



## DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EDD)

### How on earth did they do it?

Exploring the lived experiences of part-time mature students returning to postgraduate education and successfully completing their degrees.

Faidi, Dina

*Award date:*  
2021

*Awarding institution:*  
University of Bath

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**HOW ON EARTH DID THEY DO IT?  
EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF  
PART-TIME MATURE STUDENTS RETURNING TO POSTGRADUATE  
EDUCATION AND SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETING THEIR DEGREES.**

Dina O. Faidi

A thesis submitted to University of Bath in fulfilment for the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Education (EdD)

University of Bath  
Department of Education

**January 2021**

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Signed on behalf of the Doctoral College \_\_\_\_\_

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*“We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.”*

John Dewey (1933:78)

## ABSTRACT

Part-time mature postgraduate students are the 'least resourced, least valued, and least well understood' students in the UK (NIACE, 2005). The decision to pursue a higher degree is a significant step for anyone to take. For part-time mature students this step brings challenges and requires special knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The number of mature students returning to postgraduate studies continues to increase. Governments' education policies continue to encourage lifelong learning. This thesis explores part-time mature students' experiences in pursuit of postgraduate degrees several years after graduation. The study sought to establish who mature students were, what motivated them to return, their lived experiences, and how they were able to successfully complete their degrees. Eighteen participants who were older than 25 when they returned to higher education took part. Out of these, seven graduated with master's degrees and 11 with doctoral degrees. The study was phenomenological in nature and the voices of the participants were central. An interpretive framework stemmed from the findings' analysis of participants' lived experiences is presented to the reader.

The findings provide insights into their lived experiences. Their multiple identities, gap of years, and time pressure appear to be challenges they needed to overcome. While their motivation, prior life experiences, skills like organisation and perseverance contributed to their successful degree completion. The essential role of support from families, friends and supervisors and the critical role of universities was revealed. The study concludes with suggestions for further research and recommendations for governments, universities, and future mature students themselves.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis intends to explore the unique lived experiences of 18 mature students who did return to university after a gap of years away from formal education and successfully earned a postgraduate degree. The study uncovers the challenge mature students have for playing multiple roles. It was also found from reviewed literature, not only the present experience, prior life experience also could influence mature students' success. The study also reveals the critical role support plays in the experience of mature students. Support from family, friends, and colleagues are all important. Nonetheless, the support mature students get from academic supervisors was found to be most crucial.

The purpose of this first chapter is to provide an overview of the study's context, its rationale, the objectives of the research, the research questions and my position as the researcher. Following this overview, the remaining four chapters are briefly described.

### **1.2 Context of the study**

In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in mature students returning to higher education in western countries (Mallman & Lee, 2016). A policy on lifelong learning issued by the European Union (EU) in 2006 encouraged adults to pursue further education (Graham, 2015). As national economies continue to shift from industrial to knowledge bases, government policy makers have promoted participation in higher education (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). In some countries higher education is understood as a way to improve economies and individual lives through better career opportunities (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009; Moreau, 2016). However, scholars like Archer (2007), Burke (2013), and Bowls (2014) questioned if government initiatives to promote lifelong learning are merely to create more skilled workers. To encourage adults to return to education, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)'s (2014) *Education Strategy 2014-2021* promoted a further shift of economies, from knowledge to learning based, to create more opportunities for lifelong skills development.

Howard and Davies (2013) warned that pursuing a higher degree after years away from school could be an overwhelming experience. Indeed, such circumstances can be wearisome, complex, and filled with challenges to be overcome. This thesis explores and explains the lived experiences of 18 mature students who did return to university after years away and ultimately earned postgraduate degrees. They were all over 25 years of age, pursued their degrees part-time while working full-time, and supporting at least one other family member. This selection of participants fits with Richardson's (1994) definition of mature students. The rationale behind the choice of this criteria in this study will be explained in Chapter Three.

The exclusive life of 'being a student' was *not* their reality. They carry along family obligations, full-time careers, and financial commitments (Howard & Davies, 2013). Existing studies were found on mature students returning to formal education. However, most were focused on mature students returning to pursue tertiary degrees in general. The limited amount of research focused on those who return to study full-time, not part-time. Literature on this topic was limited and underdeveloped. Limited because of the specificity of part-time, mature graduate students; underdeveloped because of its intermittent and somewhat outdated appearance. The study presents an existing literature of divided opinions about the nature of learning and the reasons for success among the focus group. It was then associated with the findings from the 18 graduates' perspectives to answer the research questions and draw some conclusions.

### **1.3 Rationale**

There are several reasons that justify this study. Perhaps the best one is the high 'dropout' rate amongst graduate students. In 2009, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported an average dropout rate of 31 per cent amongst those enrolled in tertiary education (OECD, 2010); some of these will have been graduate students. Furthermore, studies aimed for postgraduate students' retention are limited. Cohen (2012) noted these available are focused on doctoral programmes. Many researchers agreed that dropping out has an expensive outcome not only for the students but also the institutions and society at large (Grasso et al., 2007). Grasso et

al. claimed that doctoral students are considered huge investments in terms of time and resources for all concerned regardless they graduate or not. Furthermore, as stated by Lovitts (2001), non-graduate doctorate students reflect on the society in terms of the contribution that they could have brought in various sciences had they graduated. Tinto (1993) and Davidson and Wilson (2013) stressed on the importance of understanding the needs of *all* postgraduate students. Better understanding could inform policies that reduce future graduate school dropouts. A reduction in the dropout rate would save great sums of time and money that are currently yielding very little results.

Second justification for this study, governments now expect economic growth from non-traditional groups such as mature adults. As employment rates are 92 per cent for doctoral degree holders and 88 per cent among those with master's degrees, there is an incentive to promote graduate study (OECD, 2019a). A better understating of their lived experiences when pursuing higher degrees is thus necessary. Higher education institutions and governments might then extend the proper support needed for mature students to return, graduate and contribute. Finally, research on mature students studying part-time while working full-time with dependents is *very* limited (Reay et al., 2002). This lacuna alone justifies serious research, as the numbers of part-time students in the thousands in the UK alone. Confirmed by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), part-time students formed 48 per cent of the total mature students' population in 2016/17 (UCAS website, accessed July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

Overall, the rationale for this thesis is practical and theoretical. Its result will, hopefully, open doors to future research.

#### **1.4 Objectives of the research**

The main objective of the study was to explore the lived experiences of mature students who earned postgraduate degrees when studying part-time after years away from university. This was reached by understanding:

- who these mature students were, including their multiple obligations and other personal circumstances;
- why they decided to pursue further education after a hiatus;



- the challenges they faced and how they overcame them;
- the skills that enabled them to succeed;
- the support they enjoyed or lacked;
- the subsequent value of the degrees in their careers and lives; and
- in retrospect, what they might have done differently.

Two other objectives were to validate the research method and to add to the thin body of scholarship on this topic.

### **1.5 The research questions**

The only way we can add to our understanding of a subject is to first know what we are adding to (Spivak, 2012). An intent of this study was to contribute to the 'textual blank' (ibid) left by an absence of discourse. There was little meaningful insights into part-time mature students' lived experiences; it was certainly insufficient to answer the main research question: *How did they do it? Exploring the lived experiences of part-time mature students returning to postgraduate education after a gap of years and successfully completing their degrees.*

Hence, the three subsidiary questions are:

- Who were these mature students?
- Why did they return to higher education?
- What contributed to their successful degree completion?

### **1.6 Positioning of the researcher (in the first person)**

As this study used a phenomenological approach, it is fitting that I position myself within the context of the research. The purpose is to acknowledge my own experiences and beliefs in regard to these phenomena and to identify influences on my interpretation of participants' experiences (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). The topic resonates with my own experience. As a mature student sharing many of the experiences of the participants, I found it easy to empathise. I decided to pursue a doctoral degree part-time at age 48, 20 years after earning an MBA degree. I realised the complexity of the experience and the special skills required. I had to overcome many challenges, having to balance study, work and raising a child. I needed to learn (or re-learn) certain skills. I overcame the loss of my mother, a defining point in my life. I learned how to regulate emotions and stay motivated. I managed many distractions

and practiced social distancing; before the pandemic required it. I experienced much of what any mature student would experience. Mature students I know had similar experiences and overcame similar challenges. All these events ignited my interest in exploring this topic to better understand how they were able to successfully complete their degrees. This study and my own experiences have led me to great respect for those who accomplished their academic goals. Reflecting on the experiences of others made me realise I was not alone. More importantly, if they could do it, so could I.

As a qualitative researcher, I was keen not to allow my own experiences and beliefs compromise the integrity of the study. I was careful to present participants' authentic reflections. I kept their 'voices' dominant and mine subordinate. My work as a researcher was to interpret their authentic contributions and conclude with an interpretive framework that could add to future research.

### **1.7 Outline of chapters**

Chapter Two provides a review of the existing literature as it relates to the objectives. It explores what 'lifelong' learning is. Provides descriptions of how we might define 'mature students' and their multiple identities. What motivates adults to return to higher education. The lived experiences of mature students. A review of several frameworks and learning theories. The learning strategies mature students adopt including of those studying on part-time basis. The importance of time management and the challenges they may have to overcome. The skills, beyond the cognitive, that are associated with the successful degree completion are identified and discussed. The support needed and the outcomes of 'the postgraduate school experience' are presented.

Chapter Three details the methodology that supports the research method used in this study. The research design and philosophical perspectives of the phenomenological approach are explained. Next, how the sample was selected is described, briefly presenting the 18 participants. The methods used and justifications for 'data' collection and the nine *themes of enquiry* are presented. The validity and ethical considerations of the research are shown.

Chapter Four presents the findings that emerged from the participants' lived experiences. These are grouped into nine themes of enquiry that were perceived as relevant to the participants and the context. These nine themes were extracted from both the literature and the findings. Sub-themes emerged and are discussed under each theme. Participants' original written quotes are presented to support the findings.

Chapter Five discusses the findings in relation to the previous literature. This puts the participants' experiences into a broader context and gives insights into their unique situations. The discussion is organised around three major discussion areas extracted from the findings' analysis. The main research question and the subsidiary questions are answered. This chapter presents an interpretive framework stemmed from the findings' analysis.

Finally, the limitations of the study, suggestions for further research and recommendations for stakeholders are presented. Following Chapter Five are the References and Appendices.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

To conclude, there is no claim for generalisability in this study. It uses participants' own reflections and a phenomenological approach for analysis to explore the lived experiences of a small group of mature students and shed light on how they were able to overcome challenges and successfully complete their postgraduate degrees. It is hoped that this study can contribute, even if little, to better understanding of this phenomenon and open door for further scholarly research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of part-time mature students when successfully pursuing postgraduate degrees. Pursuing a higher degree after a period of non-engagement in formal education could be an overwhelming experience “because mature students face higher economic, social and cognitive risks” as noted by Howard and Davies (2013, p.770). The aim of this chapter is to review what other scholars discovered about such lived experiences, divided into specific sub-topics.

First, an overview of research into lifelong learning is presented. Next, the context of who 'mature' students are, as well as their multiple identities will be examined. Followed with a review of what motivates them to return to higher education. The lived experiences, current and prior, of mature students returning to higher education are explored. General frameworks and learning theories are introduced with an overview of the learning strategies of mature students, in particular part-time students.

A mature student's commitment to studying is rarely exclusive, as they often fulfil other roles in their lives. This fact creates challenges which will be addressed. The value of time management and how they can overcome these challenges is explored next. Skills beyond the cognitive that could contribute to the lived experience are also presented. Followed with a broad overview of the support needed to get through postgraduate school successfully. Finally, there is a review of the possible outcomes for mature students. The review will highlight key concepts in the literature and presents previous scholars' suggestions for further research, where possible. First, an overview of the notion 'lifelong learning' is presented.

### **2.2 Lifelong learning**

Lifelong learning has become a focus of education policy reform in many countries around the western world (Boston, 2017). Three international organisations (the OECD, UNESCO, and EU) have supported lifelong learning through research and projects (Berglund, 2008). For example, the OECD, an

organisation that represents most economically powerful countries, considers lifelong learning as an essential requirement for economic growth. The UNESCO has stated the important role that education plays in economic growth (Berglund, 2008). The UNESCO (2013) has advocated a lifelong learning framework that can not only promote formal education, also non-formal and informal learning. Education for people of all ages should be focused on tackling challenges of the real world whether social, economic, political, legal, ethical or environmental (Scott, 2015). In 2017, the UNESCO awarded 16 countries the UNESCO Learning Cities Award to encourage lifelong learning within their urban areas. Learning cities are those that take proactive roles to give access to learning at all levels and ages. Japan created the Citizens' Universities, learning centres that offer different courses to community members of all ages (UNESCO, 2017).

The World Economic Forum (WEF) reported that the three countries that exhibit high levels of adult adaptability (Japan, Finland and Sweden) had established lifelong learning systems at all levels supporting a lifetime adult' skills development (WEF, 2017). In 2001, Singapore initiated a Lifelong Learning Endowment Fund to ensure that the resources for lifelong learning supported adult skill development (WEF, 2017). The goal of countries such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand is to create better individuals, communities, and societies. Such outcomes enhance these countries' economic development (Boston, 2017). As an example, the OECD (2016) reported that New Zealand had the highest rate of adult engagement in formal and informal education at 68 per cent. This indicates that country's intent for mature students to play a major role in the economy (Boston, 2017).

Critics of these initiatives, such as Archer (2007) and Burke (2013) claim that they are focused on the economic benefits that lifelong learning brings, more than helping to create better individuals. As noted above, the 'neoliberal' ideologies some western countries have adopted influences education policies. Hence the purported need for 'lifelong learning' really means 'more skilled workers to contribute to the economy,' with mature students expected to play important roles in boosting economic outcomes (Bowls, 2014; Burke, 2013; Zepke, 2009). Naidoo (2008), cited earlier, agreed. Burke (2013)

emphasised the opportunities for more people to enrol in universities that were once considered only for the elites. Whatever the reasons, the importance of lifelong learning is clear. Longworth and Davies (1996) argued that lifelong learning is "the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all useful knowledge, values, and skills" (p.22). Thus, if the intention of lifelong learning is truly as such, then more mature students would likely be motivated to return to education.

### **2.3 Mature students: Who are they?**

The 'mature student' term has been defined by researchers to mean many different things, usually based upon the context of their research. Richardson (1994) defined 'mature students' as those aged 25 or older on the start of their higher studies. Some consider those who enter college for the first time at the age of 21 as 'mature students,' while others consider only those who seek a higher degree as mature students (Fragoso et al., 2013). Hardiman's (2014) doctoral research used 'mature student' mainly to highlight the difference between a 'traditional' student who has just left secondary education from the 'non-traditional' student who is 21 or older and pursuing a higher degree after a time away from formal education. McCune et al. (2010) categorised returning students between the ages of 21 and 30 as 'younger mature students' and those above 31 as 'older mature students.' They justified these groupings in terms of life responsibilities and motivation to study. Across the literature there is no consistent definition of a mature student. A definition given in the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* reads: "an adult student who goes to college or university some years after leaving school" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries website, accessed August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019). Educational institutions and universities usually define 'mature student' in similar ways. For example: "Any student aged 21 or over at the start of their studies" (Oxford University website, accessed July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019). The term 'mature student' includes a wide range of learners of all ages. In their *Mature Students' Guide*, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) categorised this range by percentages: "50 per cent are aged between 21 and 24, 38 per cent between 25 and 39 and 10 per cent were over 40 at the start of their studies" (UCAS website, accessed July

10<sup>th</sup>, 2019). Of these, part-time students formed 48 per cent of the total mature students' population in 2016/17.

Mature students, or 'adult students,' (the literature collectively uses both terms) are known to be a group of non-homogenous individuals that carry with them experiences and obligations that differ from those of other younger groups. Although there is no single, agreed definition for 'mature students' among scholars, they have some common features. To list a few, they:

- started their higher education above the age of 25;
- had a 'significant' gap of time before going back to formal education;
- engaged in a career and family life before returning to study;
- accumulated knowledge and practical experience; and
- are financially independent (Saar et al., 2014).

This is by no means a definitive list. However, it clarifies this study and provides a common context for understanding the participants.

'Traditional' students in the literature are those who entered a second degree immediately after completion of their first degree and are financially dependent (Keith et al., 2006). Mature students are often older, responsible for dependents, and financially independent (Munro, 2011). None of these groups are homogenous. However, some features can be found within the mature students population that are not found among traditional students (Moreau, 2016). These include having an outdated experience in formal education, being in a minority, juggling multiple responsibilities and needing effective time management. These circumstances could affect their confidence for pursuing higher degrees. Some may feel a need to 'prove themselves' when compared with younger traditional students (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

### *2.3.1 Gender gap*

For the purpose of maintaining a gender balance, the study included mature students who fit the criteria that most researchers agreed on; that is, those above the age of 25 who returned to formal education after an absence of several years. Only four participants were under the age of 30, the remaining 14 were above the age of 30. This range is in line with Richardson's (1994)

definition of mature students as those who started their higher studies at the age of 25 or above. The four youngest participants were independent adults who had multiple responsibilities in addition to their studies.

Stone and O'Shea (2012) noted that in the past 20 to 30 years the literature has focused more on the experiences of female mature students than those of males. Sax et al. (2003) claimed that the reason there is less literature on the male experience is due to their lack of desire to participate in studies or respond to surveys. However, this reason is questionable. Researchers have debated the 'gender gap' in higher education. Vincent-Lancrin (2008) predicted that the percentage of men enrolling in higher education will drop by 2025. Onuora et al. (2008) agreed that not only were men less likely to pursue higher degrees but would experience greater difficulty in re-engaging with studying. McGivney (1999) explained this phenomenon:

*“White British women tend more than men to engage in learning activities which are connected with self-development, and which will expand their interests and activities and lead to educational progression. Men appear to be more single minded, focused and practical in their motivation to learn, seeking to further specific goals or particular interests”* (pp.4-8).

Archer et al. (2001) noted that with social and economic changes, new career opportunities had opened for women that were once exclusive to men. This encouraged more women to pursue higher degrees. This created a concern for policy makers, who shifted from wanting more women to engage in higher education to debating how to get more men engaged (Laming et al., 2016).

### *2.3.2 The multiple identities of mature students*

Regardless of gender, life circumstances for many mature students could be difficult. Unlike younger students, mature students return to study with financial, family, and social long-term commitments. McCune et al. (2010) related learner's identity to how they are placed in relation to a certain community. In the case of mature students, they are placed in several communities; family, work and universities. Henceforward, they develop multiple identities.



With multiple identities there is no exclusivity of 'being a student' (Howard & Davies, 2013, p.171). Playing multiple roles, dealing with marital issues, parenting, and not getting enough support. Howard and Davies stressed the need to support mature students in creating a shared identity among other mature students. They suggested that the development of a 'shared social identity' among mature students based on background, values, and beliefs, as well as goals and challenges, could help create a sense of belonging. Howard and Davies (2013) concluded that "the ability to 'identify' with the student community was experienced through as sense of belonging developed through a shared social identity" (p.780).

However, Scott et al. (1998) had argued that some mature students return to higher studies not necessarily looking for a shared identity of one that they already possess, but rather to escape the multiple ones they have. These existing identities could be, as noted by Scott et al., being a spouse in an unhappy marriage, a member of an unsupportive family, or even having the sense of low self-esteem. Hence, the escape is to seek compensation for such life circumstances and to develop an identity beyond their existing ones (Scott et al.,1998). Interestingly, Scott et al. stated that this escapism from their lived identities seeking a new one, could be the motivation in itself to successfully pursue their degrees.

Conversely, having multiple identities could impede the academic progress of mature students, particularly those with full-time careers. Lundberg's (2004) argued that although mature students are less able to engage within an academic setting which might hinder their learning. Yet, they are able to compensate for this disadvantage by bringing their experience of juggling other roles to enrich their academic one. Shifting from one identity to the other. Nonetheless, Lundberg's study does not provide evidence on how this shift occurs suggesting further research.

Baptista (2014) confirmed that it is indeed a constant struggle to deal with 'dual identity' if not multiple ones. The identity of a 'student' for a mature student, particularly studying part-time, might be intimidating (Malfroy, 2005). In his

study, Malfroy concluded that despite their sense of accomplishment in life, many still struggled to identify themselves as students.

Additionally, the different set of competences and knowledge that mature students bring with them from prior experience, might further separate them from the younger students. However, prior experience cannot be separated from their lived one “everything will influence mature students’ learning process” (Baptista, p.915). Baptista found that the ability to manage the different roles mature students play in their personal lives, including the role of a student without feeling anxious or guilty, is crucial for their academic achievement.

To conclude, clearly for mature students, it is a challenge to find the right balance between their identity as a student and the multiple ones they already have. Despite this challenge, many mature students continue to be motivated to return to formal education.

#### **2.4 Motivation to return to higher education**

Pintrich (2003) argued that motivation at any level is essential ingredient for academic development. Motivation is one’s drive to work with full energy to achieve the desired goal. Hence, motivation could explain human’s behaviour based on what motivates them. For decades, researchers worked on developing theories that could explain human’s motivation. From the early work of William James in 1890 on how one’s interest could influence motivation. Hence, the concept of ‘intrinsic motivation’ which Woodworth (1918) further developed (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

In higher education, the motivation to return in itself could have several dimensions; personal traits, learning environment, disposition of the student, economic development, or passion for learning (Kehm et al., 2019). Whatever is the dimension, motivation is reported to be the reason for persisting on or leaving higher studies (Litalien et al., 2015).

Over the past decades, many theories had been developed on what motivates adults to return to higher education (Scanlon, 2008). One motivational theory

that might explain the multifaceted motivation pursuing a higher degree could be the self-determination theory (SDT). First introduced by Deci and Ryan in 1985 (Litalien et al., 2015). The theory proposed that various types of motivation regulate human behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2017). SDT theory distinguishes between *autonomous motivation* (acting with a sense of interest) and *controlled motivation* (acting with a sense of pressure) (Gagne & Deci, 2005). There are two key assumptions; one is that people are driven toward growth and fulfillment, as in autonomous motivation (i.e., intrinsic motivation). As described by McGivney (1996) intrinsic motivation is “the enjoyment the individual gets from performing the activity, or the subjective interest the individual has in the subject” (p.111). The other assumption is that people are driven by external rewards such as career and financial advancement as in controlled motivation (i.e., extrinsic motivation) (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

According to Ryan and Deci (2017), SDT is focused on the experience of human’s ‘*self*’ from a phenomenological perspective (p.8). Hence, the theory focused on the internal sources of motivation, identified as integrated regulations. Ryan and Deci noted that these internal sources create a greater sense of self-autonomy. SDT theory identified autonomy as one of the three basic human’s psychological needs along with competence and relatedness. Autonomy as defined by Ryan and Deci (2017) is “the need to self-regulate one’s experiences and actions” (p.11). Competence is linked to the feeling of mastery and effectiveness, while relatedness is linked to the feeling of social integration and sense of belonging. These needs are essential for growth.

Scanlon (2008) debated that such theory among several others on motivation drawn from psychological needs, not necessarily representing the educational ‘*motives*’ of mature adults returning to education. Scanlon’s main reason is that adults’ motives are driven by their circumstances, past and future. Evidently, motivation is driven not only by the ‘current’ experience but the ones in the past. McMullin (2009) stated there is common thread of time between past, present and future experiences. Hence, the fittingness of the SDT theory to this study that is focused on the human experience ‘*self*.’

Furthermore, Niemiec and Ryan (2009) stated that SDT is considered unique from other motivation theories, as it identifies the inner motivational resources all students have that could facilitate their academic engagement. In a study assessing motivation for PhD students, Litalien et al. (2015) concluded that outcomes driven by introjected regulation, such as self-worth and values, are more productive than those driven by external regulation such as status and financial gain.

In recent decades, the increase of mature students' participation in higher studies, likely associated with lifelong learning, which has been the focus of policy makers in various western countries in recent decades. This enhanced the acceptance of a diverse student population, including mature students (Forbus et al., 2011; Mallman & Lee, 2016). With an economy shifting from industry to one relying more on knowledge, public education policies now promote further learning (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). In 2003, the UK's Department for Education and Skills published a white paper called *The Future of Higher Education* which focused on mature students. It invited universities to 'target and accommodate' mature students seeking higher degrees (DfES, 2003, p.22). In 2015, 17 Sustainable Development Goals were set (SDGs) by the United Nations (UN). Goal Four called for member states to provide "...inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (The UN website, accessed August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019). For many governments, attaining higher qualifications is a way to improve the economic outcomes of the country. It can also improve people's lives through obtaining better job opportunities in specific sectors (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009; Moreau, 2016).

Between the years 1996-2006, the increase in doctoral programme's enrolment in Europe was between five and ten per cent. Between the years 2000-2010, in UK alone the enrolment had quintupled (Kehm, 2006). The increase, as noted by Kehm reflected the economical demand in the western world. In 2000, the UNESCO estimated that education industry was a two trillion-dollar business (Hardiman, 2014). Olssen (2006) suggested that merely preparing graduates for job markets is a form of government control. While

increasing the obligations of an individual, a government lessens their obligations (Olssen, 2006).

Boosting a country's productivity and competitiveness is a discourse shared by western countries such as the UK, Australia, and New Zealand (Boston, 2017). Several scholars have promoted this discourse and linked it to a belief that greater knowledge will develop a more just society (Lauder et al., 2012). Nonetheless, some scholars have debated that the underpinning neoliberal ideology of this discourse is influencing western educational strategies. While neoliberal ideals put the obligation on the student to succeed, a 'liberal' education system may not be equipped to allow this to happen. Some scholars have disputed that a neoliberal discourse in education policy ignores important issues related to mature students such as diversity (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009; Burke, 2013). Educational reform policies focused on lifelong learning have been critiqued as being focused mainly on economic outcomes (Archer, 2007; Burke, 2013).

Additionally, Finnegan (2008) stated that education has become a commodity and an essential part of a drive for economic development. So noted Naidoo (2008), recognising a shift in the purposes of higher education from being social and cultural to economic. Contributing to the global markets is the new driving force for qualifications and job placements. Hence, Naidoo (2008) not only claimed that education has become "commodified" (p.45), also suggested that students' expectations may have become 'commodified', particularly with governments reducing spending on education while increasing students' tuition fees. Certainly, 'commodification of education', or as described by Karpov (2013), an "educational supermarket" (p.78), where knowledge becomes a commodity like other products or services offered for those who can afford it. Karpov noted that commodifying education, destroys the essential basis of intellectual discipline; creating knowledge, not selling it.

According to Collini (2011) universities in Great Britain are increasingly becoming under the supervision of governmental entities in charge of economy and employment. In June 2011, a white paper titled: 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System of Education,' was published by the

Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills (BIS). The paper proposed stable financing for higher education with better education for the students encouraging social mobility (Cable & Willetts, 2011, pp.2,3). However, the white paper was criticised by hundreds of scientists, perceived as a political initiative that totally ignores the social value of higher education. A failed 'commodification attempt' not acceptable by universities, faculties, and students alike (Swain, 2011). An alternative white paper was suggested by a group of scholars in September 2011 stating that "public higher education is financed by society and the state, but that does not mean it ought to be controlled by the state" (Karpov, 2013, p.82).

Indeed, the number of mature students pursuing higher degrees has increased over the recent years in countries such as the UK, a social phenomenon encouraged by many universities (McGivney, 2003). Adding to this was the European Union (EU) policy on lifelong learning, launched in 2006. It encouraged adults to seek further education, whether formal or informal, after finishing their first degrees (Graham, 2015). In November 2011, the Council of the European Union adopted the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL), including this statement:

*"The Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth acknowledges lifelong learning and skills development as key elements in response to the current economic crisis, to demographic ageing and to the broader economic and social strategy of the European Union"* (EU-LEX website, accessed July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

For the Council of the European Union, adult learning is considered to be an important tool for inclusion and personal development amongst all members of society (EU-LEX website, accessed July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019). Their Agenda promotes the ability of adults to access high quality education at any age, with a focus on benefits for both personal development and career enhancement (EPALE Website, accessed July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019). To achieve this, the Council noted four priorities: coordinate between policy areas to improve governance; create effective outreach to motivate and assist adult learners; provide high-quality

qualifications and skills; monitor the impact of policies to enhance the quality of adult learning (European Union Website, accessed August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020).

The OECD identified three reasons why the world of work is vastly changing: globalisation, digitalisation and population aging (OECD, 2019b). Furthermore, the *Education at a Glance* report, published yearly by OECD since 1992, reported that in 2018, 39 per cent of adults aged 25 to 64 years had completed higher degrees. Of these, 44 per cent were between the ages of 25 and 34, compared to 27 per cent between 55 and 64. There was an average increase of 35 per cent from 2008 in the youngest age bracket. Across the OECD countries, an average of 14 per cent of adults completed master's or doctoral degrees. According to the report, doctoral graduates are just 1.1 per cent of the total of all adults aged 25 to 64. Interestingly, one out of two women completed higher degrees, compared to one out of three men (OECD, 2019c). The OECD's latest report recommended the upgrading of learning systems to better develop adults' learning skills and readiness for social change (OECD, 2019c). It is also worth noting that on average, 24 per cent of adults between 25 and 64 opted for degrees in business, administration, and law, while 12 per cent chose education and only four per cent chose information technology. In 2018, unemployment among adults 35 to 44 years old was five per cent, compared to seven per cent among younger adults aged 25 to 34. According to the OECD, this indicated that employers look for skills which younger adults might lack. Hence, the need for the younger group to pursue specialisation through higher education (OECD, 2019d).

There are many reasons why a mature student might want to return to higher education. Graham (2015) listed a few: career development, educational enrichment, new skills development, life transitions and even forming new relationships. Peoples' motives could, of course, include more than one of these reasons. However, the UNESCO (2014) stated in their *Education Strategy 2014-2021* that it is the change of demographics and increase of the aging population that leads mature students to return to education. It identified a need to shift from a knowledge-based society to one that is learning-based, creating more opportunities for lifelong skills development. Waller (2006), on the other hand, claimed that mature students return to higher education for

personal reasons and were not influenced by what 'society' needed. Being inspired by others such as family members, colleagues or friends could impact the motivation to learn (McGivney, 2006).

Personal life transitions such as children growing, divorce, loss of job or death could trigger adults to seek changes in their lives. One change could be to pursue a higher degree to open new opportunities and develop personally (McCune et al., 2010). It is rare for mature students to link their desire to return to study to social reasons, as might younger students (Hardiman, 2014). Mature students are normally balancing studying with family time and work, leaving them with little time to socialise at a university (Scanlon et al., 2007). Hence, socialising is not a major motive for a mature student. The opportunities provided by distance learning have motivated more mature students to return to education, especially part-time ones (Hardiman, 2014).

The motives of mature students to return to higher education likely vary from one to another (Waller, 2006). However, in a UK study, Sargant (2000) concluded that more so among men than women, their motives are likely linked to career enhancement and financial gain. Regardless of gender, it is clear that the motives for mature students returning to higher education are these and other things. While external motivation is driven by rewards or avoiding consequences, internal motivation is driven by self-worth or avoiding guilt and shame, (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Hence, motivation can be affected by emotions and thus could influence a decision to return to studies and later engagement in learning (Scanlon et al., 2007). Interestingly, a positive emotion is a key for learning new things (Dougherty et al., 1996). General life experience can increase interest in a topic; this applies to mature students linking life experiences to academics. When a topic aligns with a student's interest and experience, engagement increases. When a student is cognitively engaged, motivation for learning increases (Bye et al., 2007). The combination of interest and a belief in one's ability to succeed will bring enjoyment (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). Thus, with what was earlier discussed on the connection of 'current' experiences with past ones, if anything, it validates the fitting of the SDT theory



to this study with its three human needs essential for growth, Ryan and Deci (2017) stated; self-autonomy, competence and relatedness. Furthermore, as Duckworth et al. (2007) noted, having 'grit'; the ability to sustain the effort and interest over the years in pursue of a goal, could predict success beyond any other measures.

Yet, Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012) argued that contrary to these positive emotions, negative emotions can also influence students' motivation. Anxiety, boredom and frustration are common emotions and mature students are susceptible to such emotions, especially anxiety. The gap of years since formal education and life responsibilities can create anxiety (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). If such negative emotions develop, a mature student may doubt their ability as compared to younger students (Kahu et al., 2015). Most importantly, they might lose the intrinsic motivation to learn, a major reason they started their journey (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

Despite the effort to understand what motivates mature students returning to higher education, the complexity of such multifaceted phenomena requires deeper investigation into their specific reasons to return. Hence, the intention of this study.

