectedness of the learner's meaning-making lens will be further explored in the next chapter.

## **6.11 Summary of subjective value**

This study proposes that a learning experience is significant if it has personal impact and it has value to the learner, and that value is assigned through the learner's meaning-making lens (Merriam & Clark 1993). Section 3 discussed the study's findings on subjective value in the context of international study. The findings demonstrate the connection between subjective value and personal impact, the two dimensions of the construct of significance. The assigning of value to an experience was found to be intimately linked to the participants' perceptions of the experience as personally meaningful and impactful. The participants' mind mapping of experiences represented the value they assigned to those experiences. Those valued experiences had an effect on the participants that they understood and articulated as having changed them in some way. They perceived this impact because it was of value to them to have changed in this way, according to the lens through which they made meaning. This lens creates a personal meaning system, or frame of reference, that shapes meaning-making, and the parts of the lens are interconnected. The complex network of ideas that underpin subjective value and the learner's meaning-making lens will be further explored in the next chapter.

## **6.12 Summary of what, how and why international study is significant**

This chapter examined the findings from the 14 participants on what, how and why their international study experiences were meaningful. The examination used the study's framework as a touchstone, as it sets out a process for understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience. Figure 6.5 presents thematic representations of what, how and why international study was significant to participants.



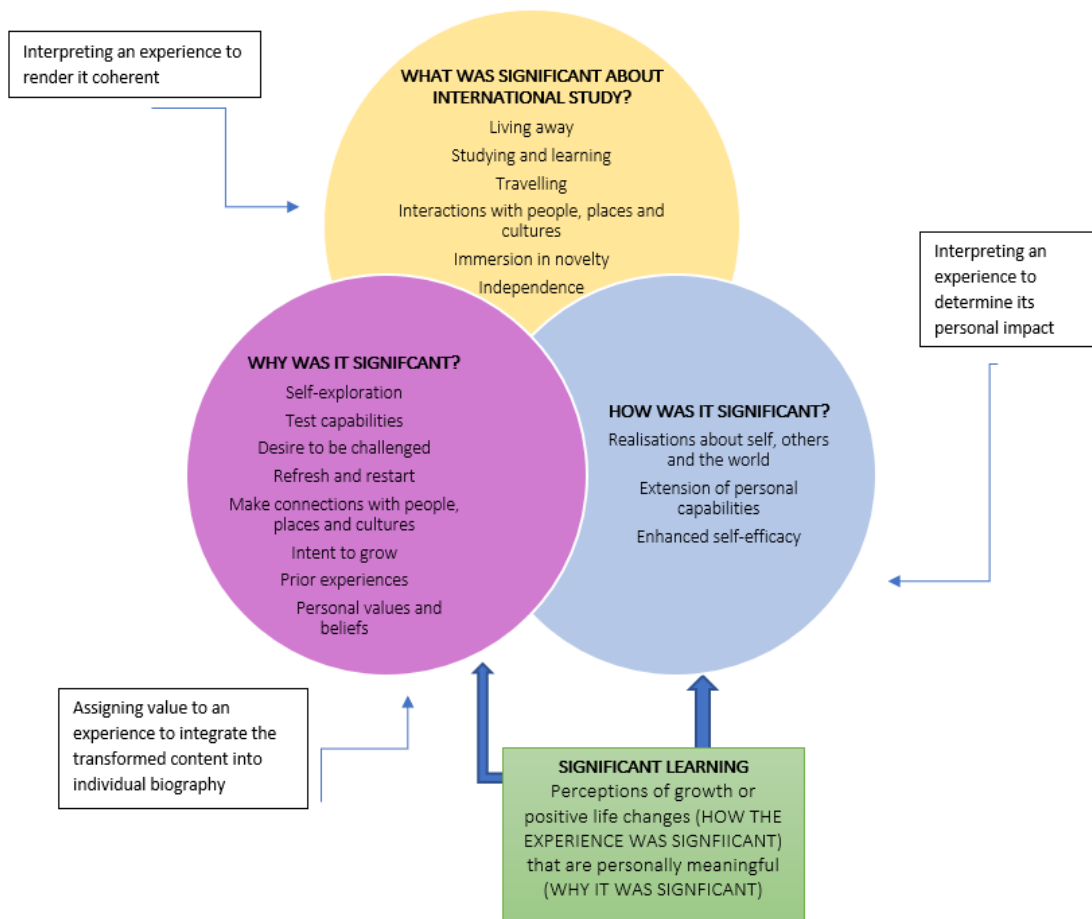


Figure 6.5: The elements of meaning-making to understand and articulate the significance of an experience

Figure 6.5 shows that what, how and why experiences are significant are three interconnected parts of the meaning-making process to understand and articulate the significance of an experience. They represent the participants’ meaning-making work to interpret their experiences and assign value to them to understand the impact of their study abroad experiences.

The meanings assigned (i.e. what was significant) to the international study experience (the yellow segment at Figure 6.5) are indicative of the participants’ reactions to, and interactions with, that learning environment. These reactions and interactions were interpreted by the participants as having changed them in terms of (i) the ways they view themselves, others and the world, and (ii) their personal capabilities. These realisations and extended capabilities enhanced their self-efficacy by making participants more open to opportunities, giving clarity over future direction, and preparing them for subsequent (challenging) experiences (the blue segment at Figure 6.5). These changes mattered to the participants, based on the rationale for why they assigned value to those changes (the pink segment at Figure 6.5). Each element of the meaning-making process leads the learner to

significant learning (the green box at Figure 6.5). Interpreting an experience to understand what is significant about it allows the learner to render their experience coherent. This coherence gives the learner a foundation for determining the personal impact of an experience, or an understanding of the ways they have changed or grown as a result of their experiences. The personal impact of an experience turns into significant learning when it is subjectively valued by the learner and becomes part of the learner's changed sense of self. These ideas will be further discussed in the next chapter.

### **6.13 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter presented an analysis of the findings from the 14 participants on what, how and why their international study experiences were significant, thus showing how the participants described significant learning from international study. The chapter first presented an analysis of what was significant about the international study experience to participants. Two perspectives on what was significant were presented – descriptive and analytic categorisations of the mind-mapped experiences. At a descriptive level, living away, studying and learning, and travelling were significant. At an analytic level, interactions with people places and cultures; immersion in novelty; and independence were significant. These findings answer the first research question around *what* was significant about the international study experience thus showing how the participants made sense of their time abroad. The chapter also discussed the findings on the participants' perspectives on the difference between international study and personal travel, providing further insight into what was significant.

The second section of the chapter reported discussed the findings on the analysis of the participants' perspectives on the personal impact of their experiences (the first dimension of the construct of significance). This discussion answered the second research question around *how* the international study experience was significant to participants. The participants described impact in terms of realisations about self, others and the world, extension of personal capabilities, and enhanced self-efficacy.

The third section of the chapter provided a discussion of subjective value, the second dimension of the construct of significance, answering the third research question of *why* international study was significant to participants. The findings showed that the participants assigned value to their experiences using the constituent parts of their individual meaning-making lenses but also that these parts are interconnected.

Chapter 7 builds on this discussion, by further examining the findings in light of the scholarly literature that frames the research questions and the study's propositions. It also explores the implications of the findings for both the theory of significant learning and discourses on the educative value of international study.

# **Chapter 7: Discussion**

## **7.1 Chapter introduction**

Chapter 6 provided an analysis of the findings on what, how, and why international study was significant to participants. This chapter discusses the findings in light of the scholarly literature that underpins the research questions. It also considers the implications of the study for the theory of life-experience learning and for discourses around the educative value of international study.

This chapter begins by revisiting the aims of the study and the approach taken to addressing the research questions (Section 7.2). Then, the chapter discusses the two dimensions of the construct significance (personal impact and subjective value) in the context of international study (Sections 7.3 and 7.4) and the socio-contextual influences on subjective value (Section 7.5). The chapter then discusses the implications of the study for our understanding of learning by meaning-making (Section 7.6) and shows how the findings have contributed to the study's framework. The chapter finishes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for the case context (international study) (Section 7.7). This final section addresses two issues in the extant international study literature: (i) the educative value of international study, and (ii) the challenges students often face in articulating what they have learned from their experiences.

## **7.2 Exploring the significance of life experiences in the context of international study**

This research explored the significance of life experiences using international study as the vehicle for that exploration. Data collection and analysis was driven by a framework synthesised from theories of meaning-making and significant learning (Boud & Walker 1990; Dirkx 2001a; Illeris 2018b; Jarvis 2006; Kegan 1982; Knowles 1984; Merriam & Clark 1993; Mezirow 2000; Park 2010). Through the lens of the framework, the study examined (i) the construct of significance (and its two dimensions of personal impact and subjective value) and (ii) the meaning-making process to understand and articulate the significance of a life experience. The study investigated these phenomena by asking what is significant about international study to participants (RQ1), how these are things significant (RQ2) and why these things are significant (RQ3).

The research aimed to add to our understanding of adult learning, by applying the theories in the framework to an exemplar life experience (international study). International study was chosen as the

context for this study because of its potential for significant learning. Moreover, issues have been raised in the international study community around what students learn from the experience, how this learning can be understood and articulated, and how it should be measured (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012; Wong 2015). Importantly, this research was conducted in the Australian context where study abroad programs are largely focussed on transfer of academic credit (Potts 2015) and are structured around the administrative processes involved in organising students to study in an overseas institution. The study abroad program selected for this research yields academic credit for the participants from subjects studied at the host university. It is largely left to the students, however, to determine what else they have gained from their experiences.

The case study approach taken in this research allowed for exploration of the case (the significance of life experiences) and the context (international study) because the boundaries between the case and context are not clear (Yin 2014). As such, the findings simultaneously reveal insight into the dimensions of the construct of significance, the process of understanding and articulating the significance of an experience and the significance of international study.

### **7.3 Personal impact in the context of international study**

One of the dimensions of the construct of significance is personal impact. Personal impact is an element of meaning-making, where the learner determines *how* an experience has affected or changed them. It is also an outcome of meaning-making, i.e. the learner's perceptions of growth or positive life changes that characterise significant learning (the green part of the framework). This dimension represents the proposition that for an experience to be significant, it must impact the learner in terms of their self-identity, capabilities, and worldview (Merriam & Clark 1993). Personal impact connects life experiences to learning, through the person's perception of the difference that the experience makes to them in positive ways (Merriam & Clark 1993; Park 2010). Jarvis (2006, p. 26) notes that "learning changes us", in ways that affect our capabilities, our self-identity, self-confidence, and the capacity to 'do things better' in the future.

Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrated what personal impact looks like in the context of international study. This research focusses on change that might not have occurred without the international study experience. The findings align with Erichsen's (2009; 2011) research on international student experiences in the US, where changes to the participants as a result of their experiences were defined by Erichsen as identity work. Identity work involves an adjustment of dimensions of the self, as the

individual tries to make sense of their identity after being placed in a new context (Erichsen 2009; 2011). What the learner sees in their ‘mirror self’ is different, and they have to begin adjusting by ‘reweaving’ hitherto fragmented parts of the self into a new and enhanced self (Qin & Lykes 2006). This process is amplified when there is a socio-contextual shift, such as during international study experiences. Personal impact is underpinned by reinvention of the self, as change to aspects of identity is fundamental to significant learning. While the personal impact of international study described in this research has three dimensions (see Chapter 6), it could be holistically termed identity work (Erichsen 2009; 2011). The participants’ reflections on their significant experiences represent realising (i.e. placing new meanings around) things about themselves, about others and about the world. These new meanings facilitated a shift in the students’ perceptions of their identities or confirmed self-perceptions. Identity work shaped the participants’ understandings of their personal capabilities.

The participants in this study often described the impact of their international study experiences as cementing their identities and capabilities. Personal impact, however, was largely described as being *more* something – more capable or more able to understand difference, for example. These changes to identity were stimulated by the participants’ willingness to challenge their extant understandings of themselves, others and the world, while also making sense of new meanings. This type of identity work in the international study context stems from being transplanted into, and immersed in, a completely different environment (Erichsen 2009; 2011). The following reflection from Calvin, one of the study’s participants, demonstrates the potential for study abroad to contribute to identity work:

*I can go to a class here in Economics and learn about Economics, but that doesn’t really shape who I am as a person, it just shapes the knowledge I have. I think student exchange actually shapes you as a person....the values that you have, your personality, your identity in a way that classes don’t...If you had to take a course on responsibility, it’s very difficult to learn responsibility from a book. The only way you learn responsibility is by actually being responsible...I think that’s the same way experiences are what shape you as a person. They’re what shapes your identity, and how you behave, and how you feel. You can’t get an experience from reading a book. You can only get an experience from going out and doing that and that’s what studying abroad does.*

Erichsen (2009; 2011) found in her study of international students in the US that the students were able to explore multiple dimensions of their identity within a new and dynamic (foreign) context. Exploration of identity dimensions in a new environment was a key part of the students’ experiences

in the research reported in this thesis. The participants' reflections showed the value of 'living unbounded' (a term used by Harry, one of the participants) and the opportunity for self-experimentation and personal growth free from expectations. This learning context stimulated the personal impact the participants described, but what these descriptions suggest is that significant learning may occur in situations where there is negotiation of the self through interactions with people and social contexts that are meaningful to the learner (Erichsen 2009; 2011). Herrington and Curtis (2000) propose that impact can occur where there is an opportunity to examine self-identity through interactions with the learner's environment and the people they encounter within it, where changes to meaning perspectives create new ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. This suggests that significant learning is what Taylor (2007) describes as relational, as the impact described by the participants in this study largely resulted from interactions with people and places. These interactions provided opportunities for participants to consider their identity in relation to others. For the participants, identity work involved extending or revising their self-perception, of "reinterpreting their sense of self in relation to the world" (Cranton 2016, p. 7).

This research found that personal impact was often articulated as realisations about self, others and the world. This suggests that realisations form the foundation of changes to identity and worldview as part of the process of significant learning. The theories that underpin realisations are discussed below.

### **7.3.1 Theoretical underpinnings of realisations**

Realisations were articulated by the participants as new or modified understandings of the self, others and the world. The participants all described new understandings of themselves as a result of their experiences. These self-realizations were about new behaviours, such as recognising that they need to take the first step when meeting new people, or shifts in their beliefs (or strengthened ones), such as greater empathy or appreciation of difference. Realisations formed the foundation of the participants' perceptions of growth and positive life changes (the green part of the framework). Van Leeuwen (2007) contends that there is a deep association between personal identity and self-realizations. Self-realizations are an important part of personal growth; they promote self-confidence, self-actualisation, self-reliance and independence (Jackson Ireyefoju 2015). Recognition of self as someone with value and autonomy is key to self-realisation (Sandberg & Kubiak 2013). The process of self-realisation is led by experimentation, discovery and critical insight (Ukeje 1979). This process allows the individual to develop autonomy by learning to "view oneself from the normative perspective of others" (Sandberg & Kubiak 2013, p. 352). Experimentation and discovery seem like

apt descriptions for the participants' experiences in a new, dynamic, diverse and challenging environment.

Using the term 'realisations' to articulate the impact of these experiences indicates that the participants enhanced their self-understanding through removing themselves from the familiar and considering their self-identity and understanding of the world in relation to other people, places and cultures. Realisations confirmed existing understandings and also gave the participants new perspectives on themselves and the world. These new perspectives also shaped future thought and action thus providing the core stimulus for thoughts, actions and the interpretation and application of new understandings for subsequent experiences. These new perspectives influenced the progression of the students' personal meaning systems, as noted by Mezirow (1994) as part of the meaning-making process. Change happens at both an individual and social level, where realisations about the world and others are reconciled with individual perceptions of the self; however, social dimensions of identity must also be altered to ensure the learner can function within new social discourses (Erichsen 2009; 2011).

Realisations were part of the positive life changes that the participants felt were outcomes of making meaning from their experiences. Individuals make meaning of their experiences by "retaining, reaffirming, revising, or replacing elements of their orienting system to develop more nuanced, complex and useful systems" (Gillies, Neimeyer & Milman 2013, p. 208). The participants often used the word 'realisations' to describe their reaffirmed or revised orienting systems as the meanings made from their experiences. These reaffirmations or revisions allowed participants to see themselves, others, and their worlds more clearly and brought the hitherto unknown or unconscious into "sharp focus" (Dirkx 2001, p. 68). As noted by learning theorists such as Kegan (1982), Jarvis (2006), and Mezirow (1991), orienting systems progress through meaning-making for learning, to become more "inclusive, discriminating, integrative and permeable" (Mezirow 1991, pp. 192-3). The realisations expressed by the participants suggest that this progression had occurred.

### **7.3.2 Realisations as the foundation for enhancements in intercultural effectiveness**

The realisations that the participants articulated about people and the world suggest the beginnings of intercultural effectiveness, a concept defined by King, Perez and Shim (2013, p. 70) as:



*knowledge of cultures and cultural practices (one's own and others'), complex cognitive skills for decision making in intercultural contexts, social skills to function effectively in diverse groups, and personal attributes that include flexibility and openness to new ideas.*

Intercultural effectiveness can be developed through immersion contexts such as international study (Lee 2012), although this type of experience has been questioned in terms of its contribution to intercultural learning (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012; Wong 2015). It is also acknowledged that simply living in another country does not automatically lead to intercultural effectiveness or linguistic improvement (Byram & Feng 2006). However, like the definition of intercultural effectiveness given above, Byram's (1997) framework of intercultural competence shows the crucial role of attitudes and awareness, particularly around gaining an understanding of different perspectives with respect and non-judgement (Lee 2012). Participant realisations in this study about people and the world, as one dimension to the impact of their experiences, indicate that the participants were open to new ideas and perspectives and possessed the necessary attitudes and awareness to form the foundations of intercultural effectiveness. The realisations also seemed to inform the participants' knowledge of other cultures and cultural practices and their understanding and appreciation of diversity.

The findings from this research align with the study by King, Perez and Shim (2013) of over 160 college students' intercultural experiences across multiple contexts, which showed the power of these experiences came from gaining an insider's view of other cultures and witnessing others' lived experiences. King, Perez and Shim's (2013) analysis of the student narratives highlighted the key role that students' emotional reactions to their experiences played in shaping their perceptions. The realisations that the participants in this study reported – about new understandings of difference, diversity, and privilege – seem to have been framed by their emotional reactions to interactions with people, places and cultures. The participants were reacting to their experiences by looking inward and comparing them to their own background and life experiences; their realisations about people and the world were a result of this comparison. They were also exploring their personal identity and using realisations about people and the world to define themselves in new or enhanced ways (King, Perez & Shim 2013).

## **7.4 Subjective value in the context of international study**

The other dimension of the construct of significance is subjective value. Like personal impact, it is an element of meaning-making (i.e. the learner assigns value to their experiences) and an outcome of

meaning-making (i.e. the personally meaningful perceptions of growth or positive life changes that characterise significant learning). Subjectively valuing an experience is fundamental to understanding and articulating the significance of an experience, as an experience can have impact on the learner but it must be valued by the learner for it to be significant and facilitate personal growth (Merriam & Clark 1993). The act of subjectively valuing an experience is shaped by the learner's frame of reference or personal meaning system (Mezirow 2000; Usher 1993). This study aimed to demonstrate what the subjective value dimension of significance looks like in the context of a given experience. The findings showed the interconnections between impact and subjective value, as the personal impact the participants described from their international study experiences mattered to them. The impact had subjective value based on the participants' learning intent and expectations of growth from the international study experience and because of their prior experiences (or absence of them) and their values and beliefs. This study also found that each of the participants' mind-mapped experiences showed some element of the participants' meaning-making lens in the value they assigned to these experiences and their resultant impact (see Chapter 5). The learner's meaning-making lens, therefore, was found to be a crucial driver in the act of subjectively valuing an experience.

#### **7.4.1 The convergence of themes on the learner's meaning-making lens**

As noted in Chapter 6, this study found the constituent parts of the meaning-making lens were interconnected. The researcher found the same kinds of answers were given to the different questions on *why* experiences were meaningful. Coding of the participants' responses to the various parts of the meaning-making lens was a challenge, as responses could have been coded to more than one element of the lens. Furthermore, value and impact were often expressed in the same way, i.e. the value of an experience was inherent in the way its perceived impact was described. The interrelatedness of the elements of subjective value highlights the complex nature of this dimension of significance and the relationship between what is deemed to be significant about an experience by the learner and the perspective from which significance is identified and articulated. The interconnectedness of subjective value suggests, then, that the learner's personal meaning system (or frame of reference) is a holistic influencer on the meaning-making process. This finding acknowledges the work of adult learning theorists on the influences on meaning-making (Boud & Walker 1990; Dirkx 2001a; Knowles 1984). It shows that learners possess a meaning-making *system*, that provides an overarching filter for reactions to, and construction of meaning from, life experiences.

When the researcher analysed why experiences were valued to explore the notion of the learner’s meaning-making lens, a convergence of themes was found. Table 7.1 shows the similarities between the themes developed around the participants’ (i) learning intent and motivations, (ii) perspectives on the purpose and value of study abroad (and its comparison with personal travel) and (iii) reservoirs of prior experiences.

Table 7.1 Convergence of themes on subjective value

Learning intent	Expectations*	Prior experiences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience difference</li> <li>• Refresh</li> <li>• Be challenged</li> <li>• Be independent</li> <li>• Make the most of an opportunity or a ‘cool experience’</li> <li>• Personal, academic or career development</li> <li>• Develop language skills</li> <li>• Make friends</li> <li>• Travel</li> <li>• Become more of a global citizen</li> <li>• Always wanted to do it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An opportunity or experience</li> <li>• Chance to become more worldly</li> <li>• Build meaningful relationships with people</li> <li>• Build personal capabilities</li> <li>• Be challenged</li> <li>• Gain independence</li> <li>• Develop academically</li> <li>• Do something different</li> <li>• Become Immersed</li> <li>• Learn by comparison</li> <li>• Learn in a real setting</li> <li>• Live unbounded</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established friends and/or family and community networks</li> <li>• Mindset to make the most of the experience and recognition of the unique opportunity it presents</li> <li>• Need for a break and to hit the ‘restart’ button</li> <li>• Desire to be independent, feeling stifled at home</li> <li>• Prior study, travel or language experiences</li> <li>• Specific prior experiences influencing what was experienced:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Prior volunteering experiences</li> <li>○ Prior engagement with the culture of the host country</li> <li>○ Doing cleaning chores at home</li> <li>○ Religious beliefs</li> <li>○ Relationship with conservative girlfriend</li> <li>○ Schooling in another country</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Absence of experiences aspects of life creating motivations to engage in certain things:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Not having lived out of home before</li> <li>○ No time to socialise at home</li> <li>○ Lack of prior travel experiences</li> <li>○ Absence of challenge or discomfort</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>These three columns are underpinned by personal values, assumptions, and beliefs, including:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• appreciation of diversity</li> <li>• curiosity and neophilia (novel-seeking personality)</li> <li>• motivation to grow and achieve</li> <li>• religious faith</li> <li>• assumption that travel is valuable for meeting new people, experiencing new things, and expanding worldviews</li> <li>• empathy</li> </ul>		

- belief in the importance of friendships, family, and a sense of community

\*Note that expectations includes the findings on the participants' perspectives on the purpose and value of study abroad and their perspectives on the comparison of international study with personal travel.

The first column of Table 7.1 lists the themes identified from participants' reflections on their learning intent and why they chose to study abroad. The second column is representative of the participants' perspectives on the purpose of study abroad and the value of the experience, particularly in comparison with personal travel. There is alignment between the themes in the first two columns. The participants described their learning intent and motivation to study abroad in ways that mirrored their perspectives on the purpose and value of the experience. Convergence of the themes in the first two columns was particularly evident in terms of the findings on the participants' intention to learn about themselves and others, be immersed in new situations and cultures, and make meaningful connections with people, which they also perceived to be the purpose and value of the experience.

The third column of the table lists the themes identified around the participants' prior experiences. These themes come from the participants' reflections on (i) how their past experiences shaped their experience of study abroad and what had meaning to them and (ii) the value they assigned to their mind-mapped experiences. This analysis uncovered specific prior experiences that shaped the international study experience (e.g. travel, volunteering), and also participants' lack of experiences (e.g. living at home without the opportunity to develop independence). As noted in Chapter 6, the participants' prior experiences often provided the basis for their learning intent.

It should also be noted that some participants responded to the question of how their prior experiences may have shaped their international study experience by saying "not sure". Others, when asked about learning intent, said they approached the experience with "an open mind". This finding aligns with Boud and Walker's (1990) contention that learning intent and personal foundation of experience are often unconscious or unarticulated. Interestingly, though, the influence of learning intent and personal foundation of experience on meaning-making could still be discerned from the participants' reflections on why their experiences were meaningful, even if they did not explicitly describe such influences. This is an important point for educators and researchers, that they may not necessarily get anything from the student by just asking about learning intent or personal foundation of experience, but they can infer it from the things students say about why their experiences are significant.

The researcher found statements that *implied* that values and beliefs shaped the participants' assigned value to their experiences. For example, Charlie did not make any specific statements about his values and beliefs in his reflections on why his mind-mapped experiences were significant. His values and beliefs, however, can be discerned from his words. Charlie described how he feels restless if he stays in one place for too long, based on his schooling experiences in another country. He said he has a need to "explore new things" to "help me feel better". Charlie's values and beliefs about the importance of restarting and refreshing one's life to give it perspective are implicit in all aspects of his meaning-making efforts. They provide the rationale for why he found significance in gaining clarity over his future direction.

In another example, Olivia determined that volunteering while she was abroad was meaningful. Olivia assigned value to this aspect of her international study because of her previous volunteering experiences; these helped her create a personal belief in the importance of helping others. Olivia felt the impact of this experience in two ways: (i) recognition of her privilege and (ii) a commitment to using that recognition to interact with people more effectively in the future (i.e. 'reacting in a certain way'). This felt impact is also reflective of Olivia's personal meaning system, as the named impact was based on her personal beliefs. This example also shows how learning intent, informed by values, often shaped the choice of activities.

Importantly, the convergence of themes around subjective value suggests that personal values and beliefs (and assumptions about people and the world) underpin all aspects of an individual's meaning-making lens (bottom row, Table 7.1). The ideas shown in this row were identified from the participants' explanations of why they valued their experiences where values and beliefs were implicit in the descriptions of subjective value. These ideas also came from instances of explicit references to values and beliefs in descriptions of why experiences and their impact mattered to participants.

The themes given in Table 7.1 are intrinsically connected and are manifestations of the participants' values, beliefs, sense of self and worldview, developmental stage, and the meanings of their experiential history. Indeed, *all* the themes shown in Table 7.1 serve a dual purpose. They provide the rationale for the experiences that the participants undertook and the standpoint from which they made meaning, but they also represent their personal meaning system. This suggests that the notion of *why* experiences are valued (i.e. subjective value) is complex and multi-faceted. Underpinning subjective value is the influence of socio-contextual factors on meaning-making. This influence on meaning-making in the context of international study is discussed below.

## **7.5 Socio-contextual influences on meaning-making in the context of international study**

Socio-contextual factors form one of the elements of the learner's meaning-making lens. Inclusion of this element in the learner's meaning-making lens in the study's framework stems from agreement amongst many adult learning theorists that learning does not happen in isolation from the learner's social world; instead, learning is intricately connected to that world and influenced by it (Jarvis 1987). The significance of international study to participants was connected to their stage of personality and identity development (Zimmerman & Neyer 2013) thus demonstrating the influence of the *learner's context* and their social construction as young adults on meaning-making and why they valued their mind-mapped experiences. This finding draws from the field of life-span developmental psychology, which examines changes in human behaviour across the life span and in different domains, such as social, emotional, and cognitive (Keenan, Evans & Crowley 2016). It also draws from Piaget's (1966) ideas on cognitive constructivism and the connection between learning and life-stage development. Significance was also connected to the nature of the learning milieu of international study and its learning possibilities (Boud & Walker 1990; Illeris 2017). This finding recognises the contextual nature of learning (Usher 1993). Gaining a deeper understanding of the socio-contextual influences on meaning-making (and on what, how and why international study is significant) requires a closer examination of the theories that underpin this study's findings on the significance of international study, as discussed below.