### **2.5 The lived experiences, current and prior, of mature students returning to higher education.**

Several factors influence the lived experiences of mature students returning to formal education. One of these factors, as argued by Baptista (2014), is their prior experience which cannot be separated from the current lived one. Scanlon (2008) noted that motivation itself is driven by both, current and past experiences.

Moreover, Davies (1999) claimed that prior experience enriches students' current one with wealth of knowledge. Other scholars such as Walker (1975), Knowles (1984), Jarvis (1985), Broomfield (1993), Lundberg (2004), Pritchard and Roberts (2006), Forbus et al. (2011), as well as Baptista (2014) reiterated this claim. While stating other benefits gained from prior experience, such as

making meaning of what they learn, recreating knowledge, and developing effective learning strategies.

As previously noted, educational policies influenced by economic goals, have created a need for students to be resourceful, independent, and self-directed. Not only do mature students meet the requirement of being independent learners, but they also bring their life experiences to the learning environment. These could contribute positively to their learning, connecting their experiences to the context of what they learn. Mackey (2005) stressed on the importance of mature students situatedness in the world at the time of the experience. Henceforward, the connection between the past and the present is vital when exploring their lived experiences.

Furthermore, to help understand the lived experiences of mature students returning to formal education, it is important to view students' experiences in relation to the society they are in. For that, scholars often refer back to Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, a concept developed by Bourdieu (1977,1986) and drawing on Mauss (1979). The theory is reviewed next.

### *2.5.1 Bourdieu's theory of habitus and mature students*

According to Bourdieu (1977) the term '*habitus*' refers to "a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (p.86). Hence, habitus is a process created through social interaction; a relationship of individuals to a dominant culture expressed through certain actions (Reay, 2004).

Bourdieu (1977) argued that the sense of '*habitus*' is best valued within an institution. This sense begins to be shaped at birth and develops within family settings. Later in life, institutions such as education and work reinforce and restructure the patterns of one's relation to a society. Hence, although individuals of certain habitus have their own personal and collective history of family, they do reinforce and reproduce the habitus of the dominant society (Reay, 2004). Bourdieu (1990) claimed habitus 'refers to something historical, it is linked to individual' history' (p.86). Thus, individual's history are vital to

understand the concept of *habitus*. Furthermore, Navarro (2006) argued that habitus “is not fixed or permanent and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period” (p.16). Additionally, Bourdieu (1990) stated “just as no two individual histories are identical, so no two individual habituses are identical” (p.46).

Interestingly, Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* was meant to be used as a methodological tool to assess the occurring structure within small interactions, as well as its activity within large scale settings Reay (2004). It attempts to generate analysis or as Harker et al. (1990) stated “a way of thinking and a manner of asking questions” after which it determines actions (p.3).

The theory was best defined as “a system of lasting dispositions acquired through past experiences” (Galessar & Cooper, 2014, p.465). These dispositions that were shaped by past experiences has the ability to shape the current ones. Also, as Bourdieu (1984) stated “condition our very perceptions of them” (p.170). The lasting predispositions vary depending on the environment individuals were exposed to (Thomas, 2002). They are reflected in a person’s attitude in general and influence of their attitude whether at work or upon their learning as a student (Bufton, 2003). For students, as Reay (2004) claimed, their habitus is ‘permeable and responsive to what is going on around them’ (p.434). The current settings allow students not only respond to what is around them, but also to internalize these encounters. Deer (2003) pointed that certain social behavior is inherited at various stages of such encounters which could lead to further interaction with their social setting.

Thomas (2002) suggested that established education institutes have their own habitus that preserves a dominant culture. Agreeing with Bourdieu’s (1977) argument that habitus can reproduce itself and individuals through its institutions creating a dominant socio-cultural system where students are able to relate to one another.

However, for a mature student who is returning to higher education, relating to one another within an educational institution might be a challenge in itself. Woodley et al. (1987) claimed that mature students who return already have

higher qualifications, are socially established, and are seeking career improvement. As learners, mature students do not return to higher education with their experience, they *are* their experience (Knowles, 1990). Hence, integrating into an educational institution habitus might be hard for many mature students. For some, adjusting to existing 'schemes of perception, thought and action' could even be a complex process (James, 1995, p.464).

The reviewed literature evident the positive contribution of prior experiences to the current ones. Nonetheless, Reay et al. (2002) declared that such contribution mature students bring from prior experiences, particularly of those studying part-time, have not been sufficiently explored. In particular, limited research has been done on mature students with dependents.

## **2.6 Frameworks and learning theories**

Several scholars have developed frameworks to structure learning theories. Such frameworks and theories could be influenced by two factors: 'perceptions' of students' environment, and 'conceptions' of learning and themselves as learners (Richardson, 2011). To clarify the concept of learning used in this study, review of few influential learning theories is presented in this section.

### *2.6.1 Student approaches to learning (SAL)*

Researchers such as Entwistle and Ramsden (1983), Biggs (1987), and Richardson (1994) investigated how students learn. Separate from the learning styles, they explored what they described as 'student approaches to learning' (SAL). The theory, originated in Sweden by Marton and Sa"ljo" (1976), suggested that students adopt different approaches to learning depending on the context, the content, and the task at hand (Richardson, 1994). A majority of studies under the SAL relied on a qualitative interview method, which Marton (1981), Marton and Svensson (1979) and Bowden (1986) described as 'experiential,' 'introspective' and 'phenomenographic.' Notably, Richardson (1994) observed that most of these studies did not specify the ages of the students under scrutiny.

Marton and Sa'ljó's study investigated the response of students on questions on a text that they had been asked to read. They discovered students' response followed two opposite approaches; one group focused on the facts anticipating the questions 'surface', while the other group went beyond the text into understanding the meaning behind 'deep' (Richardson, 1994). More research was developed based on the 'surface' and 'deep' approaches theory. Such as the one of Entwistle (1987). He further defined the characteristics of three different learning approaches. A 'deep' approach; understanding and relating concepts to previous knowledge. A 'surface' approach; task completion and the memorisation of discrete elements, but without integration or reflection. And an 'achieving' approach; setting strategies for high achievements, the organisation of time and resources, preparation and being alert. Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) and Biggs (1987) theorised the 'achieving' approach, or what was described as a 'congruent motive strategy' (Biggs, 1987, p.93). with a focus on simply getting good results. The key in this approach was to choose the right strategy to achieve success (Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006). Morgan et al. (1982) studied 29 part-time distance students at the Open University using the 'grounded theory' first outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Morgan's et al. study confirmed previous findings about students using both the 'deep' and 'surface' approaches to learning (Richardson, 1994). Watkins (2001) suggested that mature students are more likely to adopt the 'deep' and 'achieving' approaches to succeed and less likely to adopt the 'surface' approach. It is unlikely that mature students would depend upon memorisation rather than deep processing of course content (Richardson, 1994; Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006).

### *2.6.2 Metacognition Theories*

Metacognitive theories are theories of mind that focus on cognition. Schraw and Moshman (1995) attested that there is a distinction between metacognition knowledge (what one knows about cognition) and cognitive processes (how to regulate cognition with this knowledge). Schraw and Moshman also claimed that such theories can evolve based on personal experience and self-reflection. They proposed a framework with three metacognitive theories: tacit, informal, and formal. 'Tacit Theory' was based on acquiring metacognitive skills without a specific framework. In this

conception, adults are influenced by a culture or environment which shapes their conceptual frame of reference, which is informal. These tacit skills can help build the critical thinking skills needed for higher studies. Toynton (1998) agreed that mature students gain confidence from their prior knowledge. Interestingly, Toynton (2005) later argued that prior knowledge might restrict new learning if it is not obviously relevant to a student's own conceptual frame of reference.

Under 'Informal Theory,' learners acquire metacognitive skills from their environments (as in the 'Tacit Theory') but they are consciously aware of the process (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). As claimed by Kuhn et al. (1992), main advantage of informal theory over the tacit is that students can reflect systematically and deliberately on their performance then use this knowledge to enhance their thinking and performance.

In 'Formal Theory' students learn under a systematic structure similar to a university system with targeted and explicit knowledge. Hence, they can be subject to more rigorous evaluation. The potential advantage of the formal theory as stated by Schraw and Moshman (1995) is the ability for learners to make an 'informed choice about their self-regulatory behaviours' (p.361). The three theories presented are theories that can help understand how students learn. From the 'tacit' that has limited explanatory power, to the 'informal' which has more self-regulation role, to the 'formal' which has an explicit framework that can regulate one's cognition. However, Schraw and Moshman concluded that the tacit and the informal theories are most appropriate for understanding adult learners (as cited by Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

### *2.6.3 Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)*

Another theory to understanding the process of learning is called 'self-regulated learning' (SRL). This theory involves cognitive aspects as well as the contextual, affective, and motivational aspects (Pintrich, 2000). Hence, specific skills are needed for success: cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational (Puustinen & Pulkkinen, 2001). Many scholars agree on a common definition of SRL, for example Zimmerman (1986), Borkowski (1996), Winne and Hadwin (1998), Boekaerts (1999) and Puustinen and Pulkkinen

(2001). It is a way of taking responsibility for one's learning, setting goals and working to achieve them while maintaining high levels of motivation (*Learning and the Adolescent Mind Website*, accessed August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019). The importance of SRL for understanding mature students lies on the fact that it recognises sustained skill development that goes beyond formal education. It is a process for students to proactively engage in skill development (Zimmerman, 2002).

Many SRL models have emerged, out of which five have proven to be valid. Specifically, Borkowski's (1996) process-oriented model of metacognition; Winne and Hadwin's (1998) four stage model; Boekaerts and Niemivirta's (2000) adaptable learning; Pintrich's (2000) general framework and Zimmerman's (2000) social cognitive model, as summarised by Puustinen and Pulkkinen (2001, p.270). Boekaerts (1999) concluded that previous SRL models consisted of three major components: motivation, cognition, and metacognition. She later further emphasised the key role of emotions, and the ability to self-regulate one's emotions to reach one's goal (Boekaerts, 2011).

Earlier, Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) described metacognition as the 'the will and the skill.' When there is a 'will' or the motivation to achieve *something*, students find the 'skill' or the *how* to achieve that something by using the best approach they can find. It is evident that scholars agree on the strong connection between metacognition and students' approaches to learning (Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006). As Pintrich put it "self-regulatory activities are mediators between personal and contextual characteristics and actual achievement or performance" (Pintrich, 2004, p.388). One cannot be explained without the other. Scott (2015) claimed that metacognition *can* be taught and developed. It starts with awareness of what one thinks and learns, followed by questioning the quality of the thinking and learning. This process includes reevaluating the strategies used to learn and self-regulating to employ most effective learning strategies.

Norem and Cantor (1986), Eronen et al. (1998) and Nurmi et al. (2003) investigated the regulation of action and how students responded to challenges. Nurmi's (1989) two major stages for self-regulation were cognitive

planning and behavioural evaluation of outcomes. Nurmi claimed that students take responsibility for outcomes by planning for the task at hand. Students are more likely to achieve their goals by planning well (Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006). With sufficient awareness of what leads to successful learning outcomes, students can choose the strategy that best suits their needs and abilities. They are also able to modify those strategies should the tasks change, or challenges occur (Zimmerman, 2000). Pintrich and De Groot (1990) stated that within the SRL conceptual model, students are able to focus on a task regardless of any distractions.

Zimmerman (2000) emphasised the need for self-regulation beyond formal education as a skill for sustainable learning. A student's mental abilities direct their learning and the acquisition of the necessary skills (Zimmerman, 2002). Carneiro (2007) noted that learning skills are needed all through our lives. For example, learning how to learn, learning how to unlearn, organizing information, dealing with challenges, and regulating the time and effort spent. Thus, to develop the skills to self-regulate learning is important for everyone, but more important for mature students who want to achieve academic success.

Pritchard and Roberts (2006) summarised twelve essential skills for learning as: gaining new experience, connecting new ideas, linking learning to past experience, visualising, imagining, creating, critical thinking, memorising, learning from mistakes, reasoning, synthesising ideas and applying learning to life. Moreover, Kautz et al. (2014) claimed that the enabling skills needed for learning are linked to economic productivity, social mobility, and the overall well-being of people.

#### *2.6.4 The Neurodevelopmental Framework*

*A Neurodevelopmental Framework*, a learning framework first outlined by Dr. Levine (2001) helps us understand cognitive processing and learning. Learners can understand both their weaknesses and strengths and their relationship to academic and social progress (Levine, 2001). The framework consists of eight constructs for understanding learning: attention, higher order cognition, language, memory, neuromotor functions, social cognition, spatial



ordering, and temporal-sequential ordering. Levine's framework is based on neuroscience and cognitive psychology; understanding how the brain functions and how those functions affect the learning of any student (Laija-Rodriguez, 2013). Schneider and McGrew (2012) noted the similarity of Levine's constructs with aspects of the Cattell-Horn-Carroll Model of Intelligence (CHC), a theory that attempts to explain why people differ in their cognitive abilities. Although Levine's framework was designed for kindergarten to Grade 12 students in the USA, four of the constructs might help us understand mature students (*All Kinds of Minds* website, accessed August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019). These four are: higher order cognition, language, memory and spatial ordering. Of these four, higher order cognition seems to be the skill most relevant to this study.

Higher order cognitive (HOC) is composed of multi-faceted thinking skills that involve neurodevelopmental processes of reasoning, decision making, and brainstorming including creativity (Levine, 2009). Before Levine, Resnick (1987) identified some characteristics of HOC; its complex, it involves applying different criteria which could lead to multiple solutions, it includes uncertainty, and self-regulation. Zohar and Dori (2003) classified more activities under HOC related to higher education, including asking research questions, formulating hypotheses, constructing arguments, and extracting conclusions.

The Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), a well-known HOC framework named after Benjamin Bloom, reflected such characteristics. Bloom's aim was to categorise thinking skills in education from lower thinking skills like knowledge acquisition and memorisation up to higher thinking skills such as synthesising and evaluation. It also aimed to promote higher forms of thinking (McMahon, 2010). In this framework, educational objectives are divided in three main categories: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills. Identifying six levels under the cognitive category: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These levels were later revised by to be; remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, revising and creating (Qasrawi & BeniAbdelrahman, 2020). Crossland (2015) noted that students will need such skills to compete in the world. Other researchers such as

Rentawati et al. (2018) agreed that higher order cognitive skills are essential in lifelong learning especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Following is a review of mature students' learning strategies, and how part-time students differ if so.

### **2.7 Mature students' learning strategies**

In general, the motives of students influence their attitudes toward learning (Ronning, 2009). For mature students, having made the choice to pursue a higher degree, motivation comes from within. Being intrinsically motivated, learners are interested in learning as they see the value in what they are doing.

Following the 'deep' approach to learning, with more autonomy and self-regulating strategies is more likely to lead to success (Bye et al., 2007). Help them connect their own experiences to the contents of what they are learning fostering positive study habits (Howard & Davies, 2013). By comparison, a younger student more likely pursued a higher degree for extrinsic motives (such as the need for a degree to gain employment), without being interested in learning itself (McCune et al., 2010). Such students will likely follow the 'surface' approach, relying more on memorising and recalling information (Kasworm, 2003).

There is a significant difference between these two groups, according to scholars. However, Ross et al. (2002) claimed that mature students could believe that they lack the necessary skills and resources to succeed. On the other extreme, one perception that Keith et al. (2006) identified was the stereotype of age that could affect how mature students perceive their own abilities.

These social and psychological aspects are important for mature students re-entering higher education (Howard & Davies, 2013). Naturally, mature students may lose some study skills or habits with the gap of years since their full-time undergraduate days. Hence, their ability to learn might have decreased in terms of cognitive skills (Woodley, 1984). Woodley et al. (1987) confirmed that mature students may struggle when returning to formal study.

The disconnection from formal education might cause the 'out of practice in the art of learning' effect (Roberts & Higgins 1992, p.106). Percy (1985) questioned if there was strong evidence for this claim. Other scholars reported that mature students can perform as well as younger students, sometimes even better, despite their temporary disconnection from formal education (e.g., Hopper & Osborn, 1975; Smithers & Griffin 1986). Briedenhann (2007) argued that mature students were more dedicated toward studying than younger students. Two thirds of the mature students in Briedenhann's study were dissatisfied with younger students' attitudes toward studying. Overlooking the differences in how the two groups approach learning could lead to social exclusion, a potential barrier to success for a mature student. In the OECD (2013) paper on study skills, it was found that the engagement of mature students in learning can by itself develop and maintain skills such as information processing, knowledge acquisition and adaptation.

In general, each individual student has their own style of learning (Pritchard & Roberts, 2006). Knowles (1980) noted that an adult learner has certain characteristics related to learning, which include self-direction, goal setting, accumulated experience (which provides learning advantages), problem centred mentality, readiness to apply new learning and self-motivation. Mezirow (1981) suggested that learning during childhood is formative and led by a source of authority, but as adults learning becomes *transformative*, affecting one's established frame of reference. The learning process can be influenced by their personal beliefs. Hence, mature students need to develop perspectives that are more inclusive, through questioning and critical reflection, as ways to transform some beliefs (Graham, 2015).

The life experiences that mature students possess, such as confidence and discipline, are important traits when pursuing higher degrees (Wilson, 1997). Knowles (1990) found that mature students need strategies for learning that build upon their own life experience. Experience brings life skills that are advantageous; applying such skills helps them to navigate graduate school and overcome challenges, including and beyond academics. McCune et al. (2010) stated that although mature students could be slower learners than younger students, challenged by deteriorating memories and slower

comprehension, they have the advantages of better organisation, more responsible attitudes, and deeper life experiences. These advantages give mature students a base for class discussions and the ability to link theories to practices.

For mature students, the long gap between formal education programmes can mean that the learning skills that were once sufficient might become insufficient for further academic success. Learning theories developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s distinguished the skills of mature students from those of younger students (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Knowles (1984) identified four skills that adult learners possess: self-directed learning, depth of experience, active engagement, and task motivation (as cited in Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Knowles also emphasised the importance of learning skills specific to mature students, for example, goal orientation. Naturally, unless students saw a purpose and relevance to their learning goals, they would resist any new strategy.

In another study, Sewell (2000) investigated the skills of 299 students at Birkbeck College in the UK. Participants identified twelve skills that contributed to their success: information gathering, writing, reading, speaking, listening, organisation, numerical and scientific, IT, interpersonal, every day and personal abilities. Participants were also asked to rate the characteristics and abilities that might distinguish mature students from younger ones. The following attributes rated the highest: setting realistic goals, the ability to put ideas into a wider context, connecting ideas, looking at things from different perspectives, a willingness to seek advice, perseverance to complete tasks, commitment to achieve results, analysing problems, finding solutions, applying professional skills and knowledge in their studies, appreciating the value of time, knowing the value of money, the ability to focus and eagerness to learn. As noted by Sewell (2000) cognitive skills evolve with age and interventions. Hence, learning skills among mature students could be developed. Interestingly, Kautz et al. (2014) claimed that 'non-cognitive' skills are more supple to change than cognitive skills. However, Education for Life and Work (2012) reported that non-cognitive skills are measured by self or observed ratings unlike the tests cognitive skills are measured by. Unless more valid

measurements is designed, the claim of Kautz et al. remains dubious and requires further investigation.

### *2.7.1 Are Part-time mature students any different?*

Over the past three decades global interest in returning to formal education on a part-time basis has increased. Jarvis (1985) claimed that students pursuing formal education can make decisions about learning by reflecting upon experience. A key benefit Broomfield (1993) identified was the practical experience they bring to their studies, which is often shared with other students and thus enhancing students' overall learning skills. O'Connor and Cordova (2010) believed that mature students who return to formal education on part-time basis are motivated to learn. They hope to expand their knowledge in their fields, advance their careers, or both. Part-time mature students are more likely to stay in their jobs after earning degrees, as the skills acquired usually match the workplace they were at while studying (Broomfield, 1993).

Even with such benefits, a review of the literature showed little research on part-time mature students and their learning skills. The National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) in the UK noted this group as being the 'least resourced, least valued, and least well understood' (NIACE, 2005). Coffield (1997) and Davies (1999) saw part-time higher education as a difficult path. A 'lifelong sentence' as Coffield described it (1997, p.87). Nonetheless, in the UK between 2008 and 2009, half the postgraduate seats were occupied by part-time students (HESA, 2010). Hence, it is important to understand part-time mature students' motives, how they learn and if these are different from those of full-time students (Swain & Hammond, 2011). Age, life circumstances and personal values could all be contributors to part-time students' motives for studying (Ramsden & Brown, 2006).

Fish and Wilson (2009) provided evidence on cognitive ability differences between part and full-time MBA students. Swain and Hammond (2011) found that part-time students had higher levels of academic success. When identifying themselves as 'students,' both self-esteem and their sense of achievement increased. However, the multiple life roles they have to cope with could hinder their progress. Further research is needed, as most research is

focused on *full*-time students' success factors (Williams & Kane, 2010). Hence, one objective of this study of part-time mature students is to help build the body of literature about this less understood group.

## **2.8 The importance of time management for mature students**

Time management is a behaviour that results in increased productivity and decreased stress (Zampetakisa et. al, 2010). Due to their work, social and family obligations, managing time while pursuing higher degrees presents challenges to mature students. They are predicted to experience stressful situations more often than traditional students (Forbus et al., 2011).

Time management could be *the* most important strategy for mature students to succeed. It has been identified as an indicator of increased performance and decreased levels of anxiety. Students who do better in managing their time get more satisfaction from their academic experiences (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007). Lundberg (2004) found that due to their experiences juggling multiple tasks, mature students cope with time pressure better than traditional students.

Forbus et al. (2011) likewise found that the experience of mature students with time management made them less affected by major time constraints. Time management could be even more critical for part-time students, due to the responsibilities of work and family. Kember (1999) found that part-time students more frequently considered the lack of time as one of the main obstacles to success. It is a way to direct one's energy to focus on the goals to be achieved (Locke & Latham, 1990). Britton and Tesser (1991) found that a "time attitude" reflects on ones' sense of self-efficacy (p.407). Dale (1993) claimed that time management skills can be developed at any age. Macan (1994) also found that a 'time attitude' contributed to effective time management.

Macan concluded that there were three types of behaviours that produced effective time management: goal setting, list making and organisation. This conclusion was supported by Claessens et al. (2007), who considered time management as a "planning behaviour" (p.262). It focuses on the prioritisation of tasks and the elimination of distractions. MacCann et al. (2012) believed

that time management is a behaviour that can turn into a habit through conscious training and practice. Hence, it is a skill that can be developed regardless of the personality traits of a student.

Academic success relies on the development of such study skills (Crede & Kuncel, 2008). Some scholars claim that a lack of efficient time management and task organisation could be a recipe for poor academic performance (e.g., Macan et al., 1990; Longman & Atkinson, 2004). Similarly, McKenzie and Grow (2004) found that time management was important for mature part-time students trying to fit their studies around other demands. They added that there are increased numbers of mature students pursuing higher degrees part-time to upgrade their skills. Roberts et al. (2006) concluded that time management was a 'key competency' and designed an instrument to measure it. Their measures included list making, planning, organisation, and the ability to cope with change. Penketh and Goddard (2008) argued that mature women were challenged by balancing their work and life responsibilities with studying. Most of their participants confirmed that the pressure of being overloaded with high demands from both sides was a key obstacle that they had to overcome in order to complete their degrees.

Few scholars examined the difference between 'men's time' vis-à-vis 'women's time'. McNay (2000) and Hughes (2002) both talked about men's to be more valuable than the time of women. Furthermore, they claimed that men are more organised with their time, while women fall into the demands of others' needs and their time becomes less productive. Regardless of gender, Indrica et al. (2011) suggested that time management efficiency was a major contributor to academic success. Their study of 130 participants confirmed that time management influenced the motivation of students toward task completion. These studies collectively evidence the importance of time management for academic success, particularly among part-time students.

## **2.9 Challenges**

Mature students are presented in the literature as having to overcome a series of challenges to succeed in their academic pursuits. Many had not studied for a long period of time, becoming unprepared for high academic expectations.

Hence, multiple challenges may await them (McCune et al., 2010). Fragoso et al. (2013) noted that these are most noticeable in the transition to higher education after a gap of years. Often, students become anxious about returning to formal education, burdened with responsibilities of caring for elders, parents or children, financial obligations and time constraints may prevent them from giving their full attention to studying (Swain & Hammond, 2011). Losing cognitive skills during a hiatus could be one challenge that mature students have to overcome (Woodley, 1984). Brady (2001) found that balancing work and family demands required significant commitment and self-discipline.

Dawson (2003) presented a few major challenges that can stand in the way of success. These included a lack of time, too little academic support, insufficient finances, low self-confidence, and the social stress of going back to formal education. Bowl (2001) identified challenges that could arise, such as fitting into an academic environment, time management, understanding how to complete assignments, reading for information, and writing academic essays.

As noted above, many scholars such as Percy (1985), Woodley (1984), Richardson (1994), McGivney (2003), O'Connor and Cordova (2010) and McCune et al. (2010) disagree over whether most mature students 'have what it takes' to overcome these various challenges and earn a higher degree.

Contrary to this negative stereotypes, Knowles (1990) asserted that they are highly motivated and relatively independent. Piper (1981) noted that mature students have fewer opportunities to be accepted into a higher degree programme than younger students. Once accepted, Weil (1989) suggested that managing the personal, academic, financial and emotional 'waves' mature students encounter becomes a challenge by itself. Nonetheless, Richardson (1994) argued that previous studies, by making such assumptions, had focused more on academic performance and less on mature students' experiences. The knowledge gained from non-academic life experiences can be as valuable as academic knowledge, specifically in the arts, humanities, and social sciences and when doing independent work (Walker, 1975). However, Bowl (2001) concluded that a mature student could be highly



motivated yet frustrated, lacking the necessary support and advice that is normally available to an undergraduate.

Compared to younger students, mature students usually have to earn more money. Financial situations can impede some mature students' pursuit of a degree and put them under pressure (Howard & Davies, 2013). According to McGivney (2004), a financial burden could lead to discontinuation of studies. This burden is exacerbated when governments permit increased tuition fees (Naidoo, 2008). In more recent times with COVID-19 and the economic recession, the burden of increased fees is compounded with the loss of jobs and/or decreased income. The accumulated burden of debt can affect students' focus and motivation to learn. These are serious challenges. Thomas (2002) offered that hope for better future earnings after obtaining a degree could be a reason to persist despite financial hardship.

Working long hours, as most mature students do, can lead to a decline in their commitment to study (O'Keeffe, 2013). McGivney (2004) found that many students discontinued their studies due to work pressures. Penketh and Goddard (2008) found that mature women were pressured more than men in managing academic, work, and personal demands. Similarly, McCune et al. (2010) and Fragoso et al. (2013) found that women were most challenged in finding a workable balance. Brooks's (2012) study in the UK revealed that gender equal childcare cannot be assumed. Female students had more childcare responsibilities than males. A male student most likely leaves childcare obligations to his female partner.

Furthermore, time consideration for mature students, especially those with children, is lacking in many universities. Despite the assumption that university break times are opportunities for students to work on assignments, for a mature student with children, the break could be a challenge when it overlaps with school holidays (Moreau, 2016). According to Moreau, women are especially disadvantaged. Hence, Lynch (2008) suggested that childcare is a significant issue for mature students with children when managing study time. According to Lynch, females' enrollment rate in the United States in higher education had increased. In his study, only 20 per cent of female students

relied upon their partners to take care of children, while 70 per cent required childcare. Allocating income for childcare could be a major burden. As Lynch (2008) concluded, the lack of childcare could be a major reason for female students to suspend their higher studies. This too is a serious challenge.

As a parent, a mature student can have a mix of positive and negative emotions, for example, feeling of guilt while studying and of pride over being a role model (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Reay et al. (2002) claimed that the dominant emotion remains the feeling of *guilt*, because time spent studying lessens the time that could be spent with their children. Ironically, same emotion could be experienced when spending time with children, perceiving it as time away from their studies (Lovell, 2014). This is a vicious emotional circle that male students may be less inclined to fall into. In general, women are perceived as the main care givers. Hence, female students may be more prone to feel guilty (Brooks, 2015). Cultural expectations affect this perception, adding more pressure in certain cultures than others on female mature students, particularly on single mothers (Kahu et al., 2015). Thus, universities need to take into account such life challenges mature students might endure (Scott et al., 1998).

Whether male or female, mature students can be challenged by a 'new' academic environment, which is significantly different from the familiar ones they left years ago. Students may feel anxious, estranged, or inadequate. Adapting to a new 'academic language' can be a challenge on its own. Mature students may begin higher education with career accomplishments and positive self-images. Yet, they might find conflict between their 'familiar selves' and who they are becoming in their new academic world. Such transformations could affect their personal lives and relationships (Briedenhann, 2007).

Mature students attending lectures at university could encounter other challenges. Being perceived as 'outside the norm' as compared to younger students can develop self-doubt (O'Donnell & Tobell, 2016). Many mature students show enthusiasm to engage in order to make the best out of the learning experience (Reay, 2002). Scanlon (2008) found that younger students did not appreciate the mature students' eagerness to contribute and viewed it

as domination. On the other hand, mature students deemed younger students' disruptive behaviour as inappropriate and a challenge to what they were trying to achieve academically.

With the advancement of information technology (IT) the world of education had advanced as well (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). Mature students rejoining academia may lack current IT skills, adding another challenge that some students need to overcome. A study done by the European Commission (EC) in 2013 showed that a significant number of mature students lacked sufficient IT skills (Graham, 2015). Lacking IT skills in today's world is a major barrier to learning and might hinder the progress and ultimate success of mature students, in particular those who seek to study at a distance (Taylor & Rose, 2005). Another challenge which could cause anxiety to some mature students is their lack of academic writing skills. Returning to formal education after a gap of years, students could be unsure of the standard of work expected until they attempt to write their first assignment (Mallman & Lee, 2016).

A mature student might opt to deal with such challenges on their own, leaving the university community unaware. According to Marandet and Wainwright (2009), this could neutralise the role of the university in students' inclusion. A lack of proper support by the university can cause a sense of isolation among mature students, a concern confirmed by McGivney (2003):

*“While there has been action to encourage applications from non-traditional student groups, in some institutions the reception they receive is not always sympathetic and comparatively few measures have been introduced to assist them cope with any problems they may experience” (p. 132).*

Hence, there is a need to clarify what is expected from them academically, as this is critical to overcoming a variety of challenges (Mallman & Lee, 2016). Moreover, much of research exploring the challenges that mature students encounter is from an institutional perspective (Bowl, 2001). Recent studies, including this one, consider the perspectives of the mature students themselves. Preece (2000) noted the need for a change in the culture of higher education, to include the perspectives of all stakeholders.

To conclude, there is no agreed line of reasoning that defines or differentiates the challenges encountered by mature students from those faced by younger students. These can be similar as much as they can be different (Fragoso et al., 2013). Many scholars have described the challenges faced by mature students, sometimes used to advise policy makers, and make recommendations for reforms that will support students in their pursuit of higher degrees (Fragoso et al., 2013). Managing studies around life's responsibilities and not the other way around, is a challenge agreed by many scholars to be most common (Bowl, 2001). Devoting the time to study, while maintaining the roles that were already established before becoming students, amplify the pressure.

The findings in Chapter Four are intended to explore specific challenges that participants encountered and how they managed to overcome them. Skills beyond the cognitive skills such as life skills, *and* the support from family, friends, supervisors, and the university which all could enable mature students to overcome some of these challenges and contribute to their academic success are reviewed next.

### **2.10 Life Skills: Beyond the cognitive to the non-cognitive skills**

In the twentieth century, the cognitive skills related to mental abilities and intelligence were considered to be predictors of academic success. Academic performance was associated purely with content knowledge until recently (Petway et al., 2016). With the development of the educational 'landscape' and the emergence of new technologies, learning skills that engage the mind, nurture creativity, and cultivate curiosity are needed (Khine & Areepattamannil, 2016). In recent years, researchers moved beyond cognitive skills and Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests to consider 'non-cognitive' skills as important elements for academic achievement (Stankov & Lee, 2014; Garcia, 2014).

The standard definition of cognitive skills is: "connected with mental process of understanding" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries website, accessed August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019). In this context, they are the skills that mature students are conscious of having and were able to report on. However, other attributes of mature students' success could be non-cognitive.