### **7.5.1 International study as a major life event**

The significance of international study may be understood in relation to the experience as a major life event for international sojourners that facilitates personal growth (Zimmerman & Neyer 2013). International sojourners are described by Zimmerman and Neyer (2013, p. 515) as "university students who pursue some of their academic education on campuses abroad" when they are usually in the most active stage of personality development. This type of sojourn experience is significant in that it augments common age-related transitions as sojourners are exposed to situations that are unfamiliar and can be quite challenging (McGourty 2014). Analysis of the findings in this study demonstrate that the participants perceived the sojourner experience to be new and often challenging, and they found meaning in engaging in this experience, making meaning from the experience in growth-enhancing ways (Merriam, Mott & Lee 1996). These growth-enhancing ways included enhancements to personal capabilities, particularly self-confidence and independence; this may be unsurprising, given the age of the participants and the dynamic and diverse context of international

study. The findings also showed that participants accelerated their personal growth through challenging experiences, and expressed the intent to use the international study experience to do so. The findings recognise the psychological and socio-contextual influences on learning.

As noted in the discussion of the participants' perspectives on the purpose and value of international study (and compared with personal travel), they approached the experience as a major life event and *expected* to be challenged and changed as a result. Given that the experience is unstructured outside of the formal study component, it creates uncertainty and allows participants to live unbounded. This uncertainty includes questions around whether they will make friends, where and how they will live, how they will adjust their life and study habits to their new surroundings, how they will communicate, and how they will gain course credit for their study (amongst other things). The participants in this study found value in this uncertainty. Moreover, the change in context that characterises international study experiences is inevitably going to challenge participants' understandings of themselves, others and the world (Erichsen 2009; 2011), thus exposing participants to potentially competing belief systems and ways of behaving of which they need to make sense (Clark & Dirkx 2000).

The idea of the social situation of international study as a major life event speaks to being removed from one's 'comfort zone', an often-used description of the experience by sojourners (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012). The comfort zone model is well established in the adventured education literature. The model is based on the supposition (Brown 2008) that when put into challenging or stressful situations, people will overcome their fears and trepidations and personal growth will result. The comfort zone model of learning aligns with learning theories that propose a "trigger event" creates "inner discomfort or perplexity" that leads to the development of alternative perspectives or new ways of thinking or acting (Brookfield 1987, p. 25). In the international study context, participants are experiencing challenges to their "taken-for-granted frames of reference" (Mezirow 2000, p. 7) through immersion in a new culture. This may facilitate new understandings and a renegotiation of the self, others and the world (Erichsen 2009; 2011).

It was evident in the findings that the participants often felt personal impact through the process of interactions with people and situations that were new, discomforting, or perspective-altering. The *independence* analytic category of experience centred on the ideas of living without usual support networks, perceptions of being 'other' to the culture, and dealing with challenging situations. The sense of inner discomfort or perplexity that was experienced through some interactions and through aspects of living independently was meaningful to participants. Participants also expressed *internal*

*disjuncture*, or the feeling that the learner is no longer in harmony with their sense of self. As a result, they looked for change (Jarvis 2006). They spoke about needing to “hit the restart button”, being unsure of their future direction, or feeling stifled at home. The theory that disjuncture leads to learning will be explored later in this chapter.

### **7.5.2 Changes in social relationships**

Augmentation of common age-related transitions happens largely because of changes in social relationships (Zimmerman & Neyer 2013). Social relationships are a key stimulus for change; transitions in life “reflect first and foremost, relationship transitions” (Neyer & Lehnart 2007, p. 536). The age range of participants in this study reflects the typical age of participants who take up international study opportunities, that of early adulthood (Stallman et al 2010). Common age-related transitions for sojourner-aged people - such as leaving the family home, beginning work, and being part of romantic relationships - constitute critical social relationship changes that hold huge potential for personal growth. However, the age-related transitions that international study participants experience differ from the usual life transitions, as they happen in new, diverse and unpredictable environments (Zimmerman & Neyer 2013). This exposure boosts the typical age-related transitions in a profound way, through “exposure not only to an environment away from home, but an international environment that is brimming with new and dynamic possibilities” (McGourty 2014, p. 1). These ideas are evident in the findings as changing social relationships underpin this study’s three organising principles of significance. The participants found meaning in forming new relationships, living away from home for the first time, and learning to manage on their own, all within the context of new, dynamic and intercultural environments. This finding again demonstrates the psychological and socio-contextual influences on learning.

### **7.5.3 Interactions with people and places**

Identity formation is relational, that is, individuals define their identity through “rich modes of expression we learn through exchange with others” (Taylor 1994, p. 32). This research aligns with the theory that interactions with people from diverse backgrounds contribute to personal growth (McGourty 2014). In the context of international study, “hitting the road has substantial effects on who we are. The difference is made by the international people we meet on that road and with whom we form new relationships” (Zimmerman & Neyer 2013, p. 527).

This research found that relationships were a key stimulus for significant learning; the participants formed connections with local people and with other students from all over the globe and they



embarked on their international study with the intent to do so. In the social situation of international study, these connections were intense, in part, because the international experience was short enough that participants knew it had an imminent end point. This idea heightened the participants' sense that they needed to engage with and actively experience their new environments. Furthermore, the new environments presented multiple challenges for participants, particularly since the students were living independently and often living out of home for the first time. These issues prompted some individuals to seek close relationships so they could cope with and share their feelings (McGourty 2014). The challenges themselves were played out in novel situations (such as dealing with visa issues in a foreign language) and in the course of managing without usual support networks. This speaks to the temporary, novel, and yet inescapable nature of the study abroad experience. These novel situations create opportunities for students for personal growth while they go about the business of their daily lives, as noted by the participants in the meanings they made from the seemingly mundane aspects of their experience. There is a shared sense of the unique nature of the opportunity, expectations of success based around making new friends, and a need to make best use of that opportunity while also often seeking out connections for support in a new and challenging environment.

#### **7.5.4 Exploration of liminal spaces**

The significance of international study to the participants in this research suggests that international study participants are making an exploration of liminal space and discovering things about their own strengths and limitations as a result. These experiences occurred through interactions with people and culture, through experiencing new things, and through living independently. The term 'liminality' describes "a subjective state of being on the 'threshold' of or betwixt and between different existential positions" (Ybema, Beech & Ellis 2011, p. 21). This state of 'in-between-ness' creates ambiguity that has an impact on identity construction, a sort of reconstruction of the self, based on reactions to situations and experiences in their 'new world' in situations where the "sense of self is significantly disrupted" (Beech 2011, p. 287). The practices of liminality in identity construction and self-understanding may include experimentation (testing out versions of aspects of the self), reflection (self-questioning in a situation that provides the stimulus for change), and recognition (an epiphany of sorts, where the individual reacts to an externally-imposed identity) (Beech 2011). Erichsen (2009; 2011) also found that liminality characterised the experiences of the international students in her study. Students' explorations of liminal spaces, where they are reconstructing their identity based on interactions with the social world (Beech 2011), may have shaped the participants' realisations about self, others and the world.

The analytic categories of experience that emerged from this study are interconnected in terms of their relationship to the exploration of liminal spaces. The participants described the significance of being in new places, doing new things and meeting new people, and taking personal responsibility, where a sense of disruption infused these experiences. Harry articulated this idea as “living unbounded” where the expectations from family and friends were gone, as were the preconceptions about self-identity. He (and others) appeared to feel that, during their sojourn, they could start afresh, make a ‘clean break’ and be whoever and whatever they wished to be. In this sense, the significance of international study lies in the participants entering a new culture and questioning who they are, where they fit in the new world, and who they will be in the world that they will return to eventually. Participants are essentially determining which parts of their existing identity they will retain and which elements of the new culture and new people with whom they have interacted they will integrate into their ‘new self’. This exploration of liminal spaces reveals something of the individual nature of learning as well as the social context in which learning takes place, as it is both the personal practices of liminality in identity construction and the social context of the liminal space that international study creates that influence the participants’ perceptions of the significance of their experiences.

The theories discussed above that frame the significance of international study provide a picture of the learning context (and the learners’ context) in which the participants made meaning. They also help explain how context influenced the interpretations of the participants’ experiences (Boud & Walker 1990; Jarvis 1987). The theories suggest that the age and stage of development of participants shaped meaning-making, and that international study provides an environment that heightens the participants’ usual age-related transitions, social relationship changes, and interactions with new and diverse people and places. At this stage in their lives, and in this environment, the participants were able to explore liminal spaces and reassess and reshape their identities. The age and developmental stage of the participants are products of socialisation; it is expected that young adults are working on their identities and testing out capabilities as they move away from their familiar support networks. This suggests that the findings in this study on the significance of the international study experience are in part an outcome of young adults’ socialisation processes, linking the findings to life-span developmental psychology perspectives on learning.

The participants’ meaning-making work also demonstrates the ways that individuals impose certain expectations on an experience so that are selective about how they experience a social situation and how they focus on particular aspects of it (Jarvis 1987). These expectations are themselves socially-

constructed. This study found that participant expectations were expressed in personal learning intent and their perspectives on the purpose and value of study abroad and its comparison with personal travel. These expectations may be reflective of the rhetoric that surrounds study abroad, particularly where such programs encourage a certain kind of experience and the learning that is presumed to result (Bishop 2013). Some participants described ‘needing’ to make friends because they felt this was expected of them. Charlotte felt that there is an expectation to return from a study abroad experience a changed person. The significance of the international study experience to participants, therefore, is influenced by social forces around expectations and the nature of the study abroad experience.

### **7.5.5 Summary of the socio-contextual influences on meaning-making in the context of international study**

International study is a developmental opportunity steeped in discourses of global citizenry, forging international connections, and personal growth. Moreover, the rhetoric that surrounds the experience is based around notions of transformation, where potential participants are told that the experience will change their lives, and where self-reports that it was “great” may be a product of social desirability bias (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012). This rhetoric of transformation may be a factor in meaning-making from international study. However, social desirability bias acknowledges that meaning-making is socially-constructed. Acknowledging the developmental psychological and socio-contextual influences on meaning-making, the significance of international study reported in this thesis may be partly a product of age-related development, expected outcomes from international study, and the stage in life of the participants in the study.

The learning themes that emerged from Erichsen’s (2009; 2011) study of international students in the United States shed further light on the social dimension of the process of understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience. Erichsen (2009; 2011) characterised the experiences of the students in her study using the learning themes of *getting lost*, *liminality*, and *redefinition*. These themes align with the findings in this study. As with Erichsen’s study, participants in this research often experienced initial periods of frustration or confusion in dealing with the new environment (i.e. getting lost). As noted above, the participants in this study were exploring liminal spaces, doing what Beech (2011) describes as consistently evaluating what they were confronted with to determine what they would merge with their personal identity and what they would discard. The third of Erichsen’s (2009; 2011) concepts – redefinition – is particularly pertinent to the experience of participants in this study. Similarly to Erichsen’s findings (2009; 2011), the participants developed

heightened self-confidence and a strong sense of self and of personal agency, and a readiness to incorporate realisations about themselves and others into their identities. Redefinition, for the participants in this research, was described as a rebirth of sorts. Clarity about self-identity and future direction came from the participants being removed from the familiar and comparing their understandings of themselves and others with the situations they were faced with during their international sojourn. The standpoint from which they made meaning, the stage they were at in their personal growth journeys, and the learning possibilities from the social situation of international study all influenced their meaning-making efforts and the types of impact they described that resulted from their experiences.

## 7.6 Implications for (significant) learning by meaning-making

This section of the chapter discusses the implications of the study for learning through meaning-making, using the study’s framework (Figure 7.1) as a reference point. This section highlights the key contributions of the findings to the study’s framework.

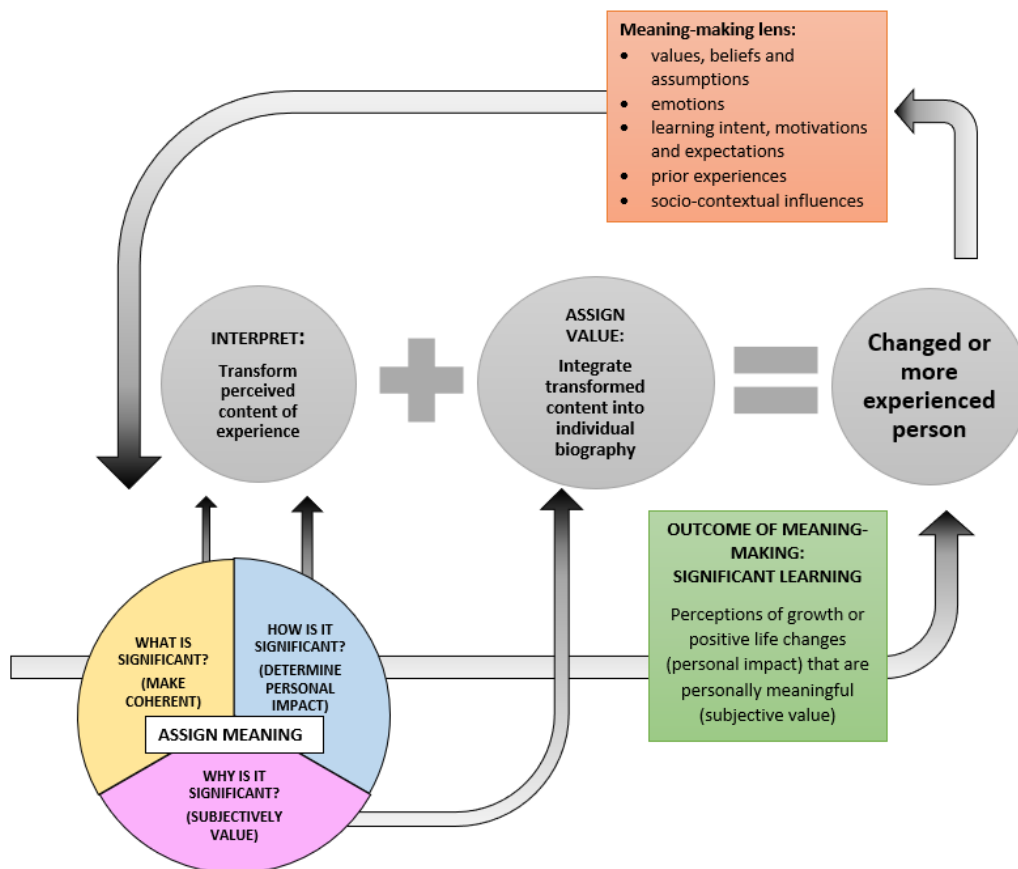


Figure 7.1: The study’s framework for understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience

The researcher acknowledges that the learning process is complex and the framework (Figure 7.1) is based on but one conceptualisation of this process. It was not the researcher's intention to create a framework that could comprehensively capture the complexity of adult learning but rather to anchor the process of learning from life experiences within meaning-making discourses around the notion of significance. This approach was taken to explore the researcher's interest in how adults learn from life experiences in ways that change them (i.e. significant learning), acknowledging that meaning-making is fundamental to learning (Mezirow 1991; 2000).

The researcher took a constructivist approach, using the study's reflective inquiry protocol to guide the exploration of learning from a given life experience. This meant the researcher could examine the learning process set out in the framework from the perspective of the participants who shared their international study experiences. The researcher aimed to describe the participants' international study experiences through the lens of the framework and show what those experiences revealed about the process of understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience. The implications of the findings for the key elements of the framework (i.e. our understanding of the process of meaning-making for interpreting the significance of an experience) are discussed below.

### **7.6.1 Experience and meaning-making: The framework's key theoretical underpinnings**

The framework is first based on the principles of experiential learning theory, that posits experience infuses all forms of learning but engagement with experiences (through meaning-making, for example) is the bridge between experience and learning (Beard & Wilson 2013). Moreover, the framework assumes that life experiences are typically haphazard, unplanned and multifaceted (Marsick & Watkins 2018). With these characteristics in mind, it was important to consider *where the learning process begins*. Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning places *concrete experience* at the heart of the learning experience, so that first the learner experiences *something* and then make meaning from *that something* to learn from an experience. This concept of learning creates questions around what is meant by the idea of the concrete experience. Jarvis (2006, p. 76) contends that "experience occurs at the intersection of ourselves and the world in which we live" and consists of an awareness of response to some kind of stimulus; that response is cognitive, emotional and physical. Underpinning the study's framework is the assumption that first the learner interacts with their social world and responds in some way to this interaction. These interactions and responses are represented in the study's use of the mind map tool to identify the basis and impetus for learning. The significant experiences named on the participants' mind maps stemmed from their reactions to particular

situations, or an accumulation of the sensations experienced in a given situation, that led to realisations about themselves and others. These reactions framed the participants' interpretations of the experience and provided the foundation for making meaning of, and understanding the impact of, their international study experiences.

The second theoretical underpinning of the framework is that of meaning-making, which is fundamental to learning from life experiences (Mezirow 1991; 2000). Meaning-making theory suggests that an experience in and of itself does not have meaning; the learner needs to assign meaning as part of the learning process (Merriam & Heuer 1996). The participants' international study experiences had no meaning until they made sense of those experiences. This sense-making work was captured in this study when the participants placed significant experiences on a mind map and when they responded to the study's reflective prompt questions. The participants transformed their experiences into conceptual meanings that helped explain those experiences (Jarvis 2006). Their meaning-making efforts shaped their perceptions of the impact of their experiences and the assigning of value to positive changes to their sense of self. Kegan (1982, p. 11) refers to the 'place' where transformation of an experience happens as a "zone of mediation" where an experience is "privately composed, made sense of". The participants' sense-making work underpins all elements of the framework, as it frames the act of rendering an experience coherent and understanding and articulating the impact of that experience in ways that have personal value.

The participants' descriptions of significant experiences fit with Mezirow's (2000) expanded concept of the stimulus for transformational learning, where he later theorised that a stimulus can be both epochal (sudden, intense moments that cause a rethinking of perspectives) and incremental (where experiences progressively accumulate as perspective transformations). These ideas underpin the learning process represented in the framework, but they also have implications for the green part, where the learner transforms the perceived content of an experience. In the context of life experiences that create impact on the learner, what the learner transforms may be dependent on the intersection of learner and their social world and the stimulus for a response to that intersection. The idea of a stimulus for learning will be further discussed in the next section.

### **7.6.2 Disjuncture as the stimulus for change in the learner**

It may not be possible to be aware of every detail of every experience, but a kind of preconscious learning happens when the learner interacts with the world (Jarvis 2006). For some adult learning theorists, this preconscious learning is triggered by disjuncture (Jarvis 2006) or inner discomfort or

perplexity (Brookfield 1987) or a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow 2000). Theories of disjuncture posit that learning results from a lack of fit between a person's existing frame of reference and the new experience. Jarvis (2006, p. 25) describes disjuncture as "the gap between our biography and our perception of our experience" (p. 25). This lack of fit causes the learner to think and act in new ways (Jarvis 2006; Merriam & Heuer 1996). Where there is disjuncture, the learner may examine the knowledge or belief or behaviour that is being presented and decide whether to accept or practise it (Jarvis 2006). However, if the disjuncture is rejected, no learning will occur.

This research did not specifically explore disjuncture or inner discomfort as part of the meaning-making process. The idea of a stimulus for learning was not included in the framework as the learning process is shown to begin with assigning meaning to an experience to render it coherent (i.e. what is significant about an experience). The study's inquiry protocol, however, uses a mind map to pinpoint the intersection between the self and the world to find the places where disjuncture may have occurred. Moreover, the findings show that the students' significant mind-mapped experiences created a trigger for learning because they were new experiences, or because the students faced disjuncture or a discomforting situation. The language and culture differences that characterise international study created the dissonance necessary for change, as did the new and unique nature of the experience. As an example, the participants described the challenges of living abroad for an extended period and how dealing with these challenges personally impacted them in ways that they valued. The challenging situations often caused discomfort, such as witnessing behaviours that did not align with their ways of doing things. It was this discomfort that provided the basis for reassessing perspectives on themselves and others and caused participants to think or act differently. The challenges often came about in a new situation that required the application of aspects of the self that had not been fully tested before or certainly not tested in those contextual ways, such as problem-solving, or resilience, or interpersonal communication capabilities. In many cases, there was initial confusion or discomfort that stimulated learning, such as the confusion Charlotte felt when she saw her Chinese friends receiving racist treatment, or when Rebecca's lack of confidence in her German language skills made her initially avoid interactions with her housemates.

Internal disjuncture can also stimulate learning, when the individual is experiencing a sense of internal disharmony, or a sense of questioning generated from within the self, where the learner feels the need to change their world in some way (Jarvis 2006). This study found that internal disjuncture also created a catalyst for learning. The participants explained situations at home that caused internal disjuncture, such as relationships, the desire to take time out from usual routines, and the pressure of

work and study responsibilities. Internal disharmony meant they were seeking challenges and the chance to test capabilities, to do new things and become more independent. This sense of internal disjuncture shaped the meanings they made from their experiences, particularly the sense of accomplishment from managing on their own, the chance to experience things they could not do at home, and making new friends.

The idea of disjuncture as the stimulus for learning underpins the process of meaning-making for learning. Jarvis (2006) contends that resolving disjuncture and rebuilding harmony often creates the catalyst for change in the learner. These ideas align with the process of understanding and articulating the significance of life experiences, where assigning meaning to an experience and determining its personal impact may be tied to the act of resolving disjuncture. The participants in this study did not reject the disjuncture, but rather embraced it and chose which parts of the new ways of thinking or behaving they wished to incorporate into their changed identities. This suggests that these types of learners have a resilient mindset. The items the participants chose to place on their mind maps (i.e. what they felt was significant about their international study experiences) represent their efforts to resolve disjuncture.

### **7.6.3 Personal impact as perception of change**

Clark and Dirkx (2000, p. 101) propose that “how the self is conceptualised is foundational to how we think about and theorise learning”. This study’s framework shows that significant learning involves perceptions of personal growth or positive life changes (Park 2010). The identity work (Erichsen 2009; 2011) that happens when learning is significant is about the learner’s understanding of how they have changed, where they accommodate new perspectives and capabilities by integrating them into their individual biography (Jarvis 2006). Hill (1977) notes that what is learned does not need to be ‘correct’ or deliberate or involve an explicit act to be valid. These ideas help to explain the types of impact that the participants described. Impact was often articulated in terms of attitudes and approaches to human interactions. Whether these attitudes and approaches were ‘correct’ or not does not really matter. The “locus of evaluation” of the effect of an experience lies with the individual (Rogers 1969, p. 5) and it is their construction of meaning that guides the learning process. The impact of a life experience, then, is deeply personal and is perceived based on the learner’s own personal meaning system.

While we have no ‘quantitative proof’ that the participants in this study changed, what they described were their *perceptions* of growth (Park 2010) and shifts in their self-identity. These perceptions were



mostly positive in terms of how they saw themselves, other people and the world, and how they understood their new or enhanced capabilities. Self-realizations and realizations about others and the world formed the foundation of personal impact. These realizations redefined their identities and their understandings of their place in the world. These ideas on redefinition provide further theoretical understandings of the concept of personal impact. Interpretation of an experience in terms of personal impact seems to result from an intersection of the learner's current understanding of self and the world and of what they are confronted with when engaging in new experiences (Erichsen 2009; 2011).

In alignment with Erichsen's (2009; 2011) work on transforming international experiences as identity work, realizations about self, others and the world emerged from this study as being foundational to how an experience is determined to have impacted the learner. Realizations form the basis of the shift in the learner's identity as they try to reconcile their extant understandings of self and others with the content of new experiences, thus stimulating personal change or growth. Self-realizations allow the learner to identify capabilities that may have been enhanced or developed as a result of an experience. Realizations frame meaning-making efforts to determine the personal impact of an experience and they underpin the learner's perceptions of growth or positive life changes.

#### **7.6.4 The key role that subjective value plays in meaning-making**

The study's framework shows that assigning value to an experience so that its content is integrated into the learner's sense of self is an act of subjectively valuing an experience and its impact. This act answers the question of why an experience and its impact are significant to the learner. This study found, however, that the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of significance are connected by subjective value. These connections influenced the participants' choice to engage in certain activities or experiences, the meaning assigned to those things, and the perception of personal impact as a result of those activities or experiences. The following example demonstrates these connections. Gretchen felt she was naïve prior to studying abroad; she had not experienced much beyond her home city. While she largely chose her host country to improve her Spanish, she elected to acculturate, travel through South America, and engage in 'unique experiences'. She identified these experiences as important to her because of the value she placed on using the opportunity to grow in confidence and maturity. Gretchen reacted to these experiences by developing feelings of accomplishment and increased self-worth. These reactions were also an expression of the impact she perceived from the experiences, of greater self-assuredness and confidence. She valued this impact because it mattered to her to have these 'achievements' from her time abroad. This suggests then, that subjective value is about (i) the act of identifying an experience as personally important, (ii) the perspective from which this act occurs, and

(iii) the cognitive, behavioural or emotional significance of the experience to the learner, based on their reactions to the experience.

In this study, all aspects of subjective value shaped the significance of living away, studying and learning and travelling abroad in novel situations where participants had meaningful interactions with people, places and cultures, and lived independently. Subjectively valuing an experience, or the naming of aspects of the international study experience as important, determined what was chosen as significant (i.e. the mind map items). The impact of international study - realisations about self and the world, expanded capabilities, and the ways these realisations and expanded capabilities enhanced self-efficacy - were expressions of the value the participants assigned to the experience for personal growth. In other words, the participants identified changes in themselves as personal impact because these changes had some value to them, thus suggesting that subjective value is inherent in the articulation of personal impact. Furthermore, because these changes were valued, they became part of the participants' perceptions of personal growth and positive life changes. As a result, the participants could articulate what they can now do, or how they now see themselves and others, which in turn better prepared them for subsequent experiences or gave them clarity over future direction. Even where the participants were asked separate questions about why they placed an experience on their maps, how it had impacted them and why they valued that impact, the presence of subjective value was felt in their responses.

While expansion is the unifying factor of personal impact, this study found differences in participant reactions to the 'same situation'. For example, many of the participants named their living situation as a significant experience, yet there were different types of impact described from this part of the experience, depending on the nature of the living situation, the participants' reactions to their situation, and their perceptions of impact. These multiple dependencies help to explain the personal nature of life-experience learning and why the same experience can have a different effect on those who live it (Merriam & Clark 1993). The differences in impact presented in Chapter 5 may also be attributed to individual meaning-making systems (i.e. the influence of personal meaning) and their effect on the process of translating the concrete experience into impact (Kegan 1980; Merriam & Clark 1996; Mezirow 2000; Park 2010). Similarly, Zull (2012) notes that there is no *one truth* but *our truth* which is different for each person, based on their meaning perspective (Mezirow 1997).

Jarvis (2006) proposes that learning involves transforming an experience through reactions - thinking, feeling and doing – and interpreting those reactions to create conceptual meanings that explain the

experience to the learner. The notion of subjectively valuing an experience seems inherent in this idea of learning, where transformation occurs because the learner assigns value to the experience. Moreover, the learner uses their meaning-making lens to assign value (Merriam & Clark 1993). Value is assigned so that the learner can integrate their perceptions of change (i.e. personal impact) into their sense of self. The learner's meaning-making lens explains the standpoint from which value is assigned. It shapes the act of subjectively valuing an experience. This lens is a complex system of interconnected influences on meaning-making (the orange part of the framework).