Although emerged from psychology's literature, the term 'non-cognitive' was later adopted in educational research for success attributes that could not be explained by standardised tests (Education for Life and Work, 2012). Education for Life and Work also reported that economists, in the process of studying the workplace, grouped all competencies other than those of cognitive nature (IQ) under the category of 'non-cognitive' skills. While psychologists' taxonomy of these skills was more specific, the three groups, psychologist, educators, and economists wanted to identify the same thing; relationship between these skills and successful outcomes (Education for Life and Work, 2012). Hence, as these non-cognitive' skills originated to fill a gap of grouping competencies in certain nature together, Camfield (2015) stated that any definition of the term 'non-cognitive' lacks precision in the literature. Nonetheless, Heckman (2008), a pioneer in this field, defined it as "motivation, socio-emotional regulation, time preference, personality factors, and the ability to work with others" (p.298). A definition that remains debatable by other researchers.

Duckworth and Yeager (2015) observed that the 'non-cognitive skills' discourse included other terms, such as 'traits,' 'social emotional learning' (e.g., Elias et al., 1997), 'soft' skills (e.g., Heckman & Kautz, 2012), '21<sup>st</sup> century' skills (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015) 'grit' (Duckworth et al., 2007) and 'character' skills (e.g., Tough, 2012). Roberts (2009) defined non-cognitive skills as the development of "patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviour of individuals" (p.140). According to Kautz et al. (2014), non-cognitive skills are the personal attributes not measured by IQ tests. This definition is so broad as to be of questionable value, as it would include many conscious acts beyond those that are included in common IQ tests, such as the Stanford-Binet IQ test or Wechsler Intelligence Scale that measures an individual intellectual functioning. According to Duckworth et al. (2007), non-cognitive attributes could include creativity, emotional intelligence, charisma, self-confidence, physical attractiveness, and grit.

Duckworth et al. noted 'grit' as most essential to success, defining it as "perseverance and passion for long term goals" (p.1087). Grit requires the

ability to sustain both effort and interest over years to achieve long term goals despite obstacles, boredom and even failure. Duckworth and Quinn (2009) argued that grit could predict achievement beyond any other measures, including talent. It confirmed that grit is not only about having resilience, but also having a deep commitment to the goal despite the long years and the challenges. Similarly, Duckor (2017) noted that non-cognitive attributes such as grit can contribute to academic achievement. Sheard (2009) agreed and also found that women scored higher on 'level of commitment' than men.

According to Hochanadel and Finamore (2015) grit, unlike intelligence, is a trait that can be developed. A person can perceive their ability differently. Grit assessment tools can be used to identify areas where mature students can learn to be persistent in pursuit of a higher degree and overcome challenges. One assessment tool is the *Grit Scale* developed by Duckworth and Quinn (2009). It focuses on the trait-level perseverance and passion, measuring the ability of individuals for maintaining focus and interest to achieve a long-term goal.

Kautz et al. (2014) noted a growing body of research confirming the influence of non-cognitive skills on both academic and work success. For example, Roberts et al. (2007), Borghans et al. (2008), Almlund et al. (2011) and Heckman and Kautz (2012). Skills for learning may be a mixture of the cognitive and non-cognitive (O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007). Several studies concluded that both contribute to academic success (e.g., Carneiro et al., 2007; Heckman et al., 2006; Lleras, 2008). These studies focused on primary and secondary education, not mature students in graduate programmes. However, Cunha and Heckman (2008) claimed that the levels of cognitive and non-cognitive skills used for learning at a mature age depend upon the work done at an early age to develop these skills. Petway et al. (2016) confirmed that these skills, developed at an early age, could contribute to future academic success.

Regardless of the terms used, skills including self-management, motivation, social awareness, and resilience are independent from the cognitive skills, yet interdependent, and highly important for academic performance (Barett &

Constas, 2014). Farrington et al. (2012) reviewed the non-cognitive skills contributing to academic success. Their list included: study skills, time management, willingness to ask for help, work habits, metacognitive strategies, and problem solving (which partially uses cognitive skills).

A framework of non-cognitive constructs was developed by Farrington et al. (2012). The five main components of the framework are: academic behaviours, academic perseverance, academic mindsets, learning strategies and social skills (Petway et al., 2016). These constructs, short on empirical evidence, are obviously conscious acts, calling into question the 'non-cognitive' description given to them. To date, the debate over which skills are most important for academic achievement continues. What is likely true is that all these skills are interdependent and collectively important. Additionally, Durlak and Weissberg (2011) suggested that investigating in ways to measure these skills could contribute to understanding how best to teach them.

## **2.11 Support**

With family and work obligations, mature students may be more likely to consider withdrawing from university than younger students. Those who have succeeded relied strongly on their families, friends, colleagues, and peers, not only financially but also emotionally (Laming et al., 2016). Most mature students are self-funded, chose further education for their own reasons and engage better with their studies than undergrads (Graham, 2015). However, a significant disadvantage is fitting academic life with other responsibilities, something that younger students usually do not have to do (Bowl, 2001). Work and family commitments, childcare, health issues and language barriers are significant obstacles that a mature student might need to overcome (Swain & Hammond, 2011).

Indeed, mature students can find themselves moving between different worlds of responsibility that younger students do not usually see (McCune et al, 2010). Bean and Metzner (1985) and Yorke (2004) declared that for mature students the support of family, friends and co-workers is more important than engagement in social life, as is often the case with younger students. The mature students' main focus is usually academic.

With childcare pressures, having unsupportive partners, young children, highly demanding careers, financial demands and even health problems are common to mature students (Swain & Hammond, 2011). Success in higher education is influenced by these various circumstances. Burton et al. (2011) observed that domestic support was of key importance.

Generally, one of the partners has to be the caretaker of the children if the other is to succeed in higher education. In most cases females are supportive, but in some cases, men were the supportive partners. The demands are generally higher on women than on men (Briedenhann, 2007). Women's motherhood roles and career responsibilities, topics in themselves, were analysed by, for example, Edwards (1993), Pascall and Cox (1993), Merrile (1999), Parr (2000) and Webber (2015). With increased numbers of women pursuing higher degrees, these are important considerations. In 2013, the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported an increase of eight percent of women pursuing higher degrees on part-time basis. Hence, academic support for women is clearly needed (Webber, 2015).

Support for childcare and domestic work are considered more important among women than men. However, both genders highly value the family support they received, including financial support extended to them, especially by their partners (Stone & O'Shea, 2012).

#### *2.11.1 The support from the University and Supervisors*

For mature students to be able to navigate and succeed in an educational system where they might feel less familiar with its 'rules of the game', universities support is essential (Bourdieu, 1993; Barrett & Martina, 2012). The relationship between mature students and their faculty members is crucial. As Jones (2008) stated, effective communication can enhance their sense of belonging. Furthermore, the feeling that faculties are genuinely interested in what they are doing and can easily be approached will motivate them and enhance their self-esteem as students (Thomas, 2002). Few scholars debated that faculty members are aware of such need yet unable to influence the university system (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Thus, non-traditional



students, such as mature ones could be at disadvantage. Reay (2004) noted it will be the mature students' obligation to adapt to an institution's culture, usually one long established. Such culture is expressed through an institute's policies, faculty, curriculum and even its student body. Sharing such a culture is the only way for mature students to integrate as part of this *habitus* (Reay et al., 2010). As mature students are not a homogenous group, integrating might be difficult and could determine their success or failure (Thomas, 2002).

As stated by Mallman and Lee (2016) the role the university plays in mature students' lived experiences is critical. Kendall (2002) noted that in the 1990s doctorate education, due to lack of demand, became a focus for policy makers in countries like Australia, the United States, and in Europe. Non-completion rates increased. According to Walker (2008) one reason was the long completion time. In a competitive higher education market, timely completion is the ultimate goal for not only doctoral students but also universities and policy makers (Roed, 2012). Hence, governments increased their focus on students' doctorate experience to support them (Pearson & Brew, 2002).

In the UK, both the Harris Report (1996) and the Dearing Report (1997) emphasised the need to create quality education for doctoral degree through developing a 'Code of practice' for research programmes (cited in Roed, 2012, p.29). First introduced in 1999, it included an institutional commitment to train supervisors with continued professional development. Aimed to create an impact on doctoral supervision, only institutes that commit were allowed to take in research students funded by the government (Roed, 2012). In 1997, further policy initiatives took place with further emphasise on skills development. Such initiatives opened doors for quality education (Roed, 2012). As universities in Europe, Australia and the United States became increasingly aware of the crucial role of supervisors. Professional development of qualified supervisors started to be carefully considered (Pearson et al., 2008). Ives and Rowley (2005) noted that the choice of the supervisor with subject knowledge and supervisory expertise is important and can impact completion rates. However, according to researchers such as Bartlett and Mercer (2001) doctoral supervision pedagogy, is seen as under-developed and under-theorised. Halse and Malfroy (2010) argued that such pedagogy is mainly designed by

policy makers, governments, and universities' administration. Thus, universities might need to consider the perspective of both supervisors and mature students themselves. The two key players in this formula.

In their study with 26 supervisors working in an Australian university, Halse and Malfroy (2010) designed a model to theorise what they called the 'professional work' of supervisors. The model, which can contribute to the creation of proper supervisory training, comprised of five components; the learning alliance; *agreement between supervisor and student to work on common goal*, habits of mind; *the ability to learn and reflect in order to make unfamiliar decisions*, scholarly expertise; *deep knowledge in certain discipline acquired from reflection and thinking*, technê; *the ability to put technical knowledge into practice*, and contextual expertise; *the understanding of university policies and climate in relation to doctorate education*. According to Halse and Malfroy, these competencies form a holistic framework, depicting the intellectual and emotional capacities needed with a moral and political dimensions, which could aid in preparing professional supervisors.

Having a quality relationship with a qualified supervisor is crucial. Generally, building any relationship including one between a supervisor and a student involves managing emotions. Mature students could experience a range of emotions through their learning experience. To be supportive as a supervisor requires showing emotions such as empathy (Roed, 2012). Empathy has been presented in the literature as a combination of cognitive skill, a trait, and a physiological phenomenon identified by Wiggins and McTighe (2005, p.98) as; *'the ability to walk in another's shoes.'* Roed (2012) noted that emotions such as empathy are addressed in higher education in three ways: disregarded, aware of its benefits, or acknowledged as key part in the learning journey. Clegg and Rowland (2010) claimed the need for universities to acknowledge and manage students' emotions that come with learning should they want to encourage more students to enroll. They also noted that caring about students and showing kindness, an interpersonal skill, can influence student's performance.

In a study with supervisors reflecting on their experience, Clegg (1997) found that certain emotions such as empathy and kindness are interlinked within supervisory role. Or better described by Horsfall (2008, p.6) as *'teaching from the heart'*. Undoubtedly, training supervisors on expressing emotions such as empathy and kindness could bring major impact on easing up and enriching mature students' lived experiences.

## **2.12 Outcomes**

The literature generally shows that a majority of mature students have had positive experiences pursuing their degrees. One important part of this was a renewed sense of confidence (Fleming et al., 2010). Crossouard (2010) agreed, emphasising the positive impact on the view of themselves during and after completion.

Several scholars agreed that the one common outcome that most mature students seek is 'personal development and growth' (Mercer, 2007). Indeed, in the OECD countries, among adults who completed further degrees, the outcomes were not only about economic growth and career advancement. Completion also brought personal fulfilment, improved well-being and greater inclusion amongst family, friends, colleagues, and the community at large (OECD, 2019c). Other studies found that adaptive coping strategies such as time management and planning can produce positive outcomes, including greater satisfaction and improved well-being (Kohler & Munz, 2006). Across the OECD countries it was also observed that with each higher educational level, the rate of 'frequent readers' increases (OECD, 2019c).

The 2018 OECD's *Education at a Glance* report indicated positive outcomes from graduate study. The employment rates were 92 per cent for doctoral degree holders and 88 per cent among those with master's degrees. As Swain and Hamond (2011) concluded that when mature students obtain higher degrees the outcomes are highly beneficial: self-fulfilment, well-being and greater family, economic and social enrichment.

## 2.13 Conclusion

A review of the literature has shed light on the key concepts of this study, including:

- The concept of lifelong learning.
- Understanding who mature students are, their needs, their multiple identities, and how they differ from younger students.
- Their motives for returning to formal education.
- The lived experiences, current and prior, of mature students including those studying part-time.
- The different learning frameworks and theories and how they may apply to mature students.
- Importance of time management.
- Challenges to be overcome.
- The cognitive and the non-cognitive skills.
- Support mature students need.
- Outcomes of higher degree programmes.

In addition, this review of literature confirms the usefulness of a qualitative method to investigate the experiences of mature students and the skills they needed to succeed. Hearing the participants' own voices while sharing their experiences is essential. This review also highlights significant gaps in the literature regarding mature students' lived experiences, especially those of part-time students.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter One, the main purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of mature students who returned to higher education on a part-time basis and successfully completed their degrees. A review of the existing literature has presented variety of reasons for adults returning to education after a gap of time, which this study will explore.

The present research involved 18 mature students who graduated with master's or doctoral degrees. These participants were diverse in terms of their ages, genders, and institutions. All participants had returned to higher education after gap of between 2 and 27 years from earning a previous degree.

The study is organised around one main research question: *How did they do it? Exploring the lived experiences of part-time mature students returning to postgraduate education after a gap of years and successfully completing their degrees.* With three subsidiary questions:

1. Who were these mature students?
2. Why did they return to higher education?
3. What contributed to their successful degree completion?

The nature of these research questions, answered from 18 unique perspectives, requires a qualitative method. Qualitative research method is most suited to investigate a social phenomenon. Seeking a genuine understating of mature students' experiences and how they succeeded in higher education meant that sharing stories in their own words is crucial.

Other methods of inquiry would not suffice to generate the *quality* of data that is the essence of a qualitative inquiry. More so, a quantitative approach driven by measurement and objectivity could not help understanding the meaning of the data collected through interviews (Merriam, 2009). The qualitative method helps uncover important findings beyond those that were anticipated by the literature. The method was found to enable researchers understand the meaning individuals bring to social phenomena within their natural settings

(Cresswell, 2013). Under this method the knowledge is created by the individuals' subjectivity through their own perspective of their experiences (Bryman, 2012). The role of the researchers is external, containing their personal beliefs and prejudice and only helping the individual create the knowledge within the context of the study (Jones et al., 2013).

The chapter will outline in detail the research design, the methodological rationale, how the participants were selected, themes of enquiry, data collection methods and the data analysis techniques used. Ethical considerations, validity and reliability are also considered.

### **3.2 Research design**

A research design provides a framework for data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2012). As the purpose was to investigate the experiences of mature students, the framework had to enable understanding of these experiences from their perspectives. Hence, the research relies on a qualitative method as it helps engage participants at a deep level. A quantitative research method could give an overview of their experiences but would lack sufficient depth.

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009) observed that social science researchers have three choices of method to use in their research: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Each method follows a paradigm, described as "worldwide, complete with the assumptions that are associated with that view" (Mertens, 2003, p.139). "Most qualitative researchers adhere to social constructivism or a constructivist paradigm" (Glesne, 2006, p.7). Having many varieties, constructivism has defined features that mainly stem from "the interaction of the mind and the environment" (Schwandt, 1997, p.19). Hence, qualitative research questions have no specific hypotheses, nor do researchers attempt to prove one. Qualitative research emphasises collecting, interpreting, and analysing information under a theme "using a variety of different inductive and iterative techniques, including categorical strategies and contextualising (holistic) strategies." Researchers present their findings and conclusions in a narrative form (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009, p.6). This study's thematic approach can be seen in the findings collected in Chapter Four and the analyses in Chapter Five.

### 3.2.1 *The phenomenological approach*

As the research draws upon human experience, the study adopted a phenomenological approach, first outlined by Husserl (1931) and Schutz (1932). It captured the meanings for individuals who have all experienced similar phenomena (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenology is mainly concerned with human experience.

The hermeneutic assumption is that these phenomena were described in similar 'common sense' terms, in English, by all participants. For example, a text which reads '*I work long hours*' carries a similar, resonant (if not identical) meaning for most who say, hear, read and write it. 'Hermeneutic Circle' as described by Heidegger (1996) is a repeated circular of interpretation identified and considered within the whole of the phenomena and then reconsidered in other ways (Mackey, 2005; Creswell, 2014). Denscombe (2010) described phenomenology as an approach to deal with people's perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and emotions. Hence, a phenomenological approach was chosen for this study as it helps to access, analyse and report on similar phenomena (Creswell, 2014). The purpose is not to explain the causes of things, but to describe how things were experienced by people using their own words.

However, Mackey (2005) cautioned researchers, as Heidegger noted, to understand the role of time in relation to participants' view of their experiences. The understanding of time creates a common thread between the past, present, and future and makes the experience 'current' (McMullin, 2009). Hence, the experience being situated in a time different than the time of the research; the researcher needs to be aware of participants' 'temporal' horizon Mackey (2005). According to Heidegger space is considered to participants' experience as important as time. Not in terms of location but to the situatedness of the person in the world at the time of the experience Mackey (2005). It is essential for the researcher during the process of interpretation to carefully examine participants' view of time and space to understand how it influenced their experience Mackey (2005). Thus, in the theme of enquiry related to time in the study, participants were asked if their understanding of time then from now had differed.

As humans, we like to share our experiences through story telling (McAdams et al., 2013). This approach embraces subjectivity, description, interpretation, and agency. It allows things to be understood as they were by the participants (Denscombe, 2010). Participants were able to ascribe qualities to their experiences while constructing a deeper understanding of themselves (Sutton, 2015). By reading and analysing their stories we can understand how these mature students interpret their successful pursuit of a higher degree (Dunne, 2019).

### **3.3 Sampling mature students**

Participants were recruited by three means: a supervisor recommending colleagues who might match the criteria, a personal network of friends and family with the 'snowball effect' to contact others, and advertising on social media; including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. By June 2019 a total of 25 mature students who had shown interest were contacted via electronic mail [Please see Appendix A]. A formal introductory letter explaining the purposes of the study with invitation to participate in the research was attached [Please see Appendix B]. A letter from the university supporting the research was also attached [Please see Appendix C]. Consent Form was also attached to be signed by participants [Please see Appendix D]. Careful regard for ethics was taken in the recruiting process. Participants were clearly informed that their identities will be kept anonymous. Hence, the study used pseudonyms names to protect participants.

By end of June 2019, 23 participants fitting the criteria agreed to join as per the purposes given in the introductory letter. Signed consents were received. In mid-July 2019, a questionnaire was sent via electronic mail to each participant. The questionnaire's purpose was to establish participants' profiles in relation to the research topic [Please see Appendix E].

The criteria for selection were as follows:

- a graduate from a higher degree (masters or doctorate) programme;
- had started a graduate programme after a gap of years from first degree; and,
- had studied on a part-time basis.



More females showed interest in participating. It was more challenging to find males who fit the criteria and were willing to participate. However, a reasonable balance along gender lines was made, with 11 females and seven male participants persisting to the conclusion of the research phase.

Out of the 23 participants who initially agreed to participate, five discontinued. Three participants, two females and one male, and after several written reminders, decided to drop out due to their demanding work schedules. The two other participants pulled out after Theme Two. Their reasons were also related to work pressures. None of the participants dropped out for reasons related to the research itself. A 'thank you' note was sent to each of the five participants via electronic mail. In total, 18 participants remained in the study and responded to all nine themes on timely manner.

Initially, it was important to maintain the criteria of the research design, including participants' ages, which was at least 30 years old when returning to graduate studies. Through the process of finding the sample, a few mature graduates had shown interest, but had started their programmes before they were 30. Two males had celebrated their 30<sup>th</sup> birthday months after they started their doctoral degrees and two other males had started their master's degree at the ages of 27 and 28 and completed them at the age of 30.

Previous researchers have not agreed on the age of a 'mature' student. Some agreed that 'mature' students are those who re-engaged with formal education after a gap of years spent focusing on careers or families at the age of 25 or above (e.g., Richardson, 1994; McCune et al., 2010; Fragoso et al., 2013; Saar et al., 2014). Hence, for the purpose of maintaining a balance of gender in the study, the sample was based on the gap of years between the previous degree and the higher degree completed, provided they started their second degree after the age of 25. Thus, the four participants under 30 were included.

### *3.3.1 The eighteen participants*

This section briefly introduces the participants in this study. The purpose is to give the reader an overview of participants' profiles in relation to the research topic, the method of enquiry, and the sampling criteria. The data was collected

through the electronic questionnaire sent to them at the beginning. Pseudonyms names are used to protect participants' identities. A table summarising the data is presented here (please see Table 1). Full participants' profiling is presented in the Appendices [Please see Appendix F].

Participants	Gender	Nationality	Marital status then	No. of children	Age 1st degree	Age 2nd degree	Gap of years	Graduate degree
Amir York	Male	Turkish	Single	0	27	30	3	Masters
Courtney Max	Female	American	Married	1	22	39	12	Doctorate
Harry Martin	Male	British	Married	1	33	37	4	Doctorate
Nora Al Badri	Female	Jordanian	Married	2	21	45	24	Doctorate
Norman Subin	Male	Indian	Married	0	25	29	4	Doctorate
Sawsan Farah	Female	Jordanian	Divorced	3	36	48	12	Doctorate
Selena Brown	Female	American	Seperated	2	40	42	2	Doctorate
Sally Said	Female	British	Single	0	25	33	8	Doctorate
Ghalia Rida	Female	Jordanian	Married	5	21	44	23	Masters
James Baker	Male	Canadian	Married	1	37	42	5	Doctorate
Khalil Abbas	Male	American	Married	0	21	36	15	Doctorate
Mona Kareem	Female	Egyptian	Married	2	22	39	17	Masters
Martin Von	Male	American	Married	0	22	29	7	Doctorate
Olivia Fares	Female	Jordanian	Married	4	22	38	16	Masters
Paloma Patrick	Female	American	Divorced	3	20	40	20	Doctorate
Sam Malek	Male	Jordanian	Married	2	22	28	6	Masters
Samar Asmar	Female	British	Married	4	23	50	27	Masters
Sarah Talal	Female	Jordanian	Married	2	24	40	16	Masters

**Table 1: Summary of Participants' Profiles**

### 3.4 Themes of enquiry

While reviewing the literature, certain themes emerged related to the research question, identifying some of the reasons why mature students decide to return to formal education and how they were able to succeed. Based on these recurring themes and the inquiries made in previous studies, nine themes were generated for this study, covering major areas to allow participants to reflect on their own experiences under each theme. However, some themes emerged during the study from the participants themselves. These additional, emergent sub-themes were then investigated to see what other scholars had found, in order to weigh their relative importance. The weighting was integrated within the nine themes. The last theme allowed the participants to have a final reflection on their experiences without limiting or directing their thinking.

The nine themes of enquiry, offered to participants as 'invitations' were:

1. Circumstances, motivation, and expectations
2. Time management
3. Learning skills
4. Challenges
5. Support
6. Outcomes

7. Sustained skills learned
8. Revisit and advice
9. Final reflections

Complete list of the nine themes with the sub-questions within each theme is presented in the Appendices [Please see Appendix G].

The first theme of enquiry was sent to participants via electronic mail in early July 2019. Theme nine, the last in the series, was sent to participants in the first week of September 2019. Each theme of enquiry was meant to explore a specific aspect of the experiences of mature students. As such, themes were 'departure points' for participants to begin reflection, but not a framework, prescription, or limit upon the scope and sequence of possible responses. Under each theme of enquiry there were two or three open-ended questions related to the general theme. These prompted participants to reflect with focus and depth, and to prevent overly general responses. The nine 'generative themes' constructed the research but did not constrain it. Participants had full freedom to explore their memories and write about each theme in depth.

### **3.5 Data collection methods**

There were two stages of data collection: a single questionnaire, followed by nine virtual semi-structured asynchronous 'interviews,' both conducted by electronic mail. According to Barbour (2008) semi-structured interviews give participants freedom to reflect and share experiences but ensure that their purposes remain intact.

The preliminary questionnaire was sent after receiving written consent from participants, for the reasons described earlier. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their participation and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. The results from the questionnaire built a foundation of basic knowledge before the start of the virtual interviews. Once the questionnaire results were collected, interviews via electronic mail started by sending one theme of enquiry a week allowing a span of two weeks to respond.

The data collected from the interviews were grouped within the themes of enquiry as according to the emerging similarities of participants' responses. Direct quotes were used to maintain personal accounts so a reader can connect the findings with the people from whom they were derived. This method uncovered important aspects beyond those that were initially anticipated.

### *3.5.1 Questionnaire*

At the start, a short electronic questionnaire was sent to participants for several reasons. First, to ensure that participants fit the criteria for the study. Second, to establish participants' demographic and historical profiles in relation to the research topic. Third, to gain an overview of the characteristics of the mature students in general. Finally, to identify potential issues to be explored in greater depth. Two weeks were allowed for participants to send back their completed questionnaires. The researcher was ready to provide any clarification needed. All participants were able to complete the questionnaires on time.

### *3.5.2 Semi-structured, asynchronous 'interviews'*

After the consent forms and questionnaires were returned by participants, semi-structured, written virtual 'interviews' were conducted via electronic mail. Nine themes of enquiry were extracted from the literature review, which identified the key areas to invite participants to reflect upon. One theme was introduced roughly every week, over a period of about three months. There was a span of two weeks for responding to each theme. This gave participants time to reflect and then write about their experiences in greater depth than if they were conversing in person. It also provided a low-stress environment for participants, who did not have to answer immediately.

A follow up electronic mail was sent to some participants as a reminder to respond to the theme at hand, if two weeks had passed. It was crucial to give participants enough time to reflect on each theme separately, yet without allowing several themes to accumulate unanswered. Electronic mails were sent to some participants for clarification and to request further details; this was done to ensure that their experiences were not misinterpreted. After theme nine a final electronic mail was sent to participants asking them to reflect

on their experiences with the method that was selected. Their responses are outlined in this chapter. A thorough rationale on the use of electronic mail as a method for semi-structured interviews is presented next.

### *3.5.3 A rationale for using electronic mail for semi-structured interviews*

In a study that requires participants to reflect upon their experiences, semi-structured interviews are most useful. They allow participants to express themselves from their own perspectives (Murray & Sixsmith, 1998). However, finding participants who fit the criteria for the study and arranging live interviews was almost impossible. Geographical distance, time zones, work schedules and limited research funding were all major obstacles. To overcome them a different technique was required.

Miles and Huberman (1994), Kvale (1996), Strauss and Corbin (1998), Taylor and Bogdan (1998), Gubrium and Holstein (2002), Patton (2002) and Denzin and Lincoln (2005) had identified similar challenges such as time, cost and limited geographical access to participants as being major obstacles to carrying out qualitative research. Hence, some researchers now use internet based qualitative research methods (Meho, 2006). These methods are categorised into three main types: online asynchronous interviews, online synchronous interviews, and virtual focus groups (Meho, 2006).

For this study the discussion will be about the first type, the asynchronous method. Meho observed that several qualitative studies had used electronic mail for conducting virtual 'interviews;' for example, Foster (1994), Persichitte et al. (1997), Kennedy (2000), and Murray (2004). Online asynchronous interviews are normally conducted via electronic mail, with multiple exchanges between a researcher and participants within an agreed period of time. The information shared remains confidential and is not available to other participants (Meho, 2006). This method is most useful when participants are not easily accessible due to geographic distance, as was the case in this study.

### *3.5.4 Advantages and disadvantages of using electronic mail*

Research that is not externally funded can become affordable to individuals by using electronic mail. It allows a diverse sample of individuals to participate in

the research without the costs of telephone calls or personal visits. It also cuts the costs and effort of transcribing spoken conversations (Meho, 2006). These advantages allow a researcher to spend time and energy on what is most important.

For this study, participants were initially advised that the period of their involvement would be limited to three months. The electronic medium enabled the process of sending invitations to participants who lived in different time zones. The invitations were received and responded to at different times without affecting the process of the research. However, the time necessary to receive responses from all participants varied, and in some cases delayed the data collection process (Meho, 2006). Imposing a time limit was essential to ensure the collection of all data as per the agreed schedule. An electronic spreadsheet was kept for recording participants' names, the dates when each invitation was sent and which responses they completed [Please see Appendix H].

Meho (2006) noted that a data collection time lag depends on factors such as the motivation and commitment of participants, the quantity and quality of data required and the time each participant has to reply. Bowker and Tuffin (2004) claimed that the longer the time for responding, the more commitment participants show. Conversely, Hodgson (2004) believed that there was a risk of more dropouts if the time for responding was too long. For this study a time frame of two weeks was set for each of the nine themes. Almost all participants kept their commitment to this time frame.

Selwyn and Robson (1998) claimed that facial expressions and 'body language' are lost when communicating via electronic mail. Some visual cues observed in a face-to-face interview might be lost, but their importance for answering the research questions is minimal. Nonetheless, Murray and Sixsmith (1998) suggested that with the asynchronous approach, participants are able to reply at their convenience. They have time to consider the topics before replying. Hence, allowing participants time to reflect produces considered, thoughtful responses as opposed to the 'top of the head' replies often given in face-to-face interviews. Bowker and Tuffin (2004) suggested that

participants could feel more comfortable sharing personal information via electronic mail than in an interview. Several researchers have concluded that quality of responses in person or via electronic mail is the same (e.g., Curasi, 2001; Meho and Tibbo, 2003; Murray, 2004; Denscombe, 2010). Meho (2006) provided evidence that the participants responding via electronic mail were more reflective and thorough in their responses. Although the asynchronous method presents challenges, these were overcome. The cost, time and geographical advantages of the asynchronous electronic approach overcame the loss of facial expressions and body language using the electronic medium. For these reasons, it was the best way to answer the research questions.

### *3.5.5 Participants' reflection on the method used*

During the data analysis phase, and to bolster the rationale, a follow up electronic mail was sent to participants inviting them to reflect on the method that was selected. Participants were asked:

*Did this method allow you to communicate your personal experiences fully?  
Was there appropriate time between the invitations for reflection on each theme? Had we met in person would it have changed what you shared with me? If so, how?*

Three participants did not reply back. Out of the 15 who responded, three agreed on the method used with reservations, while the other 12 agreed that the method gave them time to think and reflect deeply about their experiences. Harry wrote that *"...this method enabled me to think and reflect about my experiences more deeply than if it was an interview, for example. With interviews, your response is usually the first thing that lands in your head, whereas with this, there was a period of contemplation before responding."* For Courtney, the asynchronous method *"...gave me the time to think and write and edit before sending them back to you, rather than just speaking, which would not have allowed for me to think in an expedient manner."* Ghalia had a similar opinion: *"The fact that questions were sent electronically gave me the chance to take needed time to reflect on the questions and respond to them in depth, with the chance to make amendments and additions before sending when needed."* Not only did it give them time to think but the freedom to write at their own pace, as expressed by James: *"I like to write, and I was able to sit*

*down and reply when it suited me. I also had time after reading the invitations to think about them before getting my initial responses written.” Paloma “... found being able to read the questions gave me time to reflect, and a space to fully communicate my experience.”*

However, three participants had reservations about the asynchronous method. Martin commented on the value of synchronous communication: *“One could communicate all experiences fully by writing out one's thoughts. However, I typically felt that I was leaving things unsaid. There are benefits to an interactive approach - either verbal or written.”* Mona *“...would have expanded in expressing my experience fully had it been face to face interviews.”* Samar *“... felt that I was able to communicate my experiences well, however, if we had been face-to-face you could have asked more probing questions to get a more meaningful and deeper understanding. I may have added more detail and given more examples.”* All participants agreed that the time between the invitations was appropriate for reflections on each theme.

Opinions varied when asked if meeting in person would have changed what was shared and how. Six participants confirmed that meeting in person would not have changed things. For example, Sawsan wrote that *“...no it would have been the same. Your approach was an effective one.”* Courtney explained: *“I don't think it would have – but I may not have been able to articulate as clearly my thoughts without the ability to read and edit them before sending them. Text offers that opportunity to check your own biases, etc. before submitting the responses that stream of consciousness oral interviews do not.”* As did James: *“Had we met in person I would have given an immediate response, but not the more reflective responses. So, the end result would have been that you had less information in terms of quantity, and a lower quality of information too.”*

Other participants thought that meeting in person might have created deeper conversations. For example, Norman: *“I guess it could have been slightly different. Research shows that there are some values of face-to-face interviews, as you can pick up different actions or gestures which you can probe further. It also allows you to pick up on certain responses and ask further*



*questions in an area that the respondent seems to be interested in.”* Martin expressed: *“I expect that in-person discussions would create new thoughts and ideas as both shared experiences and resulting conclusions.”* So did Harry: *“I feel that I might have been able to provide potentially richer and more specific data had the interviews been conducted in person.”*

In summary, participants’ reflections generally support, with some reservations, the rationale for choosing the asynchronous electronic communication method used in this study.

### **3.6 Data analysis**

The 18 participants collectively generated 47,720 words for analysis. The data from the short electronic questionnaires were gathered and analysed to provide an overview of the characteristics of the mature students in the study. A detailed participants’ profile was built and used when analysing the demographics of each participant, as presented in Chapter Four [Please see Appendix F]. A table summarising the data of the participants’ profile was presented in this chapter under section 3.3: Sampling mature students (Please see Table 1).

Data from the written virtual semi-structured asynchronous interviews’ submissions were collated and thematically analysed. Data were carefully read and reread to ensure clear understanding. When necessary, an electronic mail was sent to a participant for further elaboration or clarification. First, the data was analysed by theme to look for similar patterns in participants’ input. A separate document for each theme was created. Listing initial key points from each participant under the theme being analysed. Common categories that emerged from the data were identified. Nine separate word documents were created for the nine themes of enquiry.

Next, on post-it notes, initial observations from each theme were jotted down. Each observation written on a separate note. Post-it notes helped in dissecting data, detecting commonality, and regrouping it in a way that brought better understanding with new interpretation of the phenomena been researched.

These observations translated into emergent sub-themes which then were recorded in a separate document.

After that, emergent sub-themes listed under each main theme were finalised. Sometimes similar sub-themes emerged under more than one theme, these were listed under each theme to later examine how these themes could be connected. For example, sub-theme 'creating balance' emerged in theme two; time management and theme four; challenges.

Finally, these emergent sub-themes were grouped and presented using power point slides. Each slide contained one main theme with its sub-themes. These slides were placed in Chapter Four, each under its related theme (please see figures 1-9). The analysis of the data with the sub-themes that emerged under each theme were discussed in Chapter Five in line with the literature review. When connecting the dots between the sub-themes and the existing literature explored in Chapter Two, three main areas emerged that were concluded as the main key attributes for the successful degree completion of part-time mature students. These three areas of discussion will be presented in Chapter Five.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

The ethical principles of social research can include three priorities: protection of participants' interests; avoidance of misrepresentation; and informed consent (Denscombe, 2010). As the study involved human subjects, careful regard for ethics was needed at each stage of the process: collecting data, analysing it, and sharing the findings. Confidentiality, anonymity, and the continued wellbeing of participants were respected. Punch (2014) confirmed the need to be aware of the ethical implications of all decisions made by a social researcher. Honesty, integrity, and avoiding harm to participants are expected (Denscombe, 2010). Before signing their consent forms, assurance was given to participants that any data would be stored securely and only accessed by the researcher.

The research has not created any ethical problems. Participants were informed of the research process well in advance. They had the freedom to participate

or decline participation. They were fully aware that they might share sensitive or personal information. Participants' identities were protected using pseudonyms to keep them anonymous. Once confirmation is received that the doctoral thesis is accepted by the university, all information obtained from participants will be destroyed.

The research conforms to the *British Educational Research Association* (BERA, 2011) guidelines and the University of Bath's current *Code of Good Practice in Research*. Full consideration of the ethical implications of the study had been articulated through the completion of an *Ethical Implications of Proposed Research* form, which was submitted to the University of Bath Ethics Committee. The study was approved by the department of Education at the University of Bath.

### **3.8 Validity and Reliability**

Validity and reliability, terms related to the accuracy and trustworthiness, are considered paramount to the integrity of any research (Denscombe, 2010). Often seen as fitting with the quantitative research rather than the qualitative research. A debated argument, which is why some qualitative researchers replaced validity with dependability (Bryman, 2012). Validity as viewed by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) relates to the researchers' ability to convince the readers of the justification of the findings by being transparent throughout. While dependability as viewed by Newby (2010) depends on how well the researcher could clarify the context of the research to the reader. Both relies on skills and integrity of the researcher. The intent of this study was to maintain full transparency through the research process to gain the confidence of the reader. Creating a genuine understanding to the phenomena under investigation, required a method of inquiry that can generate *quality* data. The data of the study, which presented mature students' experiences, were participants own words. Under this method the knowledge is created by the individual's subjectivity through their own perspective of their experiences (Bryman, 2012).

Robson (2002) attested that if results are trustworthy and could be replicated then the study could be considered reliable. The data were mindfully

interpreted to extract the meaning, then was used within the context of the study answering the research questions. While communicating and justifying the procedures with credibility throughout. The researcher is aware of the limitations of this study. Given the small sample and interviews conducted via electronic mail for justification presented earlier in this chapter. The findings, however, are hoped to provide some evidence to suggest that there is value in further, broader investigation.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has justified the use of a qualitative research method which enables answers to the main questions of the study. It describes the selection and sample of participants and explains the data collection method and the rationale for it. It also presented participants' reflections on the method. Data analysis is outlined. Ethical considerations were established, and validity and reliability had been acknowledged. The findings from the questionnaires and virtual interviews are presented in the next chapter.

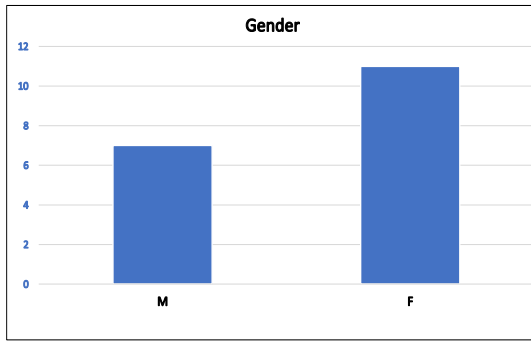
## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

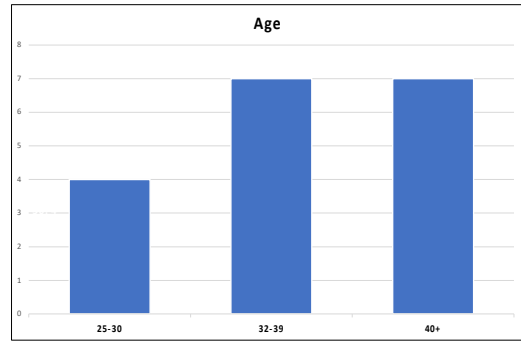
This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative data that were gathered over about three months. They provide insights to the lived experiences of mature students who decided to pursue higher degrees after a gap of years from finishing previous degrees. In keeping with the phenomenological approach, the focus of this chapter is to present participants' responses to semi-structured 'interviews' via electronic mail in the 'raw' version as reported. Responses are presented in thematic order, based upon how the research was conducted. Each theme of enquiry represented one or more aspects of the experiences that participants had lived. The themes were originally extracted from the literature review. Sub-themes emerged during the study from the data collected from participants. These were presented as key findings under each theme. The findings of the questionnaire are presented briefly, followed by the more substantial findings of the interviews.

### **4.2 Questionnaire findings**

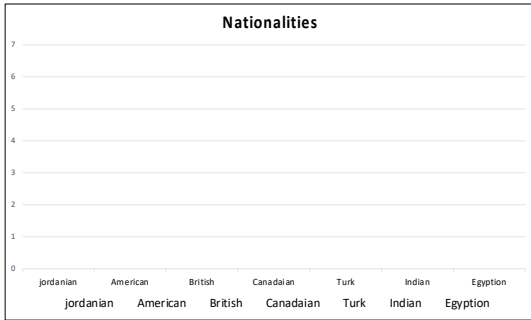
As mentioned in Chapter Three, the questionnaire's purpose was to establish participants' profiles in relation to the research topic. Four were under 30 when they started, seven were between 32 and 39 and seven were above 40. There were 11 females and seven males, and their demographics were diverse. They represent seven different nationalities. Six Jordanians, five from the United States, three British, one Canadian, one Turk, one Indian and one Egyptian. Thirteen participants were married, two were single, two divorced and one separated. Thirteen had between one and five children. All but two had a full-time job when they were pursuing their studies. Ten participants came from corporate backgrounds and six were from education and academic backgrounds. Of the 18 participants, 11 graduated with doctoral and seven with master's degrees (Please see charts 1-7).



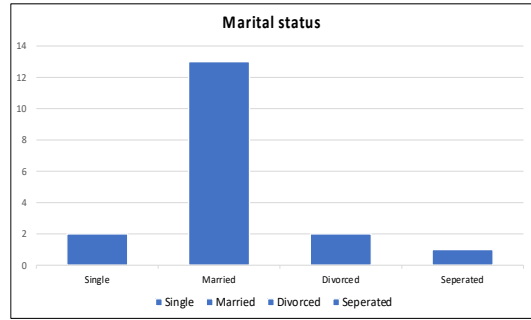
**Chart 1: Participants number by gender**



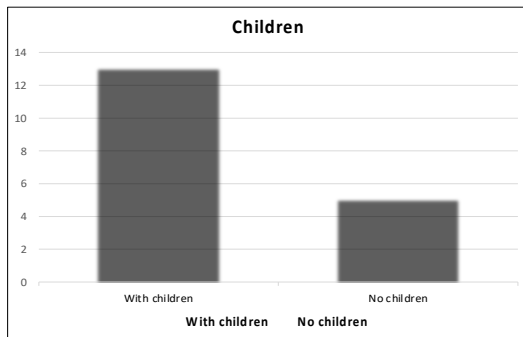
**Chart 2: Participants number by age**



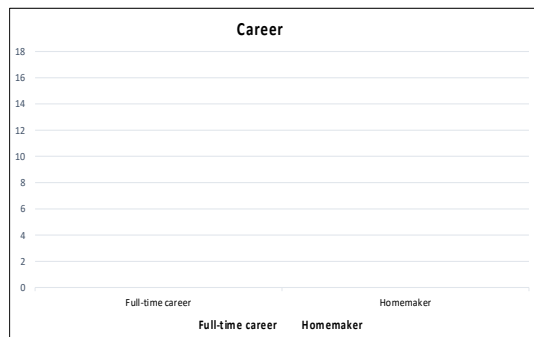
**Chart 3: Participants number by nationalities**



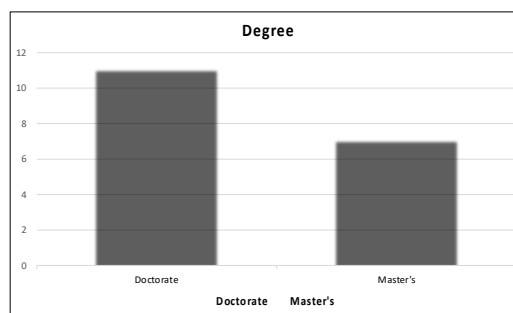
**Chart 4: Participants number by marital status**



**Chart 5: Participants number with children**



**Chart 6: Participants number with full-time career**



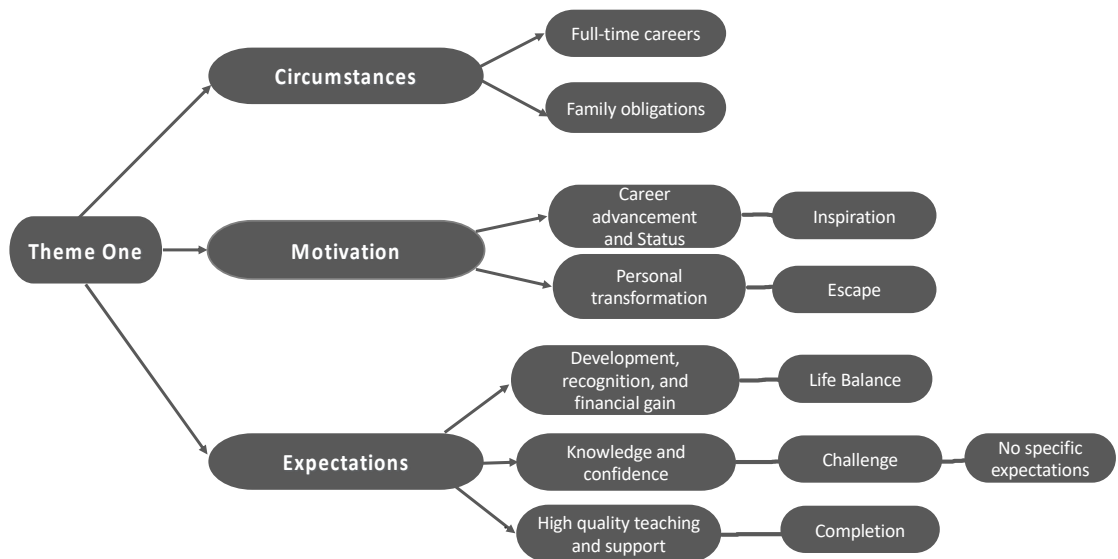
**Chart 7: Participants number by degree earned**

### 4.3 Theme One: circumstances, motivation, expectations

At the beginning of this study, it was important to understand participants' circumstances at the time of their studies and their reasons for re-engaging with formal education. As discussed in the literature review, the reasons why people return to higher education vary. The motivation to pursue a higher

degree is intertwined with circumstances as well as expectations. Hence, these three issues were combined under one theme of enquiry. Participants were asked:

- Please describe the circumstances when you decided to return to study as a graduate student.
- Can you explain what motivated you to make that decision?
- What were your expectations?



**Figure 1: Theme One main themes and emerging sub-themes**

### **4.3.1 Circumstances**

Participants differed in their circumstances, reasons for re-engagement and expectations. The key findings that emerged were full-time careers, parenting, family obligations, playing multiple roles, and one unique participant having 'no pressure' with support from others.

#### **4.3.1.1 Full-time careers**

All participants except two had been into their careers full-time, while studying part-time. Hence, a key circumstance for participants who worked full-time was studying under the pressure of work. Amir explained: *“I had to travel extensively for my work.”* The choice for part-time study for participants working on full-time basis was explained by Khalil: *“I had always wanted to get*

*a PhD, but I knew that it would be very difficult for me to stop working due to family and financial obligations, so working on it part-time while working was my only option.”*

Courtney worked in academia for many years, an advantage that helped her decide on the right programme to pursue. *“I had the good fortune to work on a grant funded project that put me in regular contact with 20 or so college presidents from across the U.S. in all types of institutions.”* However, at the time she enrolled for her doctorate programme, not only she was working full-time, her first child was born. Harry shared similar work circumstances. *“At the time, I was working in the Department of Education, so it made obvious sense to follow that pathway.”* I had comparatively free access to key staff/academics, which made the experience more straightforward.” Furthermore, Harry like Courtney, just started a family while working full-time. Khalil’s circumstances working full-time were as difficult *“due to family and financial obligations.”*

#### *4.3.1.2 Family obligations*

In addition to full-time careers there were also family obligations. From being married, raising children together or as single parent, getting divorced, marrying again, to taking care of an ill family member. Selena described the pressure of family obligations: *“I settled into life working with three children, an ailing mother, and husband that worked overseas several months at a time. I was about two years in with work and everything when I decided, with the encouragement of my husband, to return to school.”* Sawsan went through a difficult divorce, after which her ex-husband took their two boys and left the country. In her words, *“I had my baby girl with me and a full-time helper. I always wanted to continue my postgraduate study, followed my dream of postgraduate work to enhance my skills and it was really therapeutic.”* Paloma experienced similar circumstances as a single mother. *“When I got divorced, and was now ‘officially’ a single mother, the idea resurfaced as a way for me to become a professor and begin a career where I could support myself and my family.”* Samar had an easier experience, as her children were grown and had left home to study: *“As my children grew older and left for university, I decided to also finally pursue my dream of a postgraduate degree.’*



Most participants struggled with certain pressures having to play multiple roles. Such struggle best described by Paloma *“I basically had no life. I didn’t do anything socially; I didn’t sleep, and I felt like I had missed two years of my family’s life. If I did go anywhere I always had my books with me so I could study. In order to still work out I purchased a bike trainer so I could ride my bike and read. Family, friends and my children pitched in and took on responsibilities around cooking and childcare.”*

It is worth noting that while most participants struggled, Sam had zero pressure, as he explained: *“I had zero pressure from my family and company, it was absolutely my inner wish.”* Furthermore, he received financial support from his employer to defray tuition costs.

#### **4.3.2 Motivation**

Aside from the common motives, discussed in Chapter Two for mature students returning to higher education, participants had their own motives. The key findings that emerged under this sub-theme were career advancement and status, passion for learning, inspiration, and 'an escape.'

##### *4.3.2.1 Career advancement and status*

All participants pursued higher degrees with intent to advance their careers or to create new professional opportunities. As James put it, *“I decided that the key to my career advancement was to get a doctorate.”* He continued on with the three aspirations he had, to *“...earn more money; have more influence; and, to not have to take orders from people who were incompetent.”* Harry had a specific career goal within the academic world. *“I realised that moving on to doctoral studies was necessary to take advantage of any promotion opportunities.”* So did Norman. *“I had reached a particular level in my job and realised in order to go further I would need the doctorate.”* Olivia pursued the M.B.A. degree out of work obligations. She said that *“the regulations in [the] UAE state that [a] higher education profile is a must to work in the academia field, even if the job is not [at] a teaching faculty.”* Sally wanted more than advancement; she also wanted a ‘UK credible degree’ to supplement her local undergraduate degree.

Most participants reported a need to pursue their studies for career, knowledge, or financial advancement. Sam was an exception, as there was no immediate need to earn a further degree for these reasons. His curiosity got him searching for a master's degree he could obtain while still working. Yet, *"...to be honest, the main motive was the prestigious and financial rewards which I [would] achieve when I hold this degree."*

#### 4.3.2.2 Personal transformation

Although career advancement was the main motive, it was not the only one. Passion for learning and personal desire had driven nine participants, both men and women. For example, Courtney. *"I love to learn... since I was a child, I wanted to be Dr. Courtney."* And Amir. *"I was interested in learning and developing myself."* Amir also wanted to develop skills, *"...to sharpen myself for future."* Ghalia, with a law degree and five children, became a homemaker. Ghalia volunteered her time to teach at a Saturday school. She *"...found great sense of purpose and enjoyment"* in teaching children. She pursued the M.Ed. degree to formalise the pedagogical knowledge she had gained. Khalil wanted to earn a Ph.D. since he first graduated but leaving work and income were difficult decisions. *"I wanted to get a Ph.D. because it was important for me personally, and it was important for my parents, as well."* Nora had always wanted to pursue a higher degree, but with two young boys and moving to a new country, it was a daunting task. As she put it, *"I knew I was not good at distance learning."* The opportunity only came when her two boys were older and a new Ed.D. programme was launched in a university nearby. Courtney's passion for learning was not her only motive. A reduction in fees at the university where she worked was one more reason, she pursued the Ed.D. degree. *"Working full-time at the university, I only had to pay half tuition, so that made it attractive as well."* With a new-born daughter, Courtney also had the motive of *"having my grand champion of an advisor again."*

#### 4.3.2.3 Inspiration

Around 90 per cent of the people who worked with Martin held PhD degrees, including his father, who worked there for over 50 years. As Martin put it, *"the company has a long history of PhD degreed research staff."* Martin believed that obtaining a Ph.D. would be beneficial to him as a researcher. Inspired by

the environment he worked at as he explained: *“Another motive for pursuing the degree was interacting with many colleagues who had one, and clearly impressed me with their knowledge and professionalism.”* Not only was he encouraged to pursue a PhD degree, the company also subsidised his tuition fees. *“The company had a tuition reimbursement plan where they would cover the cost of coursework towards a degree up to a certain amount.”* While Martin’s colleagues had influenced his decision in an inspiring way, James had the opposite kind of inspiration: *“I interacted with colleagues who had doctoral degrees. They had positions of authority, with no teaching load and elevated status and salaries. I was not terribly impressed with their knowledge or efficacy as leaders.”* He knew *“... the key to my career advancement was to get a doctorate.”* James greatest inspiration came from his MA thesis’s supervisor who agreed to supervise his doctoral work *“I knew he would support me, and he knew I could do the work.”*

Khalil’s inspiration came from his manager at the time *“... he told me that if I was serious about it then I really needed to get started.”* Same experience with Martin *“...my manager noted on my performance appraisal that I should pursue a PhD.”* For Paloma, after a divorce and as a single mother of three, Paloma was inspired by her brother to start her doctoral studies, *“...who encouraged me to go back and told me it was ‘my time.’ I began to embrace the idea.”*

#### 4.3.2.4 Escape

Selena desired to pursue a higher degree because *“...it sorts of provided an escape for me.”* At the time she was not enjoying the place she was living, nor the instability of a marriage which ended in divorce *“I had two young sons, a husband that was gone a lot, and a full-time job. Not only that, he did not support my ambitions to continue my education.”* After remarrying, with three children, an ailing mother, and a full-time job, Selena earned a master’s degree and followed it with a doctorate. Although Mona started her degree for professional reasons, however, going through divorce and fighting cancer while pursuing her master’s created a mental escape for her *“Having to work on assignments kept my mind busy with something that gave me a purpose to*

*live.*” With a difficult divorce and added responsibilities, Sawsan thought the experience was ‘fulfilling’ and “*was really therapeutic.*”

### **4.3.3 Expectations**

Aside from the common expectation of enriching their lives with new learning, the participants had various expectations. Some were general and some were personal and specific. A few were not expecting much upon the start of their studies. The following key expectations emerged: career development, recognition, financial gain, finding a life balance, enhanced knowledge and confidence, challenge, a high-quality teaching and support from supervisors, and 'get the degree.' Two participants had no specific expectations.

#### *4.3.3.1 Development, recognition, financial gain*

As a corporate executive the expectations of Amir were “*...to accelerate my learning.*” Amir wanted to “*...check what I learned in my day-to-day job vs what is the latest in 'academy'.*” Sam, also an executive, expected similar outcomes in addition to recognition of his achievement by his employer, family, and friends. Norman expectations “*to move up in my career and do get involved in some more consultancy work.*” Olivia had expected to improve her critical thinking skills and realise financial benefits: “*I was expecting monetary benefits to afford the high cost of living, housing, and education for children.*”

#### *4.3.3.2 Life Balance*

For participants working in academia, especially those with families, their main expectations were to balance families and careers while discovering new ways of thinking. Norman’s expectation was to find a balance between his job and studies; hence his choice of programme to get the flexibility needed. Paloma “*...expected it to be really hard to balance family, work and school. I was afraid it would be really difficult on my family.*”

#### *4.3.3.3 Knowledge and confidence*

Courtney expected “*...to gain a level of confidence in myself and from those around me based on the knowledge I'd certified through the degree.*” Khalil expected to gain deep knowledge of academic research, as did his colleagues who studied full-time. The experience did not meet his expectations. “*I now*

*realise that ... doing a Ph.D. part-time is not an adequate substitute for doing one full-time.*” His explanation was that the distractions while working were too great.

#### 4.3.3.4 Challenge

Selena “...expected graduate school to be very difficult and quite challenging.” She explained “...was not confident in my abilities to be able to handle it. I went on blind faith and trusted my professors that expressed their confidence in me.” Courtney expected mental challenge “I expected a challenge. I expected to have my mind bent in new directions and find new ways of thinking in each of the programs I embarked on.” Khalil also “...expected it would be very difficult, that I would have to work a lot every night and every weekend. It was even harder than I expected.”

#### 4.3.3.5 Completion

Sawsan put her expectations into a time frame, to “...finish my master's in three years and finish [my] doctorate in seven years and all came as expected.” This was similar to Martin: “My expectations were that I would complete the course work in five terms and identify a thesis topic and professor along the way.” Nora simply expected to “...get my degree to continue an academic career.” For Selena it was simple expectation as she put it: “just didn't want to fail.”

#### 4.3.3.6 High quality teaching and support

Support from her supervisors is what Sally expected, yet “I was very disappointed at the lack of support and in some cases lack of interest by the supervisor.” James did not find certain professors interested in his research, as he had expected. His expectations for high quality teaching were also not met. “I found that the academics teaching us school leadership were thoroughly unqualified to teach the courses!” However, his expectations of learning about teacher development were met. “Overall, my expectations were mostly realistic and mostly fulfilled.” Both Mona and Samar had expected high quality teaching, curriculum and learning outcomes in their M.Ed. programmes. They expressed similar satisfaction that their expectations were met. Mona wrote: “I wanted freedom in expressing myself and my work.” Freedom of expression is what she got.

#### 4.3.3.7 No specific expectations

Two participants did not have specific expectations. As Harry put it, *“I don’t remember having too many expectations. As I knew most of the staff who delivered the content, I didn’t foresee too many problems.”* Harry added *“I had comparatively free access to key staff/academics, which made the experience more straightforward.”* Contrary to Harry, Ghalia *“didn’t know exactly what to expect. I started out slow in order to test the waters.”* She wanted to make sure she could *“...cope before committing fully.”*

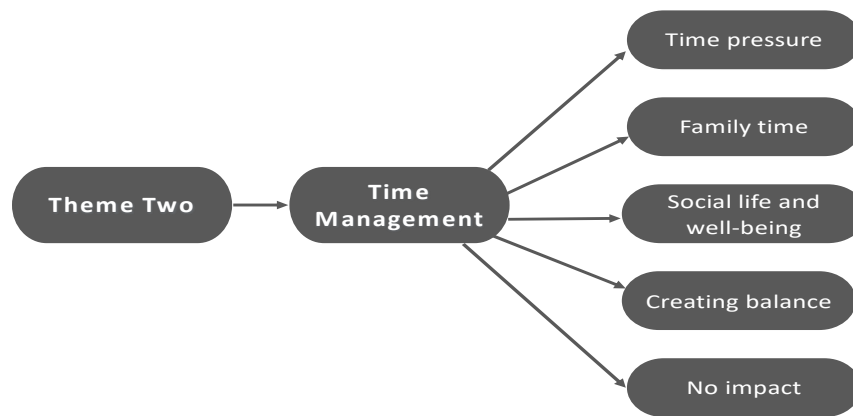
To conclude, the participants’ circumstances, motivation and expectations varied. Almost all made decisions based on a desire to advance in their careers and develop professional skills. How did they succeed in managing their time while working to meet their expectations? This will be explained in the next theme.

#### 4.4 Theme Two: Time management

Most participants had families and full-time careers, so how they managed their time was essential for their success. In this theme of enquiry participants were asked:

- Can you describe the ways studying affected other aspects of your life then?
- Do you understand that time differently from your perspective today?
- If so, could you explain in what ways?

The key findings were time pressure, family time, social life, well-being, purpose, and support. Two participants reported that studying had no major impact on their lives.



**Figure 2: Theme Two main theme and emerging sub-themes**

#### 4.4.1 Time pressure

Amir, Norman, Sally, Samar, Khalil, and James all shared that managing time was difficult. James found it difficult “...*simply making the time to do the work. I stress making, not finding. I had to stop doing some things. It was a matter of making difficult choices to give up some short-term pleasures in order to achieve the degree.*” Khalil explained that “*I had to be very careful with my time, and make sure I was not wasting time on unnecessary things at work or school and had to plan out my days and nights carefully.*” Most participants agreed that they were under time pressure and needed to be very disciplined, with little time to spend with family and friends. Several had to give up precious time for studying. Amir: “*Whatever time left I had to spend in a quality manner.*” Aside from her social life, which was affected, Sally described the pressure she had at that time: “*When I first started it was intense. I had a two full-time jobs, so [I] dedicated weekends and four hours twice a week to studying.*” Being in the workplace full-time, her biggest challenge was having to step in and out of the ‘*academia mode,*’ as she described it.

#### 4.4.2 Family time

For Khalil, as a father the experience was “...*mentally and physically draining...*” and harder than he expected. Making sure that he was there for his kids at school, for homework and at play times was difficult. “*I realised once I finished that a lot of the time, I was only half-engaged. Much of the time my mind was often elsewhere.*” James was a high school teacher when he was studying. He spent long days teaching from 8:00 am, going to classes and getting home at 10:00 pm. These long days affected the relationship with his

wife at that time. Paloma felt that although she was disconnected from family, friends, social life and even sleep, yet *“...it brought me joy. I loved my courses, my teachers and my peers.”*

Olivia's purpose of having a better career made time spent away from the family to study worthwhile: *“I truly believed that having a solid career gives us a sense of accomplishment and self-worth.”*

#### *4.4.3 Social life and well-being*

Participants' social lives were directly affected; yet, for some making new friends from 'like-minded' colleagues was rewarding. Nora was and is socially active. Studying affected Nora. *“The effect was to become more selective in relations.”* Interestingly, this allowed her to evaluate the relationships she had. *“Looking back now I realise that many relations did not add to my life, and they just happened because time permitted.”*

Courtney' household chores got ignored, as did her family and social circle. Yet the aspect that was affected most was her well-being: *“What really took a hit were my sleep and my general fitness.”* Samar had a similar experience: *“My health started to suffer. I did get quite sick as a result of anxiety.”* When she started writing her thesis *“things became quite crazy!”* Norman not only gave up his social life, but also hobbies he loved such as reading. His family holidays had to be spent completing assignments. For Mona fighting breast cancer with chemotherapy treatments was both a struggle and a way of positive distraction from the pain.

#### *4.4.4 Creating balance*

As a single mother Sawsan needed domestic support to create time for completing school assignments, plus her duties as a school principal: *“I had full-time domestic help.”* Ghalia managed to become more efficient with her time. She had five girls to take care of, the youngest being six. *“They learned to adjust to my absence two nights a week during lectures.”* As did Sawsan, Ghalia delegated more household chores to her domestic helper. The pressure was rewarding for Ghalia, a lawyer and mother of five. The time she spent at university *“to nourish my intellect and interact with like-minded individuals*



*through the course and research*” was her time alone. *“It gave me plenty of energy to persevere and it made the extra effort required to balance studying and other family aspects worth it.”* Martin split his weeks into days for work and days for staying on campus to visit the library and meet with professors. Martin *“...selected courses for which the classes met twice a week and on the same days.”* He made time for *“...being around professors [as it] definitely enhances [learning] and during a Ph.D. programme it’s even more pronounced.”*

#### *4.4.5 No impact*

Contrary to other participants, Harry's studying did not affect other aspects of his life, even though he was working full-time with a family. *“I guess I was very lucky in that I could do my studies almost as part of my job, and I could be very clear on identifying pockets of time (especially the summers) to do my studies.”* Selena started her studies while married to an unsupportive husband. Most of her studying was done at work or after he went to bed. Her boys were active and demanding but did not disrupt her studies. *“Luckily, I can study anywhere and with any amount of noise. I studied but it didn’t disrupt my life much.”* After divorce, she still needed to take care of her kids and mother, but still managed to finish the Ph.D. *“It’s a lot of work but I never let it disrupt my life too much. I suppose that’s why it took nine years to finish my Ph.D.”* She summed up the reason: *“It’s more about time management and the ability to study with noise and distraction.”* Sam also had a smooth ride while studying, but for another reason. His career kept him busy and away from home. His lifestyle did not change much while he was pursuing a master’s degree. *“My wife was used to this lifestyle, in which we don’t really have much on the calendar. We used to be very practical and boring couple.”*

#### *4.4.6 Understanding time management now*

When asked if their understanding of the time spent on their studies then was different today, most participants shared similar views. Amir truly *“I loved it when I did it.”* Harry agreed: *“I look back on that time very fondly.”* Some reflected on the balance of time for work, family, and study. Courtney wrote: *“I do still marvel at how I used to do it all.”* Similar words came from Paloma. *“At the time people always asked me how I did it. When I look back, I wonder how I did. I can’t imagine working at that pace now.”* Ghalia explained that *“...you*

*are most organised when you are busy. It gives me comfort and confidence that if I need to, I can do it all over again and I will have the ability to get organised when needed.*" Selena shared similar thoughts. *"I have no idea how I managed my time and when I look back, it just didn't seem that hard. It was a matter of persistence. It was a matter of reaching goals. It was one day at a time."* Yet, *"...honestly, I don't think I could do it today. I just don't have the drive I had even ten years ago."* However, she continues to learn. *"That is the perspective that has changed. I now understand that I don't need school to learn."* James explained that *"...time management was vitally important to my success."*

Some participants reported that the time spent away from family and friends affected their lives more than they realised at the time. James continued: *"I chose to spend more time studying than being with other people."* He realised that *"In retrospect, the pressure caused me anxiety. Those busy summers took a toll on me and my marriage."* Khalil had a similar perspective: *"In retrospect, I didn't fully appreciate the colossal effort I was putting in, and how exhausting it was."* And *"...only now do I fully realise that I felt constantly mentally exhausted."* Samar reflected with some regret: *"Looking back I realise I put too much pressure on myself to get the highest grades. I sometime forgot to look at the bigger picture and appreciate the learning experience."* Yet her insight today reflects the wisdom she gained: *"That withstanding, it was a very productive and enlightening experience."* Sarah would sum it up: *"Time became very valuable after studying, why not use it wisely?"*

To reiterate, managing time required great self-discipline, which exacted a toll from most participants. Most, but not all enjoyed time management support from their families and friends. Two participants hired domestic support as part of their time management strategy. Participants had to develop their own strategies of managing their time and finding some balance.