The research findings agree with extant literature, that the interpretation of experiences always happens from a particular standpoint (Usher 1993). This standpoint creates a personal meaning system (expressed in this study as the learner's meaning-making lens) that shapes meaning-making. Personal meaning systems provide a frame of reference for interpreting experiences and assigning value to an experience and its impact for significant learning (Merriam & Clark 1993). This system provides the learner with a rationale for, and approach to, each new experience. This research demonstrated how the learner's reactions to an experience are framed by the perspective from which meaning is made (Usher 1993). The participants' reflections on the significance of their experiences showed that thoughts, actions and emotions underpin the act of transforming an experience into learning and the reactions to experiences are framed by value judgements made by the learner using their personal meaning-making lens (Jarvis 2006). The following observation from Harry, a participant in this study, demonstrates this idea:

*It [learning from international study] is just something that's developed from the process of actually being a certain person and reacting in a certain way. I know some people who went on exchange, all they just did is drink and get crazy. They won't get personal responsibility, they wouldn't have had a 'flat Mum' experience, and they'd probably just see it as an opportunity to go out and party for four months. They won't necessarily get that personal development that I have.*

Harry's use of the phrase, "actually being a certain person and reacting in a certain way" resonates with the idea that subjective value is influenced by a person's frame of reference. 'Being a certain person' creates a lens that shapes the process of making meaning and assigning value to an experience. Adult learning theorists have conceptualised the learner's meaning-making lens in different ways. What unites these perspectives is the proposition that adults come to each learning opportunity with a store of experiences that accumulate in volume, range and depth as they go through adulthood (Knowles 1980). Past experiences are not *just* experiences; instead, they become the perspective from which learners approach each new experience and make meaning from it.

In summary, the findings on subjective value added value to the study's framework. While the framework shows that meaning-making involves asking what, how and why an experience is significant (i.e. the tri-coloured circle at Figure 7.1), subjective value frames all three questions. The study found that there is personal value inherent not only in the assigning of value to an experience but also in the act of rendering an experience coherent and determining its personal impact. The act of subjectively valuing an experience is shaped by the learner's personal meaning system. Moreover, when the learner assigns meaning to an experience, they are engaging in this meaning-making effort from a particular standpoint. Their personal meaning system shapes the way they integrate the transformed content of an experience into their individual biography.

### **7.6.5 The social-contextual dimensions of meaning-making**

It was evident in this research that (i) meanings are constructed within the social world (Merriam & Heuer 1996), and (iii) meanings are dependent on the learning environment and the learner's context (Boud & Walker 1990; Usher 1993). Adult learning is shaped by the society in which it takes place and the values, beliefs, attitudes and norms of that society (Jarvis 1987; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner 2007). The learner's own meaning system is shaped by these influences. Learners themselves are social constructs (Jarvis 1987) and thus they undertake meaning-making work as social beings. This means learning is relational, in that the self is constructed and reconstructed through interactions with significant people in the learner's life and within a range of social contexts (Erichsen 2009; 2011). Moreover, the significance of an experience to the learner is also shaped by contextual factors. As discussed in Section 7.5, the participants' meaning-making work was influenced by their age and stage of development, where their perceptions of significant learning stemmed from contextual elements such as liminal spaces and changes in social relationships. These factors themselves are socially-constructed and speak to the developmental nature of learning.

At any given point in time, individuals inhabit multiple and sometimes divergent worlds. It is the interactions with these worlds that stimulate learning and the nature of that learning. Illeris (2005) proposes that learning environments create certain kinds of learning possibilities. This idea speaks to the connection between individuals and the social context in which they are situated that shapes learning from life experiences (Clark & Dirkx 2000). This research revealed the learning possibilities from international study through the kinds of situations and experiences that characterise such a learning context. Significant learning, then, is a product of the learner's interactions with a social situation and their individual meaning-making from their particular standpoint (using their personal

meaning system), and the learning possibilities a given experience facilitates, all of which are socially-constructed.

The findings on the socio-contextual influences on meaning-making contribute to the study's framework and this research acknowledges that those influences were embodied in the participants' perspectives on the significance of their international study experiences. It is noted, however, that the social and contextual nature of adult learning is not always recognised in experiential learning approaches (Fenwick 2000) and this has been one of the criticisms of Kolb's model (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner 2007). While the framework shows that socio-contextual influences are one of the elements of the learner's meaning-making lens, the entire framework is located within a socio-contextual setting and draws inspiration from social constructivist theory.

### **7.6.6 Progression of the learner's personal meaning system**

It is generally accepted that the learner is changed through meaning-making for learning. Some adult learning theorists also contend that personal meaning systems themselves are progressed through this process (Kegan 2000; Mezirow 2000). Indeed, Daloz (1986) suggests that personal growth is about the progression of transformations of our personal meaning systems. Within the context of the cognitive development, maturity, and stage in life of the participants in this study, the ways they expressed the significance of their experiences suggests that their personal meaning systems were progressed. This progression was suggested in the participants' descriptions of the ways they intend to take their learning forward and in their understanding of an enhanced sense of self. This idea is reflected in the framework, where the changed person is connected to their meaning-making lens, thus showing that the learner and their lens are changed through significant learning.

While personal meaning systems have been shown to exert a compelling influence over what is experienced, and the meanings made from it, it is important to note that the learner may not be aware of their personal meaning system. In relation to the prior experiences and learning intent elements of the learner's meaning system, Boud and Walker (1990) contend that these meaning-making influences may be unconscious or unarticulated and this may have an effect on learning. According to Boud and Walker (1990), if individuals understand their learning intent, they may be able to appreciate the learning potential in the experience and effectively make meaning from it, i.e. link meaning-making to personal goals. Conversely, a lack of intent may result in superficial experiences and missed growth opportunities. This may matter to a life experience such as international study, where there is potential for informal or incidental learning from an experience that has expected

outcomes and impacts. It was beyond the scope of this research to determine whether a lack of awareness of the students' personal meaning systems resulted in missed growth opportunities. This research did, however, provide insight into these influences and demonstrated how they were manifested in what the participants chose to experience, how they experienced it and how they felt they had changed as a result.

### **7.6.7 Learning by meaning-making: Two considerations**

This research explored meaning-making with a group of young adult sojourners and revealed what mattered to them. The first consideration in terms of learning by meaning-making is that it occurs within the scope of the learner's reflective capabilities. Experiential learning is a process of human cognition and of meaning-making that relies on the varying capacity and confidence of the individual to construct meaning (Fenwick 2000). The idea that learners will make meaning from a learning opportunity assumes capacity for self-awareness and metacognition that is not inherent in everyone (Coulson & Harvey 2013; Moon 2004). It was not the intention of the researcher to make judgements on the meanings the participants made from their experiences. It was still possible, however, to discern varying levels of reflective capabilities in the participants' responses to the prompt questions. This may mean that interpreting the significance of an experience requires a certain level of cognitive development to be present already (Merriam 2004). It is suggested that without guidance and structure, learners may be overwhelmed by the complexity of their experiences and it will be difficult to construct meaning for learning (Coulson & Harvey 2013). The mind map and reflective questions used in this study to understand and articulate the significance of an experience provide such guidance and structure while still retaining the value of uncertainty and of students' personal explorations of liminal spaces.

The second consideration relates to the researcher's interpretation of significant learning, based on the work of Merriam and Clark (1993). As shown in the green part of the framework, outcomes of the meaning-making process are expressed in positive terms, as perceptions of personal growth, even if the experiences that led to that growth were challenging or painful. Moreover, the theories of Mezirow (2000) and others on the influence of personal meaning systems on meaning-making suggest one direction of growth, where these meaning systems are expanded in favourable ways. The research reported in Merriam and Clark's (1993) study and in this thesis did not uncover any growth-restricting changes to the participants, therefore the construct of significance is considered to mean change in the learner in growth-enhancing ways. In the case of this thesis, the participants expressed the intent to grow and use the international study experience to gain greater independence, understand and

appreciate difference in others and enhance personal capabilities. These may be considered growth-enhancing expected outcomes. The researcher recognises, however, that it may be possible for an individual to find their meaning system is less inclusive, open, reflective as a result of a learning experience. The researcher also acknowledges Merriam and Clark's (1993) view that a learning experience may also constrain the learner, leading them to adopt more rigid perspectives on themselves and others and become less inclined to integrate new experiences into their sense of self.

### **7.6.8 Summary of the study's implications: Using this study's new inquiry protocol as a guiding framework**

This study describes the process of understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience, and it explores the construct of significance, using a new inquiry protocol for understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience. The protocol was applied to international study but may be used as a guiding framework for research in other contexts. There are several key principles that underpin the protocol. The first is that experience is the basis and impetus for learning (Beard & Wilson 2013) and that an experience in and of itself does not have meaning (Merriam & Clark 1996). Learning from life experiences stems from the learner's interpretation of each experience (i.e. meaning-making work). The type of learning that changes the learner is described as significant learning by Merriam and Clark (1993), where the learner is affected in some way by an experience and personally values the experience and its effects. Meaning is both individually and socially-constructed (Jarvis 1987) and learners bring their values, motivations, learning intent, and reservoir of prior experiences to each new experience (Boud & Walker 1990; Knowles 1984; Mezirow 2000). Through interpreting experiences and understanding and articulating their significance, the individual understands how they have grown and integrates this new growth into their sense of self (Jarvis 2006). Each experience is influenced by past experiences and in turn influences subsequent experiences (Dewey 1963; Knowles 1984) and the learner's personal meaning system is progressed (Mezirow 2000).

A mind map was used in this study to stimulate recollections and help participants name the significant aspects of their international study experiences. The mind map is represented by the yellow segment of the tri-coloured circle, shown in Figure 7.1. This part of the framework signifies the idea that breaking down an experience into its meaningful parts provides a foundation and conceptual centre for the reflective process. This process could be applied to any learning experience, where the researcher would first ask what their participants felt was significant about the experience under

examination, using the mind map to identify those things. This element of meaning-making work involves rendering an experience coherent, i.e. considering what was significant about the experience.

By first considering the aspects of the overall experience that were meaningful and why this was so, participants are then able to contemplate the ways they may have changed as a result (i.e. considering how an experience was significant). In doing so, participants are reconstructing their experiences in terms of what they felt to be personally relevant and important (Merriam, Mott & Lee 1996) and deciding what to incorporate into their personal identities (Erichsen 2009; 2011). The reflective prompt questions guide the learner to determine how their sense of self may have been redefined and the kinds of personal capabilities that may have been enhanced or developed. Here, the researcher is asking participants to explore new understandings of themselves, others, and their social worlds as these realisations form the foundation of their expressions of personal impact.

The process of constructing meaning around perceptions of change seems to involve the learner storing the meanings made (i.e. where learners interpret their experiences) in their minds and releasing those outcomes as perceptions of change or growth (Jarvis 2006). Release of these outcomes is supported by assigning value, as only that which matters to the learner becomes significant learning. Thus, helping learners assign and articulate the value of an experience is a key part of helping them understand the growth they have achieved. This element of the study's new inquiry protocol acknowledges that learners use their personal meaning systems to assign value to an experience and its impact and that learning is a product of social and contextual influences. This acknowledgment is included in the reflective prompt questions that help learners to understand why their experiences are significant and why they become part of their enhanced self-identity as a result of making meaning of, and understanding the impact of, an experience.

## **7.7 Implications for discourses on the educative value of international study**

It has been proposed that participants in international study programs may have some difficulties understanding and articulating learning from their experiences; thus there is some concern over the educative value of the experience (Wong 2015). This section of the chapter discusses the implications of this research for discourses around the educative value of international study. It also discusses how we might uncover and measure that value.



### **7.7.1 Alignment with current literature on impacts and outcomes**

This research confirms what is known about student motivations around, and expectations of, international study. The extant literature shows that travel, meeting people and gaining a broader understanding of the world are the primary motivations and expectations of international study (Nyaupane, Paris & Teye 2010). This research also supports the findings in the key studies discussed in Chapter 3 on the outcomes and impacts of international study. These studies show impacts and outcomes including career direction (Dwyer 2004), personality maturation (Zimmerman & Neyer 2013), personal-relationship building (McLeod et al 2015), and improved communication skills (Luo & Jamieson-Drake 2014). This research adds to the body of knowledge around outcomes and impacts of international study and demonstrates how motivations around (and expectations of) personal growth, relationship-building, and intercultural effectiveness characterise the participants' approaches to their experiences and shape the meaning-making process.

The findings in this research also echo the outcomes of Gemignani's (2009) study that established participants' culture learning was concentrated on perspectives – recognition of different perspectives and changes to their own perspectives – and that this learning came from interactions with people from the host culture. A study by Park (2002) found that through assimilation, participants shifted their meaning schemes; this finding aligns with the results from this study on participant realisations as a key impact of their experiences. Importantly, the participants' realisations that were uncovered in this research demonstrate that significant personal change is more than just what we learn, it involves how and why individuals make choices about what is integrated into their self-understandings and understandings of people and the world (Erichsen 2009; 2011).

Dolby's (2008) research shows that national context plays a key role in students' experiences of study abroad by colouring students' expectations of the experience and how they make meaning from it. National context also influences how study abroad fits into participants' lives and identities more broadly and “how they visually and experientially map the world and understand its possibilities” (Dolby 2008, p. 54). In Dolby's study, Australian students were found to have a stronger sense of global identity than American students. Australians were able to move with reasonable ease in different countries, “selecting from each what is most useful or helpful” (Dolby 2008, p. 60). It is from this context that the Australian students in this research made meaning from their experiences. This context may help to explain the significance of interacting with people, places and cultures that this research found, and the participants' openness to new perspectives and ways of doing things.

Previous doctoral studies on understanding study abroad experiences have shown that the experience is highly individualised but that it is possible to identify common themes from the data (Gemignani 2009; Sherman Johnson 2016). This research also found that, while the participants' experiences were deeply personal, it was possible to categorise what and how their experiences were significant, thus demonstrating the conditions for learning that the context creates and the broader interpretations of the participants' experiences. This research also found that experiences were often shaped by unusual or happenstance events or unanticipated factors, as noted by Gemignani (2009), thus showing the haphazard and unstructured nature of informal or life-experience learning (Marsick & Watkins 2018).