#### **4.5 Theme Three: Learning and life skills**

In this theme of enquiry participants were asked:

- Can you name the most important life and / or learning skills that contributed to your success and how you acquired them?

- In what ways did those skills enable you to succeed in your graduate studies?

Numerous learning emerged, including organisation, collaboration, research, information management, data analysis, academic writing, ‘skim’ reading, critical thinking, planning, technical skills, communication, and persuasive skills. Participants also identified general life skills such as 'grit,' determination, perseverance, passion, resilience, patience, persistence, asking for help, learning from others’ mistakes, task completion, self-discipline, self-reflection, and life-work balance.



**Figure 3: Theme Three main themes and emerging sub-themes**

#### **4.5.1 Learning skills**

Participants had common learning skills that contributed to their success. Other than time management, which was an essential skill for all, majority of participants agreed that organising skills was key to their success. Selena explained that “...the most important skill I have sort of comes naturally, and that is organisation and [being] detail-oriented. I am extremely neat and organised, and I pay attention to even the minutest details.” Ghalia echoed Selena: “I have always, since my school days in Amman, been well organised and conscious of the importance of time management.” Similarly, Harry was “...a firm believer that the key to success in any form of higher education is the ability to be organised.” He further explained that “...the key was to organise my year and identify the blocks of time where I could prioritise the Ed.D.”

Norman shared something similar: *“Doing a part time degree while working really requires good organisation and time management.”* Khalil thought that *“...a big part of it is based on will power. Many people are easily distracted and choose to waste time, and they need to develop enough inner strength to put their learnings about good organisation to use.”*

Many participants stressed on the importance of writing skills. Courtney explained: *“In my mind, no matter your discipline, at the graduate level a solid grasp of the written language is essential.”* Courtney confirmed why *“most assignments involved writing... many of my courses were online or hybrid, even class discussions required the ability to write.”* Interestingly, James was the only participant who mentioned the ability to use electronic mail to *“...avoid the work of transcribing many hours of conversations, which I had done for previous research.”* He also *“...learned how to delete huge amounts of text ruthlessly.”* These two technical skills might seem specific to one project, but James added: *“Overall, I learned to be an efficient researcher and writer.”*

Not only writing, reading was an important skill for learning. Mona stressed *“reading for each class was around 100 pages per week therefore I had to develop fast reading skills, diagonal reading skills, other skimming skills, and mind mapping skills to be able to cope with reading and understanding the content while being tight for time.”* A success enabler as she explained *“reading and research skills helped increase my independence in learning.”*

Samar, who was 50 at the time, started her studies with a gap of 20 years from formal education, had to acquire new skills in a short span of two years. The skills included, research methodology, data collection and analysis, ICT, and assignment writing *“all new skills learned on my course.”* Some skills were challenging for Samar especially IT. However, she learned and enjoyed at the same time *“I was so surprised with my progress and achievement on this course and the confidence it gave me to try out and use technology on my practicum with my students.”* She elaborated *“Acquiring these skills equipped me with confidence and motivation to continue to grow.”*

For Amir, critical thinking was *crucial* “*Critical Thinking helped me succeed in my graduate studies.*” Ghalia strongly agreed with Amir “*critical and creative thinking were a crucial component of the MEd.... unfortunately, neither of these skills were taught to me during my school or university years.*”

Learning skills emerged varied among participants, whether acquired during this academic journey or from their previous learning experiences, all agreed not only helped them earn their degrees, but also played a major role in their career development. Further on this will be presented under theme seven.

#### **4.5.2 Life skills**

Almost all agreed that certain life skills such as resilience, perseverance, determination, and grit were important. James reported that “*...the most important life skill that enabled my success was task completion, or the determination to finish what I had started.*” Similarly, “*determination*” and “*perseverance*” were important skills for Nora and Sally. Selena wrote: “*I think with those three skills – organisation, patience, and persistence – you can accomplish just about anything.*” Self-discipline was one skill that helped Sam succeed. “*Since the master’s degree is heavily based on reading and working, I liked it the most.*” Sam stressed that “*...if it was a 100 per cent on campus programme, I would have never been able to enrol in it, or to pass it.*” Samar recognised a different skill. “*The course placed great emphasis on self-reflection. This was the first time I had done this as a regular and assessed exercise. I found it therapeutic and very personalised.*” Amir found reflection important, “*...especially when there was too much time pressure. It helped to take a breath, see through what I would like to achieve.*” Courtney found “*grit*” a core skill for being able to complete her degree, “*...that inability to accept non-completion as an option was the greatest skill that assisted me in completing my doctoral work.*” She attributed this to her upbringing. “*My family always encouraged me to get up every time I fell down.*”

Passion was a reason for success by Norman: “*Passion helped me as it gave me a drive to complete my degree.*” Sawsan identified “*hard work, resilience and taking responsibility*” as her life's motto in all aspects, including studying. Paloma recalled how her children were the reason to be resilient, even when

she wanted to quit. *"I am not sure where this resilience comes from. Every time it felt like it was too much, or I wanted to quit, I thought of my children and that I had to do it for them."* Paloma learned another important life skill that she would not have been able to succeed without: *"...asking for and accepting help. I realised I could not do this thing alone."* Rather than offering help, James watched two of his colleagues, as intelligent as they were, fail to complete their doctoral programmes. This too was a life skill. *"I suppose one might say that a life skill was the ability to learn by observing the mistakes of others!"*

Some participants reported that skills that they mastered from life circumstances helped in their studies. Martin had purchased a home just months before his programme started. As he described that time, *"the additional work in house upkeep and improvements gave me experience in handling multiple simultaneous efforts."* A similar thought was expressed by Olivia. *"My abilities to wear multiple hats."* Sally claimed the *"freedom to choose"* as a key to her success. *"Choosing to go back to university as a mature post grad student."* Exercising her freedom was an important act, followed by strategic planning.

#### **4.5.3 Skills acquirement**

Participants attributed the skills they acquired from their upbringings, previous education, work, and life experience, self-taught, developed, by observation, and out of necessity. As Amir explained: *"I acquired the skill from my early education and family environment."* Upbringing and prior life experience were key source for acquiring many skills. Courtney's upbringing taught her to accept failing as a way to succeed *"I had the comfort to be able to fail ... I safely failed and got up again over and over."* While for James, he learned it observing the failure of his colleagues *"I had seen two friends fail to complete their programmes; both of them were very intelligent people and better scholars than me ... I was not going to fail."*

Some skills were either further developed or acquired during postgraduate years. Mona's reading and research skills *"acquired over the span of the 20 years ... and they were honed during the master's program."* Nora, James, Samar, Khalil, Selena, Ghalia and Sarah all reported skills that were self-

taught during their postgraduate study. Nora *“skim reading is something I taught myself and it was a must to be able to go through the massive reading required. The journals and summaries were again self-taught.”* As for James: *“I learned how to delete huge amounts of text ruthlessly. I learned that data quality mattered most, and that excessive quantity undermined my thesis.”* Selena developed her skills *“over time and practice.”* Some skills were developed out of necessity during postgraduate. As Paloma reflected: *“I don’t recall ever developing ‘good’ study habits prior to going back for my PhD.”* Once acquired, there is one way to master any skill as Courtney explained *“skills were honed by repetition.”*

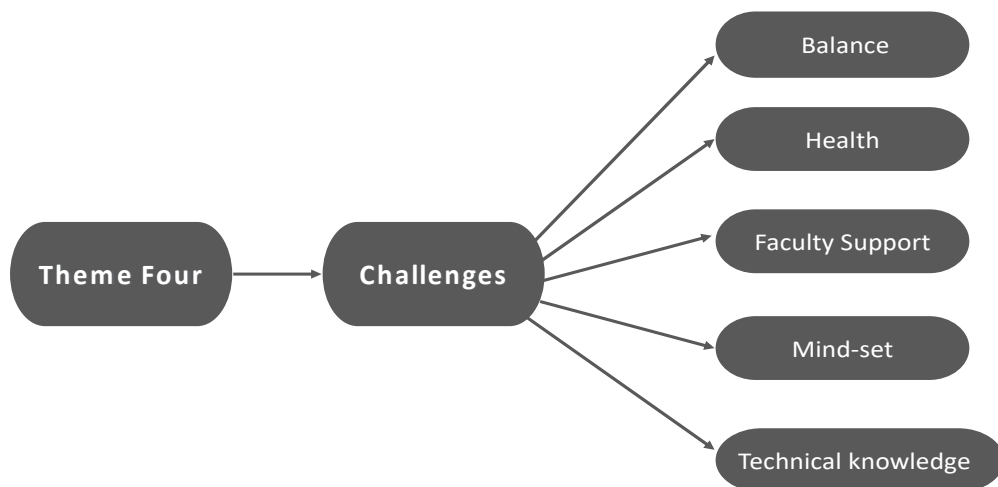
In summary, the most important skills identified by participants and repeated by almost all were organisation and perseverance. Separately, participants outlined other specific skills that were important for them in their own ways; some of these were reported by many. All agreed that these skills were pivotal for success.

#### **4.6 Theme Four: Challenges**

Before every participant's success came challenges. The fourth theme of enquiry focused on the significant challenges that participants encountered during their studies. They were asked:

- Did you encounter significant obstacles or challenges during those years?
- Were any of them unexpected?
- Please explain how you overcame them.

The common challenges that emerged were (life / work / study) balance, health, faculty support, mind-set, and technical knowledge. Three participants reported that they were able to complete their studies smoothly without any significant challenges.



**Figure 4: Theme Four main theme and emerging sub-themes**

#### 4.6.1 Balance

As most participants worked full-time, they were balancing work obligations with study deadlines. Amir explained that *“sometimes an unexpected business priority or trip popped up. The professors were mostly understanding [in] these situations. I spoke with them openly, contracting with them new deadlines sometimes.”* Norman planned to finish the Ed.D. programme in four years but finished it in five due to work obligations. *“I just had to re-motivate myself. I did this by going back to the university for a week and reconnect [sic] with my supervisors and colleagues. This gave me the momentum to resume my research.”*

Married participants with children had additional challenges. Mona *“... was finding it hard to balance my time between my work, study and raising children and attending to a husband.”* Selena had three boys, a husband, a sick mother and a full-time job. *“Trying to find a balance to include everyone in my life was a challenge.”* Courtney encountered several significant challenges, including becoming a mother for the first time. *“I was in that challenging space of learning how to be a mother on top of working full-time and then adding school into the mix.”* When she found a balance between motherhood and studying, she was pregnant again.

#### 4.6.2 Health

Some participants had health challenges. Sawsan had a major operation that slowed her progress. Yet, she reflected positively on that time: *“I took it as an*



*opportunity to focus on reading relevant literature to my thesis.”* Mona was diagnosed with breast cancer in her second year of graduate study. She overcome this huge challenge with the support of her professors. *“My professors were a big reason why I continued with my studies, despite getting a cancer diagnosis after completing just three courses in the programme.”* James developed back pain from the long hours working behind a computer and had to see a doctor, chiropractor, and change his seating arrangement to manage the pain. *“Had I not solved this problem I may not have finished the work because of the constant pain.”*

#### 4.6.3 Faculty Support

Sally's biggest challenge was the lack of supervisory support: *“They appear to be reluctant to provide 'advice' and I am not sure why, but it was always non-tangible talk, rarely something solid to support me. I just wish they would be willing to spend time talking to their students, getting to know them and their work.”* Her expectations were not met. *“My biggest shock was the support that was not there! I did not expect to be so alone in the journey.”* To overcome this lack of support she relied upon two colleagues who were going through similar learning journeys: *“I was able to call on each of their strengths to support me in my work.”* A similar story was shared by James. *“The biggest surprise was the unwillingness of faculty members to join my thesis committee. There were professors who published and taught about my specific topic who did not even bother to reply to my invitations to participate. Their reluctance delayed my studies.”* After threatening to go to a lawyer, his supervisor finally took action to form his thesis committee. While doing her teaching practicum, Samar encountered challenges because *“...my mentor was not very helpful, and I learned very little from him. He often asked me to cover lessons which I wasn't prepared for. He observed me teaching and usually his feedback was very negative and critical.”* Luckily, *“My professor's feedback was the most helpful and related to what I had learned on the M.Ed.”* Courtney was frustrated after her first advisor died in an accident. She explained that *“...no one in the department but my first advisor had made an effort to get to understand my interests, this [second] one didn't -- likely not out of not caring and more out of the sheer lack of time based on her workload.”* Courtney was able to overcome

this challenge by thinking of her late advisor. *"I had to pick myself up and persist."*

#### 4.6.4 Mind-set

For some, just becoming a student again after a gap of years was a challenge. Ghalia explained that *"...the most significant challenge I faced was adjusting to be[ing] a student again at the age of 45. It took a while to adjust."* Ghalia was able to overcome her biggest challenge. *"I worked on myself, received a lot of encouragement and often pushed myself outside my comfort zone to eventually become more willing to accept new challenges."* Samar opened up about how she felt when she first joined the program: *"I was very nervous, lacked confidence in my abilities and my knowledge of education and was afraid of looking stupid in front of my peers."* Through the program Samar was able to overcome this challenge: *"As I started to read, I gained confidence and started to believe that I was capable of understanding and implementing what I was learning."* Amir, an MBA graduate over 30, explained why he was not able to finish his PhD at the first attempt. *"Professors did not have the mind-set of having a Ph.D. student who is in business and has a different background and schedule."* He continued: *"When I came to the thesis stage, the academic committee started to put together strange barriers as I was not a typical student. I had to 'freeze' my Ph.D. at the thesis stage."*

#### 4.6.5 Technical knowledge

Martin had a purely technical challenge understanding the maths necessary to represent his engineering: *"My math skills have never been strong - I'm in engineering because of my interest in the behaviour of things and how to make them work."* Harry found a challenge in collecting data, as his study participants lived two hours away. Having to fit the time around work and family commitments, Harry emphasised how this limited the *"weight of data I collected."* James reported something similar: *"With the distance came challenges such as print resources, conferring with my supervisor and submitting chapters."* Khalil identified few challenges: *"...formulating ideas for a research topic, working on the actual research over long periods of time, and being nimble and able to pivot where research ideas didn't quite work out."* Martin found the difference to undergraduate work to be a challenge. *"I had to*

*learn that being a grad student is very different from undergrad (including Master's in my case, since we didn't have a thesis requirement at Stanford) - one is intended to be more self-directed vs. simply learning course material, solving homework problems, and taking exams.” He elaborated: “One needs to integrate various and often disparate learnings to solve a new problem.” Martin summed up his experience: “The Ph.D. pursuit is a large body of work spread out over a long-time frame, with some intermediate goals such as the candidacy exam. One needs a certain type of focus and self-discipline to be productive in such an environment, and I found (and still know) that I function better with short term goals.”*

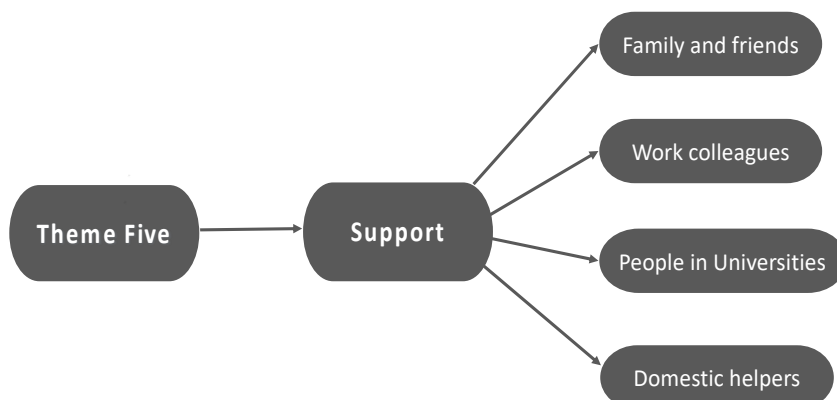
These accounts show that participants overcame significant challenges to finish their postgraduate programmes. Other than balancing work, life, and study obligations, each had personal challenges. A few faced challenges from their universities that were unexpected. In the following theme, participants comment on the support they received that helped them overcome these serious challenges.

#### **4.7 Theme Five: Support**

In this theme of enquiry participants were asked:

- Who supported you the most?
- Can you explain how?

All agreed that without the support they received they could not have completed their degrees. The key sources were family and friends, work colleagues, people in the universities, and domestic helpers.



**Figure 5: Theme Five main theme and emerging sub-themes**

#### 4.7.1 Family and friends

The support of families was key to the success of all participants; specifically, their spouses, parents, and children. Harry gave credit to his wife. *"It was her [sic] who actually encouraged me to return to education and apply for a graduate university course in the first place. When I did need some time to work on the thesis or disappear off on data collection, I could do so with unconditional support."* Norman acknowledged support from family and colleagues, but *"...especially my wife, who was very supportive and understanding through the whole process."* A similar recognition was made by James: *"My wife, by not complaining about the time I took away from home to attend courses, or the time I took at home writing, or the six weeks I took one summer to finish writing my thesis. She was always supportive of me."* Martin had similar appreciation for the support of his wife. *"The decision to pursue a Ph.D. part-time was a joint one... she knew from the start that it would require some changes to our lifestyle."* He explained how critical her support was for him to finish the programme: *"...her income was our only source of food, gas and house payments during 1989.... Her participation in and support of my journey was critical to my success."*

Not only wives were supportive of participants. Nora acknowledged *"...my dear husband, who was my backbone throughout. His pride and interest in my work was a great motivator."* Nora also recognised her father, *"who insisted to finance my study."* Samar attributed success to *"My husband [who] encouraged me to go back to education and supported me financially."* She explained *"...as the course became more intense, we spent less time together. He did feel neglected, especially when I was at university in the evenings. I also felt guilty that I wasn't around. I'm sure there were times when he wondered why he had encouraged me to go back to studying - but overall, he was supportive and not too demanding of my time."* Courtney explained that *"My husband and my young children gave me the space to learn. [They] picked up other duties or accepted with understanding my absence and the things we had to let go because I was in school and working full-time."* Ghalia, a mother of five girls, reported that *"My husband was my biggest support in this journey. He encouraged me to sign up for the course to start with and continued to support me throughout. He was patient and accepting of all changes we had*

*to make at home, willingly took more responsibility with the girls and covered for me whenever needed.” Sarah gave credit to her family. “My husband was my first support and my son. Giving me the time and understanding.” In addition to recognising her husband, Selena recalled that “...my mother supported me the most while she was alive. After that, my current husband, Jason, supported me every step of the way and encouraged me to finish.” Olivia concurred: “My family, my mother and husband were the most supporters, [sic] and without them I would have never been able to make it.”*

Some participants enjoyed support from many people. Khalil was one of the luckier ones. *“My wife was very supportive by taking the kids to give me more free time to work on my research when I was falling behind. While the time was extremely helpful, I think my parents support was more important because they constantly reminded me that the challenges and obstacles, I was facing were normal and that I could get through them if I just kept trying. The emotional support was extremely important to me.”* Paloma corroborated Khalil's experience: *“I had a large support network of friends, colleagues and family without whom I would not have finished. It is hard to pick who supported me the most as if I removed any single piece of my support system, I think I would have not been successful.”*

A unique experience was shared by Mona, who fought breast cancer while finishing a master's degree. She also dealt with a divorce and taking care of two girls. Thus, she needed all the support she could find. *“My professors supported me most, my mother, my ex-husband, children and maid.”* Unusually, her ex-husband helped her when she was studying and in chemotherapy sessions. He also helped financially so Mona could focus on recovering and completing her degree: *“My ex-husband was taking care of the children during the time I was attending classes in the afternoons. He also helped me financially.”*

Courtney *“...built an amazing personal learning network, my friends and family and finally, the faculty in my department.”* Selena gave credit to *“...my close friends and the little bit of family I have [who] supported me throughout various stages of the process.”* She continued: *“I had family/friends that helped me*

*with my children while I went to class in the evenings. I had moral support and some cheerleading from friends and family too.”*

#### *4.7.2 Work colleagues*

The more fortunate were also supported by their managers and co-workers, such as Amir and Sam, who received financing from their employers. *“They encouraged my learning. This was big support”* Amir reported. Support at work was experienced by James and Martin. James explained how *“The principal of the school where I worked in Switzerland was supportive, as he agreed to special leave so I could return to Canada for the oral defence. When I got back to the school, he even raised a toast to me at the staff Christmas party for having achieved the doctoral degree.”* Martin had the greatest support from his direct manager: *“My being allowed to work part-time for so long took some internal organisational support and he had to convince some people that it was a worthwhile investment.”* He also gave credit to his colleagues: *“Other supporters were co-workers who had their PhD degrees and were able to give me some perspective on what the journey might be like and tell me I was up to it.”* Sally, single at the time, *“... was supported most by two colleagues and friends... parents and family, they were emotionally supportive.”* One colleague in particular supported her both *“...mentally and emotionally. He would call me to check on my mind and emotions, to encourage me, to keep me on track.”* His support filled the void left by her supervisor at the university: *“He really stretched my thinking, challenged my thoughts and encouraged me to be reflective, objective and to think for myself. He faithfully and tirelessly read and gave feedback on my assignments. It was exactly what I needed, and what I expected the university supervisor to do - I was so disappointed.”*

#### *4.7.3 People in universities*

Nora cited the importance of professors. One key was to plan well and a second *“...is to choose an advisor who is interested in your topic.”* Some participants were fortunate to get support from their advisors. Nora reported that *“...both my advisors in Dubai and in Birmingham gave me a lot of support throughout the three years. Both advisors offered to read my work more than one time and came back with useful comments.”* Paloma shared a similar reflection: *“The faculty [members] were extremely supportive, and I always felt*

*they believed in me and wanted me to be successful. This was a large part of what helped me overcome - so many people believing in me and supporting me [that] I couldn't let them down."* Likewise, Norman: *"My supervisors were both extremely helpful in guiding me through the process, giving me constant advice and encouragement to keep moving forward."* Support from study colleagues and classmates helped too: *"They [were] all going through similar challenges and so it is easy for them to relate and provide support and guidance."* Like Nora and Norman, Martin noted that *"...without my advisor's help and guidance, I would definitely never have completed the work. He was patient in working with me on my research, never expecting more than I could deliver but having a good sense of what I was capable [of] and allowing me to push myself to meet his needs."* James received support from his supervisor *"...after I showed him some chapters. He helped me get a committee formed. He waited to see if I could produce something of value. He was critical of my first draft, especially of the theoretical background I had chosen for my literature review. Once I showed him a second draft, he was supportive and even read my chapters over his summer holiday to help keep me going."*

#### *4.7.4 Domestic helpers*

There were other sources of support reported. Sawsan, a divorcee, acknowledged that *"...my domestic maid helped me in managing the house. My children supported me by being patient, helped me in distributing and collecting the completed surveys to the students in the different schools that were surveyed. Simply, they let me alone!"* Samar also gave credit to domestic helpers. *"My housekeeper and driver really kept the house running smoothly. They really made everything possible. Without this crucial support for the girls, I couldn't have gone back to studies."*

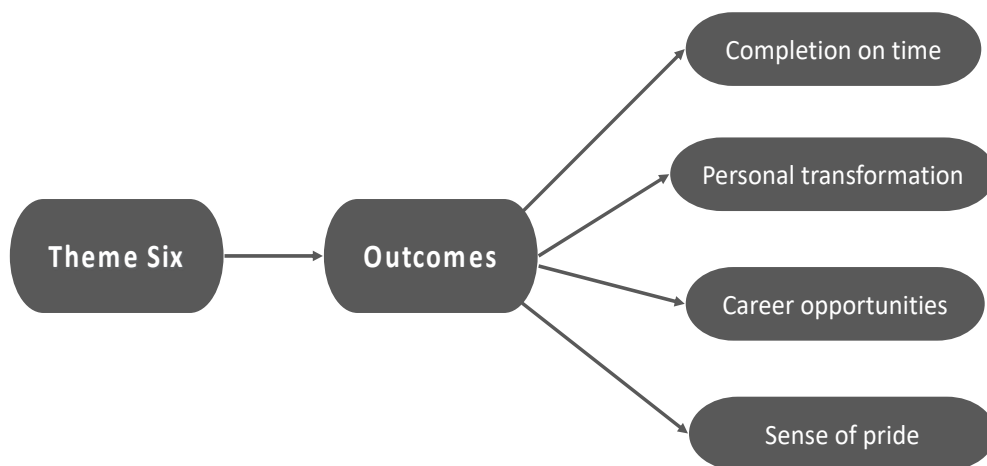
In summary, possibly none of the participants would have succeeded without support from others. All had the 'right people' to whom they could turn. Perhaps Selena summed up the gratitude of all participants: *"I am very thankful that the right people come into our lives at just the right time!"* Mature students' success is important not only to them, but also for the people around them who supported them.

## 4.8 Theme Six: Outcomes

Under this theme of enquiry participants were asked:

- Can you explain the most rewarding and/or satisfying outcomes of your postgraduate studies?
- Are these understood in the same ways now as when you graduated?
- Please elaborate on your perspective at both times.

Nine of the 18 participants reported that the most rewarding outcome was simply completing their degrees. Others were personal transformation, career opportunities and a sense of pride.



**Figure 6: Theme Six main theme and emerging sub-themes**

### 4.8.1 Completion on time

Completion was the most significant outcome in this study. Nine participants expressed the importance of this outcome. Nora wrote simply that *"...the most rewarding outcome was achieving my goal. Knowing I could do it made me feel nothing is impossible."* Her perspective remained the same. *"This outcome is still my biggest reward and is my motivation to keep growing."* Selena was also clear: *"I think the most satisfying outcome was just finishing my doctorate."* She added: *"I'm still enjoying being free of the pressures of grad school and I still enjoy being called doctor."* Sally echoed the others: *"The most rewarding outcome is earning (by my own sweat and blood) my doctorate. The sense of achievement is overwhelming and rewarding."* Courtney simply wrote: *"Being done with them! Knowing that I have no higher ladder that I have to climb."* Martin remarked that the words "rewarding" and "satisfying" *"...aren't ones that I would have associated with the completion of my work there."* However, he



continued: *"I felt accomplished to complete the thesis, which I believe described the process and results clearly and concisely."*

#### 4.8.2 Personal transformation

Norman confirmed that his perspective remained the same, as *"...the objective was clear: make a contribution in an area that I was passionate about and also open some future opportunities with the degree."* Sawsan explained that *"In addition to getting a better work opportunity, I believe I became a better enlightened person thinking more at the macro level."* She confirmed that her perspective remained unchanged. Another personal realisation was reported by Ghalia: *"I believe that the most rewarding outcome of this experience was the personal transformation I achieved."* She added that *"...it helped me view the world with more openness and acceptance and to seek to become a better person in all aspects of my life."* Martin realised that the knowledge he gained *"...had proven to be invaluable... this knowledge allows me to read technical publications with a critical eye."* Samar added that her rich knowledge of learning skills was major outcome of the M.Ed. programme: *"The course has shaped my thinking and made me into a lifelong learner."*

#### 4.8.3 Career opportunities

Amir wrote that *"...although not attributable only to my studies, I believe my graduate studies accelerated my career development."* Amir had delayed satisfaction. *"Most of the rewards and outcomes came in the longer term, through my career and life journey."* He explained how *"...it has impacted not only me but also the people around me. I became a more advanced coach / trainer for my teams. I contributed even more to my company."* Similar outcomes were reported by Sam, who mentioned *".... recognition... faster growth..."* Harry explained his perspective then: *"Doing the Ed.D. was (in my view) an essential part of my professional development, and I had to get a doctoral qualification to achieve what I wanted to in my career."* As an academic, the majority of his colleagues held doctoral degrees. When he received his, it was *"just another box ticked,"* as where he worked it was *"normal"* to be called 'Dr.' but after working in another university he understood his achievement differently: *"Not many people have a doctoral qualification, and that actually, it was (and is) a real privilege to use the title 'Dr.' and to have*

*the opportunity to undertake an in-depth research project.*” For Courtney, to know that “...my career possibilities were far greater than they had been before I finished my doctoral degree” was her biggest reward. “I often still suffer from bouts of 'imposter syndrome.' I am trying to maintain the humility that just because someone doesn't hold a terminal degree does not mean that they don't know enough.” Olivia did not get the financial rewards she was hoping for; however, she got two important outcomes: “career advancement” and a “sense of accomplishment.” For Mona, “...the most rewarding outcome is that I am now officially allowed to practice the work I love.” She added that “...the degree allows me to teach any subject or become a class teacher in the primary school.” Although a new graduate, she reflected on her new perspective: “I see how much more I need to learn and understand and that the master's [degree] has provided me with tools and direction as to how to access learning further and become a lifelong learner.” James explained that “At first, having a doctoral degree made no difference. The year after, my contract was not renewed, and I had to find a new place to work. But the new place was possible because I had the degree.” As time passed “I gained positions of greater responsibility and authority as a result of the doctoral degree.” James summed up in this way: “I think the degree lends some credibility to my work as I meet new people, but the degree does not serve as cover if I do poor quality work. Competence remains more important than qualifications or credentials.” Not only Paloma was rewarded on a personal level, but “...my 'promotion' to visiting assistant professor was satisfying as it was a first step in my goal to be a professor at the university where I worked.” She understood thing differently years later. “There were no open positions where I worked and due to a chance encounter, I ended up going down a different career path.” The difference is that “...the Ph.D. wasn't only needed to be a professor but opened up other doors both within and outside of academia.” She summed up by noting that “the work that I thought I was going to do as a result of my degree I have not yet achieved, and this has been frustrating.”

#### 4.8.4 Sense of pride

Samar and Sarah shared a similar “sense of accomplishment and pride.” Sarah emphasised her sense of pride: “The best reward is the knowledge

*about my abilities and strong will.” Khalil agreed on “...the sense of accomplishment. Of knowing that I could commit to something difficult and spend six long years working hard to reach this important personal achievement.” A new graduate when he responded, his perspective has not had time to change much. He added: “Perhaps over time I may have a different perspective, but in the relatively short time since my graduation the sense of satisfaction and relief has been my dominant feeling and the most satisfying.”* Martin explained that two different kinds of reward were *“...receiving a significant salary increase for three years following the degree...and [I] felt highly respected for the achievement of developing and publishing a significant body of technical work.”* He elaborated: *“We had two papers approved for publication, which were my first two in refereed journals, and I remember being proud of that.”* However, *“...my research was really just an extension of my advisor's knowledge, innovation and passion for advancing the state of the community's knowledge.”* Sally expressed *“a sense of respect and humility towards the work, research, publications of the many, many, many people out there who are so often uncelebrated and even unnoticed.”* Paloma had a more personal take on the outcomes: *“I think the most rewarding outcome is how proud my kids were, and continue to be, of what I achieved and the impact it had on their lives.”* And *“...I was also extremely proud of myself for finishing...”* a sentiment that has remained the same. Sam expressed how the degree made him feel as being a role model for his children. Sam thought the same about these outcomes in 2019 as he did at graduation.

Perspectives on outcomes then and now differed in several ways. Nine participants reported that there was no major shift. Four participants graduated only few months before this study was conducted, one of whom is Mona: *“I just graduated this summer therefore I only have one perspective about this.”*

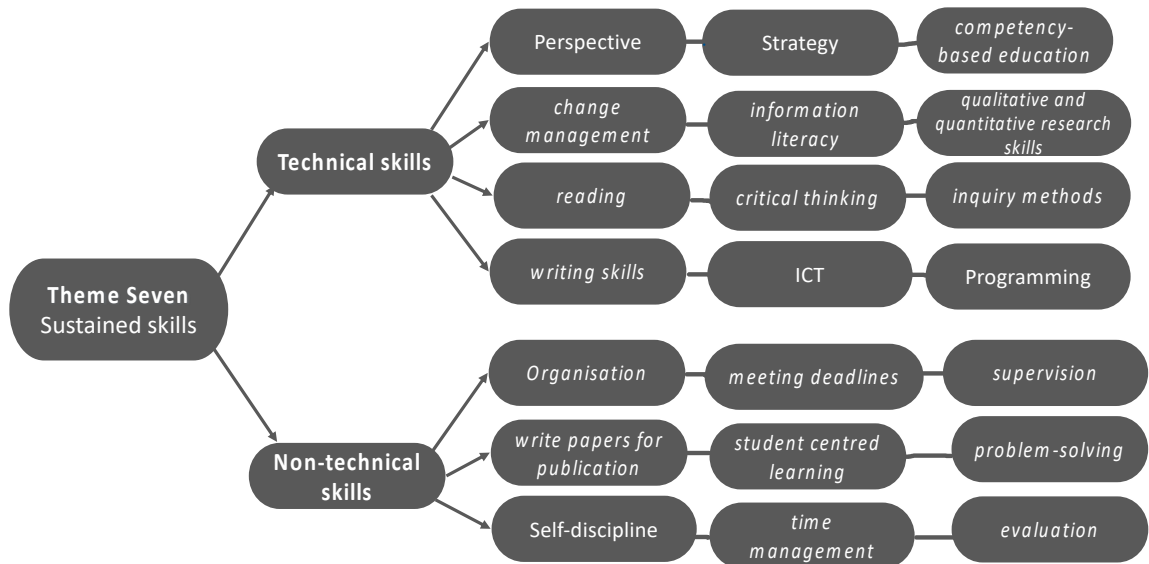
#### **4.9 Theme seven: sustained skills**

In this theme of enquiry participants were asked:

- How are you using the skills that you developed in your graduate work today?
- Have these skills enabled you to achieve greater career rewards?

- If so, how? Please consider very specific and complex skills.

Skills that participants developed did enable them to advance their careers. They are grouped into two categories, technical and non-technical.



**Figure 7: Theme Seven main themes and emerging sub-themes**

#### **4.9.1 Technical skills**

Amir responded by stating that *“I am using perspective every day while [...] acquiring new companies, entering [in] to new industries. I use strategy for assessing current and possible new businesses. I use change management every day in business, and this was one of the important subjects of my studies.”* Courtney reported that *“[Knowing] how competency-based education programs are developed and run not only got me hired as director [I was] then eventually promoted to Associate Dean.”* She elaborated by explaining that *“I am utilising that knowledge daily as Associate Dean. I also use my information literacy, qualitative and quantitative research skills regularly.”* Nora reported that: *“...the love of reading, curiosity and critical thinking...”* were the main reasons for success *“...in my chosen career. I wanted to become an academic. I am now a professor of education in a graduate teacher prep program.”* She added: *“These skills were developed through my research study and have made my personal and professional life more meaningful and more exciting.”* Sawsan reported similar benefits. *“I became a consultant and a governor for three schools in our region as people in our region trust educators who do their doctorate degrees with reputable universities.”* She continued: *“ I do*

*consultations and I follow the same inquiry methods I did for my doctorate [sic] thesis using quantitative and qualitative methods. Moreover, I developed my ICT and writing skills.” Norman applied the skills learned in his doctoral studies: “My research was closely linked to my actual work, so my study programme has given me wider depth of knowledge in terms of work. It has also enabled me to be better organised.” James categorised the skills he developed: “I think that there are two kinds of knowledge to consider. One, propositional knowledge, i.e., knowing that. Two, procedural knowledge, i.e., knowing how.” He gave some examples of both. An example of propositional knowledge is “...critical thinking. I learned the value of getting to one's core beliefs as a prerequisite for reasoning forward to new understanding.” As for procedural knowledge, or knowing how to do something, he recalled that “I learned social skills, particularly how to interview people for understanding. These are skills I use often in my current work.” James added that “I became a better writer in grad school, and that improved ability stays with me today and helps me earn my living.” As for the advancement of his career, James replied that “In recent years, the skills from grad school have been key to getting some types of work. Having the doctoral degree gave me entree but being able to do high quality work was what made me valuable to organisations.” Sally confirmed the value of the skills she developed: “My boss has now appointed me as an advisor and part of the strategic team.” Paloma wrote that “I am currently involved in a project that involves building on the qualitative skills I used in my dissertation. I definitely use the skills I developed around writing a research question, how to write a literature review, methodology. I also used these skills in writing previous grant [proposals] and in the current project I am working on.” Khalil explained that “there are specific technical skills I developed, such as expertise in specific machine learning algorithm and programming.*

#### **4.9.2 Non-technical skills**

Khalil also wrote about the value of non-technical skills: “*There were also non-technical skills I developed or strengthened, such as how to do a proper literature review to understand the prior art in a research area [and] how to write research papers for publication. I believe the non-technical skills are going to prove the most useful to me in the long run, as those are skills, I can*

*use independent of what technology or problem I'm working on.*" Martin agreed that non-technical skills had helped most in his technical career: *"The final skill that I may have honed during my Ph.D. work is writing about complex and large-scale work; I have written several significant technical papers about complex projects I've been involved in at the lab. Having written a thesis allowed me to plan and execute those writing tasks more effectively."* Martin was rewarded after obtaining his degree by *"...being given leadership roles where I'm responsible for teams of mostly Ph.D.-degreed engineers and scientists. I also received a substantial salary raise in the two years following the degree being awarded."* Harry reported the value of *"A number of the project skills that I developed (around meeting achievable deadlines; organising my work; etc.). I have been able to share [these] with my own research students through supervision, as well as help students identify, develop and refine their research project ideas using my own experiences as a frame."* Samar shared a similar thought. *"During my M.Ed. and since I have tried to implement new teaching methods in my classroom, including student centred learning, [task] differentiation and inclusion."* Selena applied the skills she learned at work and in her family life. *"I use my organisational and problem-solving skills as well as [when] mentoring my students each term. I apply the project and time management skills I've learned to my service activities as well as with my son and his schoolwork."* Olivia explained how skills developed benefited her: *"I am currently much better in revising personal statements, essays and conducting more successful interviews, conducting staff performance evaluation and designing professional development plan for the division."*

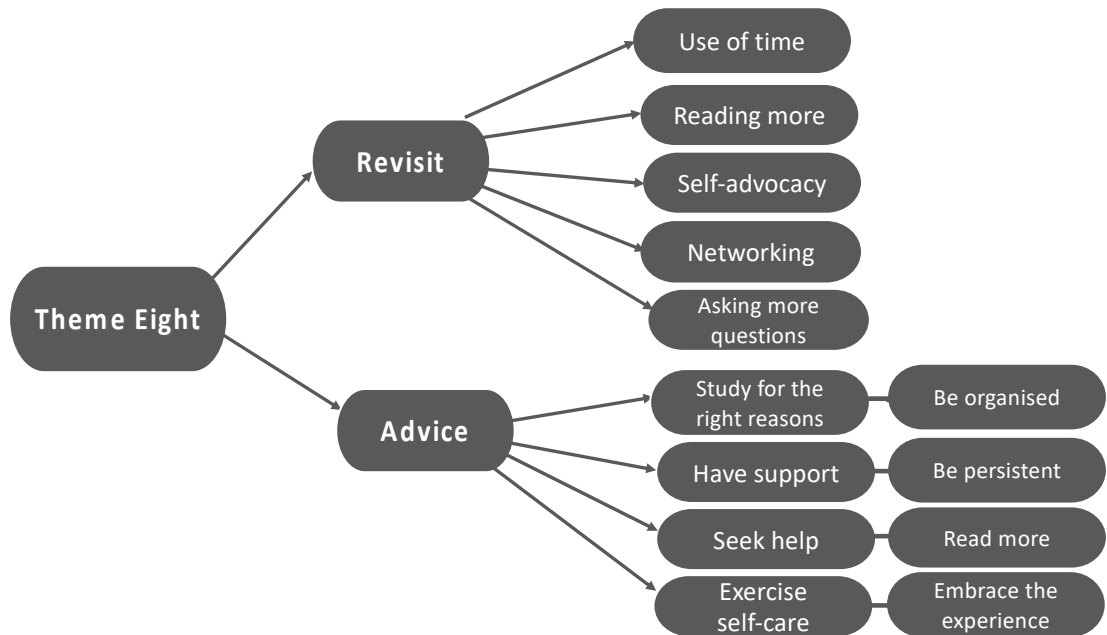
To conclude, a combination of both technical and non-technical skills that participants developed through their postgraduate studies and were able to sustain did enable them to advance in their life and careers.

#### **4.10 Theme Eight: revisiting and advice**

Under this theme of enquiry participants were asked:

- If you could revisit your graduate study years, what would you do differently?

- What advice would you give to a mature student pursuing a higher degree?



**Figure 8: Theme Eight main theme and emerging sub-themes**

#### 4.10.1 Revisiting

Sixteen participants reported that if they could revisit their studies, they would do things differently. The key finding that emerged was their use of time. Other findings were reading more, self-advocacy, networking, and asking more questions.

Nora mentioned her use of time: *“If I could revisit, I would have taken more time. I would have pondered more on many questions along the way. A doctorate is not a degree to accomplish ... it’s a life journey.”* Sally shared a similar reflection: *“I would spend more time in university attending other activities. I feel I missed out on more of the academic thinking and way of life. I would be more in contact with supervisors as I felt I did not get the best from them.”* The use of time was also what Ghalia would change: *“I would like to give myself more time and perhaps finish the course over a longer period of time. Embrace the experience as much as possible.”* Selena responded similarly. *“I regret leaving my cohort a year earlier than I could have. I was no longer surrounded by people motivated in my field. There was a void, and it was hard to fill despite the fact that my friends and family listened. It just wasn’t*

*the same.*” Mona had similar reflections: *“I would have gotten to know more of my fellow graduate students at a deeper level if I had the time. I would have taken more risk in doing projects with people I didn't trust to gain that experience.”* Sawsan wished she had more time: *“I would not have done it with a full-time job.”* Paloma shared a similar wish: *“It would be to not have worked and instead done research/worked as a T.A.”*

Amir had two experiences, the first of completing a master's programme which he was satisfied with, and the second of *not* completing a doctoral programme. He realised that *“...maybe I could have taken some more time before the thesis stage, to speak with the professors, understand their needs, explain my situation to them...to help smoothen some of the friction I received during the thesis stage.”* Contrary to Amir, Norman *“...took an extended break before starting the thesis and lost a year in the process. I spent a lot of time trying to perfect every chapter of the thesis before moving on to the next one, and again I think I lost a lot of time in the process.”*

Samar would read more. *“Doing the course has made me appreciate that reading is crucial to development and learning and to continue to grow, expand our knowledge, understanding and empathy.”* Martin agreed. *“I would definitely spend more time reading the literature in the field of my thesis work. It would have been more enriching personally to develop a better understanding of the broader field and particularly its participants.”*

Having lost her supervisor halfway through the programme, Courtney reflected on what she would do differently. *“I would self-advocate better. I would be more persistent in garnering the attention and help I needed from my chair to move through the last part -- the dissertation hours -- more quickly.”* Khalil had similar reflections on his choices of advisor and topic: *“If I could go back with my present knowledge and experience, perhaps I would have been more careful about picking my advisor, making sure that the topic was more interesting to me and more directly applicable to my career interests.”*

James shared very specific things he would do differently. *“Skills wise, I would ask more questions of my supervisor earlier in the process... and being very*



*specific from the start by doing more research before writing the proposal.”* Based on the experiences he had with course content, James wrote that *“I would make no assumptions about course content or the instructors. I would take the published material for what it really was: advertising. And so, I would ask many more questions than I did then.”*

Exceptionally, Harry reported that *“Once I got the ‘bug’ of academic learning I always found study to be a pleasure rather than a chore, so I wouldn’t really change anything about my graduate study years.”*

#### 4.10.2 Advice

Participants were generous with their advice to mature students pursuing higher degrees. The two key findings were to 'study for the right reasons' and 'have support.' Other advice emerged, such as to be organised, read a lot, network, seek help, exercise self-care, be persistent, and embrace the experience.

Khalil’s advice was especially pertinent for mature students. *“Pursuing a higher degree (especially a Ph.D.) is difficult even under good circumstances. Someone who is mature is going to find it especially challenging because of other life commitments. They need to make sure they have (1) a very strong reason that will keep them going and (2) strong support from those around them.”* Norma’s advice was to *“...stay committed by reminding yourself why you pursued this degree in the first place.”* Moreover, *“...try and stay organised, work within the timelines set by the university. And don’t hesitate to seek moral support from family and friends. They play a huge role in letting you complete your degree.”* Samar also mentioned family support. *“Your family will actually be very proud of you and you will be a role model for your children. It will encourage them to read and work hard too. I would encourage anyone to return to education.”* Sam advised students to *“...study in front of your family members, and always talk to them about how interesting it is. This will be one good motivator for them to pursue their personal development after graduation.”* Sawsan advised students to *“...focus, plan and organise your time well and remember; when there is a will, there is a way.”* Paloma’s advice: *“Don’t try to do it alone. Have a support system in place, accept help when*

*offered, and ask for help when you need it. Be intentional about self-care. A mature learner is likely balancing a job, family and school. Make sure to take care of yourself, make time for exercise, reflection and I strongly recommend yoga for stress reduction and centring.” Courtney declared that “You are your own best advocate -- you advocate for yourself in all other areas of life, your career, family, health. Do not be afraid to self-advocate during your graduate studies.”*

The main advice that Selena gave was to *“...be organised and methodical from the beginning. Save everything from your classes, especially any paper written. A schedule for writing is very important!”* A second piece of advice was to *“...stay connected to your cohort for as long as possible for moral support.”* Most importantly, *“...you must have persistence, patience, and the ability to jump through all of the hoops, and, of course, perseverance when all you want to do is quit.”*

Nora wrote that *“My advice is to take your time. Allow yourself to go deeper and to look further before deciding to move to the next step.”* Sally’s advice was to *“Stay within an academic community of researchers. It is important not to get isolated.”* And like Samar, Sally advised students to *“...read, read and read again - don’t rely just on what others say, get back to basics for yourself and come to your own conclusions.”* Sarah advised students to *“Never to give up; chunk information and study and practice as much as [you] can because persistence is what it takes to succeed.”* Mona advised students to *“...focus on the experience as much as on the goal.”* James *“...would advise graduate students to engage in a process of clarifying things right from the start... and to plan for success. I would tell them that their job is not to learn everything about their discipline... a graduate degree is a finite task.”* Harry made three points. *“First, make sure you are doing the study for the 'right' reasons... because you want to learn more or study further (the intrinsic reasons for study, if you will). Second, be organised and disciplined. Third, try and have the confidence to share your draft work [and] initial thinking.”* Harry added that *“While your pursuit of a graduate degree indicates that you're intelligent, motivated and capable, be sure to accept help and guidance from those around you - and work to expand that circle of potential collaborators and*

*advisors.*” One last bit of advice was to “*be brave and be yourself!*” Amir advised students to “*Enjoy the learning and don’t give up! Seek for help, if you need it.*”

In this theme participants were able to revisit and share extra tips on what they found most important and what could they have done different. The use of time came as dominant that they would do better if they could revisit. A feeling of guilt also overshadowed several participants. A natural feeling despite the effort to balance, as one obligation overtook the other.

#### 4.11 Theme Nine: final reflections

Under this last theme of enquiry, to help participants share final reflections, participants were asked:

- Are there other life or learning skills that help explain your success as a mature graduate student?
- If so, please elaborate on them.



**Figure 9: Theme Nine main theme and emerging sub-themes**

'Determination' was confirmed by most participants as the key to success, sometimes using synonyms such as 'resilience.' The maturity they brought to graduate work was alluded to in different ways, such as prioritising tasks and collaboration with others. A few participants mentioned study skills such as writing, note taking and using technologies.

Sarah responded succinctly on behalf of many. *"I would say that determination is key to success!"* Paloma attributed her resilience to her mother's influence. *"I believe I channeled much of her strength and resilience, and that deep sense that I needed to be strong and resilient for my children came from watching her strength and struggles."* Ghalia noted that *"...an older individual has a wealth of personal experiences that can enrich his / her graduate degree. Life and work experiences make learning a deeper and more rewarding experience."* Olivia concurred, writing that *"after 10 years in the workplace, I was conscious of my strengths and weaknesses, and could compensate accordingly. For example, deadlines in the business world had taught me how to budget my time."* Amir *"...was doing too many things at the same time. Business, studies, family, friends, and hobbies, etc. But this didn't mean I would be all over the place. I aligned my priorities and I focused on what I am [sic] doing."* Courtney explained that it was important to have *"...the ability to juggle and prioritise all of the demands on your time, as well as the ability to let your fear of missing out go."* Sawsan succeeded by *"planning and organising, resilience, problem solving, critical thinking, and researching and exploring."* Sally had *"a sense of self accountability, determination and a willingness to learn from others who experienced this journey."* Mona reiterated her *"...determination, writing skills, reading skills and analytical skills."* Nora thought that *"...the positive experience of collaboration during the programme has left me with determination to create a collaborative environment at work."* Martin agreed *"...collaboration was critical to success. While I still had more maturing to do as my life progressed, I believe this knowledge helped me to function more effectively with my professor and fellow graduate students."* Harry reiterated the value of time management: *"I really believe that the key to success as a mature grad student is to ensure that there are fairly substantial pockets of time where you can really get your teeth into your studies and be disciplined during these times."* Sam gave specifics: *"Skills such as communication, time management, and analysis will definitely add to your understanding, and automatically to your success levels."* Norman summed up: *"Skills such as communication, presentation, network of connections was [sic] all very helpful for data gathering, presentation and research."* Concerning part-time studies, Norman found that *"It was really challenging as a part-time student to manage work, family matters and study*

*at the same time. I think the various life lessons equipped me to prepare well and manage this situation.” Khalil added “... the ability to communicate, both in writing and in speaking / presenting, to explain and justify one’s work. This includes writing technical papers for publication, writing one’s dissertation, presenting research at technical conferences and symposia, and of course defending one’s dissertation. [These are all] critical to success for all graduate students.” Selena was “...very organised and methodical and I think that is an essential skill in graduate school. Patience and persistence are critical too.” She “...was often the only female in the class,” so “being stubborn and determined helped. If a woman is going to enter a male-dominated field, she should really consider how that makes her feel.” James reported that “in terms of life skills, I should add that patience and self-denial were required at the time. The ability to manage people who volunteered for my study [was important]. Perhaps somebody should write a book about how to get people to volunteer for research without being paid!”*

#### **4.12 Summary**

This fourth chapter outlined the main findings that emerged from the qualitative data collected from the electronic mail asynchronous 'interviews.' The findings of the nine themes of enquiry were presented in 'raw' form. The analysis of these findings is presented in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, FURTHER RESEARCH, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of mature students returning to higher education on part-time basis after a gap of years. The intent in this chapter is to discuss the findings and to answer the research main question and its subsidiaries. The main research question is: *How did they do it? Exploring the lived experiences of part-time mature students returning to postgraduate education after a gap of years and successfully completing their degrees.* The three subsidiaries:

- *Who were these mature students?*
- *Why did they return to higher education?*
- *What contributed to their successful degree completion?*

The chapter will discuss the findings of Chapter Four in light of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The findings were originally grouped into nine themes, sub-themes emerged from the original nine. For the purpose of this discussion, this chapter is structured around three main areas of discussion extracted from the findings' analysis, revealing key aspects of participants' lived experiences.

The first area of discussion 'identities of mature students' explores the significance of who were these participants, the gap of years, their multiple identities, and the connection between their current and prior experience. The second area 'motivation for learning' discusses the motives of participants to return, sustaining their motivation, their learning strategies, the learning skills used, how they managed time, and what challenges they had to overcome. The third area 'success enablers', discusses other contributors helped participants reach their goal of degree completion, including the 'life skills' and the support they received.

The chapter will next discuss the outcomes of their experiences. Finally, this chapter presents the limitations of the study, researcher subjectivity, suggestions for further research, and recommendations.

## **5.2 A phenomenological approach**

As reviewed in Chapter Three, for Heidegger (1996), space and time form our experience of phenomena. The participants' lived experiences reflected both concepts. Time and how it connects the past, present and future; space for their circumstances and their 'ways of being-in-the-world' (Mackey, 2005). Analysis of the findings was indeed not one dimensional but had multiple dimensions. Time, space, structure, and influences all contributed to the participants' narratives. The hermeneutic circle, 'to interpret' (Freeman, 2008), drew upon these multiple dimensions. Analysis was done by dissecting individual participants' narratives into parts and then fitting them into a new whole (Mackey, 2005). Taylor (1985, as cited by Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) described individuals as 'self-interpreted beings,' meaning their abilities to interpret the events of their own lives (p.8). Hence, dissecting and re-assembling the participants' interpretations of events allows the reader to appreciate their experiences in different ways.

### *5.2.1 An interpretive framework*

The intent of this framework is to present to the reader a visual interpretation of the researcher's understanding of the findings within the context of the research topic. An interpretative framework is 'a basic set of beliefs that drives action' (Guba, 1990, p.17). It helps the researcher to see the findings from a new perspective (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). The framework encompasses a particular theoretical model, in this case Boekaerts' (1999), that could help conceptualise the research phenomena. It also offers a wider range of interpretations that inform certain methodological choices. The value of such interpretations is decided by how much it matches participants' perspectives (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Furthermore, according to Perren and Ram (2004) placing the findings within a certain framework could help researchers reflect upon the possible consequences of any new perspective.

Consequently, the purpose of this framework was to simply help make sense of the data collected and later analysed, drawing a graphical interpretation out of the findings without a claim of its originality. It is justified for a phenomenological research as it shows what makes the phenomena unique

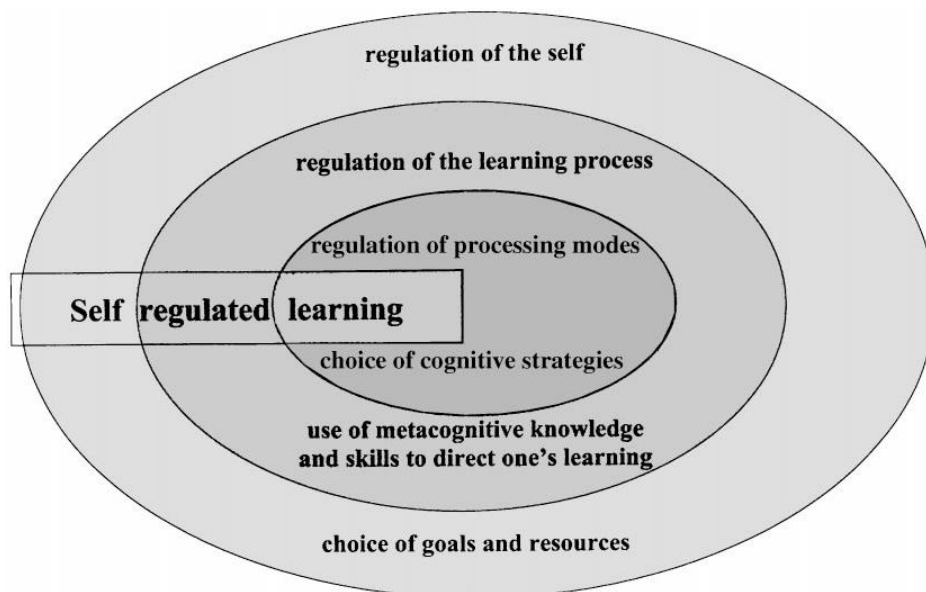
from the researcher's own perspective. It also presents the answers for the main research question, and the three sub-questions in a visual form.

For a successful interpretation, a rich and detailed data was collected from participants within the context of the phenomena under exploration. Hence, the use of semi structured interviews via electronic mail as a data collection method. The findings of the collected data were presented in Chapter Four.

In a phenomenological based research, when analysing the data, researchers attempt to explicitly interpret the meaning of the phenomena from the participants' point of view (Creswell, 2013). It is important to give evidence of the participants' sense making of the phenomena, as well as highlighting researcher's own. Thus, the data discussed in this chapter was carefully analysed, maintaining the voice of participants central; while, looking at the data from the outsider's perspective to help develop higher insights.

Several learning theoretical models were reviewed in Chapter Two, all of which help us understand how mature students successfully manage to complete their postgraduate degrees. However, the learning theoretical model used in this framework is based on Boekaerts' (1999) modified Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) model. This model best represents the interpretation of the participants' collective lived experiences. Boekaerts was the first to use situation-specific measures of the importance of goals and their influence upon students' motives and behaviour (Boekaerts & Niemivirta, 2000). Boekaerts' SRL model consists of three major components: motivation, cognition, and metacognition. She later emphasised the importance of emotional regulation (Boekaerts, 2011), a major component which was observed in most participants' experiences (Please see Figure 10).





**Figure 10: Boekaerts' (1999) original three layered SRL model.**

The study focused on mature students studying part-time. The findings revealed numerous learning strategies that Boekaerts' SRL model could accommodate. Hence, the choice to incorporate this model in the framework. To understand how the interpretive framework connects to the findings of this study, the components of the interpreted model are presented in detail.

The framework begins with a goal. As Boekaerts and Corno (2005) indicated, goals once set will direct the learning process, drive motivation, and influence the cognitive, metacognitive, and emotional regulation strategies required to achieve those goals. In this study, the participants' 'self-set goal' was pursuing postgraduate degrees. Hence, the success measure for this goal was the successful completion of their postgraduate degrees.

The framework then establishes the multiple identities of the mature students in this study. These are as discussed in Chapter Three; aged above 25 years, with gap of years away from formal education, study on part-time basis, have prior knowledge and experience, financially independent, with family obligations, and multiple roles.

The components of the learning strategies the participants had adopted, including their sub-components are then summarised. First, the motivation (the reason to return) 'why,' both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were listed. As illustrated in the framework, career advancement, financial gain, and getting the degree were the participants' extrinsic motivation to pursue a degree. While personal transformation, passion for learning, and determination were key intrinsic motivation factors to keep them going.

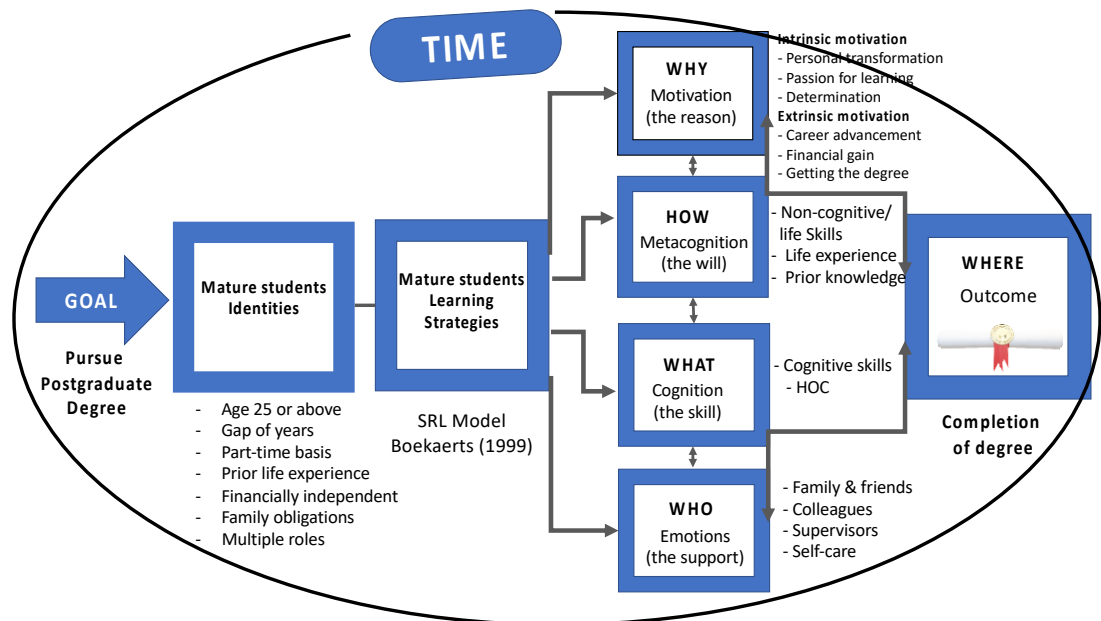
Secondly, the metacognition (the will to succeed) 'how.' Life skills beyond cognition found to be critical for mature students pursuing a degree. Life experience, as well as prior knowledge were also vital. Hence, in the framework these were listed under the will to succeed. Thirdly, the cognition (the cognitive skills) 'what.' Although this study had demonstrated the importance of life skills and prior experiences on mature students' lived experiences. Yet, a degree cannot be attained without appropriate cognitive skills such as the higher order cognition skills (HOC). Cognitive skills that were key to participants' experiences were discussed in this chapter.

Finally, the emotions (the support) 'who.' The findings confirmed what the reviewed literature suggested: it is almost impossible for mature students to complete their degree without support. Support from family, friends, colleagues, and supervisors are all essential. For most participants, finding the work/life/study balance was hard to achieve. Thus, from interpreting the findings, supporting oneself through self-care was included in the framework.

Time, as indicated by all participants, was the key for degree completion. In the interpretive framework, time encompassed the whole experience from beginning to end. From the time the participants start pursuing their degree, given their circumstances. Sustaining their motivation throughout the experience, while managing their multiple roles. To the time they successfully complete their degrees. Time was key element throughout their lived experiences, and as such emphasised in the framework.

The framework concludes with a destination. Among the other outcomes discussed in detail, the most important one, as per their set-goal, was ending

the experience with a degree in hand. This interpretive framework is simply an illustration of one possible interpretation of the data analysed. It is not meant to be a theoretical model to follow. However, it may guide some mature students towards degree completion (Please see Figure 11).



**Figure 11: An 'Interpretive Framework' for the lived experiences of Mature students returning to higher education**

### 5.3 Discussion

This analysis involved careful reading and rereading of the transcripts. This work identified key commonalities and compelling singular anecdotes. While each participant had unique experiences to share, there were common reasons for their success. Most, but not all participants shared deep thoughts on all nine themes of enquiry. All participants presented their journeys as positive transitions and turning points in their lives, despite the challenges they encountered. Almost all were able to precisely identify the key contributors to their successful degree completion.

For the purpose of this discussion, three main areas are discussed here. The areas were carefully selected based on the researcher's analysis of findings concluding what could be the main key attributes for a successful mature students' lived experience. Under each main area other related attributes are discussed. The identities of participants in respect of how the literature collectively represents such people is discussed first.

## **5.4 Area of Discussion One: Identities of Mature Students**

A mature student's commitment to studying is rarely exclusive, they often have to fulfil other roles in their lives. This section examines who were these participants. Discussing how the gap of years, having multiple identities, and their prior experience influenced their journey.

### *5.4.1 Who were these mature students?*

Participants were diverse in terms of age, nationality, gender and demographics. In the literature mature students are indeed diverse. Researchers such as Richardson (1994), McCune et al. (2010), Fragoso et al. (2013), and Hardiman (2014) differed when defining mature students and their ages. All agreed that they are heterogenous individuals who returned to formal education after gap of years. This study's participants had sizable age differences. Four were under 30 when they started, seven were between 32 and 39 and seven were above 40. The median age of the 18 participants was 38. As McCune's et al. (2010) categorised students under 30 as 'younger mature students' and those above 30 as 'older mature students.' Hence, the majority of this study are considered 'older mature students.' Munro (2011) noted that often mature students are from the 'older' group. An argument to be debated on the same ground that an exact definition of mature students is debated. Nonetheless, the only significant difference between the two groups as McCune et al. claimed is the level of motivation and the multiple responsibilities older mature students hold. A claim agrees with most participants in the study.

Thirteen participants were married with children and working full-time. Two were divorced and one separated, all with children. Only two were single without children. Ghalia and Samar were married with children; they were the only 'homemakers.' The remaining sixteen had full-time careers. All participants completed their degrees on a part-time basis. The choice of part-time study was similar to the reason cited in the literature, that is, having full-time careers with multiple responsibilities. O'Connor and Cordova (2010) believed that mature students who choose to study part-time are very motivated to learn. It was indeed the choice of participants to study part-time. For some, such as Khalil, this was the only option. Both Sawsan and Paloma,

single mothers after divorces, had full-time careers and children to raise. Their success confirmed what Briedenhann (2007) found: they were more dedicated than their younger peers. Nonetheless, despite the dedication, studying under the pressure of work and family was a key challenge to almost all participants.

#### *5.4.2 Gender gap*

Among participants, 61 per cent were female and 39 per cent male. This profile reflects what the literature identified as a 'gender gap' in higher education. However, it is difficult to refute or agree with the literature based on the small sample size of this study. The 'gender gap' here was based on the number of females and males accepted to participate in this study, which the researcher was able to reach and recruit within the limited means available.

Indeed, according to Archer et al. (2001) greater career opportunities that opened to women have encouraged more to pursue higher degrees. The OECD's latest *Education at a Glance* report reported that more women completed higher degrees than men, with a success ratio of 1:2 women compared to 1:3 for men (OECD, 2019c). Although Laming et al. (2016) suggested that policy makers need to encourage more men to enrol. This point is debatable. Sax et al. (2003) observed that there are fewer studies of men's enrolment than of women, which Stone and O'Shea (2012) explained was due to men's lack of interest to participate in studies. However, in the present study, the men who were invited were as willing as the women to participate. Furthermore, men (especially those who finished many years ago) were more thorough and open in their responses than women. Nonetheless, the simple fact that it was easier to find female participants than males continues the debate about gender balance.