### **7.7.2 Moving 'beyond it was great'**

International study is recognised for its potential to be transformative (Perry, Stoner & Tarrant 2012) and there are expectations across the field and among key stakeholders that the experience should contribute to a range of educational outcomes (Curran 2007). There have been concerns raised in the literature, however, over the value of the experience. These concerns are largely due to self-reports from students of transformation that are not supported by evidence (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012) and surface responses to questions of what was learned (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012). The issue of so-called disappointing learning from international study has been framed as the 'beyond it was great' argument (Engle 2013). This argument calls for evidence of learning that goes beyond student claims of a 'great' experience. These claims are often examined in the context of the development of intercultural competence (Wong 2015), but they are still relevant to other types of learning from international study.

A key part of the debate surrounding the educative value of international study is the documented challenge that many students face in articulating what they have gained from their experience (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012; Montrose 2002; Wong 2015). Experiential learning theory dictates that learning from experience must include some form of engagement with the process to turn an experience into actual learning (Beard & Wilson 2013; Dewey 1963; Kolb 1984; 2015). The 'beyond it was great' argument has been interrogated by Wong (2015), who proposes that students' claims that international study is 'great' should be taken seriously and we should find better ways to understand what students are trying to say about their sojourns. Wong (2015, p. 123) contends that the issue may not be that students have "nothing to say"; he suggests the issue is that students do not know *how to* describe the learning from their experiences. Importantly, this study has given students a structure within which to explain how and what they learned from international study, using a mind

map and set of reflective prompt questions, based on a framework that describes the process of understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience.

Using the study's framework, the participants in this research *did not* describe the results of their experiences as disappointing, or as a time when they learned nothing of value. All participants articulated the ways that the experience had impacted on them to enhance certain capabilities, to influence their views of themselves and the world around them, and to better prepare them for future life experiences. They could express how they felt they had *changed* and what that change *meant to them* in terms of their enhanced identity. The study's findings have implications for the validity of prior claims that the 'results' from study abroad are disappointing. The study's findings also give us a new perspective from which to consider what results we should be looking for from international study, and why these particular results may be important. The significant experiences the participants in this study described and made meaning from, and the types of impact that resulted, demonstrate that the experience was more than 'great'.

This research found that participant perspectives on the purpose and value of international study were grounded in the opportunity to test their capabilities, interact with different people, and "hit the restart button". The significance of the experience to the participants was inherently tied to these ideas. What mattered to the participants was the *experience* of living, studying and travelling abroad and the contribution of the experience to their own personal growth. As Erichsen (2011, p. 128) noted in her study of international students in the United States, "adult learners are continually in a process of re-storying their life experiences and who they are in relation to these". By living the re-storying process, international study participants are shifting their identities in relation to what they see, hear, and do while studying abroad. These shifts may be seen as part of the ongoing reconstruction of life experiences where the self is in constant flux (Erichsen 2009; 2011). This idea of shifting identities is especially important to international sojourners and their stage of personal growth.

All participants found value in the experience and, across the group, there was agreement that study abroad is about self-exploration and that it is a deeply personal experience. Charlotte noted that international study is a "good platform for self-experimentation without judgement because of the new people". Charlotte also felt that the idea of 'making the most' of the experience is subjective, saying that "just because you don't do your experience like everyone else's, doesn't mean that it's not a valid experience and it doesn't mean that you haven't gotten anything out of it". These

perspectives suggest that student claims that the experience was ‘great’ should indeed be taken seriously.

Significant learning theory highlights the subjective nature of adult learning (and the influence of personal meaning systems on what is valued) and how the impact or significance of a particular experience varies from person to person (Merriam & Clark 1993). The 14 participants in this study had individualised experiences and it was their own perceptions of personal impact and their unique meaning systems that drove their interpretation of the experiences. It was still possible, however, to categorise the experiences and their impact in thematic clusters (see Chapter 6). The common thread was found to be the extension of personal capabilities and sense of self (Merriam & Clark 1993). This reveals insight into the value of the international study experience for participants and what this value looks like, in a broad and generalisable sense. It might be time to reconsider the rhetoric of international study outcomes or at least to reconceptualise what is meant by outcomes in the context of international study.

### **7.73 Let’s get real: Expectations of learning from international study**

While it is a costly exercise for students to spend one semester abroad, none of the participants in this study expressed that their psychological and financial investments had not been worthwhile. This, again, points to the complexity of the notion of educative value – of what has value and of what is meant by ‘results’ of learning from international study (Zull 2012). It has been noted by Vande Berg, Paige and Lou (2012), however, that participant self-reports are not used to assure learning in other educative domains. This calls into question whether international study participant self-reports are sufficient assessment and evaluation items (and sufficient for whom?), particularly when universities invest significant resources in study abroad programs. It does not seem possible to evaluate, quantify or place an external judgement on learning from life experiences, as this kind of learning is personal and based on subjective *perceptions* of growth (Park 2010). However, if outcomes need to be measured externally, then a statement of personal value by the participants may not be satisfactory for the field.

This research suggests that further examination is needed of the learning potential of the international study experience and the ways in which participants are able to understand and articulate that learning potential. This research also calls for more realistic approaches to alignment of the experience with expected outcomes, and consideration of what can be reasonably expected from student learning from one or two semesters abroad. As Forsey, Broomhall and Davis (2012, p. 137), suggest, “it would be

helpful to ease up on the rhetoric and get more realistic about what students can expect from their time overseas” (Forsy, Broomhall & Davis 2012, p. 137). This research used an inquiry protocol, based on a theoretically-grounded framework, to understand and articulate the significance of international study. Use of the protocol revealed that the participants *could* identify how they had grown as a result of their experiences, which provided some insight into the idea of what ‘great’ meant to the participants. The idea of ‘great’ was not what the participants had *learned* from their experiences but how they understood them in terms of ways they had changed and how they interpreted those changes using their personal meaning-making lens.

Moreover, given that most studies on outcomes and impacts of study abroad occur soon after students have returned home (Potts 2016), it may be difficult to ascertain what ‘learning’ has occurred, as the learning may not be fully realised in participants for many years to come. Indeed, it may never reach consciousness (Zull 2012). The impacts of international study described in this research were expressed by participants within a few months of returning home. They represent the participants’ interpretations of the experience at one point in time, and they may change in the future. Dewey’s work on experiential learning includes the notion that life experiences are interconnected, and thus the gains from one experience necessarily affect future experiences (Dewey 1963). The expressions of significant learning in this study were a product of the immediately-felt impact. The nature of this impact may be felt differently over time, as it is merged with subsequent experiences. Some impact may be delayed, or new perspectives on impact may be constructed in the future. Real impact may be latent and may only be understood years later (Wong 2015) which again suggests that expectations of (immediate) outcomes of international study experiences may need to be revised. The ‘impossible things before breakfast’ (Woolf 2007) that are expected of international study may indeed be impossible.

Another consideration is the usual stage of growth of study abroad participants; perhaps this creates limitations on their capacity to make meaning from their experiences. Certainly, the types of impact expressed in this study were consistent with usual age-related transitions of young adulthood (Zimmerman & Neyer 2013). As Merriam (2004) suggests, engagement in the learning process to lead to a more mature and autonomous level of thinking requires a certain level of cognitive development to be present already. The depth of meaning found in this research may be as much as could be expected from the participants at that point in their lives. Importantly, however, the significance of the experiences as described in this research showed *what mattered* to the participants. They experienced personal growth, a changed sense of self, and a broadened perspective on people

and the world. For young adults who are exploring their identities and their place in the world, this learning is profound.

It seems that there are still challenges inherent in attempts to date to quantify and measure outcomes and impacts of international study, as Potts (2016) has shown in her review of the extant literature (see Chapter 3). Again, this suggests there are divergent views on what constitutes impact from international study (as opposed to a lack of worthy outcomes or impacts from the experience). Furthermore, as Wong (2015, p. 123) has suggested, the issue with apparently disappointing results may stem from the expectations of non-participant stakeholders, who may have an “expectation that gains should be greater, more rapid, or more consistent”. It may also be that the issue is with the measure of impact, not the student or the experience itself (Wong 2015). Most studies are qualitative and anecdotal in nature (Di Pietro 2014), as is this research, but attempts to quantify life-experience learning may be methodologically challenging and may still not produce the outcomes that some stakeholders are seeking.

#### **7.7.4 International study and employability**

It is acknowledged that participation in extra-curricular activities is an effective way to develop the job-related capabilities and personal attributes that employers expect (Clark et al 2015; Dace Pool & Sewell 2007). International study is an activity that has career capital for graduates and is highly valued by employers (Crossman & Clarke 2010; Curran 2007; Potts 2016; Potts 2018). An Australian study of stakeholder perceptions of the link between international experiences and graduate employability found that employers perceive international experiences as the chance to “put people into spaces” where they would be “exposed to global thinking” (Crossman & Clarke 2010, p. 605). Recruits with international study experiences were also seen to be more capable of building relationships and conducting international business (Crossman & Clarke 2010, p. 605). However, it should be noted that while research has demonstrated links between studying abroad and employability, causality is difficult to demonstrate, particularly in terms of isolating the contribution of factors to an individual’s personal and professional development (Potts 2018).

Unsurprisingly though, international study specifically is linked to the development of foreign language skills and intercultural competence (Crossman & Clark 2010; Curran 2007). While there have been questions raised over how deeply the experience contributes to such development, this research demonstrated the significance to participants of language acquisition (for those who had learning intent to do so) and for understanding and appreciation of diversity. Generally, the

participants felt they became more culturally sensitive and enhanced their ability to interact with a range of people from different backgrounds. Learning a foreign language is difficult; it takes a long time to develop fluency and it requires a willingness to communicate with people in the host language (Curran 2007). This research showed that it is possible for international study to contribute to language fluency and intercultural competence, where students have expectations to improve in these areas, take steps to facilitate that improvement, and assign meaning to this kind of growth.

To date, there is a lack of evidence to demonstrate that graduates who have studied overseas actually perform better in the workplace than those who have not (Crossman & Clarke 2010). If there are differences, they may simply reflect the influence of personal attributes and capabilities (Di Pietro 2014) that may not be connected to the experience of international study (but nevertheless may be enhanced by the experience). This research demonstrates that the participants *felt* that their knowledge of the world had broadened and that they had developed greater empathy and understanding of difference. Attitudes and awareness are crucial to intercultural development (Hunter, White & Godbey 2006) so at least the international study experience has formed the foundation of the participants' intercultural effectiveness. This study aligns with the findings of an investigation by Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) of returned study abroad participants; they found 'evidence' of impact in the students' attitudes, rather than in more tangible and easily-measured outcomes.

The key message here is that, without positive attitudes towards diversity and intercultural understanding, there may be no chance of enhancing intercultural competence even if the student spends a prolonged period studying abroad. The students in this study were not guided to develop intercultural competence but they still tried to immerse themselves in new cultures and interact with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, even if these interactions were challenging. They did this, based on their values and beliefs and motivations to experience new things and interact with different people. It may be that one or two semesters abroad may not be the most powerful mechanism for developing intercultural competence or global citizenship (Potts 2016), but this research does show that the experience contributed in some way in these areas. What this looks like in practice is something that can only be evident once graduates are working and interacting with a range of people in the workplace. In the context of graduate preparedness to enter the workplace, however, positive attitudes towards cultural diversity and confidence in intercultural relationships may be sufficient for demonstrating the effect of international study on graduate employability development.

Given that this study's participants had not completed their undergraduate degrees at the time of the interviews, the impact of international study on their careers could not be determined. Interestingly, however, several of the participants felt that their experience had provided them with clearer career direction, cemented their career decisions, or helped to develop their knowledge and capabilities in their chosen fields. This came about through undertaking volunteering or part time work, the academic component of the program (and from being able to or learn about other systems and study subjects not available at home) and from the clean break from normal life that allowed them time and space to develop new perspectives. Participants all described the impact of their experience on their self-confidence, resilience, independence and willingness to take on new challenges, and many of the participants felt that six months of study abroad had given them a passion for further travel or working overseas after graduation. While this felt impact cannot be measured in terms of actual career direction or employment or career trajectory, it is at least possible to determine that the experience laid the foundation in these areas according to how the participants perceived the significance of their experiences.

The significance of international study experiences as described by the participants also demonstrates the contribution of the experience to employability around the personal attributes that employers value. Employers are looking for graduates with the personal characteristics that guide effective job performance, such as initiative, flexibility, adaptability, and motivation, as well as communicative capabilities and the ability to work well with others (Curran 2007). The participants articulated perceptions of greater self-confidence, adaptability and resilience, being better able to communicate with people and an improved willingness to take up opportunities. Interactions with people and the resulting impact of these interactions were a key component of the significance of their international study experience which highlights the contribution of the experience to developing the collaborative approaches that guide effective workplace performance. This research also showed that international study is fertile ground for learning to handle new and unanticipated situations (Di Pietro 2014). This notion of learning from experience is grounded in both the value of learning from experience and in the authentic nature of international study in relation to the attributes that it helped foster. The findings in this research align with the extant literature on the personal and social developmental outcomes of international study (Potts 2016), where it is accepted that study abroad participants are likely to be more confident, mature, self-aware, adaptable and able to cope with ambiguity and change (Di Pietro 2014).



Di Pietro (2014, pp. 6-7) contends that the decision to embark on study abroad can be correlated with “unobserved students’ traits that positively affect labour market outcomes after graduation”. This suggests that motivations, values and other personality factors may influence the significance of international study for employability. One large US study of first-year college students on the choice process and intent to study abroad found that intention to study abroad can be positively predicted by openness to diversity, previous interactions with diverse people, and participation in other extra-curricular activities (Salisbury et al 2009). A study by Li, Olson and Frieze (2009) supports propositions in previous studies that achievement motivation (desire to work hard and do things well), neophilia (a novel-seeking personality), migrant personality (high willingness to engage with mobility), and desire to help others are fundamental motivating factors for electing to study abroad. This research speaks to the idea of intrinsic motivation, to “seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn” (Ryan & Deci 2000, p. 70). Socioeconomic status and social and cultural capital – including a high interest in reading and writing and in the social sciences – may also contribute to the value placed on international study as an educatively-beneficial activity (Salisbury et al 2009).

This research demonstrated that the participants intended, through their decision to study abroad, to take something meaningful for their personal growth away from it. Even those students whose programs included a compulsory semester of international study had this intention. Many of the participants expressed long-held desires to study abroad, had previous travel experiences or parents who had worked overseas, or were from culturally-diverse backgrounds. They had also spent a significant amount of time saving to enable them to study overseas. The application process itself is lengthy and complex, which requires students to be committed to studying overseas to persevere. Furthermore, the growth-enhancing interpretations of the challenges that participants faced while studying internationally, their need to be challenged, their desire to experience difference, and their motivations to have a ‘successful’ experience point to the influence of personality factors on the significance of the experience (Li, Olson & Frieze 2013). This suggests the participants like the ones in this study are poised to learn significantly from their experiences before they even leave home. These are the kinds of people that employers want, so the value of graduates who have studied abroad to industry may lie with their personal value systems and an inherent desire to grow and to test capabilities.

## **7.8 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter draws together the discussion of the significance of life experiences in the context of international study and discusses the implications of the findings for theories on meaning-making for significant learning and for discourses around the educative value of the study abroad experience. This study represents the researcher's developing understandings of adult learning from life experiences that have no curriculum to guide the learning process. It also represents the researcher's interest in study abroad as a potentially-significant life experience. As a descriptive case study, the research provides insight into the significance of life experiences by examining the dimensions of the construct of significance in the context of international study. It also demonstrates what the process of understanding and articulating the significance of an experience looks like in practice.

The research process revealed the complexity of human (adult) learning. The researcher concurs with observations made by Jarvis (2006) and Merriam (2017) that it does not seem possible to create a single definition or model of adult learning or ever fully understand the phenomenon, despite ongoing research in the field that has influenced thinking around how adults learn. Furthermore, any model of learning is by nature likely to over-simplify the reality and complexity of the process of learning (Jarvis 1987). What this research does, however, is extend earlier work on significant learning by Merriam and Clark (1993) by creating and applying a new framework that captures the key elements of the meaning-making process to understand and articulate the significance of a life experience. The research revealed new understandings of how the personal impact of life experiences in the findings on realisations as a key expression of impact. It showed that the learner's meaning-making lens plays a vital role in understanding the significance of an experience. In an extension of the original framework, the findings highlighted that (i) subjective value frames all elements of meaning-making, and (ii) meaning-making is influenced by the socio-contextual environment. The findings demonstrate the study's propositions, that learning is significant if it has an impact on the individual and there is personal value assigned to both the experience and its impact. The next chapter presents the researcher's concluding thoughts, discusses the significance of the study, and suggests areas for future research.

## **Chapter 8: Concluding thoughts**

### **8.1 Chapter introduction**

The previous chapter drew together the findings on the significance of life experiences in the context of international study. This chapter provides an overview of the research outcomes and their significance. Firstly, the chapter revisits the research problem and explains the methodological approach to addressing the research aims. Then the chapter discusses the contribution of the study to theories of meaning-making for learning and for discourses on the educative value of international study experiences. The limitations of the study are acknowledged and then recommendations are made for future research and final concluding thoughts are given.

### **8.2 Overview of the research aims and methodological approach**

Life-experience learning is often serendipitous but always occurs when a person interacts with their environment and with others (Conlon 2004; Marsick & Watkins 2018). Life experiences and learning are connected through the process of meaning-making, where it falls to the individual to interpret their experiences (i.e. make sense of them) and recognise their personal significance (Kegan 1982; Jarvis 1997; Mezirow 2000). Significant learning has an impact on the learner and leads to personal growth, because the experience and its impact are valued by the learner using their unique frame of reference (Merriam & Clark 1993). The construct of significance, in the context of learning, has two dimensions – personal impact and subjective value.

This research investigated the construct of significance in the context of learning and the process of understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience. This investigation was conducted in the context of international study, where participants described the significance of their study abroad experiences. The rationale for selecting international study as the context for the study came from extant literature on the potential of the experience to contribute to participants' personal growth (Curran 2007; Perry, Stoner & Tarrant 2012). However, there are concerns in the international study community about the educative value of the experience and how to recognise this value (Vande Berg, Paige & Lou 2012). There are calls to find new ways to understand what students mean when they say the experience was “great” (Wong 2015).

The single case study with embedded units design provided the researcher with 14 instances where the significance of the international study experience was described. This qualitative case study

approach allowed the researcher to explore perspectives of those who had experienced international study to gain a deeper understanding of the case (the significance of life experiences) and context (international study). The research aimed to contribute to (i) adult learning discourses on the meaning-making process of understanding and articulating the significance of life experiences and to (ii) understandings of the significance of international study.

This research investigated a new approach to moving “beyond it was great”, using a new inquiry protocol for approach to understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience. This new protocol includes reflective prompt questions derived from a framework based on theories of meaning-making for learning and of the dimensions of the construct of significance. The data were analysed according to the key components in the framework to identify themes around what was significant about international study experiences (RQ1), how those things were significant (RQ2) and why they were significant to the participants (RQ3). The significance of the findings are summarised below.

### **8.3 Significance of the research**

This section of the chapter examines the contribution of this research to the theory of significant learning and to the value of international study as a significant life experience. Importantly, this research contributes further insight around the dimensions of the construct of significance, the process of interpreting the significance of a life experience, the educative value of international study experiences, and how to measure learning from that experience. It has wider implications for exploring life-experience learning and how meaning is constructed from informal learning experiences.

#### **8.3.1 Contribution to theory about meaning-making for significant learning**

This research brings together Merriam and Clark’s (1993) work on significant learning and the seminal works on meaning-making, acknowledging the socio-contextual perspectives on learning (Boud & Walker 1990; Dirkx 2001; Jarvis 1987; 2006; Mezirow 2000). The choice by the researcher to integrate these theories offers a new approach to exploring life experience learning and recognising the value of informal, unstructured learning that takes place outside the classroom. Using international study as a vehicle, this research investigated the significance of life experiences using a new inquiry protocol. The research revealed insight into the dimensions of the construct of significance. While the expressions of personal impact (the first dimension) in this study were in the context of a given

experience, they show that meaning-making to construct significant learning from experiences is largely identity work (Erichsen 2009; 2011). Participants expressed personal impact as realisations about self and others; these realisations shaped their perceptions of their personal capabilities. The participants were testing their identities in a new environment and reinventing themselves in ways that mattered to them. Learning that changes us (i.e. has personal impact) changes our identity and our perceptions of our personal capabilities. These changes come about through experiencing disjuncture or inner discomfort that provides the stimulus for learning (Brookfield 1987; Jarvis 2006). Reinvention happens when the learner is confronted with something new or that challenges their existing ways of thinking. The learner then reconciles their extant understandings of themselves and others with what they have experienced and decides, based on their personal meaning system, what to incorporate into their sense of self.

The research highlighted the key role that subjective value (the second dimension) plays in understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience. The study found the learners' meaning-making lens (or frame of reference) influenced both what the participants experienced and the meanings that they made from these experiences (Boud & Walker 1990; Kegan 1982; Jarvis 2006; Knowles 1984; Mezirow 2000). Assigning value to an experience and its resultant impact is a subjective act, from the perspective of the learner's frame of reference. Irrespective of expected outcomes from an experience like international study, it is what matters to the individual that determines the outcome (personal impact) of a learning experience.

The findings showed the influence of the learner's frame of reference on all stages of the meaning-making process. This research found that assigning value through the learner's frame of reference comes into play from the outset. It influences what individuals experience, how they experience it, and the meanings that are attached to the constituent parts of the experience and their impact. Assigning personal value to an experience - as shaped by beliefs, expectations, identity, worldview, and prior experiences - is a key part of translating the impact of an experience into personal growth. Understanding why experiences were meaningful suggests that learning may be integrated into the learner's sense of self and carried forward because it matters to the learner, that they are "personally involved" in the impact of an experience (Merriam & Clark 1993, p. 137). By articulating these ideas and demonstrating what they look like when applied to a particular life experience, this research contributes to adult learning theory and the process of meaning-making to transform an experience into actual learning.

The findings revealed the social construction of meaning and of the learner themselves, as interpretation of an experience is a social phenomenon and the social environment provides the stimulus for that interpretation (Jarvis 1987). The social dimension of learning was found in the participants' attitudes towards the purpose and value of international study and their learning intent, motivations and expectations of the experience. These findings reveal the potential of the learning context to foster certain kinds of learning (Illeris 2017) and the kinds of learning that international study facilitates. In this study, the significance of the experience was inherently tied to the participants' stage in life and the age-related transitions that are commonly experienced (Zimmerman & Neyer 2013) and the types of situations that students experience when they study abroad. The significance of any given life experience will be connected to the social environment in which the experience occurs and the standpoint from which the learner makes meaning. The findings suggest that learning is often related to life-span development.

We may never fully understand the phenomenon of adult learning, and theorists' attempts to conceptualise the learning process are inherently challenged by the reality and complexity of adult learning (Brown 2015; Jarvis 1987; Merriam 2017). This study contributes to ongoing work to capture an approach to how adults learn using the construct of significance to bridge the gap between experience and learning. To this end, a key outcome of this research is a new inquiry protocol for understanding and articulating the significance of a life experience that has relevance for all informal, unstructured learning experiences. The new protocol can be used in the education abroad sector to support learners to make meaning of, and understand the impact of, international study experiences. It can also be used with other experiences (extra-curricular or more broadly with any life experience) to make meaning of, and understand the impact of, those experiences.

The mind map and reflective prompt questions form the foundation of the process of understanding and articulating the significance of life experiences for learning. The introduction of the mind map at the outset of the meaning-making process to provide an anchor for reflections and interpretations of the experience is an important contribution to learning from life experiences. The mind map helps learners reconstruct the meaningful elements of their experiences. It also provides a conceptual centre for reflections on the meaning of these elements and the ways learners have been changed as a result of reacting to certain situations and happenings and making sense of those things. The mind map also helps ensure that learners are not overwhelmed by the prospect of trying to discern what was significant from the complex and multi-dimensional nature of life experiences. Understanding what is significant about an experience (i.e. the process of rendering an experience coherent) is

foundational meaning-making work that facilitates the transformation of an experience into significant learning.

### **8.3.2 Moving ‘beyond it was great’: Contribution to the field of international study**

This research explored the impact of international study experiences on the participants and how and why those impacts were valued. It addressed Wong’s (2015) call to look for better ways to understand what students are trying to say when they claim that their international experiences were “great”. One of the key issues in the field of international study, and generally for life-experience learning, is the challenge that learners face in understanding and articulating what they have gained from an unstructured experience without clear educational goals. Previous studies have highlighted the often-surface responses from participants in international study programs about what they have learned (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012). In this study, when students were asked what they have gained from international study, they were asked to explain their experiences in terms of the meanings made and how they made those meanings, using the study’s mind map and reflective prompt questions. The research found that what was significant to participants (RQ1) was the meaning they assigned to the ‘ordinary aspects’ of the international sojourner experience – living away, studying and learning, and travelling. These aspects were meaningful to the participants because of (i) interactions with people, culture, and places, (ii) immersion in novel experiences, and (iii) the chance to live independently.

While what was significant to participants were the seemingly ordinary aspects of living and studying abroad, the learning environment of international study and the participants’ interactions with this environment impacted them in ways that facilitated personal growth (RQ2). The impact the participants described from their experiences contributed to their ongoing identity formation. They articulated the impact of their experiences as realisations about self, people and the world, and enhancement of capabilities such as self-confidence and resilience and increased capacity to interact with people. These realisations and capability enhancements engendered a sense of self-efficacy in the participants and clarity over future direction. This research showed that while the impact felt by the participants may not have met with the rhetoric of transformation that surrounds international study nor the lofty aim of highly-developed intercultural competence, it did reveal that the participants *perceived* they had changed and had changed in positive terms. Importantly, the participants perceived they had changed in ways that mattered to them. The ways that mattered to the participants show why international study is significant (RQ3). The study revealed how the participants’ personal values and beliefs, learning intent, and prior experiences influenced both what they experienced and

the meanings that they made from these experiences (Boud & Walker 1990; Kegan 1982; Jarvis 2006; Knowles 1984; Mezirow 2000). Participant attitudes towards the nature and purpose of the international study experience also shaped the meanings that they made, highlighting the influence of socio-contextual factors on meaning-making. The participants expected and were motivated to use the international study experience to test and enhance their identities and their personal capabilities, to explore aspects of their sense of self by taking a break from usual routines, without the judgement of people who know them. These factors explain why they expressed the personal impact of the experience in the ways noted above.

As a significant life experience, there is huge potential in study abroad to contribute to students' personal growth. This potential was revealed in the ways in which the participants in this study understood and articulated the purpose of international study and what they hoped to gain from it, and how they felt the experience provides the conditions for significant learning. We need to better appreciate what "great" means when students describe a learning experience and accept that "great" for a student may be quite different to "great" for an experienced pedagogue. Although there may be standard, accepted ways to measure academic gains and the economic benefit of education abroad (Schroeder 2016), it is vital to recognise the value of immersion in a foreign culture, challenge, discomfort, and risk-taking. The students in this study experienced personal growth, a changed sense of self, and a broadened perspective on people and the world. For young people who are still discovering who they are, and how they can make a difference, this learning is profound. The findings in this study, therefore, reinforce calls to hold realistic expectations about the depth, breadth, and rate of learning from education abroad (Forsy, Broomhall & Davis, 2012).