#### *5.4.3 Gap of years*

For the purpose of maintaining the criteria of the research design in this study, the sample was based on the gap of years between the previous degree and the higher degree completed, provided they started their second degree after the age of 25. A criterion agreed by other researchers (e.g., Richardson, 1994; McCune et al., 2010; Fragoso et al., 2013; Saar, et al., 2014).

Among participants, the shortest 'gap' in this sample was two years and the longest 27, with an average of 12 years. A majority came to grad school with knowledge and experience, career and family obligations and financial independence. Regardless of the length of the gap, for most participants the gap of years was a major challenge. As noted by Swain and Hammond (2011), McCune et al. (2010), and Fragoso et al. (2013) the return could affect their abilities as students. A concern resonated by several participants. Best explained by Ghalia “...*the most significant challenge I faced was adjusting to be[ing] a student again at the age of 45. It took a while to adjust.*” Ghalia’s input and others reflected Mallman and Lee’a (2016) claim that mature students could be unsure of what work expected from them as students. Thus, the critical need to be supported when they return to education.

Several participants reported the lack of proper support by the university to help them adjust when they return. The study raises a concern echoing the voices of these participants and Preece’s (2000) for such lacking. Inviting more research in this area to consider the perspective of all stakeholders including those of the mature students.

#### *5.4.4 Multiple identities*

A significant finding of this study was the multiple roles almost all participants had to play while pursuing their degrees. Being married, raising children, for some getting divorced, remarrying, taking care of an ill family member, and working full-time. Dealing with multiple roles, a concept emphasised in the literature. The findings of the study agreed with Howard and Davies (2013) that mature students lack the exclusive identity of ‘being a student’. When returning to study they already have multiple identities. A disadvantage all participants have experienced with no exception.

Even more, for some participants, multiple identities created pressure and with it a need to escape one identity to another. Scott et al. (1998) noted the notion among mature students wanting to develop an identity beyond the ones they have. Indeed, Scott’s et al. notion is observed among few. Selena escaped a bad marriage, Mona her fight against cancer, and Sawsan her difficult divorce. Whereas for few others, shifting identities was like shifting gear. The work

Martin did for his new house taught him to handle *'multiple simultaneous efforts'*. Olivia, with four daughters and a full-time career learned how to *'wear multiple hats.'* Undeniably, some participants struggled with this phenomena. Sally's biggest challenge, in spite being single, as she described it was shifting between *'work mode'* and *'academia mode'*. Two identities she withheld at the time.

There is no clear evidence in literature nor findings how mature students learn to shift *'modes.'* Nonetheless, their experiences of juggling multiple roles help them better cope with pressure as noted by Lundberg's (2004). The experience of participants such as Martin and Olivia could be proof to Lundberg's claim. Contrary, such phenomena might influence motivation for learning or create anxiety as McCune et al. (2010) stated. Interestingly, most participants were found to have experienced both. Such mixed experience best described by Paloma *"I basically had no life. I didn't do anything socially; I didn't sleep, and I felt like I had missed two years of my family's life. If I did go anywhere I always had my books with me so I could study. In order to still work out I purchased a bike trainer so I could ride my bike and read. Family, friends and my children pitched in and took on responsibilities around cooking and childcare."*

Naturally, such struggle to balance for the different roles will create a *'struggle'* of identities as stated by Baptista (2014). Moreover, agreeing with Malfroy (2005), part-time mature students, being often away from the university's environment, might feel intimidated in their identities as *'students.'* Several participants experienced such emotion, Norman, Ghalia, Samar. Sally expressed: *" I feel I missed out on more of the academic thinking and way of life."*

Clearly from findings, not all participants were able to find the correct formula to stay motivated while pressured with their multiple roles despite the fact they all successfully earned their degrees. Often, one identity took over the other. Hence, the debate remains on how best to balance the multiple identities mature students have. Highlighting the need for further research.

#### 5.4.5 Current and Prior Experience

Indeed, as Mackey (2005) noted, the situatedness of participants in the world at the time of the experience is important. Participants' experiences reflected the importance of their prior experience in their current experience. Best described by Norman: *"It was really challenging as a part-time student to manage work, family matters and study at the same time. I think the various life lessons equipped me to prepare well and manage this situation."*

Thus, it is noted from the findings' interpretation how participants' prior experience influences their current. Agreeing with Baptista (2014) on the values prior experiences bring; making meaning of what they learn, recreating knowledge, and other learning strategies. Such recognition of the value of experiences mature students bring to their studies was confirmed by several other scholars like Walker (1975), Knowles (1984), Jarvis (1985), Broomfield (1993), Lundberg (2004), Pritchard and Roberts (2006), and Forbus et al. (2011).

Despite the value of prior experiences clearly reflected in participants' experience, some felt academically 'outdated'. However, the claim of O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) and Kahu et al. (2015) that being 'outdated' could lead to doubt in one's academic abilities, were not strongly observed among the majority. Indicated by their willingness to learn and upgrade. Paloma learned *'asking for help from others;* James *'learned from other people's mistakes.'* These two life skills evidence the notion that mature students are not lacking the confidence to seek and learn when in doubt. Not only findings of this study, other scholars such as Hopper and Osborn (1975), Percy (1985), Smithers & Griffin (1986) questioned such claim.

Undeniably, the confidence level might have fluctuated for many participants in different times during their experience. However, findings indicated that they were able to bounce back sustaining both their confidence and motivation. Some accredited their prior life experience to this ability. As Ghalia noted *"...an older individual has a wealth of personal experiences that can enrich his / her graduate degree. Life and work experiences make learning a deeper and more*



*rewarding experience. A mature learners' input in a learning environment is likely to be more impactful on others as real-life experiences are shared."*

Indeed, prior experience could bring a wealth of knowledge to the current experience, as Davies (1999) indicated. Such wealth can contribute to the learning process. Sadly, this study and studies like Davies (1999) and Reay et al. (2002) found that such wealth, particularly the one part-time mature students bring, was not sufficiently explored in the literature. Perhaps a future study focusing on their positive contribution to learning rather than the challenges they have to overcome is due.

Based on what was discussed in this section, it appears that participants' identities and their motivation are strongly connected. Best illustrating this connection Khalil's reflection: *"Pursuing a higher degree (especially a Ph.D.) is difficult even under good circumstances. Someone who is mature is going to find it especially challenging because of other life commitments. They need to make sure they have (1) a very strong reason that will keep them going and (2) strong support from those around them."* The next section will discuss participants' motives to return and how they sustained their motivation. It will also further highlight the link between their identities and their motivation for learning.

## **5.5 Area of Discussion Two: Motivation for Learning**

This section discusses participants' motives to return to higher education, sustaining their motivation while pursuing the degree, managing their time, their learning strategies, and the learning skills most helped in completing the degree. First will discuss their motives.

### *5.5.1 Why did they return to higher education?*

The findings confirm both theoretical and empirical literature about motives. In this context, participants' motives extended beyond economic growth. As Moreau (2016) claimed, motives are not merely about economics, but mature students' lives and the lives of their families. Hence, among participants, a few such as Harry, Martin, and Samar, shared their motives to return with their spouses. Aware of the consequences of such decisions in their families' lives.

Most participants were aware of the need for further studies to advance their careers. James, Harry, Norman, Olivia, and Sally all worked in academia and realised this. Men more than women in this study confirmed that their motive was knowledge attainment for career advancement and financial enhancement as found by Sargeant (2000). However, with a small sample size this finding could be debatable. Particularly with the increased career opportunities for women indicated by several scholars such as Archer et al. (2001). Regardless of gender, most governments' encouragement of mature students to re-enrol appears to be driven by a desire for improved economic outcomes as noted by Marandet and Wainwright (2009) and Burke (2013).

Moreover, Finnegan (2008) and Naidoo (2008) warned that education was becoming 'commodified' by governments and perceived so by students. Despite the policies aimed to promote lifelong learning such as adopting the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL) in 2011, 'commodification' can conflict with the purpose of lifelong learning and higher education in regard to perceiving the mature student as an individual human being, not a consumer, beyond any financial regulation (Karpov, 2013).

However, the findings unveiled other motives for participants to return that are beyond the 'commodification' notion, despite difficult circumstances and financial obligations. Driven with both extrinsic and intrinsic motives, the two regulators for motivation which self-determination theory (SDT) had identified. Similar to the findings of Litalien's et al. (2015) study assessing motivation for PhD students, participants although driven by both regulators, autonomy; an internal source of motivation defined by Ryan and Deci (2017) as "the need to self-regulate one's experiences and actions" appeared to be the key drive to their return and perseverance (p.11). Autonomy in participants' motivation best explained by Harry *"First, make sure you are doing the study for the 'right' reasons... because you want to learn more or study further (the intrinsic reasons for study, if you will)."*

The findings of this study observed other motives. Nine participants shared their passion for learning as a motive. Inspiration was another. McGivney (2006) noted the influence of 'inspiration' on motivation to learn, which can

come from family, friends, colleagues or academics. This inspiration was expressed by few participant such as Martin and Paloma, one inspired by colleagues and the other by a family member. Kahlil's manager not only inspired him, also pushed him to it "... *he told me that if I was serious about it then I really needed to get started.*"

Both Waller (2006) and McGivney (2006) claimed that personal life transition had a major influence on mature students' decisions to go back to higher education. Selena fit with this claim, as she went through a bad marriage, divorce, and remarriage, caring for an ailing mother and then dealing with her death. Through it all she was able to complete a master's degree and a doctorate as well.

Nora, Mona, and Samar linked their motives to emotions, interest, and cognitive engagement. Scholars such as Bye et al. (2007) and Scanlon (2008) highlighted these as major factors to increase a motivation to learn. The opposite could also happen. According to Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012), emotions of anxiety and frustration can impact the intrinsic motivation to learn, something both Salma and Sally experienced. Salma had to overcome anxiety and Sally frustration. Naturally, the difficult circumstances for mature students when returning including the outdated experience in formal education, the gap of years, and juggling multiple responsibilities could cause anxiety.

Interestingly, the pressure that led to anxiety, for some participants like Samar and Sarah produced sense of *'accomplishment and pride.'* Although anxiety caused by such difficult circumstances is inevitable for most mature students. However, and similar to what Zampetakisa et al. (2010) claimed, the sense of *'accomplishment,'* could actually decrease stress and anxiety. As Khalil reflected "*knowing that I could commit to something difficult and spend six long years working hard to reach this important personal achievement.*" Still, the debate remains as this *'sense of accomplishment'* is reported in retrospect after the experience is over, not during. Well noted by James: "*In retrospect, the sacrifices were worth making, but I would never do it again.*"

None of the participants considered social aspects as major motives for their decisions. Indeed, it was the least motivating factor, as observed by Scanlon (2008), given their many obligations and the little time available for socialising. However, socialising is a human need, hence, several participants felt the need to try. Nora managed to make new friendships with 'like-minded' people. Yet, the majority admitted that not only they could not create new friendships, the ones they had were negatively affected. Sadly, studying on part-time basis, for most, simply they did not have the time. *James one of several "declined many social invitations in the last summer, in order to get my draft thesis written."*

This phenomenon requires further investigating, particularly on the role of university to avoid the sense of isolation part-time mature students might feel. Thomas (2002) noted that integrating can be difficult. Indeed, for a few participants this was true. Sally, Mona, and Nora were willing to integrate and engage with university's culture when they had the time. Norman struggled keeping up between work, family, and study. However, integrating in the university's *habitus* might not be their 'only way' to succeed as Reay et al. (2010) had claimed.

The findings established that participants had varied motives. From extrinsic motives including career advancement, gaining a degree, financial gain. To intrinsic motives such as passion for learning, and personal transformation. Whatever the motive, findings clearly indicated they sought what lifelong learning promised, and policy makers committed to fulfill: *"the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all useful knowledge, values, and skills"* (Longworth & Davies, 1996, p.22).

It is worth noting here that this study was concluded before COVID 19 pandemic and the economic recession that followed. With the burden of increased fees, compounded with the loss of jobs and/or decreased income, the motives of participants analysed in this study might become debatable in the future. However, the debate that need to be urgently addressed, for mature students to be motivated to re-enrol, is the commitment of policy makers to

lifelong learning under such circumstances. In line with the four priorities of the EAAL' Agenda adopted by the Council of the European Union in 2011; coordinate between policy areas to improve governance; create effective outreach to motivate and assist adult learners; provide high-quality qualifications and skills; monitor the impact of policies to enhance the quality of adult learning (European Union Website, accessed August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020).

### 5.5.2 Sustaining motivation

The findings confirm that the experience was often difficult for participants, even though they were motivated to return to education and engage in the learning. In James words: "*The process of earning the doctoral degree was long, frustrating and at times, intense.*" They all needed to navigate through postgraduate school with its added obligations. Hence, sustaining interest and motivation was crucial. Bye et al. (2007) claimed, interest and motivation for learning could increase when a topic aligns with previous life experience. Indeed, participants reflected this value in their input. This was best explained by Norman "*being passionate about a particular field helped as it gave me a drive to complete my degree.*"

However, as Scanlon (2008) argued, adults' motives are driven not only by their past, but also their present. While the previous experience could help build interest and motivation, the present experience must maintain them. As Norman further emphasised "*My research was closely linked to my actual work, so my study programme has given me wider depth of knowledge in terms of work.*"

In general, it was observed from findings that participants were self-motivated by the goal they set to achieve from the beginning. Having made the choice to pursue a higher degree, in line with Boekaerts' (1999) SRL theory, they took complete responsibility for their own learning maintaining high levels of motivation. Thus, participants were able to find their own strategies to stay motivated. Such as engaging in skill development, one of SRL key aspects, elaborated by Salma "*Acquiring these skills equipped me with confidence and motivation to continue to grow.*" To regain motivation, Norman spent a week on campus to '*reconnect with supervisors and colleagues.*'

How participants regulated their own motivation is illustrated at its best by Nora's reflection: "...the most rewarding outcome was achieving my goal. Knowing I could do it made me feel nothing is impossible." Years after she completed her degree her perspective remained the same "This outcome is still my biggest reward and is my motivation to keep growing." Next will further discuss participants learning strategies and the skills that helped them succeed.

### 5.5.3 Learning Strategies

Strategy is 'a plan that is intended to achieve a particular purpose' (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries website, accessed April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020). Hence, participants needed certain strategies to achieve their goal. In Chapter Two several learning theoretical models were reviewed, all of which help us understand participants' learning strategies. A brief reminder of these theoretical models is listed here:

- *Student approaches to learning (SAL)* by Marton and Saljo (1976) promoted three different learning approaches: 'deep, surface, and achieving.'
- *Metacognitive theories* of mind that focus on cognition. Schraw and Moshman (1995) suggested a framework comprised of three theories: 'tacit, informal, and formal.'
- *Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)* in several models. Boekaerts (1999) concluded that most SRL models has three major components: 'motivation, cognition, and metacognition. Boekaerts (2011) added 'emotions' to her modified SRL model.
- *Neurodevelopmental Framework*, (Levine 2001) helps teachers understand the cognitive processes of learners. It has eight constructs: 'attention, higher order cognition, language, memory, neuromotor functions, social cognition, spatial ordering, and temporal-sequential ordering.'

As discussed earlier, self-regulated learning (SRL) appears to be essential for academic success. Boekaerts' (1999) SRL model best represents the interpretation of the participants' collective experiences. Boekaerts' (2011) revised SRL model consists of four major components: motivation, cognition,

metacognition, and emotions regulations. The findings of the study suggested that almost all participants followed certain SRL strategies in their learning. They took complete responsibility for their own learning maintaining high levels of motivation. Finding their own strategies to stay motivated. Such as engaging in skill development, one of SRL key strategies, elaborated by Salma *“Acquiring the skills equipped me with confidence and motivation to continue to grow.”* Other strategies SRL related were reported by participants, such as learning how to learn (or to unlearn), organising information, dealing with challenges, and regulating time and effort.

Cognitive strategies were also reported by participants. Such as higher order cognition construct (HOC) in Levine’s (2001) framework. It helped participants understand their own weaknesses and strengths. This was reflected by Olivia’s experience: *“I was conscious of my strengths and weaknesses and could compensate accordingly.”* Most participants used higher order cognition when asking research questions, formulating hypotheses, constructing arguments, and extracting conclusions.

A ‘deep’ approach to learning, where students understand and relate concepts to previous knowledge, was observed by several participants. Similar to what Watkins (2001) suggested that they likely do as matures students, adopting the 'deep' and 'achieving' approaches than a 'surface' approach. For part-time students with full-time careers, this approach helped them connect what they learned to what they knew from experience. Courtney reported: *“My research skills and writing ability helped me immensely. Those were well honed during my undergraduate career as a journalism major and then built upon as a graduate student.”*

As Howard and Davies (2013) suggested, this can create positive study habits and help ensure success. However, Martin's previous knowledge, as advanced as it was, did not help him comprehend new technical knowledge. The difference was best explained by Martin himself: *“...grad study is very different from undergrad ... one is intended to be more self-directed.... I remember sitting in my office reading technical papers about past work in my field and related ones recommended by my advisor and feeling pretty lost.”*

Although Martin obtained a master's degree from Stanford University, the learning challenges persisted. For Martin, as Toynton (2005) noted, prior knowledge may have limited rather than facilitated new learning. Martin explained this technical limitation *"My math skills have never been strong - I'm in engineering because of my interest in the behaviour of things and how to make them work."* Thus, his explanation could refute Toynton's argument.

Despite the observation that most participants took a 'deep' learning approach with self-regulated strategies, other theories were reflected by participants. For example, James was able to identify metacognition as a learning strategy. He described the knowledge acquired during his studies in two parts; *'propositional knowledge, i.e., knowing that'* and *'procedural knowledge, i.e., knowing how'* to do something. This is similar to what Schraw and Moshman (1995) observed about metacognition, which is knowing about cognition, and the skill of using this meta-knowledge. Both Ghalia and Amir agreed that critical thinking skills were crucial for their academic success, consistent with Schraw and Moshman's (1995) theory about 'tacit' learning and its contribution to success. Naturally, the 'achieving' approach was observed by all participants setting the right strategy and organising their time and resources to achieve their goal as noted by Heikkilä and Lonka (2006). Each participants developed certain strategies aimed to achieve the set-goal. James explained his strategy *"It was a matter of making difficult choices to give up some short-term pleasures in order to achieve the degree."* Reflection was a good strategy for Amir *"It helped to take a breath, see through what I would like to achieve."*

Clearly, awareness of the different learning strategies, regardless of their formal names, helped participants succeed. What matters is that learning skills were acquired and developed as they were applied to postgraduate studies. How these skills were applied will be discussed next.

#### *5.5.4 Learning skills*

Participants' accounts reflected some of Pritchard and Roberts' (2006) research on the twelve 'essential' skills for learning summarised in Chapter Two: gaining new experience, connecting new ideas, linking learning to past experience, visualising, imagining, creating, critical thinking, memorising,



learning from mistakes, reasoning, synthesising ideas and applying learning to life. As found in Chapter Four, participants were able to identify the specific learning skills needed for their study, these included organisation, collaboration, research, information management, data analysis, academic writing, 'skim' reading, critical thinking, planning, technical skills, communication, and persuasive skills.

Although Woodley (1984) argued that mature students' cognitive abilities might decrease with age, agreed by Ross et al. (2002) who further stated that mature students could also doubt these abilities with age, the data in the findings question these arguments. Eight of the 18 participants were over 40 when they started their higher degrees. All developed the skills they needed to achieve their goal. Either by applying the skills they learned from previous experience or developing and acquiring new skills. James, who was 42 when he started, learned new skills. He explained: *"Overall, I learned to be an efficient researcher and writer."* These skills not only contributed to his success; they opened new doors to earn a better living with his reputation of doing *'high quality work.'* Sawsan was 48 when she started; she learned inquiry methods, ICT, and academic writing skills in grad school. She is now a consultant and governor of three schools. Samar started her master's degree aged 50, with a 20-year gap in her formal education. Although she experienced anxiety, she managed to acquire new skills such as research methodology, data analysis, ICT, and academic writing. She also enjoyed the process. The learning skills that was most used by participants; organisation skills proved to be most crucial. This is consistent with the 'achieving' approach to learning, which Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) and Biggs (1987) theorised. As discussed earlier, the organisation of time and resources are strategies for high achievement (Entwistle, 1987). Some 33 years later, Harry agreed that *"...the key to success in any form of higher education is the ability to be organised."*

The OECD's (2013) paper on study skills concluded that mature students' engagement in learning helped them develop their skills. Hence, learning skills could be developed at any age. Not all skills were acquired during postgraduate years. Participants reported that several skills were acquired

even before, from their previous education, work, or life experience. Mona's reading and research skills "*acquired over the span of the 20 years ... and they were honed during the master's program.*" So did Amir "*I acquired the skill from my early education and family environment.*" Whether participants had, acquired, or developed their skills, they used them to their advantage during study and after graduation. Hence, the argument that cognitive skills decrease with age, one that Percy (1985) questioned, was not buttressed by this study. Further investigation is needed.

This study focused on part-time mature students, but the literature had little research on *part-time* mature students and their learning skills. Most findings were drawn from *full-time* mature students. As the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education observed, part-time mature students are indeed the 'least resourced, least valued, and least well understood' students in the UK (NIACE, 2005). Clearly more research on this topic is justified, if only by its absence.

#### *5.5.5 Managing Time*

Of the 18 participants, 16 recalled one thing years after they completed their degrees: time. Nora, Sally, Ghalia, and Mona agreed that 'use of time' is the one thing they would manage differently. Time at on campus, asking questions, thinking, time with supervisors and with fellow students. As Ghalia put it, time to "*embrace the experience as much as possible.*" Indeed, participants without exception experienced time pressures. As predicted by Forbus et al. (2011), Amir, Norman, Sally, Samar, Khalil, and James all found that managing time was a challenge. Participants were aware of the pressure and the choices they needed to make in order to make time for their studies. For participants with families, 16 found that making time for family, especially children, was a challenge. The literature highlights the pressures on women's time, differentiating between 'men's time' vis-à-vis 'women's time' for example, McNay (2000), Hughes (2002), and Penketh and Goddard (2008). Interestingly, two male participants reported time pressures. Khalil described finding time for his children as 'mentally and physically draining.' James admitted that time away affected his relationship with his wife. Contrary to

previous studies, family obligations and struggles were equally prevalent among women and men.

Many participants reported on time for self-care and well-being. As predicted by Swain and Hammond (2011), struggling with health and well-being is common among mature students. Courtney's well-being, including her ability to sleep, took a toll. Samar suffered from anxiety and was often sick, especially during thesis writing. Norman had to give up his hobbies and family vacations. James reported that the enormous time spent away from home caused him anxiety.

For some, the time spent on assignments was pleasurable. As claimed by Zampetakisa et al., (2010), time spent productively decreases stress and anxiety. For Mona, fighting breast cancer with chemotherapy treatments, time spent on assignments helped her heal, as it 'kept her mind busy.' Olivia sacrificed time with her four daughters, knowing the reward will be worth the effort.

Making time for studying was indeed a challenge for almost all participants. Those who managed time effectively were the exceptions. As MacCann et al. (2012) showed, building a 'habit' of effective time management required 'training and practice.' Harry was able to do most of his studying in his working hours. Selena studied at night. Martin was able to make the time for study and to be on campus with his professors. Sam accorded his ability to manage time to the lifestyle he and his wife already lived. *"We used to be very practical and boring with not much on the calendar."* Such honest reflections confirm what Forbus et al. (2011) claimed: the life experiences of mature students, regardless of content, made them more effective and realistic in managing their time.

*'Time became valuable'* wrote Sarah, a notion confirmed by most. Despite the sacrifices, all participants reflected fondly on the time spent studying. Courtney, Paloma, and Selena wondered how they managed to balance work, family, and study. Ghalia explained that *'you are most organised when you are busy.'* Kearns and Gardiner (2007) showed that the satisfaction in mature

students' academic experiences came from effective time management. For almost all participants self-discipline and organisation were fundamental to managing time. Dale (1993) claimed that time management is a necessary skill that can be developed at any age. Indeed, for participants learning the skill was a necessity. Selena explained "*I have no idea how I managed my time ... it was a matter of persistence. It was a matter of reaching goals. It was one day at a time.*"

It is worth noting here that findings suggested that time consideration for mature students, especially those with children, is lacking in many universities. A key challenge that was noted by Moreau (2016) and pointed out by several participants. Overcoming this challenge and others will be discussed next.

#### *5.5.6 Overcoming challenges*

Indeed, the pressure of studying with full-time careers and family obligations proved to be the biggest challenge that participants needed to overcome. This finding is consistent with the literature. In simple terms, the postgraduate school experience is long and difficult and presents numerous challenges to be overcome. Weil (1989), Richardson (1994), Bowl, (2001), McGivney (2004), Penketh and Goddard (2008), McCune et al. (2010), Swain and Hammond (2011), and Fragoso et al., (2013) agreed that juggling responsibilities is a challenge for all mature students, one that could obstruct their paths to completion. Fifteen participants shared how they faced and overcame the pressure. Mona, Selena, Courtney, Khalil, Amir, and Olivia wrote at length. Mona's words are representative: "*...finding it hard to balance my time between my work, study and raising children and attending to a husband.*" However, analysing the data of these 15 participants' experiences confirmed that applying the SRL strategies discussed earlier, such as emotional self-regulation helped them deal with such pressure.

Bowl (2001) observed that the common behaviour amongst mature students is to manage studies around other obligations, not the opposite. This behaviour may be common, as it was reflected in the present study. Participants such as Martin created '*pockets of time,*' prioritising study over other duties. This required '*focus and self-discipline*' as he put it. Similar strategy to Macan's

(1994) 'time attitude.' Indeed, as Brady's (2001) concluded in his study, commitment and self-discipline were key for balancing lives. Even for a single participant with no dependents like Sally, the pressure was challenging. Her biggest challenge, discussed earlier, was the switch between '*work mode*' and '*academia mode*,' as Sally described. Shifting 'modes' under pressure might influence motivation for learning or create anxiety, a phenomenon observed by McCune et al. (2010) that younger, full-time students usually do not experience. Harry explained his strategy to overcome such challenge "*I have always been one for doing multiple things at once (well in my adult years at least so knowing how to switch off from some things and focus fully on others was probably the key.*"

Reay et al. (2002) and Marandet and Wainwright (2010) observed feelings of guilt; this emotion was felt by many participants. Brooks (2015) showed that guilt is a common emotion, especially amongst mothers with family obligations. Guilt develops when spending time away from children studying, or the opposite - as Lovell (2014) claimed - when spending time with children away from study. This is a 'lose-lose' situation that was reported by several participants, male and female alike. For example, Samar, despite her husband's encouragement to study, felt guilty for not being '*around enough*'. Ghalia, mother of five girls, had guilt feelings which she had to overcome. Other participants, including Courtney, Olivia, James, Kahlil, and Norman dealt with similar feelings of guilt. Despite the effort to balance, 'guilt' is a natural feeling for people with multiple identities, as one role might overtake the other. Most participants were driven by internal motivation as discussed in the previous section. Thus, according to the theory of self-determination (SDR), and as Ryan and Deci (2017) noted, they have the ability to overcome such feeling.

Another emotional challenge derived from the struggle to focus on postgraduate studies. The loss of cognitive skills, as Woodley (1984), Weil (1989) and Bowl (2001) claimed, could create emotions such as frustration and anxiety. These were reflected in the accounts of Ghalia and Samar. It took Ghalia time to adjust to becoming a student again at age 45; the adjustment period included anxiety. Samar lacked confidence in her abilities and was

'...afraid of looking stupid in front of my peers.' Samar was able to overcome such feelings. So did Ghalia '*...pushed myself outside my comfort zone.*'

Participants represented in this study ultimately did '*have what it takes*' to earn higher degrees, contrary to Woodley (1984) and Roberts and Higgins (1992) claims about how the 'disconnection' from formal education might cause the 'out of practice in the art of learning' effect (p.106). However, sufficient ICT skills might be lacking, according to the European Commission (2013). Indeed, a few participants did have technical challenges to overcome. For example, Martin, although an engineer, struggled with mathematics. Khalil struggled when formulating a research topic. Sawsan struggled to acquire sufficient ICT skills. Samar needed to strengthen her learning skills. Yet, all participants overcame their technical challenges, by learning new skills or applying their previous acquired ones to new contexts.

Another challenge was financial burden. Tuition fees added to the existing financial obligations that participants had. McGivney (2004) and Howard and Davies (2013) showed that such burdens can hinder and perhaps terminate the pursuit of a degree. Khalil's experience is an example of how financial obligations can affect a student. The only way for Khalil to pursue a doctoral degree was on part-time basis. "*It was my only option,*" as he put it. For most participants, hope for financial relief after graduation was a motive. Olivia, with four children and a full-time career, explained the reason she was willing to take on such a burden was that "*I was expecting monetary benefits to afford the high cost of living, housing, and education for [my] children.*" To persist despite the hardship, as Thomas (2002) observed. A few participants enjoyed financial support from their workplaces or family members. For example, Martin and Sam received financial support from their workplaces. Samar was supported by her husband, Mona by her ex-husband, and Nora by her father.

A lack of supervisory support, as noted by Bartlett and Mercer (2001) was reported in this study. Sally, James, Courtney, and Samar all shared stories related to this challenge. "*They appear to be reluctant to provide 'advice' and I am not sure why,*" Sally explained. James, Samar, and Courtney shared similar stories reflecting a lack of support by faculty members. The results

included frustration and loneliness, as Sally “...*did not expect to be so alone in the journey.*” The findings revealed a crucial gap between the expectations of mature students and universities. Moreover, the interpretation of Sally, James, Courtney and Samar’s experiences indicated that they were unsure of why there is such lack of support. Thus, they had to overcome such feelings on their own. “*I had to pick myself up and persist,*” Courtney reported. The findings agree with Marandet and Wainwright (2009) claim that mature students often deal with struggles alone, leaving their universities unaware and pushing themselves towards further isolation. Moreover, Mallman and Lee (2016) warned of the feelings of isolation mature students could experience if universities were not able to provide appropriate support. Thus, as Scott et al. (1998) noted universities need to take into account such life challenges mature students have to endure.

Also, as observed by findings, learning how to support is crucial. Not only academically but also emotionally. Indeed, as Clegg and Rowland (2010) stated, universities do need to learn how to better manage students’ emotions. Faculty advisors and thesis supervisors are knowledgeable academically but are rarely trained to provide counsel with empathy. Perhaps it is time, as Preece (2000) suggested, to take mature students’ emotional needs consideration as policy.

## **5.6 Area of Discussion Three: Other Success Enablers**

Participants had various opinions about what contributed to their success, but they all agreed that there were 'enablers' other than learning skills attributed to their successful completion. This section discusses what are these contributors, including life skills (or 'non-cognitive' skills as in the literature), the support they received and how these helped.

### **5.6.1 Life skills**

Almost all participants attributed their successful degree completion to certain skills, such as resilience, perseverance, determination, and 'grit'. Collectively reported in the literature as 'life skills', 'soft skills', 'traits or 'non-cognitive' skills. Kautz et al. (2014) summed them as the 'personal attributes' beyond what IQ tests can measure; both Stankov and Lee (2014) and Garcia (2014) agreed.

Kautz et al. (2014) confirmed the increased body of research in such skills indicates the increased influence of these skills on academic success. Hence, it was important to address personal attributes in the study. Nora, Olivia, Sally, Khalil, and Selena acknowledged perseverance to be key to their success. James mastered '*task completion*'. Sawsan identified '*taking responsibility*' as key contributor, a self-regulatory learning approach described by Pintrich (2004) as 'when there is the will, students find the skill.'

Resilience was reflected as key to success in the stories shared by several participants, especially those with family obligations, as was determination. Sarah responded succinctly on behalf of many "*I would say that determination is key to success!*" Paloma's source of resilience was mysterious "*I am not sure where this resilience comes from,*" she wrote. Whatever the source, it prevented her from quitting. Such resilience was identified by Barrett and Constan (2014) as essential for academic success. For Sam, 'self-discipline' (Wilson, 1997; Brady, 2001) was key to his success. James, Paloma, and Sally learned from other people. Paloma by asking others for help. James from other people's mistakes. Sally's '*determination allowed her to learn from others who experienced this journey.*' These life skills, discussed earlier, are evidence the notion that mature students can influence and be influenced by others.

Additionally, Bean and Metzner (1985), Yorke (2004) and Scanlon et al. (2007) claimed that mature students put little importance on socialising. However, the experiences of many participants such as James, Paloma, Selena, Norman, and Sally suggest otherwise. In fact, Farrington's et al. (2012) 'non-cognitive' framework that included social skills as key components of academic success appears to have been confirmed by the present study.

'Grit', uncommonly associated with academic achievement, emerged in the findings. For example, Courtney stressed that 'grit' was a key to her success, "*...that inability to accept non-completion as an option was the greatest skill that assisted me in completing my doctoral work.*" Duckworth et al. (2007) 'grit' as 'perseverance and passion for long term goals' and claimed that it could predict academic success or failure. Similarly, Sheard (2009) and Duckor (2017) agreed. Other literature suggested that a 'level of commitment' could



be defined and measured. Indeed, success in postgraduate school requires deep commitment and long-term vision. Participants' lived experiences reflected such commitment. Best described by Selena *"It was a matter of persistence. It was a matter of reaching goals. It was one day at a time."*

Self-regulation strategies, as discussed in the previous section, found to be critical for all participants. Courtney had to deal with her mental distraction *"My mind tends to wander and ask questions that may or may not be related to the topic at hand. But I have built a personal toolkit to help me through my own mental distraction."* Thus, emotional self-regulation of mature students is key focus area that might be worth further investigation.

Life skills such as what was discussed may be developed at an early age (Cunha & Heckman, 2008; Petway et al., 2016). Some participants agreed. Interestingly, skills reported in the findings to have been developed and acquired during postgraduate are those of technical nature. While the life skills were observed to be related to upbringing and prior life experience. Courtney attributed her skills to her upbringing, Amir to his early education and family. Similarly, Khalil explained *"...I don't know how you acquire perseverance, but I believe it can be developed by reminding oneself of why they are doing what they are doing and envisioning the future once they are successful."* Interestingly, Paloma highlighted *"these life skills have nothing to do with how smart a person is. Generally speaking, if you make it to grad school, you probably have the brain power."* However, life skills, as important as they are, were not enough to ensure success. Participants needed support from others.

### *5.6.2 Support*

It is likely that only a few participants would have succeeded without support from others. With busy calendars support was needed simply to create time for studying. All participants shared gratitude for the freeing of time needed for studying and connecting with 'like-minded' individuals. Bean and Metzner (1985), Yorke (2004), Graham (2015) and Laming et al. (2016), all agreed on the importance of support.

Bowl (2001) noted the disadvantages mature students face compared to younger students due to their multiple obligations. As discussed earlier and explained by Laming et al. (2016), support is essential for success. Participants received support from families, friends, colleagues, supervisors and hired domestic helpers. Sawsan, Ghalia, and Samar relied much on domestic support. Interestingly, Burton et al. (2011) found that 'domestic support' was key for the successful degree completion of many mature students.

Many married participants gave credit to their spouses. Most shared responsibilities and received an equal share of support. Perhaps this was due to the fact that all but two worked full-time. Harry, Norman, James, and Martin credited their wives; Nora, Samar, Ghalia, Sarah, and Courtney gave credit to their husbands. Unsupportive spouses could lead to withdrawal, as Swain and Hammond (2011) warned. Martin and Harry's wives encouraged them to return and then supported them during their studies. In this sample men and women were very supportive and dedicated to their families, work, and their spouse's studies. Stone and O'Shea (2012) showed that mature students, male and female, highly appreciated family support. Participants also credited other family members for supporting them. For example, Nora's father insisted on paying her tuition fees. Courtney's brother, Olivia's mother, Khalil's parents, and Courtney's children were important supporters. Mona was supported by her ex-husband financially and emotionally while going to chemotherapy treatments during her degree programme.

Some participants had networks of support beyond their families. Sam received financial support from his employer. Selena and Courtney relied on their friends. Amir, Sally and Martin relied on colleagues. Sawsan and Samar hired domestic support. Paloma had a complete network of family, friends, and colleagues to support her. *"It is hard to pick who supported me the most, as if I removed any single piece of my support system, I think I would have not been successful."* The findings confirmed, agreeing with Stone and O'Shea (2012), that such network of support is highly valued. However, the findings indicated that the most crucial source of support is the one coming from the university.

Hence, this study and other previous studies, such as the ones by Fragoso et al. (2013), Mallman and Lee (2016), and Christie et al. (2016) call for educational policies that can ensure proper support from the universities is provided. Also, the findings from this study similar to reviewed studies like Clegg's (2000) stressed on the impact of emotional support on non-traditional students like mature students. Yet very few participants received support from their universities, including their supervisors. Nora, Martin, and James were among the few. Norman was fortunate to be supported by both supervisors and colleagues. Such support is needed for all mature students.

Furthermore, doctoral supervision pedagogy as seen by Bartlett and Mercer (2001) and observed by participants' experiences is indeed 'under-developed' and 'under-theorised.' Findings found the perspective of mature students' needs are overlooked when such pedagogy were designed. Halse and Malfroy (2010) stated similar concern. To avoid increased non-completion rates, which walker (2008) warned from, the perspective of all stakeholders needs to be addressed including mature students and perhaps supervisors themselves. Frustration felt by participants like Sally and James for lacking necessary support from their supervisors, could be attributed to the lack of support for supervisors themselves from their universities. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) among other scholars raised similar concern. A notion that calls for future investigation.

## **5.7 Outcomes**

Swain and Hamond (2011) concluded that when mature students obtain higher degrees the outcomes are highly beneficial: self-fulfilment, well-being and familial, economic and social enrichment. Most participants echoed similar opinions. Earning the degrees were their biggest rewards. Although this was the most important outcome for all participants, only nine, including Nora, Selena, Sally, Courtney, and James stressed its importance. Martin "*...felt accomplished to complete the thesis.*" Perhaps as Mercer (2007) noted, what mature students really seek out of their degrees is 'personal development and growth.' The OECD (2019c) report claimed that the outcomes were not merely about economic growth and career advancement. Harry realised later that gaining the title of Doctor was not just a career essential but a privilege,

something Crossouard (2010) noted about how doctoral students view themselves after completion.

Participants did gain depth of knowledge in their fields. Across the OECD countries it was observed that with each higher educational level, the rate of 'frequent readers' increased (OECD, 2019c). The accounts of Samar and Martin fit with this observation. Reading more led to further learning and career development in their respective fields. With such development came opportunities to advance their careers. This was an expectation that many participants aspired to, and few did. Courtney's *"...career possibilities were far greater than they had been before I finished my doctoral degree."* Her experience reflects the OECD's 2018 *Education at a Glance* report on the high employment rates for graduate students, noted in Chapter Two above. Yet not all participants who advanced in their careers were financially rewarded. Martin received a *'significant salary increase,'* but Olivia did not.

Sally touched on a critical outcome. Coming from the Middle East and attending a British university made her appreciate western academia, *"...knowing how little we in the Middle East regard and respect academia."* However, a slow shift might be in the making. In 2015 the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government stated its goal to allocate 1.5 per cent of UAE's GDP on research, tripling such spending (MBRSG Policy Council Series, 2015). Sally added: *"I am grateful for the experience and the outcome is rewarding."*

Fleming et al. (2010) observed that positive experiences bring greater confidence to mature students. Participants' final reflections addressed how they would have used their time to make the experience even more rewarding. Ghalia would *"embrace the experience as much as possible."* Nora mused that *"I would have pondered more on many questions along the way. A doctorate is not a degree to accomplish ... it's a life journey."* Khalil described postgraduate studies as *'difficult even under good circumstances.'* What appears important is to be motivated for the right reasons, equipped with the proper skills and to seek support from those around. Or as Mona advised *"...focus on the experience as much as on the goal."*

## 5.8 Summary

The participants' decisions to return to higher education were initiated by their motivation to succeed both professionally and personally. Participants were generally not motivated by considerations of economic growth, as shown in the literature about public policy. Participants faced numerous challenges; the most significant proved to be their multiple identities. The basic research question '*How did they do it?*' was answered. One reason was the support of families, friends, colleagues, and supervisors. However, relationships with these parties, as well as their own well-being were negatively affected due to the time needed for study. Those who established understanding with their partners on how their studying would affect their lives got the most support. Time management was the most essential skill, but the most challenging to maintain. Participants used two key strategies: self-discipline and organisation. Another reason was the application of 'integrated skills,' both cognitive and non-cognitive. Prior life experience was found to be more important than prior knowledge. Life experiences enabled these mature students to build confidence in themselves and their abilities. Yet, some were doubtful of their academic abilities at the beginning. Their perseverance and 'grit' overcame their doubts. Contrary to Bourdieu's *habitus* theory, most participants were able to navigate new environments with confidence, despite not being 'normal' university students.

## 5.9 Limitations of the study

The researcher is aware of the limitations of this study. With its relatively small-scale sample, this study cannot represent the experiences of the thousands of mature students who have returned to higher education. Furthermore, the study explored the lived experiences from the mature student's perspective, not taking into consideration the specifics of each institution participants chose to complete their degree at. Specifics such as culture, *habitus*, principles, and policies. The voice of institutions was not heard in this study. As this study emphasised the importance of their support, their perspective is vital. However, the study's aim was to keep the voice of mature students central, not the institutions'. Future research on mature students' experiences from the institutions' perspective might be needed. Specifically, on issues related to the *habitus* at universities and how the choice of the university mature students

return to, might influence their lived experiences. More importantly, further research focused on the supervisory relationship established between the supervisors and mature students, with the emotional burden they both seem to experience is required.

Another issue that could be considered a limitation related to the method used for data collection. Although the validity of findings derives from the quality of the 18 participants' shared experiences. 'Interviewing' participants through electronic mail captured their written expressions of the experience. Other senses, such as verbal intonation and body language were untouched. Hence, the participants' lived experiences as presented in written form may suggest that there was more to share had there been live interviews.

Conversely, some participants may have been less willing to share their thoughts in live interviews. Some participants were less than thorough in a few of their written reflections. The older men were more thorough than the younger women. Hence, the ideal balance of findings did not occur. The study was not based on gender equality but did address the gap of years between their first and higher degrees. Finding male mature students willing to participate proved to be difficult. The study sustained seven male and 11 female participants. This inequality might have influenced findings, especially those about support, time management and perseverance.

Although the researcher affirms that the study satisfies the conditions by which interpretation of questions sent to participants is valid. Nonetheless, there is a potential for differing interpretations due to the chosen method, which may have influenced participants' input. For example, Theme Two relating to time management, the second question stated: *Do you understand that time differently from your perspective today?* This question could easily be misinterpreted by participants if not put in its context. Several participants did ask for clarification before responding to the question. This implies the need for further investigation into how to validate questions asked to participants in order to prevent any misinterpretations in future studies.

The intent of this study was not to make generalisations, but rather to present the lived experiences of a select group. The findings in the study might warrant further exploration with this population from other perspectives. Hence, it is hoped that it could provide some evidence to suggest that there is value in further, broader investigation.

#### **5.10 Researcher's subjectivity**

The researcher is a mature student who re-entered the academic world after the age of 40. She was aware of her potential lack of objectivity when analysing the submissions of participants. Bryman (2012) observed that social research is influenced by several things, and one is a researcher's personal values. Our values can influence our beliefs. Reflecting on the implications of the methods, values, decisions, and subjectivity in the research process is what Bryman (2012) and others have called *reflexivity*. Practicing reflexivity helps avoid bias when analysing the knowledge generated by research. Edmondson (2007) claimed that for a social researcher to state that personal experience had not influenced outcomes would be untruthful. The fact that both participants' and researcher's subjectivity cannot be entirely overcome is acknowledged as a strength of the research, not a weakness. Subjectivity is to be exploited and not exorcised. This disclosure neither validates nor invalidates the research outcomes (Gergen & Gergen, 2007). Thus, the researcher's bias has been minimised by being aware of its presence in the study.

#### **5.11 Further research**

This study revealed the limited amount of research available about the lived experiences of mature students who returned to higher education after several years. In particular and as per Reay et al. (2002), those who studied part-time with dependents and full-time careers. Most previous studies were focused on mature students returning to formal education full-time not specifically for higher degrees. As the NIACE report (2005) noted, part-time mature students are the 'least resourced, least valued, and least well understood' student constituency. The contributions of participants in this study could encourage further investigation using a larger sample. The findings of this study could inform a survey that would reach a statistically significant sample of people.

The study revealed the importance of other skills and attributes to success beyond the academics. Such as life skills (non-cognitive) and prior experience. Further investigation needed not only on what skills are important but also how to equip mature students with such skills before they return.

For most participants support was critical, particularly from faculty members. Fragoso et al. (2013) claimed that such support is needed for all mature students. This study showed gaps in support. Supervisors were found not to be properly trained to support their students emotionally. Perhaps further investigation is needed on how to better prepare supervisors for their roles.

This study concerns successful students, but the OECD reported that an average of 31 per cent of students who entered tertiary education 'dropped out' (OECD, 2010). This is an enormous proportion of students - almost one third. Little research was found on dropout rates and their causes, especially among part-time postgraduate students. What was found focused on individual students' reasons for dropping out. Limited knowledge exists about the effectiveness of policies and interventions in place (Vossensteyn, 2015). Hence, further research is needed to investigate the 'mature student's dropout' phenomenon, which is very costly.

Last of all, the study revealed that mature students' expectations might not always align with government's expectations. Few participants although working full-time, were not able to advance in their careers, nor contribute further knowledge after obtaining their degree. Another consideration for policy makers that might require further research.

Thus, this study unveiled further questions for future research:

1. What other skills might attribute to mature students' successful degree completion beyond the academics?
2. How to better prepare supervisors for their roles?
3. How to deal with the 'mature students' dropout' phenomenon?
4. Are expectations aligned with all stakeholders? If not, how to align them?



Following are few recommendations addressed to various stakeholders.

## **5.12 Recommendations**

The success rates of mature students are important to universities. These influence accreditations and reputations and may be used to market or rank the university. Stakeholders need to understand the particular characteristics of mature students and implement proper strategies to meet their needs (Briggs et al., 2012). Thus, the recommendations:

### *5.12.1 For policy makers and researchers:*

- Develop effective national strategies to decrease dropout rates and increase degree completion.

As discussed, limited research was found on dropout students' rates, part-time students in particular. The little research focused on the individual's reasons for non-completion. Moreover, limited knowledge was found on effectiveness of policies and interventions put in place if any (Vossensteyn, 2015). Although the study focused on successful mature students and not on dropouts. However, the limited research revealed the need to investigate the phenomena of 'mature students' dropout.'

- Investigate the (mis)alignment between mature students' expectations and those of governments regarding the outcomes of postgraduate programmes.

Policy papers such as OECD reports repeatedly emphasised the increasing demand for competencies that can adapt with a rapid changing global economy. However, most participants' motives to return were beyond economic needs, more into personal growth. Hence, an investigation on this (mis)alignment regarding the outcomes of postgraduate programmes to understand the gap and set the right policies for alignment is recommended.

### *5.12.2 For institutions of higher education:*

- Train thesis supervisors to become skilled mentors of mature students both on academic and emotional level.

To navigate and succeed in an educational system, where mature students might feel less familiar with its 'rules of the game', universities support is critical

(Bourdieu, 1993; Barrett & Martina, 2012). Furthermore, the support from faculty members is as critical. When supervisors are genuinely interested in what mature students are doing, this could motivate them and enhance their self-esteem as students (Thomas, 2002). The study highlighted the impact of emotional support especially for non-traditional students. Hence, the recommendation.

- Educate mature students about the roles of family members, friends and colleagues over the course of a postgraduate degree programme, especially those studying part-time.

This could allow mature students to prepare in advance a support system that proved to be critical for their success.

- Accommodate mature students with flexible deadlines, academic support, and counsel when appropriate.

Time proved most important for mature students in this study, especially those with multiple responsibilities. A consideration Moreau (2016) noted that lacked in many universities. Perhaps a change of policies at academic institutions with strategies that can support students with children need to be considered.

- Adopt an assessment tool such as the *Grit Scale* as part of the admission procedures. This could enhance understanding of mature students' potential for success and inform any support strategies.

The study concluded that cognitive skills alone are not enough to determine success. Noted by scholars like Duckworth et al. (2007), Sheard (2009) and Duckor (2017), the 'level of commitment' is key indicator for success. Other non-cognitive skills such as '*grit*' might be an important predictor. Hence, consideration to assess non-cogitative skills is recommended. This could provide clear understanding of mature students' potential, and extend the needed support including emotional support to help them succeed.

#### 5.12.3 For mature students:

- Establish informal volunteer networks, whereby established postgraduate mature students mentor newly returning mature students.

The phenomena of mature students re-entering higher education after a gap of years is evidently hard. Being prepared could make the experience more fulfilling. *'Learning from others mistake'* as James expressed. It could also allow mature adult to prepare in advance a support system that proved to be critical for their success.

- Share the outcomes of this and similar studies with mature adults considering a return to higher education.

For many mature students had they known what this study had unveiled perhaps it could have made the journey less complex. Being prepared could make the experience more fulfilling.

### **5.13 Conclusion**

It is hoped that this study adds to a growing body of empirical knowledge that brings unique insights to the lived experiences of mature students. It also illustrates how the phenomenological approach helped producing rich and insightful personal accounts of these experiences. The process of this study offered an opportunity to reflect on my own experience as a mature student. As a researcher, I was surprised by some of the findings. I had expected that there would be much talk about the importance of academic skills and its relevance to the subject matter of the study. This barely features as the other life skills emphatically emerged. I was also surprised by the complexity of the motivation to return to education and what becoming a student again meant in the individuals' lives. Most surprising was the strength of feeling mature students reported about the immense need for support, supervisors' support included, to overcome the challenges they had to endure. The study renewed my faith in lifelong learning and increased my admiration of any individual who perseveres to pursue further education. I hope the successful outcome of participants' lived experiences of this study will encourage more mature students to return to higher education.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: An introductory electronic mail

Dear participant,

Thank you so much for accepting to be a participate in my doctorate research. I cannot wait to hear your story and learn from your invaluable experience.

We will work on stages on a span of almost 3 months covering 9 topics. each topic will be sent you by email, all you need to do is to share your experience and reflection in your own words and email back to me.

I will be emailing you one new topic every week, and you will have two weeks maximum to send your reply for each topic. This should not take more than 30-45 minutes of your valuable time, depending of course how much you want to elaborate.

Please make sure that you do fit the criteria needed for my research:

1. A graduate from a higher degree (masters or doctorate)
2. Started your degree when you were 30 years old or above
3. studied on a part-time basis.

I am here attaching the following for your kind attention:

1. The invitation letter
2. letter of endorsement from the University of Bath
3. The consent form to fill, sign and send back to me by email to confirm your participation.

I plan to start sending you my first research topic July 1st.

Again, I am utterly grateful for your participation and support.

Kind regards  
Dina Faidi  
Doctorate Candidate  
University of Bath

## Appendix B: An Invitation letter to Participate



*How do they do it? The learning experiences of successful mature graduate students.*

**A study by Dina Faidi, doctoral candidate, University of Bath.**

### **An Invitation to Participate**

Dear

I am currently pursuing a doctoral degree in education at the University of Bath. For my doctoral thesis I am carrying out research into the experiences of mature students who acquired their higher degrees (Master's or Doctorate) on a part time basis after the age of 30. My research has been approved by the University's Department of Education. Attached is a letter supporting my work from professor Sam Carr at the University.

I am looking for volunteers who are willing to participate in this research. The voices of mature students will be central to the study, through their sharing of stories that explain their journeys toward success.

**The objectives of this study are:**

1. To identify mature students and their levels of education.
2. To explore why they decided to pursue further education after a hiatus.
3. To explore the obstacles to success and how they overcame these.
4. To identify the specific skills that enabled them to succeed.
5. To identify other challenges of higher education on part time basis.
6. To understand the value that graduate degrees added to their lives.
7. To add to the body of scholarly knowledge in this discipline.

I am seeking mature graduates who started their Master's or Doctoral degrees at the age of 30 or more on a part time basis. The research will begin with a simple questionnaire, followed by written online 'conversations' about these journeys toward success. The study will include nine topics, spaced two weeks apart. It should normally take about 30 minutes to write a response. Confidentiality will be maintained at all times; participants' names and any personal information will not be disclosed. All files collected will be completely anonymous. The information will be used solely for scholarly purposes, including the production of my doctoral thesis. Afterwards all files will be destroyed. Participation is completely voluntary. Participants can withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason for doing so.

If you are willing to be part of my study or require further information, please contact me directly at [d.faidi@bath.ac.uk](mailto:d.faidi@bath.ac.uk).

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating. I look forward to your reply.

**Dina Faidi**

Doctoral candidate

## Appendix C: An endorsement letter from the University of Bath supporting the research



**Professor Andrea Abbas**  
*Head of Department*

**Department of Education**  
Bath BA2 7AY · United Kingdom  
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**April 6th, 2019**

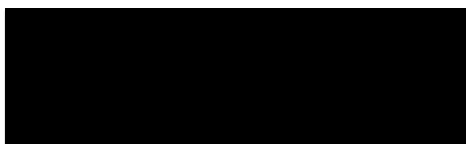
**Re: Letter in support of Dina Faidi's research**

**To whom it may concern:**

I am writing this letter to support the research of Dina Faidi. Dina is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Education, University of Bath and I am her thesis supervisor. In short, Dina's doctoral thesis seeks to explore the experiences of those who have completed postgraduate higher degrees later in life. She is aiming to better articulate the challenges that mature students face and the skills and attributes they rely upon to successfully learn.

This letter is a letter of support, verification, and endorsement of her work. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any concerns or issues.

**Dr Sam Carr,**  
**Senior Lecturer and Director of Studies for Education with Psychology**  
**Department of Education**  
**University of Bath**  
**E-mail: [s.carr@bath.ac.uk](mailto:s.carr@bath.ac.uk)**



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Research Degrees (MRes, MPhil, PhD, EdD)	+44 (0)1225 386545/6341	<a href="mailto:ed.doc@bath.ac.uk">ed.doc@bath.ac.uk</a>
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## Appendix D: Participant Consent Form



*How do they do it? The learning experiences of successful mature graduate students.*

**A study by Dina Faidi, doctoral candidate, University of Bath.**

### Participant Consent Form

*Please tick either 'yes' or 'no' in the spaces provided and sign your name below.*

1. I have read and understood the *Invitation to Participate*.      yes \_\_\_      no \_\_\_
2. I have received adequate information about this study.      yes \_\_\_      no \_\_\_
3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.      yes \_\_\_      no \_\_\_
4. I agree to my interviews being documented.      yes \_\_\_      no \_\_\_
5. I am satisfied with terms of confidentiality as explained in the *Invitation to Participate*.      yes \_\_\_      no \_\_\_
6. I am satisfied that my questions have been answered.      yes \_\_\_      no \_\_\_
7. I agree to take part in the research.      yes \_\_\_      no \_\_\_
8. I understand that signing this consent form does not bind me to participate and I can withdraw at any time.      yes \_\_\_      no \_\_\_
9. I would like to receive a summary of the research findings.      yes \_\_\_      no \_\_\_

Participant's printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E: Questionnaire for Research Participants



*How do they do it? The learning experiences of successful mature graduate students.*

A study by Dina Faidi, doctoral candidate, University of Bath.

### Questionnaire for Research Participants

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. This questionnaire should take less than two minutes. Most of the items are just ticks but some require a little more information.

1. Your age today: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Your gender:      Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_
3. Your marital status when you returned to / started graduate school:  
Single \_\_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_\_ Separated \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_\_ Widowed \_\_\_\_\_
4. Your present occupation:  
Working \_\_\_\_\_ Unemployed \_\_\_\_\_ Homemaker \_\_\_\_\_ Student \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
5. Your nationality: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Did you have children when you returned to / started graduate school?  
Yes, I had \_\_\_\_\_ children. No \_\_\_\_\_
7. At what age did you finish your first degree? \_\_\_\_\_
8. After you earned your first degree, and before you returned / started graduate school, what was your main occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
9. At what age did you return to / start graduate school? \_\_\_\_\_
10. At what age did you finish your last graduate degree? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Was your study on part time basis? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
11. What was the last degree you earned? \_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you for your time.*

**Dina Faidi**

Doctoral candidate

Please return this questionnaire to me via email at [d.faidi@bath.ac.uk](mailto:d.faidi@bath.ac.uk).

## Appendix F: The Eighteen Participants' Profiling

Full participants' profiling is presented here. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms names are used.

- 1. Amir York** is Turkish and now 45 years old. He achieved his Executive MBA degree 15 years ago while working as a Country Manager at a multinational company. Amir was 23 when he earned his first graduate degree and was 27 when he returned to higher education. A gap of five years between the two. When studying he was single with no children. He is currently married with one child, working in a multinational based in the UAE. It is worth noting that following his MBA, Amir pursued a doctoral degree at age 31, completing the courses but not the thesis due to work obligations. In line with the purpose of the study, only his experiences in completing the MBA were discussed.
- 2. Courtney Max** is from the United States and 40 years old. Courtney was 22 when she earned her first degree. When she returned to pursue the Ed.D. there was a gap of 12 years. She achieved her last degree at age 39 while working as a Project Director. When studying she was married with one child. She is an Associate Dean in an American University in the United States.
- 3. Harry Martin** is British and now 45 years old. Harry was 29 when he earned his first degree. At 33 he completed his master's degree. Four years later, at 37 Harry returned to pursue his Ed.D. degree. He achieved his last degree at age 42 while he was working as a Sports Development Officer. While studying he was married with one child. He is currently a professor at a British University in the UK.
- 4. Nora Al Badri** is Jordanian and now 55 years old. Nora was 20 when she earned her first degree and 45 when she began the Ed.D. programme. A significant gap of 25 years between the two degrees. She achieved her last degree at the age of 49. While studying she was working as a lecturer and was married with two children. She is currently a lecturer at an American University in the UAE.

5. **Norman Subin** is Indian and now 34 years old. He achieved his last degree in 2019 while working as a Project Manager. Norman was 29 years old when he began the DBA programme. There was a gap of four years following his MBA. When studying he was married with no children. He is now working with a governmental academic entity in the UAE.
6. **Sawsan Farah** is Jordanian and now 69 years old. At the age of 48 she returned to higher education, 12 years after completing a master's degree. She achieved her Ed.D. degree when she was 56. When studying Sawsan was divorced with three children. She is currently semi-retired and working as a consultant.
7. **Selena Brown** is from the United States and now 52 years old. She achieved her last degree in 2019. Selena was 42 years old when she started a Ph.D. programme, with a gap of two years since the previous degree. Selena earned her Ph.D. while working as an administrative assistant. When studying Selena was separated from her husband, with two children. She is now a professor in an American University in the United States.
8. **Sally Said** is British and now 42 years old. Sally was 33 when she returned to pursue the Ed.D., with a gap of eight years from previous formal education. She achieved her last degree at the age of 38 while working as a teacher. When studying she was single with no children. She is now working with a governmental academic entity in the UAE.
9. **Ghalia Reda** is Jordanian and now 48 years old. Ghalia was 21 when she finished her first degree. She returned to formal education at age 44, a gap of 23 years. She achieved her last degree at the age of 46 while being a homemaker and attorney at law. When studying she was married with five children. She now volunteers her time to teach children in a Saturday school in the UAE.
10. **James Baker** is Canadian and now 60 years old. He pursued his last degree when he was 42 years old teaching at a junior college in

Switzerland. The gap between his M.A. and Ed.D. programmes was five years. When studying he was married with a son in primary school. James now works as an independent consultant to schools and governments outside of Canada.

**11. Khalil Abbas** is from the United States and now 42 years old. Khalil was 21 when he finished his first degree. He was 36 when he returned to pursue a Ph.D., with a gap of 15 years. He achieved his last degree while working as a computer scientist. When studying he was married with no children. He is working with a global digital industrial company in the United States.

**12. Mona Kareem** is Egyptian and now 42 years old. She was 22 years old when she finished her first degree with a gap of 17 years. Mona was 39 when she returned to earn the M.Ed. She achieved her last degree while working as a teacher. When studying she was married with two children. Months into her studies she got divorced, then developed breast cancer. She is now cancer free, living in her home country raising her two girls.

**13. Martin Von** is from the United States and now 62 years old. He was 22 years old when he finished his first degree and returned when he was 29 to pursue a Ph.D. with a gap of seven years. He achieved his last degree when he was 33. When studying he was working as an engineer and was married with no children. He is working with a global digital industrial company in the United States.

**14. Olivia Fares** is Jordanian and now 48 years old. She was 22 when she completed her first degree. Olivia returned to pursue the M.B.A. degree when she was 38, with a gap of 16 years between the two. She achieved her last degree eight years ago. When studying she was married with four children and working as a computer engineer. She is now managing a governmental children's nursery in the UAE.

**15. Paloma Patrick** is from the United States and now 52 years old. Paloma was 40 when she returned to education to pursue a Ph.D., twenty years after her first degree. She achieved her last degree nine

years ago when she was working as a lecturer. When studying she was divorced with three children. She is working as an Associate Director in a prestigious Graduate School in the United States.

**16. Sam Malek** is Jordanian and now 37 years old. He achieved his last degree five years ago while working as a Logistics Team Leader. There was a gap of six years between his first degree and the pursuit of a master's degree at the age of 28. When studying he was married with two children. He is still working in the same company.

**17. Samar Asmar** is British and now 54 years old. She was 23 when she earned her first degree. There was a gap of 27 years between her first degree and her pursuit of the M.Ed. degree. She achieved her last degree at the age of 52. When studying she was married with four children. She was and still is a homemaker who volunteers in projects related to education.

**18. Sarah Talal** is Jordanian and now 43 years old. She was 24 years when she earned her first degree and decided to pursue a master's degree at the age of 40. A gap of 16 years between the two. She achieved her last degree in 2018. She was married with two children. When studying she was working and still as a Learning and Development Specialist.

**Appendix G: The Nine Themes of Enquiry with the Sub-Questions within each Theme.**

Themes of Enquiry	Sub-Questions
<b>Theme One: Circumstances, motivation, and expectations.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Please describe the circumstances when you decided to return to study as a graduate student.</li> <li>• Can you explain what motivated you to make that decision?</li> <li>• What were your expectations?</li> </ul>
<b>Theme Two: Time management.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you describe the ways studying affected other aspects of your life then?</li> <li>• Do you understand that time differently from your perspective today?</li> <li>• If so, could you explain in what ways?</li> </ul>
<b>Theme Three: Learning skills.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific life and/or learning skills contributed to your success.</li> <li>• Can you name the most important ones and how you acquired them?</li> <li>• In what ways did those skills enable you to succeed in your graduate studies?</li> </ul>
<b>Theme Four: Challenges.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you encounter significant obstacles or challenges during those years?</li> <li>• Were any of them unexpected?</li> <li>• Please explain how you overcame them.</li> </ul>
<b>Theme Five: Support.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who supported you the most?</li> <li>• Can you explain how?</li> </ul>
<b>Theme Six: Outcomes.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you explain the most rewarding and/or satisfying outcomes of your graduate studies?</li> <li>• Are these understood in the same ways now as when you</li> </ul>

	<p>graduated? Please elaborate on your perspective at both times.</p>
<p><b>Theme Seven: Sustained skills learned.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are you using the skills that you developed in your graduate work today?</li> <li>• Have these skills enabled you to achieve greater career rewards? If so, how?</li> <li>• [please consider very specific and complex skills]</li> </ul>
<p><b>Theme Eight: Revisit and advice.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you could revisit your graduate study years, what would you do differently?</li> <li>• What advice would you give to a mature student pursuing a higher degree?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Theme Nine: Final reflections.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there other life and learning skills that help explain your success as a mature graduate student?</li> <li>• If so, please elaborate on them.</li> </ul>



## Appendix H: Participants' Follow Up Record

Bath research participants aliases names	Initials	Gender	Consent	Questionnaire (July 1)	Theme 1 (July 1)	Theme 2 (July 11)	July 20- delayed	Theme 4 (July 25)	Theme 5 (Aug 1)	Theme 6 (Aug. 14)	Theme 7 (Aug. 24)	Theme 8 (Sep 3)	Theme 9 (Sep 14)	Gender
Amir York	AY	M	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	M
Courtney Max	CM	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	F
Harry Martin	HM	M	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	M
Nora Al Badi	NB	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	F
Norman Subin	NS	M	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	M
Sawsan Farah	SF	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	F
Selena Brown	SB	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	F
Sally Said	SS	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	F
Ghalia Reda	GR	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	F
James Baker	JB	M	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	M
Khalil Abbas	KA	M	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	M
Mona Kareem	MK	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	F
Martin Von	MV	M	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	M
Olivia Fares	OF	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	F
Paloma Patrick	PP	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	F
Sam Malek	SM	M	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	M
Samar Asmar	SA	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	F
Sarah Talal	ST	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	F
Salim Samaan	SS		In											M
Maisa Halebi	MH		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes								F
Kelly Summer	KS		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes					F