This study's new inquiry protocol for understanding and articulating the significance of life experiences can be used by researchers and practitioners in the field of international study to transform the way universities approach their support mechanisms for student learning from international study. The protocol asks participants to consider their experiences in terms of personal impact and subjective value. The richness of data captured in this study using the protocol demonstrates its value as a new way of evaluating the impact of study abroad. It addresses a pressing need for students to be supported to make meaning of, and understand the multi-dimensional impact of, their study abroad experiences.

A key starting point is asking students to draw a mind map of the elements of their experience that they found meaningful. The students can then be stepped through the reflective prompt questions for



each item on their mind maps. This process represents a potential change in practice; instead of asking students what they learned, or leaving it up to them to determine their learning, students should be asked to describe the *significance* and the *impact* of the experiences they placed on their mind maps. It is typical for international study participants to be asked what they have learned from their experiences (Forsey, Broomhall & Davis 2012). Students often provide one-dimensional responses to such questions (Wong 2015). Framing the meaning-making process using the study's new inquiry protocol provides a foundation for eliciting deeper meanings from an experience than just "it was great". Moreover, this process enables direct links to be made between the type of experience and its perceived impact and to explore the range of different meanings assigned to the same experience. If we can develop a greater understanding of an educative experience (in terms of the meaning a person assigns to it and the individual translations of impact it affords), then we can gain a greater understanding of the learning potential of that experience.

## **8.4 Limitations of the study**

The findings in this study are grounded in the life experience of international study and they revealed what the participants valued about that particular experience and why they valued those things. The participant sample of 14 is small and thus represents a snapshot of international study experiences. However, the methodological approach the researcher took, using a mind map and reflective prompt questions to probe the significance of each student's mind-mapped items, provided depth of insight into the case and context.

The process of understanding and articulating the significance of an experience relies on the learner's point-in-time perceptions of an experience. In the case of international study, these perceptions are usually gathered soon after participants have returned home (Potts 2018). As such, this research reveals those perceptions at the time they were captured for the study, i.e. within months of participants returning to Australia. Capturing those perceptions also relied on the ability of the participants to articulate their thoughts and feelings about the experience that was being examined in a single reflective event. Understandings of the significance of the experience may change over time, particularly as they are viewed in relation to subsequent experiences and enhancements to the learners' meaning-making systems (Greenaway 2018). Indeed, Mezirow (2000) later revised his theory of transformational learning to capture perspective transformation in both an episodic way and as gradual change. Furthermore, the findings relied on the perceptions of change within the individuals who participated in the research, not the tangible, observed outcomes that the international

study field seems to crave. This in itself is both a limitation and a strength, as it demonstrates the complexity of evaluating learning from a life experience and the subjective nature of meaning-making from such experiences. The study calls for new ways to recognise learning that occurs outside of formal settings how impact is measured.

The research was conducted in the Australian context, where study abroad programs are generally focussed on an exchange of academic credit, where it is largely up to the students to determine what they have learned outside of the formal study component. Of the 14 students in the sample, five were enrolled in the Bachelor of International Studies, where one semester of international study is a compulsory component of the program. These students are assessed on their post-experience reflections and thus they had already engaged in some form of interpretation of their experiences. The other students in the sample had varying levels of interaction with the experience since returning to Australia.

The study called for voluntary participation. Only a small number of students responded to the recruitment email out of the total number who study abroad in a given semester. It may be assumed, then, that those who did volunteer were motivated to talk about their experiences and felt they had something meaningful to say about them. Moreover, even though the participants often described the difficulties and challenges of studying abroad, they were passionate about the value of the experience and how much it meant to them. This is another limitation and strength – the students' enthusiasm for international study as a personal learning journey may have informed their meaning-making work in the study, but it also provided the researcher with rich data suitable for the scope of a doctoral study.

## **8.5 Recommendations for future research and concluding thoughts**

This research demonstrates the significance of a single life experience and provides insight into the process of meaning-making to understand and articulate the significance of life experiences and into the dimensions of the construct of significance (personal impact and subjective value). This research suggests that further exploration of the process of meaning-making for learning in other life experiences would be beneficial. Using the study's new inquiry protocol to frame the research process, the mind map and set of reflective prompt questions could be used by researchers to investigate the significance of other unstructured experiences. This research also suggests that deeper understanding of how learners' perceived changes to thought, emotions and behaviour are manifested, and how they influence subsequent experiences, would add to the theory of life-experience learning.

Given the enduring debate around the educative value of international study and the push for outcomes from such a high-stakes experience, this study points to the need for ongoing research into the ways in which international study experiences are measured. Future research may also further investigate how to support participants to make meaning from their experiences and understand the impact of those experiences. An outworking from this research is a set of evidence-based resources for practitioners to use with students in a range of extra-curricular activities to understand and articulate the significance of those experiences. Use of these resources could provide further evidence of the impact of the study's new inquiry protocol on practice and allow for a change in practice on a larger scale. This research has the potential to shift how study abroad is measured and evaluated – by students, researchers, international study practitioners, and universities – as they endeavour to demonstrate the impact of this experience.

This research revealed that when participants were asked to consider the *impact* of their experiences rather than what they had *learned*, they were able to articulate impact around capability development, self-identity and self-efficacy and clarity over future direction. All participants described the value of the international study experiences and the contribution of the experience to their personal growth, particularly at a time in their lives where they were seeking challenges and the opportunity to test their capabilities. It may be time to reconsider the rhetoric of international study and take a more pragmatic approach to what can reasonably be expected in terms of learning from one semester of study abroad. Future studies may also investigate the nature of the experience and the scope and limitations of its ability to provide the stimulus for (significant) learning.

This study points to the need for more qualitative approaches to add to the richness and depth of understanding of the international study experience, and of life-experiencing learning more broadly, with more representative data sets. This is ultimately more than just going beyond 'it was great'. It should involve furthering understanding of how and why the international study experience is significant. Future approaches should aim to comprehend the meaning of international study beyond one-dimensional lists of things learned, as often reported by participants, and to recognise what cognitive, emotive, and behavioural change looks like. Moreover, universities have little control over what happens to their students when they study overseas and it seems that clear, concrete, and achievable outcomes have not yet been formulated. The question, therefore, of whether student self-reports of the impact of their experiences are sufficient for the success of the experience is an important one to address.

Experience is both the basis and impetus for learning (Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993) but learning through experience beyond the academy creates new conditions that require learners to be more proactive and self-reflective (Coulson & Harvey 2013). This type of learning is usually haphazard and often results from incidental learning or happenstance. In the case of international study, learning is essentially in the hands of the individual. There is huge potential for growth that comes from living in another country for an extended period, living and interacting with people not met before, navigating a different culture (and language, in some cases), budgeting, organising travel, and experiencing countless new things. The question is *how* the international study experience, or any life experience for that matter, leads to learning. There is acknowledgement that life experiences are deeply personal endeavours and that adults bring with them to each experience a breadth and depth of prior experiences and their own value systems. It is important, then, that adult learners can bridge the gap between learning and experience by recognising what their experiences mean to them, and understanding how they may have changed and how their changed self will approach and make meaning from future life experiences.

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## Appendix A: Participant recruitment email

Subject: Request for participation in PhD research project on study abroad

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Hello! My name is Andrea Reid and I am a doctoral student at UQ. I am researching student experiences of study abroad and I would really appreciate your help.

This project has the support of the Manager of UQ Abroad, Ms Jan McCreary. You are receiving this email as a student who has recently completed the UQ Abroad program and may have an interest in participating in my study. Your input could help shape the way we understand study abroad experiences and how to design them to help students make the most of their time overseas.

Further information about the project is given in the attached Participant Information Sheet and Consent form.

I am seeking domestic students who have studied abroad for one semester in both English-speaking and non-English speaking countries and who represent a range of programs that we offer at UQ.

I understand how busy students are so my goal is to make the participant experience as convenient as possible. Participants will be asked to:

- attend one 45-60 minute face-to-face interview on campus at a time and location that suits - the interview is essentially a chance for you to unpack your experience and consider what you have gotten out of it (coffee and cake provided!)
- review the interview transcript, should you wish to, for accuracy and further comment (sent via email)
- provide me with feedback on the interview questions (if you have any)

Remember, your participation is completely voluntary and you can choose to stop at any point.

If you are interested in participating please respond to this email and I will arrange a time and place for the interview that is suitable for you. You can contact me at any time with questions at xxxx.

Thank you in anticipation

Yours sincerely

Ms Andrea Reid

Doctoral candidate, The University of Queensland

## Appendix B: Participant information sheet and consent form



The University of Queensland  
Brisbane Qld 4072 Australia  
Telephone (07) 3345 4615  
International +61 7 3346 7848  
Facsimile (07) 3365 4299

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

#### Meaning-making from international study experiences

Chief investigator: Ms Andrea Reid, PhD student, The University of Queensland. Email: xxxx Ph: xxxx

Supervisors: A/Prof Susan Rowland, Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation, and Faculty of Science. Email: xxxx Ph: xxxx Dr Christine Slade, Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation. Email: xxxx Ph: xxxx

Dear Participant,

My name is Andrea Reid and I am a PhD researcher from The University of Queensland. I am conducting a project to investigate how students construct meaning from experiences, with a focus on the experience of student exchange.

#### How can I participate?

With your consent, your contribution to the project will involve a face-to-face interview of approximately one to one and a half hours. Interviews will take place on campus at a date and time that suits you. Should you wish to, you will have the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview to check for accuracy and share any additional commentary.

#### What are the benefits of participating in this study?

Your participation in this study may help shape the way that we understand the meanings made from student exchange and the impact of the experience. The interview is essentially a chance for you to unpack your experiences and consider what you took away from them. You may also benefit from knowing you are participating to recommendations for program administrators on the design of student exchange programs to facilitate student learning.

#### What are the risks to me of participating and how will these risks be minimised?

This study presents only minimal risk to participants as the data will be collected through a pseudonym of your choice. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from participating at any time. Participation in this study will in no way affect your grades or any of your courses. You can also confidentially request to be removed from the participant list at any time during the study, with no consequences. If you choose to withdraw, all data collected up to that point will be excluded and deleted.

#### How will the data be managed and used?

I wish to record the interviews and require your consent to do so. I will manage all collected participant data and it will be held as strictly confidential. All recordings will be securely stored

on my personal computer with password-only access, along with transcripts of the interviews. Any paper-based data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Publications of findings from the research will be communicated through a pseudonym of your choice and all statements made during the interviews that are presented verbatim in the research will be attributed to that pseudonym. As part of the background to each participant, I will collect information on your gender, program and year of study, and the region in which you undertook your study abroad program. This information will be coded against your pseudonym and presented in the research as attached to your pseudonym.

Results of the research project will be published in my PhD thesis, peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings and other dissemination opportunities. Should you wish to be informed of the final outcome, I will email you a copy of my submitted PhD thesis.

### **How do I get started?**

If you agree to take part in the research, please complete the short survey at the link provided in the email. Once I have confirmed your participation in the study, I will contact you to arrange for an interview. You will need to complete the consent form provided at the beginning of the interview. By signing the consent form, you are telling me that you:

- understand what you have read
- consent to take part in the research
- consent for the interview to be recorded
- consent to the use of your personal information as described above:
- the use of a pseudonym for your background information and statements quoted verbatim in the research

This study has been cleared by one of the human ethics committees of The University of Queensland in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's guidelines, approval number 2017000586. You are welcome to discuss your participation in this study with project staff. If you wish to speak to an officer of the University not involved in the study, you may contact the Ethics Officer on xxxx.

Thank you in anticipation



Ms Andrea Reid  
Chief Investigator

# PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM



Participation in interview

I have read and understood the information sheet about this project and any questions I have asked were answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to the interview being recorded.

I agree to participate in the project, realising that I may physically withdraw from the study at any time and may request that all traces of my participation are deleted from the project's records. I understand that my decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect my grades or course or prejudice my relationship with UQ.

All information that I provide will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that all data collected will be coded and reported on according to the pseudonym of my choice. I will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript and will have the opportunity to verify my comments and may request for amendments to be made where necessary.

I agree that research data provided by me or with my permission during the project may be included in the researcher's PhD thesis, and presented at conferences and published in journals and disseminated through other appropriate opportunities. I give consent for the use of data in future research projects that are extensions of, or closely related to, the original project or in the same general area of research.

Signed..... Date.....

Name..... Email.....

Thank you for your interest in participating in this project.

If you have any further enquiries please contact:

Ms Andrea Reid  
Xxxx

# Appendix C: Ethics approval



THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND  
**Institutional Human Research Ethics Approval**

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**Project Title:** The question is not what you look at, but what you see:  
A phenomenological investigation of student  
construction of meaning from study abroad experiences

**Chief Investigator:** Ms Andrea Reid

**Supervisor:** Assoc Prof Susan Rowland, Dr Christine Slade

**Co-Investigator(s):** None

**School(s):** School of Chemistry and Molecular Biosciences

**Approval Number:** 2017000586

**Granting Agency/Degree:** PhD

**Duration:** 31st July 2022

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**Comments/Conditions:**

Expedited Review - Low Risk

- HREA application form, 29/04/2017
- Gatekeeper consent form, 29/04/2017
- Gatekeeper letter, 29/04/2017
- PICF - staff, 29/04/2017
- PICF - students, 29/04/2017
- Project description, 29/04/2017
- Recruitment email - staff, 29/04/2017
- Recruitment email - students, 29/04/17
- Student information survey, 29/04/2017

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Note: if this approval is for amendments to an already approved protocol for which a UQ Clinical Trials Protection/Insurance Form was originally submitted, then the researchers must directly notify the UQ Insurance Office of any changes to that Form and Participant Information Sheets & Consent Forms as a result of the amendments, before action.

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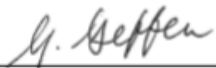
**Name of responsible Committee:**

**University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee A**  
This project complies with the provisions contained in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and complies with the regulations governing experimentation on humans.

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**Name of Ethics Committee representative:**

**Professor Emerita Gina Geffen**  
**Chairperson**  
**University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee A**  
**Registration: EC00456**

Signature  Date 05/06/2017